

FROM WHORE TO HEROINE: DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF THE FALLEN WOMAN AND REDEFINING FEMALE SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR FICTION¹

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Abstract

*The fallen woman, long existent in patriarchal discourse and intensified by Victorian sexual ethics, succumbs to seduction or sensual desires, suffers social condemnation and ostracism, and eventually dies, either repentantly or shamelessly. The questions of female sexuality and feminine virtues are dealt with in **The Great Gatsby**, **Daisy Miller** and **The Awakening**. Daisy Buchanan, Jordan, and Myrtle, all three sexually*

*transgressive women, are punished, with Myrtle, the most sexually aggressive, being subjected to an outrageous death penalty. Daisy Miller, upon engaging in acts of self-presentation and female appropriation of male space, undergoes social disapprobation and dies an untimely death. Edna, though boldly adopting a single sexual standard for both men and women and awakening to life's independence and sexual freedom, eventually realizes there is no space for her and submerges herself in the ocean. In contrast, the recent contemporary narrative pattern deconstructs the myth of the fallen woman and allows the fallen woman to live and prosper. The fallen woman, traditionally a secondary character who is considered a threat to the virtuous heroine, has emerged as a major or central character with a revolutionary power that both conquers and heals. Like **Water for Chocolate**, **Chocolat** and **Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café** acknowledge female mobility and sexual freedom and appropriate a space hitherto denied to fallen women. Eva Bates and Gertrudis, satiating female sexual desires and representing eroticized female bodies, overturn the traditional narrative of falling and dying by becoming competent and worthy members of society. Tita and Vianne are central heroines who challenge the cult of true womanhood, embody the sexualized New Woman and display strength and personal power, making them pillars of their communities.*

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze how selected contemporary popular novels overthrow the myth of the fallen woman and explore how these literary works defy feminine virtues set by patriarchal gender rules, appropriate female space and mobility and assert female sexual freedom. Three novels

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, namely, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller* and *The Awakening* are selected and discussed concurrently so as to provide a background, set the tone and illustrate earlier-ultimately-unsuccessful attempts of varying urgency to challenge the status *quo*. The unresolved issues raised by these novels have led to the growing intensity and culmination of female defiance and the smashing of the tradition in three contemporary works, namely, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, all of which can be considered as representing fully-fledged feminist discourse. The paper focuses on the dialog these contemporary texts have with one another and illustrate how they concertedly deconstruct the myth of the fallen woman and redefine female sexuality.

Laura Esquivel, a Mexican, Joanne Harris, who is British, and Fannie Flagg, an American, are contemporary women writers whose works are best-selling contemporary popular fiction and have been made into globally successful films. *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* have enjoyed a worldwide readership and, simultaneously, have been taught either as fiction or film adaptations in a number of schools and universities.

Originally published in 1989, Laura Esquivel's first novel, *Como Agua Para Chocolate*, became a bestseller in the author's home country, Mexico. It has been translated into thirty languages and the English version, *Like Water for Chocolate*, enjoyed similar success in the United States as well as in many other countries. Based on the book, the film with a screenplay by Esquivel herself, swept the

Ariel awards of the Mexican Academy of Motion Pictures, winning eleven in all, and went on to become one of the most popular international films of the past few decades. In 1994 *Like Water for Chocolate* won the prestigious ABBY Award, which is given annually by the American Booksellers Association. The book and the film have won Esquivel rapid international acclaim.

Subsequent to her two obscure early novels, Joanne Harris published *Chocolat* in 1999. The novel immediately made her one of the most celebrated contemporary British novelists. *Chocolat* became a bestseller not only in the United Kingdom but also in the United States. In 2000, the novel was made into a successful motion picture which artfully combines sensual evocativeness and touches of the supernatural.

