

FOOD, EMOTION AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION BY WOMEN WRITERS¹

Surapeepan Chatraporn²

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the connection between food and emotions and analyze how food empowers the women who cook and serve it. In the selected fictional bestsellers, which were made into successful films, food plays a vital role. Food functions as the title, the main theme, the dominant imagery, and distinctive figures of speech. Food has a direct impact on the emotions and behavior of those who consume the food prepared by these female cooks. Their food provides physical nourishment as well as emotional and spiritual sustenance. Food is used as a vehicle to communicate feelings, and an outlet for female creativity and artistic expression. The female cooks, who appear initially weak and inferior in

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² Associate Professor of English, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

status, grow to be influential and indispensable. Having derived their power from food, these female cooks eventually assume the roles of artistic chefs and, more importantly, saviors of body and soul.

Introduction

Food has a central place in human life. It isn't just necessary for the body, however. It also has a tremendous impact, both directly and indirectly, on emotional and intellectual well-being (Somer, 1999: 5). Food can be a tangible symbol of love and concern for others. It is a source of comfort and consolation. It is also the oldest and best form of medicine known to mankind (Geary, 2001: 3). There is a two-way relationship between food and emotion. One's emotions can affect what and how much one eats, and what one eats can affect the way that one feels (Eldershaw, 2001: xiii).

Traditionally, food has always had an intimate association with women's lives and the work that women do. As wives, mothers and primary caregivers, it has been the duty of women to prepare food for the family. In patriarchal societies where they have been excluded from power and their roles have been limited to the domestic sphere, women have found a creative outlet through the preparation of food. Food has given them opportunities to make decisions and exercise some degree of power.

The objectives of this paper are: to study the significance of food and the relationship between food and emotions; to analyze the influence of food on emotions and behavior; to analyze the mental states of women who are deprived of their rights and liberty, whose roles are limited, and whose space is restricted; and to analyze the reversal of women's roles and the creation of female power by means of food. The paper is a study of three contemporary fictional bestsellers,

which were made into successful motion pictures, namely *Like Water for Chocolate* written by Laura Esquivel, *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris, and “Babette’s Feast” by Isak Dinesen. All these three fictional works of remarkable literary merit were composed by women writers. Though these three women writers are of three different nationalities--Mexican, British and Danish, their works deal with the same theme of food, emotion and the empowerment of women by means of food. In the two novels and the short story, food plays a vital role. Food functions as the title, the main theme, the dominant imagery, and distinctive figures of speech.

The significance of food

In *Like Water for Chocolate* food figures in the title of the novel. It is central to what happens in the novel. It is a structuring device, a metaphor and an important image throughout the work. The title *Like Water for Chocolate* is a colloquial Mexican expression meaning “agitated, restless, confused, unsettled.” It can refer to a person, an event or a relationship that is particularly intense or passionate. It calls to mind the image of water about to boil. The title is the clearest use of food as a symbol in the entire novel. It conjures an image of boiling water, which reflects the emotional state of the main character, Tita, a woman in turmoil whose pent-up anger and confusion are about to explode. “Tita was literally ‘like water for chocolate’ — she was on the verge of boiling over” (Esquivel, 1995: 151).

The title, subtitle (*A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*) and epigraph (“*To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid.*”) all concern food. The novel is divided into twelve chapters, each representing a different month. The title of each chapter consists of a type of food as well as the name

of a month, for instance, “*Chapter Three — March: Quail in Rose Petal Sauce*” (Esquivel, 1995: 45). There is also a recipe for the particular dish featured in the title, and the preparation of this dish controls the structure and narrative content of the chapter. All the novel’s key scenes revolve around the preparation and eating of food. The characters’ lives unfold in the midst of these activities and through them. Food is the means through which readers come to understand Tita’s struggles to find true love and independence from the influence of her overpowering mother. The recipes that help to structure the novel function as a Greek chorus, commenting on the characters and events that take place.

Initially, the story is told from the first-person point of view of a cooking instructor who lists the ingredients of a particular dish and explains its method of preparation. Then the narrative shifts to third-person point of view to relate the events that occur in the lives of the characters and their involvement with food. Each chapter concludes with the words “to be continued” and the menu to be prepared in the following month, for instance, “*Next month’s recipe: Chabela Wedding Cake*” (Esquivel, 1995: 20). Food even figures in the layout of the book. Prints of carved wood designs found on stoves that were commonly used in Mexico in the 19th century appear at the very beginning of the novel and at the start of every chapter. Consequently, *Like Water for Chocolate* has the appearance of both a novel and a cookbook. It also resembles some of the monthly magazines popular with women and other groups of readers.

The most important events of the novel take place in the kitchen. It is where most of the action occurs. The main character, Tita, is born in the kitchen.

Tita made her entrance into the world, prematurely, right there on the kitchen table amid the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bay leaves, and cilantro, steamed milk, garlic, and of course, onion. (Esquivel, 1995: 5-6)

As a child, she plays there, and as she grows, she finds love there. The kitchen is a playground and a school. It is the scene for Tita and Pedro's forbidden love. It is where the food is kept and where passion is found. When her mother forbids her to marry, Tita buries her sorrows in the kitchen, devoting her life to cooking. It is in the kitchen that Tita learns both the science and the art of cooking, and in the process, comes to an understanding of life. Tita is "*a person whose knowledge of life was based on the kitchen to comprehend the world*" (Esquivel, 1995: 7) and she learns "*the secret of love and life as revealed in the kitchen*" (Esquivel, 1995: 239). When Tita dies, the house and the entire de la Garza ranch are consumed by fire. The only things that survive are Tita's old book of recipes.