Often described as folksy, Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, written by comedian, actress, producer and author Fanny Flagg, in 1987, remained for thirty six weeks at number one on the New York Times bestseller charts. This second novel brought Flagg unexpected overnight success and was released as *Fried Green Tomatoes* by Universal Studios in 1991. The script, co-written by Flagg and Director/Producer Joe Avnet, received an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay based on material previously published. Fannie Flagg also narrated *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* for an audio edition in 1992 and received a Grammy Award for her recording of the novel.

All these three bestsellers subtly interweave the issues of female position and examine them from a female

perspective. Prevalent in these works are female identity, sexuality and autonomy. These authors have repudiated the patriarchal notion of feminine nature as binary. They have explored to a great extent the frame of female identity, the pattern of female sexuality and the possibility of female autonomy. Together they have deconstructed the long-running myth of the fallen woman and have redefined female sexuality so that it truthfully and realistically reflects the true nature of women.

Throughout male literary history, woman has been depicted as the embodiment of either virtue or evil. As Abrams (1999: 90) puts it, images of women are often represented as tending to fall into two antithetic patterns. On the one side are idealized projections of men's desires—the Madonna, the Muses of the arts, Dante's Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin and the "Angel in the House." On the other side are demonic projections of men's sexual resentment and terror—Eve and Pandora as the sources of all evil, destructive sensual temptresses such as Delilah and Circe, the malign witch and castrating mothers. Lois Tyson (1999: 88) agrees that there are only two identities a woman can have. She can be either a "good girl" or a "bad girl." These two roles, as referred to in more modern terms as "angel" and "bitch," define women in terms of male desire and sexuality.

The two opposing images of women as "good girls" and "bad girls" were further fortified by the Victorian feminine ideal and the cult of true womanhood in the nineteenth century. The ideal woman was viewed as submissive, modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, pious and above all, pure, while the perfect wife was made to be submissive to her husband, selflessly

devoted to her children and excelling in the arts of family life. Her principal virtues included submission, the man dictating all actions and decisions; domesticity, the home being the woman's domain where she made "a haven in a heartless world"; piety, the woman having a strong faith in God and leading a religious life; and, most importantly, purity, the woman being spiritually and bodily pure and innocent.

Victorian sexual and marital ideology reinforced the discrimination between men and women earlier instituted by science and the church. Science analyzed women as intellectually and emotionally weak and the church believed women needed the strong guidance of morally superior men to attain spiritual development. This consensus produced a code of etiquette which rigidly protected women from their inherent weaknesses. Victorian sexual purity and propriety not only strengthened the edicts of science and the church but also exerted a significant influence on women's lives and women in literature. Living in a male-dominated society, women were forced to be weak and passive. Women were looked on as unnatural if they were too forceful in their actions and emotions. Worse, they were frowned upon if they expressed their sexuality too blatantly. Battan elaborates on the misbelief of female sexuality:

The cornerstone of this inter-connected set of beliefs (of science and the church) was the "passionless" woman. Rejecting the long-standing belief in the insatiability of women's sexual desires, nineteenth-century ministers, moralists, and physicians argued that the sexual drives of women were much weaker than those of men. Unlike the raw sensual urges

that drove male desire, they insisted that women's erotic impulses were shaped by maternal instincts and a social conscience, and were spiritual in nature.

(Battan 2004: 603)

The Victorians believed passion to be deviant; thoughts of sexuality would cause insanity and, hence, repression was necessary for women. With the strong societal enforcement of these beliefs, many women lived with great shame, guilt and fear of damnation. The themes of sexual morality in fiction often emphasized the woman's sexual frustration or her punishment, which stemmed from her sexually deviant behavior, as it was considered unthinkable that a woman would have sexual thoughts or desires.

When a woman deviated from the idealized conception of womanhood, she was stigmatized and labeled as a fallen or ruined woman. Fallen women were, in other words, women who gave in to seduction, women who lived a life of sinful desire and women who betrayed their families. Thus, women with strong sexual desires who embraced sensual pleasures, wives committing adultery, prostitutes and unwedded mothers were sure to be branded as sexually immoral and condemned as fallen women. Once yielding to temptation or self-indulgence, the fallen woman had no hope of redemption until her death as the fallen woman was viewed as a contagion, a moral menace and a vicious influence on society. This sexual immorality was often treated with legal severity and female sexual disorder was regarded as a serious social problem. Fallen women, thus, were threatened with social hostility and received little sympathy. A sexual double standard forced them to undergo a

degrading ordeal where their sexual history was laid open to hostile scrutiny.

The double standard in judging sexual behavior in men and women has been strictly applied to life in the patriarchal society and has long existed in that literary tradition invented and sustained vigorously by male writers. Physically, a woman was seen as property and as man's slave, clay to be shaped and molded. Female sex was, thus, controlled by male desire and judgement. Public knowledge of a woman's sexual misbehavior brought about severe humiliation, shame and guilt on her and resulted in violent public disapproval, condemnation and social ostracism.

The myth of the fallen woman, long existent in patriarchal discourse and intensified by Victorian sexual ethics in which purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity were accentuated, enriched the narrative tradition. The narrative of the fallen woman dramatizes the themes of sexual morality, adultery, prostitution and rape. The frame of the narrative sets the pattern in which the woman falls, by seduction, rape or sensual desire, suffers public disgrace and rejection, undergoes social condemnation and ostracism and eventually dies shamelessly or repentantly. The conventional treatment of the ruined woman follows this pattern of falling and dying. Isolation and death are seen as punishment for her nonconformity and sexual misconduct.

Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the myth of the fallen woman was played out in patriarchal discourse. The pattern of falling and dying reverberated and the narratives foreseeably ended in punitive death of the fallen woman. The questions of moral sexuality and feminine virtue haunted women in

fiction in the twentieth century as it had done in the previous periods. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Daisy Miller* by Henry James and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, all portray fallen women who were chastised either through alienation or rejection and finally met with death. Even though these women were created to be modern female characters, they could neither escape their fate nor break away from this long-running literary tradition.

The Great Gatsby depicts early twentieth-century women, Daisy, Jordan and Myrtle, all three being versions of modern women, who violate the cult of true womanhood. Daisy and Myrtle commit adultery while Jordan engages in premarital sex and displays sexually improper behavior. Their violation of sexual taboos stigmatizes them as fallen women. A sense of discomfort with these ruined women is felt throughout the novel not only at their sexual misconduct but also at their misbehavior in public and, especially, at their freedom which was unacceptable in women even in the twentieth century. Tom's double sexual standard over his own and his wife's behavior is unequivocally delineated and is met with approval.

Following the tradition of the fallen woman narrative, these ruined women are unsympathetically portrayed. Daisy is pictured as a spoiled brat and remorseless killer who does not deserve the love and devotion of the idealistic Gatsby. Jordan is characterized as a liar and a cheat. Her manipulateness and her invasion of the male domain of golf further damages her womanhood. The most unsympathetic of the three is Myrtle who is loud, obnoxious, wildly affected and overtly sexual. Myrtle cheats, bullies and humiliates her husband. Her sexual aggressiveness and her interest

in Tom's money make her no different from a prostitute.

In all three cases, the transgressive women are to different degrees punished by the sequence of narrative events. Daisy not only is imprisoned with Tom in a loveless marriage but also has to bear his incurable philandering nature. Jordan is punished when Nick ends his love affair with her. The most severe punishment is meted out to the woman who most threatens the feminine ideal. Myrtle violates patriarchal gender roles so unabashedly despite the powerlessness of her status as a woman from the lower class. Her sexual vitality, which is her personal power, is portrayed as an unforgivable form of aggressiveness. Her intense sensual vivacity makes her the only thing in the garage that stands out. Tom's abuse of Myrtle is slight in comparison to the novel's punishment of her. Her violent death can be seen as sexual mutilation and testifies to the fact that her sexual vitality is her real crime, unimaginable and unpardonable. The novel finds sexual aggressiveness the most offensive and endangering quality a woman can have. Daisy and Jordan may be bad girls from time to time but Myrtle's sexual aggressiveness makes her a permanently bad girl. Myrtle, the most ruined woman according to patriarchal gender rules, thus, is made to suffer an outrageous death penalty as a consequence of her sensual sin.