Similar to Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, food plays a vital role in Harris's *Chocolat*. Food functions as the title, the main theme and the dominant imagery. *Chocolat*, the title of the novel, not only refers to mouth-watering, luscious chocolate but also connotes a celebration of pleasure, of indulgence, of love, and of all the sweeter things in life. The chocolate is symbolically a rich delicious feast for the body as well as for the soul; it satisfies sensual craving and brings about spiritual delight.

The main theme of the novel is the tremendous impact of chocolate upon the townsfolk. Ansen states: "*The novel makes a plea for passion and pleasure as opposed to repression and denial*" (Ansen, 2000: 77).

Vianne's luscious chocolate pits the forces of liberation and renewal against those of repression and rigid tradition. Her aphrodisiac sweets awaken the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's abundance and ecstasy. The novel also explores the ideas of community, morality, loneliness, belonging, tradition and innovation, all presented through the imagery of confections.

Joanne Harris unfolds a tale of life, love, death, and bereavement, of fear and violence, and – most importantly – of happiness through the imagery of confections. At her chocolate boutique, La Céleste Praline: Chocolaterie Artisanale, Vianne lavishly decorates the display window with a variety of multicolored chocolates and sweets.

In glass bells and dishes lie the chocolates, the pralines, Nipples of Venus, white rum truffles, mendiants, candied fruits, hazelnut clusters, chocolate seashells, candied rose-petals, sagared violets ... (Harris, 2000: 33)

At Easter, her chocolate parlor features a giant chocolate statue of Eostre with a corn sheaf in one hand and a basket of eggs in the other, to be shared between the celebrants. Images of delicate liqueur chocolates, the rose-petal clusters, the gold-wrapped coins, the violet creams, the chocolate cherries and almond rolls, plump chocolate hens, piebald rabbits with gilded almonds, and nests of spun caramel waft across the pages. The smells of "*vanilla essence and cognac and caramelized apple and bitter chocolate fill the house*" (Harris, 2000: 245) and fragrance the novel. All these chocolates seem to join in the chorus "*Try me. Test me. Taste me*" (Harris, 2000: 310)

In addition to the title, the main theme, and the dominant imagery, food functions as

distinctive figures of speech. Francis Reynaud, Curé of the parish, who assumes the role of the moralistic pillar of church and community, is furious at the “Grand Festival du Chocolat” which poses a grave treat to Lent, a season when townspeople are to give up all kinds of sweets. Harris describes his fury using food analogy, writing that his anger was “*rising like boiling milk, uncontrollable*” (Harris, 2000: 137).

Food is evidently central to the novel. The chocolate boutique has been the talk of the town. Its presence in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, a rigid, tranquil town, is deeply felt by each member of the community, with some being lured by and giving in to its dazzling sights and tantalizing smells. The chocolate parlor looms large in their minds, “*Curé Reynaud preached such a virulent sermon on the topic of abstinence that the opening of La Céleste Praline ... had seemed a direct affront against the Church*” (Harris, 2000: 55).

Similar to Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* and Harris’s *Chocolat*, food plays an important role in Dinesen’s “Babette’s Feast.” Food functions as the title and a main theme and provides sharply contrasting images. Food figures in the title of the short story and is central to the climax and the denouement of the story. “Babette’s Feast”, the title, refers to a sumptuous feast prepared by Babette, the once renown chef of the Café Anglais in Paris, for an austere religious sect that has renounced all earthly pleasures. The lavish banquet intended to be a feast for the body and frowned upon by the devout group turns out to be an ultimate feast for the soul. The material nourishment miraculously provides spiritual sustenance. The feast, which is Babette’s supreme artistic expression, becomes her ritual sacrifice. Babette’s voluptuous banquet transforms food into grace and weds religion with art.

The story artistically interweaves food, faith, gratitude, talent and friendship into one entity. One dominant theme is the transformative power of art through food. With its restorative power, Babette’s food erases conflicts and prejudice and inspires happiness and harmony in the remote puritanical community.

Though food is not the predominant imagery in “Babette’s Feast” as it is in the other two novels, Dinesen gives two remarkably contrasting food images. While the daily food of the ascetic villagers is a split cod, and an ale-and-bread-soup, Babette’s gourmet dinner consists of course after course of dazzlingly sumptuous food and wine of the best quality. To this bleak hamlet, Babette brings the awesome power of French cooking; her creations feature one luscious sensation after another. Stephanie Branson states: “*The two different food images connote the distinction between sober northern European Protestantism and sensual southern European Catholicism*” (Branson, 2000: 50).

Branson points out the interplay between two distinct cultures — that of the French, Catholic, sophisticated, sensual Babette and that of the Norwegian, Protestant, provincial, self-denying villagers (Branson, 2000: 51). Esther Rashkins notes that “*food has tended to be viewed allegorically*” in the story as representing the schism between the “*ethical*” Norwegian, puritanical sect of Protestantism, nurtured on split cod and ale-and-bread soup, and the “*aesthetic*” sensuous inclinations of French Catholicism, nourished by “*haute cuisine*” and epitomized by the master chef Babette (Rashkin, 1995: 356). The short story is, thus, an interesting blend of austerity and opulence.

Babette’s artistry and joie de vivre frighten the Puritan villagers who feed on them (Podles, 1992: 555). They see Babette as “*the*

dark woman” and her young helper as “the red-haired boy” attending a witch (Dinesen, 1993: 42). Martine and Philippa, the two daughters of the late Dean, call a meeting of the faithful. Trembling, they all vow to consume the food without tasting it.

*...we will cleanse our
tongues of all taste and
purify them of all delight or
disgust of the senses, keeping
and preserving them for the
higher things of praise and
thanksgiving.*

(Dinesen, 1993: 41)

Their refusal to taste Babette’s feast and to ignore the sight and the smell of it is taken as an ordeal of the spirit to be endured in silence. The prospect of extravagant dishes, the lavish ingredients of which were all transported from Paris, threatens their faith and devotion. Viewing such a worldly feast with trepidation, the villagers sing a hymn to guard themselves from the temptation.

*“Take not thought for food or
raiment
careful one, so anxiously ...
Wouldst thou give a stone, a
reptile
to thy pleading child for
food? ...”*

(Dinesen, 1993: 44)

Ironically, the hymn of antagonism toward food changes at the end of the story into the symphony of spiritual union induced by the food “the Brothers and Sisters” initially dread.

The connection between food and emotion

In *Like Water for Chocolate* food is intimately tied to the emotions of the characters and directly influences their

actions and behavior. Tita’s life revolves around food from the day of her birth.

*From that day on, Tita’s
domain was the kitchen,
where she grew vigorous and
healthy on a diet of teas and
thin corn gruels. This
explains the sixth sense Tita
developed about everything
concerning food.*

(Esquivel, 1995: 7)

Her sorrow and happiness are bound with food, “the joy of living was wrapped up in the delights of food” (Esquivel, 1995: 71). Her relationship with food is so profound and so complex that Tita becomes a part of the food she makes, and the food becomes an extension of her.

For Tita, food provides a temporary escape from the iron-fisted control of her mother, Mama Elena. It is through food that Tita is able to communicate her feelings to others (Dobrian, 1996: 63). It is her only creative outlet. Tita learns the art and science of cooking from Nacha. When Tita’s hopes and dreams are squelched, she turns for comfort to her favorite foods. She makes up her own recipes or tweaks the old ones she has learned to create spectacular dishes that have a miraculous power over those who eat them.

Tita expresses her emotions through food. It is through food that Tita is best able to give voice to her soul, and the love and desire that are buried deep within her. Having been born and raised in the kitchen, Tita looks at the world and experiences life from the perspective of food. She compares the things that happen to her and the feelings she experiences with different kinds of food. The novel is full of brilliant metaphorical expressions that relate to food, one of which serves as the novel’s title. Other examples are, for instance, “fresh as a head of lettuce”

(Esquivel, 1995: 136) and “*how a lump of corn flour is changed into a tortilla, how a soul that hasn’t been warmed by the fire of love is lifeless, like a useless ball of corn flour*” (Esquivel, 1995: 67).

Under the domination of her tyrannical mother, Mama Elena, Tita is unable to express her love either through words or actions (Lowenstein, 1994: 594). Instead, food is the vehicle through which she conveys her love. Tita expresses her overwhelming love for Pedro through her aphrodisiac dish, quail in rose petal sauce.

With that meal it seemed they had discovered a new system of communication, in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and poor Gertrudis the medium, the conduction body through which the singular sexual message was passed

(Esquivel, 1995: 52)

Food is the mouth-watering means by which Tita manages to communicate her devotion to Pedro as well as her love for Roberto, her nephew, and Esperanza, her niece. Valdez emphasizes: “*Food cements the bond between the aunt and her niece and nephew, and explains why the children love Tita as much as if she were their mother*” (Valdes, 1995: 81).

Food is also a potent tonic for all the characters’ physical and emotional ills. Chenchá’s oxtail soup is the cure for Tita’s breakdown, and Tita uses food to treat Pedro’s burns. Tita also devises special dishes to cure bad breath and to help Rosaura lose weight.

Tita’s cooking has a magical power over the members of her family and the visitors to the de la Garza ranch. Her dishes can make other characters both happy and sad. Tita has a gift

for putting her sorrow, her longing, her passion and her joy into the dishes she cooks, and these dishes then have a magical power over the people who eat them. Esquivel’s use of “magical realism” lends a sense of believability to the strange happenings in the novel. It also accounts for much of the book’s vibrancy, charm and appeal to the reader.

Like Esquivel, Harris draws similarities between cooking and alchemy in *Chocolat* when she writes “*There is a kind of alchemy in the transformation of base chocolate into this wise food’s gold, a layman’s magic*” (Harris, 2000: 64).

In *Chocolat*, cooking becomes a sacred ritual which turns food into ambrosia. “*The food of the gods, bubbling and frothing in ceremonial goblets. The bitter elixir of life*” (Harris, 2000: 64). Again in the same manner as Esquivel, Harris makes clear the connection between food, cooking and the human emotion and spirit, “*The mingled scents of chocolate, vanilla, powerfully suggestive;*” (Harris, 2000: 64).

For Harris, cooking is an art at which to marvel and to enjoy,

This is an art I can enjoy. There is a kind of sorcery in all cooking: in the choosing of ingredients, the process of mixing, grating, melting, infusing, and flavouring, the recipes taken from ancient books, the traditional utensils. (Harris, 2000: 62)

Cooking, being a sacred ritual, connects the cook to the people she cooks for and does influence the mood, spirit and behavior of everyone involved.

Food has an influence on the emotions and behaviors of the characters. Armande, the

village's oldest resident, sipping a tall glass of mocha with a splash of kahlua feels awestruck by its exquisite taste. "*It was more than an appreciation. It was almost reverence ... Her pleasure was almost frightening*" (Harris, 2000: 81-82). The drink gives an energy to her voice and a forcefulness to her slow movements. Another time Armande tastes one of Vianne's chocolate specials. Denying the drink is a stimulant, Armande exclaims in delight, "*An aphrodisiac*" (Harris, 2000: 119). Armande is among one of the villagers who visits time and again La Céleste Praline not only to satisfy her physical pleasures but also to fulfill her spiritual needs. Finally, she becomes a regular customer of the chocolate parlor and turns out to be a true friend and steadfast supporter of Vianne. All those chocolate specials enhance her physical strength, sharpen her strong individualism, and intensify her defiance to the community's rigidity.

Ironically, the one who feels the most influence of chocolate is Curé Francis Reynaud, the archenemy of passion, pleasure and change. Sneaking into the chocolate shop with a strong determination to destroy it, Reynaud is dazzled by the spectacular sights and overwhelming smells of a chocolate extravaganza. "*It is an amazement of riches ... of all shapes and colours ... the rich fleshy scent ... drags down the throat in an exquisite trail of sweetness*" (Harris, 2000: 309-310). At his weakest moment, he can no longer resist the voluptuous temptation of these chocolates with "*entrancing*" names, which he has long and painstakingly suppressed his strong, natural desire for. "*A luxury ... layers of flavour, like the bouquet of a fine wine, a slight bitterness, a richness like ground coffee*" (Harris, 2000: 311). His visual as well gustatory tastes of chocolates bring about a change to both his body and his mind. "*...warmth brings the flavour to life and it*

fills my nostrils, a taste succubus which has me moaning" (Harris, 2000: 311).

Similar to *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Chocolat*, Dinesen makes a clear connection between food and emotion in "Babette's Feast." The devout villagers solemnly guard themselves against temptation and self-indulgence. They make a resolution to neither experience the taste of the worldly food nor be affected by its lavishness. Ironically, Babette's feast has a strong and direct influence upon their actions and behavior.

General Lorens Loewenhielm, who still carries deep in his heart his pure and lasting love for the "*ethereal*" Martine after all these 30 years, is the first to feel overwhelmed by Babette's feast and commends the exquisite banquet to be beyond praise. "*Amontillado! And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted ... This is exceedingly strange! ... I am eating turtle-soup and what turtle-soup!*" (Podles, 1992: 48-49). So exclaiming, the General is seized by a queer kind of panic and empties his glass of wine, one after another.

Under the influence of Babette's food and her culinary art, words are miraculously recovered at the end of dinner. Lorens, whose words failed him when he was a young military officer charmed by the supernatural beauty and pure life of Martine, suddenly speaks of his enduring love for Martine who subtly acknowledges her own feelings. Philippa and Babette who also stifle all speech about their losses can finally loosen their tongues. Rashkin notes Babette finally reveals that she was a great chef in Paris and describes the life she lived and lost there (Rashkin, 1995: 359). And "*deep, forgotten chords vibrate*" (Podles, 1992: 47) in the heart of Philippa, who recognizes her lost life as an artist, and who now consoles Babette with the same words Achille Papin, a celebrated idolized opera singer mesmerized

by Philippa's angelic voice and heavenly presence, used to lament his and the opera world's loss of Philippa's beautiful voice. Rashkin concludes somehow the feast has loosened all these tongues and enabled them to speak of loss and suffering. The food has allowed silences to be filled and memories recalled (Rashkin, 1995: 360).

The villagers are also influenced in the same manner by Babette's food. "*Usually in Berlevaag people did not speak much while they were eating. But somehow this evening tongues had been loosened.*" (Podles, 1992: 49) And they reminisce about their happiness and sorrow of bygone days. With their exalted state of mind, they feel they are lifted to a higher and purer sphere. They feel lighter in weight and in heart: "*The convives grew lighter in weight and lighter of heart the more they ate and drank. They no longer needed to remind themselves of their vow ... for they eat and drink in the right spirit*" (Podles, 1992: 50).

Food has brought a magical change to the deeply felt emotional states of all. As Podles put it, old bitterness and recriminations between the brethren are reconciled, old sorrows healed, and loves restored, and all made whole again in a transcendent feast ((Podles, 1992: 554). Babette's feast inspires happiness and harmony. Two old ladies discover their long-lost friendship and a couple remember their youthful love affairs. The dining room has become a heavenly place with small halos blending into a glorious radiance. Transformation has taken place.

They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time

itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air.

(Podles, 1992: 53)

Babette's feast produces a sublime, uplifting effect that announces the transcendence. As the guests leave, their sins forgiven and their sorrows healed, they join hands in the starlight and dance in a ring around the village well. With the regained harmony and unity, the "*old Dean's flock*" experience celestial second childhood.

...as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool ... in this regained innocent attire...It was...blissful to have become as a small child; ... in this kind of celestial second childhood. They stumbled and got up, walked on or stood still, bodily as well as spiritually hand in hand, at moments performing the great chain of a beautiful lancers.

(Podles, 1992: 54-55)

Podles points out the further symbolic implications of the dance scene. The wall speaks of grace, the stars of the heavenly realm and the ring dance, reminiscent of a folk element of Nordic paintings, suggests that its participants have touched eternity in the presence of grace as the ring brings to mind the concept of no beginning and no ending (Podles, 1992: 559). The unforgettable evening inspires heavenly feelings and celestial visions. The sense of culinary wonders brings about deep religious experiences. The earthly and sensuous food merges with the unearthly and transcendent.

The reversal of role and empowerment of the female cook

In *Like Water for Chocolate* Tita has the most miserable childhood. Unloved by her mother, she must keep all her emotions and her love for Pedro bottled up inside. In this way, she differs little from many other women who are weak, powerless and denied their own identity. But when she assumes the duty of cooking for the family, she begins to acquire a greater role. In the kitchen, she discovers a channel for her emotional and creative energies. She becomes an artist and creator. She is no longer the pathetic, unloved daughter of a domineering mother; she becomes a competent adult. She is able to express her feelings and desires through the food she makes, and in this way, she achieves power and influence over others.

Gradually, Tita learns to free herself from the heartless domination of her own mother and demands her rights and freedom as a woman. She determines her own role and claims the freedom to express her own wishes and desires. She finds the courage to stand up to her mother and demand the right to live her life in the way she sees fit.

*I know who I am! A person
who has a perfect right to
live her life as she pleases.
Once and for all, leave me
alone; I won't put up with
you (mother)! I hate you,
I've always hated you!"*
(Esquivel, 1995: 199)

At these magic words the spirit of Mama Elena disappears forever and Tita is the master of her own life, her own heart and soul. Tita's greatest victory, however, is in overcoming the prohibition against love and marriage, and sharing her life openly with Pedro.

Tita also becomes more than an aunt to Roberto and Esperanza. She is more properly their mother, feeding and caring for them. Because of the love and devotion that she gives to the children, her niece and nephew come to look on Tita as their mother. When Esperanza is born, she seems destined for a life similar to her Aunt Tita's. As the youngest daughter of the family, she has no right to marry. Instead, she will be expected to look after her mother until her mother's death. But Tita will not stand to see her niece suffer the same fate that was thrust upon her. Tita finds a voice to speak out for the right of her niece to live her own life. She refuses to allow the child to be named after her. She quarrels with Rosaura, Esperanza's mother, over the way that the child is raised and the long-standing family tradition which denies the youngest daughter the right to marry. In the end, when Esperanza marries Alex, it is a great victory for Tita over the tyranny of cruel, senseless tradition.

Tita's skills in the kitchen give her power and authority. Her cooking can bring joy or sorrow to those who eat it. The guests who taste her *chabela* wedding cake, for instance, are overcome with nausea and an overwhelming nostalgia for lost loves. Anyone who eats her quail in rose petal sauce is filled with uncontrollable passionate desire. Her turkey mole with almonds and sesame seeds induces feelings of joy and fulfillment, while her chiles in walnut sauce arouse sexual desires. Other dishes that Tita concocts bring relief to Pedro's burns and help cure Rosaura's bad breath and her poor digestion. Once she discovers her culinary gifts, Tita is no longer the weak, powerless "nobody" she was as a child. She becomes the central figure on whom the novel's other characters learn to depend. In the end, it is Tita who has power and influence over others.

The kitchen is the setting for all of the major events of the novel. Initially, it is a symbol of Tita's confinement and her lack of freedom. It represents the denial of her identity. The scope of Tita's entire world is defined by the four walls of the kitchen. The kitchen is a place of physical and emotional imprisonment. In her role as cook, Tita must submerge her own love and desire, and focus her energies on pleasing the people who eat her food. Traditionally, the kitchen has been the domain of wives, daughters, mothers, servants and slaves. For many feminists, the kitchen is a symbol of the marginalized world to which women have long been relegated. It is a place of routine drudgery. Indeed, in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the kitchen was not seen as an important place where women could demonstrate their abilities and express themselves as individuals. Most feminists believe that the kitchen is a space where women are denied the right to satisfy their desires, express their individual identity, and achieve personal success.

But with her love and magical affinity for food, Tita proves this conception of the kitchen wrong. Thanks to her culinary gifts, she is able to reclaim the importance of the kitchen as a space in which she can express her emotions, her desires and her abiding love for Pedro. It is in the kitchen that Tita finds an outlet for her creative energies. In fact, the kitchen becomes a character in its own right, aiding Tita in her struggle to assert herself as an independent woman. Thus, in *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel looks at the kitchen from a different perspective than some feminists. By putting this room at the very heart of the novel, she points to its importance as the place where the main female character can yield authority. Through her portrayal of Tita, Esquivel also shows us the similarities between cooking and alchemy, and by making clear the connection

between food, cooking and the human spirit, the author reclaims the kitchen as women's exclusive domain. Rather than taking her female characters out of the domestic sphere, Esquivel turns the kitchen into a shrine and cooking into a sacred ritual that joins the cook with the people she cooks for, and that influences the mood, spirit and behavior of everyone involved.

Similar to *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* witnesses the reversal of role and the empowerment of the female cook in the character of Vianne Rocher. Vianne Rocher is an atheist and single mother. There is a strong implication that she is perhaps a sorceress, inheriting magic power from her witch mother. Vianne and Anouk, her daughter, are wanderers traveling from place to place guided by the change of the wind and the turn of a card. At the beginning of the novel she is viewed as an outsider, a new comer who dares to open a chocolate store right opposite the Church at the onset of Lent and tries to settle in with close-minded people in Lansquenet, a religiously conservative town. Curé Fancis Reynaud, immediately seeing in her an evil influence and a force of destruction, takes an instant dislike to her and spreads vicious rumors about her. He must rid his sleepy town of the temptations Vianne represents. It seems that the quiet, austere life of the town is disrupted by the arrival of a young, proud and independent-thinking woman who has become an object of hatred for many.

Most of the townspeople have resigned themselves to somberly walking through life bearing the grave disappointments they have experienced. They have learned long ago not to expect anymore from life. There is Josephine, the wife trapped in an abusive marriage; the married couples who have slowly lost any element of passion; Armande, the grandmother who has been cut off from

the life of her grandson, Luc; the gypsy who seeks temporary shelter; and Reynaud, the priest who is trapped by his own secret sin and paralyzed by the fear of not living up to his predecessor. All these people in despair and the repressive atmosphere of the small town are changed by the compassion and loving nature of Vianne. Her chocolate parlor standing in the center of the drab town becomes a place where secrets can be whispered, grievances cured and wishes fulfilled.

The novel witnesses a reversal of the role of Vianne. She has figuratively grown larger and has brought light to Lansquenet with her ability to awaken the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's abundance and ecstasy. Her life-affirming attitude, generosity, and the delicacies she prepares empower her. Vianne establishes a magical relationship with the villagers. She makes friends with the outcasts. She dares to be the victim of slander because she challenges rigid tradition, and she offers food for a hunger that has been buried deep down within the people she meets. The magic power of her particular blends which fill the spiritually-starved people with physical and spiritual satisfaction become magic restorative remedies for them all. Vianne begins to emerge as a healer and savior. She shows her willingness to welcome each person unreservedly and this act of kindness inspires an awakening and sparks a rebirth within the people around her. She is the healer who does not turn away from people's brokenness. Nor does she judge them or expect them to owe a debt of gratitude to her. "By offering comparison and acceptance, Vianne helps people take a long, loving look at themselves. She helps them be in touch with themselves and feel comfortable with their humanness. By so doing, Vianne seems to be giving people insight into the loving nature of God" (Catholic New Times, 2001: 18).

Sharing the chocolates is an expression of emotional and spiritual healing and a method of sharing the gift of love and compassion with one another (McNulty, 2001: 45). The novel seems to end with the final message that Christians must define themselves not by what they refuse to do but by what they embrace and whom they include. Moreover, Vianne's food, which represents the earthly and the sensual, is closely related to and can pave the way for the spiritual and the transcendental.

In "Babette's Feast" Babette's status has changed from a fugitive to a towering figure on which all villagers depend. Babette Hersant arrives on the Puritan sisters' doorstep as a "*friendless fugitive, almost mad with grief and fear*" (Podles, 1992: 22). According to the letter of introduction from Achille Papin, the French opera singer, she was a fighter in the Paris Commune uprising in which her husband and son were killed. Babette is described as "*a massive, dark, deadly pale woman with a bundle on her arm, who stared at them (the sisters), took a step forward and fell down on the doorstep in a dead swoon*" (Podles, 1992: 29). When the sisters restore her to life, Babette begs for asylum and offers to become their housekeeper. With their fear of French luxury and extravagance, the sisters hesitantly agree and, for the next twelve years, Babette cleans, washes, and cooks simple meals for the sisters, and the poor and sick of the village.

Though arriving "*haggard and wild-eyed like a hunted animal*" (Podles, 1992: 31), in her new friendly surroundings Babette soon acquires the appearance of "*a respectable and trusted servant*" (Podles, 1992: 31). A "*beggar*" turns out to be a "*conqueror*" (Podles, 1992: 31). Babette begins to demonstrate her "*resourcefulness*" and ability. "*Her quiet countenance and her steady, deep glance had magnetic qualities; under her eyes*

things moved, noiselessly, into their proper places" (Podles, 1992: 31). In the course of time the village comes to acknowledge Babette's skills and "*excellence*." She manages to reduce housekeeping and food expenses and her "*soup-pails and baskets acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick*" (Podles, 1992: 32). Her name is now included in the pious villagers' prayers and they thank God for the "*speechless stranger*" (Podles, 1992: 33). Babette soon becomes an indispensable member of the sisters' household. "*The stone which the builders had almost refused had become the headstone of the corner*" (Podles, 1992: 33). The sisters on whom Babette depended have become totally dependent on her.

Babette gains power through the art of her food. Her first and only request to cook a real French meal for the community to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the founding Dean gives her an opportunity to display her artistic talent and show her gratitude to her devout mistresses. In preparing a great feast, the artist-cook does her utmost and spends all her money won from the lottery. Babette is a cook of consummate artistry; under the influence of her culinary art, sins are forgiven, sorrows healed, and loves restored. Her art transforms food into grace and inspires happiness and harmony in the pious community. Her miraculous dinner serves to reconcile the ascetic with the aesthetic, the spiritual with the physical; spiritual fulfillment is obtainable through the intake of earthly food. General Lowenhielm speaks of the woman chef at the Café Anglais.

... the greatest culinary genius of the age ... this woman is now turning a dinner ... into a kind of love affair — into a love affair of the noble and romantic

category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!

(Podles, 1992: 50-51)

In her lavish self-donation, the artist-cook emerges as the giver of grace through her art. Like all great artists, she soars amidst the wonders of transcendence. From a haggard fugitive and trusted servant, Babette comes to be "*a marble monument*" (Podles, 1992: 59) in the community. In the end, the two sisters are moved to tears by the generosity and artistic talent they have witnessed in Babette. Philippa foresees Babette serving God in paradise.

"Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!" she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks, "Ah, how you will enchant the angels!"

(Podles, 1992: 59)

The triumph of the female cook over adversities

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* and "Babette's Feast" the female cooks -- Tita, Vianne and Babette -- start off as weak and inferior women. They are in one way or another deprived of their rights and liberty. Their roles are limited to being cooks and their space is confined to the kitchen and the dining room or the chocolate shop. They are faced with antagonistic forces which attempt to suppress them and strip them of their hopes and desires. Nonetheless, the female cooks strive against their opponents and emerge as victors. They gain their power and become influential figures upon whom the community depends.

Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate* grows up in a female-dominated realm in which her widowed mother, Mama Elena, is the matriarch of the De La Garza clan and ranch. Mama Elena, Tita's prime antagonistic force, is the tyrannical dictator who embodies strict rules and relentlessly upholds the family tradition. Her fierce temperament and her rigid enforcement of family tradition deprive Tita of her rights and liberty and torture her heart and soul. Gradually, Tita revolts against her mother and exercises her power through her culinary gifts and experience. Tita eventually breaks away from the long-practiced and outdated family tradition, acquiring for herself as well as for her niece, Esperanza, absolute freedom to live a life of her own desires and dreams. Furthermore, Tita has become the pillar of the De La Garza ranch, managing and supervising all the family affairs. Her ultimate victory is her final union of body and spirit with the love of her life, Pedro.

Vianne in *Chocolat* wanders into a male-dominated community in which Francis Reynaud is the patriarch. As an unwed mother, atheist, and outsider, Vianne is greeted with disrespect and hostility. Reynaud, seeing Vianne as a temptress who deliberately comes to lure his pious parishioners, presents himself as her archenemy. His influence significantly hinders Vianne's attempt to establish relationship with the townspeople and ruins her newly-opened chocolate parlor. Nevertheless, with her culinary skills and secret recipes, her generosity and her life-affirming character, Vianne wins over the hearts of the townspeople and reintroduces to them their natural feelings of love and desires and, more importantly, life's pleasures which they have long overlooked and renounced. Vianne, the wrongly-accused pagan force of darkness, has become the source and bearer of light, who brings life and love to the town

of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes with her brilliant and sensuous confections.

Babette in "Babette's Feast" flees in panic and desperation from patriarchal Paris, where her family and friends were killed in the uprising. Babette takes refuge in a puritanical town led by the two sisters, Martine and Philippa, who assume leadership after the death of their highly-revered father, the Dean. Babette, who begs for food and shelter from the two sisters, finds herself in an austere community that has renounced all earthly pleasures. Over the years, Babette has reversed her status from a refugee and beggar to a strong, capable woman whose food and home skills sustain the sisters as well as the poor and the sick. The antagonistic force against Babette's French banquet is the strict asceticism of the puritans, who regard lavish food as a great sin and a divergence from the path to heaven. Ironically, Babette's extravagant dinner helps erase personal prejudice, induces happiness and creates unity and harmony in the community. The feast for the body turns out to be spiritual food for mind and soul and leads the villagers closer to heaven. Through her supreme culinary art, Babette, the artist-chef, has transformed herself to be a savior of Christians.

Conclusion

Esquivel, Harris and Dinesen show that food has a direct influence on the emotions and behavior of both the cook and those who partake of her food. Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate* develops such a profound relationship with food that she becomes one with food and the food she cooks becomes an extension of herself. Tita's dishes can produce either positive or negative effects, physically as well as emotionally, on those who consume her dishes. Vianne's luscious chocolate in *Chocolat* pits the forces of liberation and renewal against those of

repression and rigid tradition and awakens the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's pleasures and ecstasy. Her life-affirming attitude, generosity, and the delicacies she prepares enable her to have magical power. Her chocolate shop in the drab town becomes a place where secrets can be whispered, grievances cured and wishes fulfilled. Babette's voluptuous banquet in "Babette's Feast" transforms food into grace and weds religion with art. With its restorative power, her food erases conflicts and prejudice and inspires happiness and harmony in the strict religious community.

Restricting the role of the woman to being the cook cannot deprive her of her creativity, individuality and artistic expression. With her acquired knowledge of food, her accumulated experience of cooking, and her culinary art, the female cook can uplift her status and can bring about changes to the world around her. The cook, who appears initially weak and inferior in status, grows to be influential and indispensable. Her food serves as both physical nourishment and spiritual sustenance. Having derived her power from food, the female cook eventually assumes the roles of an artistic chef as well as savior of body and soul.

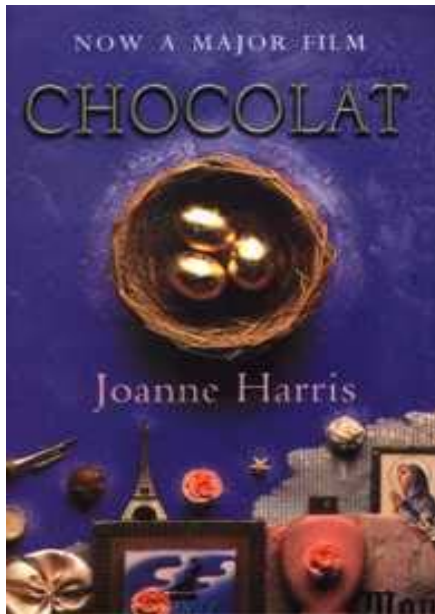
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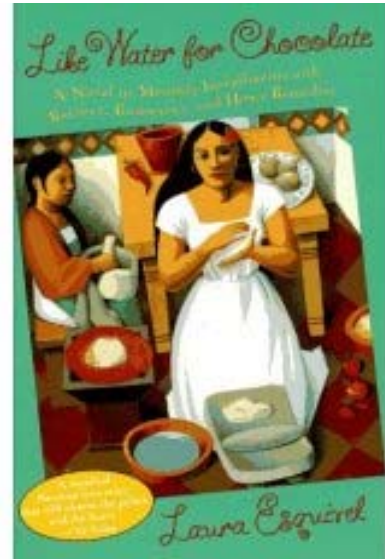
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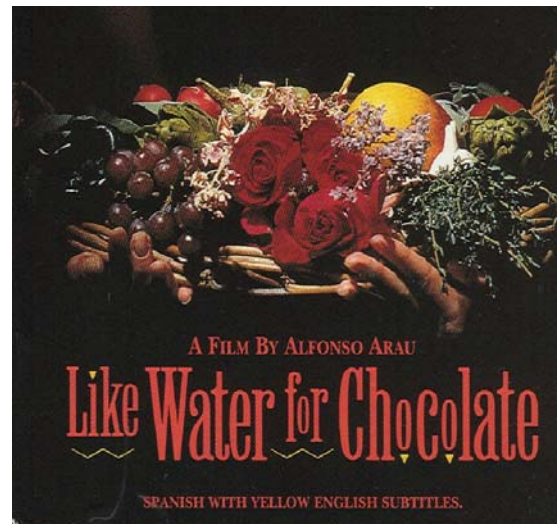
Illustrations



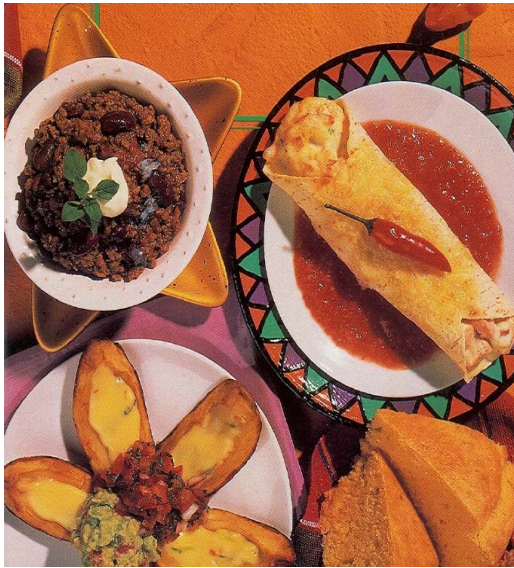
"Vianne's luscious chocolate pits the forces of liberation and renewal against those of repression and rigid tradition. Her aphrodisiac sweets awaken the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's abundance and ecstasy."



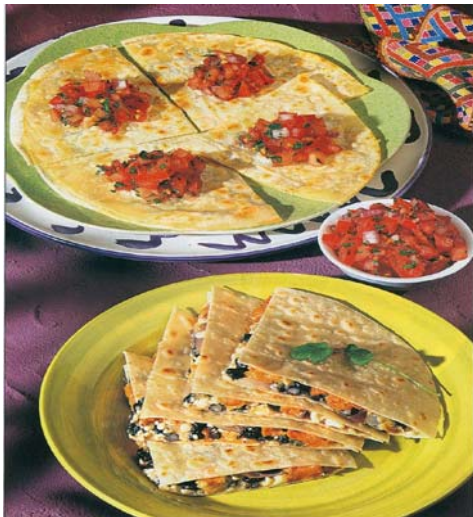
"It is in the kitchen that Tita finds an outlet for her creative energies...the kitchen becomes a character...aiding Tita in her struggle to assert herself as an independent woman."



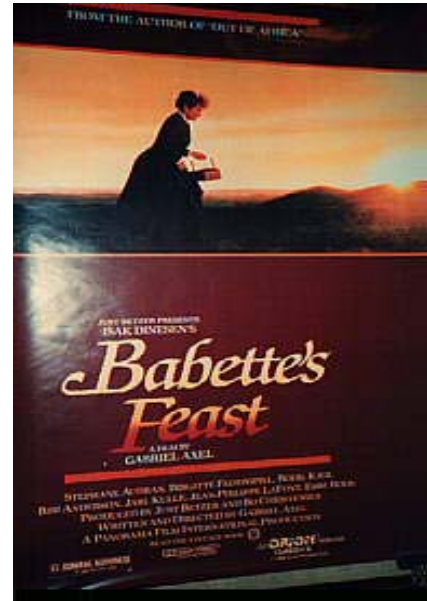
"Food is the means through which readers come to understand Tita's struggles to find true love and independence from the influence of her overpowering mother."



“Traditionally, food has always had an intimate association with women’s lives and the work that women do.”



“Tita expresses her emotions through food. It is through food that Tita is best able to give voice to her soul, and the love and desire that are buried deep within her.”



“Babette’s art transforms food into grace and inspires happiness and harmony in the pious community. Her miraculous dinner serves to reconcile the ascetic with the aesthetic, the spiritual with the physical.”