Daisy Miller deals with the issue of acceptable female self-presentation and behavior and can be read as a narrative of sexual impropriety in the late nineteenth century. The whole novel is, in a sense, the story of Winterbourne's attempts and inability to define Daisy in clear moral terms—whether she is a good or a bad girl. His preoccupation with Daisy's character

and his repeated failure to analyze and categorize her into some known class of woman reverberate patriarchal projections of female binary nature.

Daisy breaks free of the constraining cult of true womanhood in which piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity are prized (Allen 1984: 12). Daisy is inevitably labeled a bad girl in the eyes of the snobbish European society as well as the American expatriates. Daisy boasts about the company of the many gentlemen friends whom she greatly enjoys. She goes sightseeing with Winterbourne after an only half-an-hour acquaintance. She appears on the street socializing with men and makes a spectacle of herself causing scandalous gossip. She shocks high society by walking out with Giovanelli, an Italian of unknown background and obscure origin, whom she allows a close relationship. Her doubtful character and ill reputation are further aggravated when she is found side by side with Giovanelli at the Colosseum after dark. Daisy is a bad girl because she does not perform the role of woman “correctly.” Lisa Johnson (2001: 47) notes “*She upsets the order of things, with a body that alternately plays with and mocks ‘proper’ displays of femininity. Her conflicts with the rules of etiquette are inscribed through the terminology of ‘exposure.’*”

Daisy ventures where proper women do not go—into the street, and into frank speech. In other words, Daisy crosses the gender line and appropriates some male space and freedom. Lisa Johnson (2001: 42) names her “*a resister of patriarchal authority*” and “*a gender outlaw*” while “*nice*” society, including Mrs. Costello, Winterbourne and Mrs. Walker, reads in Daisy traces of the prostitute or fallen woman, though her behavior hardly

escalates to the level of actual whoredom. In line with the narrative of fallen women, Daisy undergoes social disapprobation and dies an untimely death of Roman fever. Her death can be seen as a punishment for her appropriation of masculine liberty and her subversion of feminine limitations. Edward Wagenknecht (1978: 4) writes “*she is, in short, a rebel, and the price of her rebellion is death.*” Daisy has crossed the gender line of female sexuality to pursue her desires; her free attitude and undisciplined behavior are morally beyond redemption. She is, therefore, killed off. However, it is interesting to note that even though Daisy dies, she neither repents nor turns docile. Louise K. Barnett (1979: 287) states “*she breaks rather than bending to social demands.*”

The Awakening, published at the turn of the century, startled its contemporary readers with its frank portrayal of a woman’s social, sexual and spiritual awakening and, more astoundingly, its bold depiction of a single sexual standard for men as well as women. The consequence of a woman’s violation of feminine virtues, particularly female sexual behavior, is her self realization that there is no space for her in this world and the only way out of this vacuity is to escape from a world that ignores her needs and desires.

In the patriarchal narrative tradition, marriage has always been the goal of every woman’s life. Service to her husband and her children are the wife’s duties. Passionlessness and submission are her attributes. Selflessness is her daily practice and self sacrifice her pleasure. Dutiful and virtuous wives accept and value these codes and they never wish to seek more independence than that which they can enjoy in their husbands’ home shrine. In the novel, Adèle Ratignolle is a literary

example of the Victorian angel in the house. She embodies true womanhood and epitomizes perfect motherhood. Edna Pontellier, also a wife and mother of two sons, on the contrary, has settled into neither the role of the devoted wife nor the selfless maternal mold.

Edna breaks all the rules formulated for women. She seeks personal freedom, yields to her romantic affection for Robert Lebrun and satisfies her sexual desires with Alcée Arobin, a philanderer with whom she never wishes to form any real relationship. Marriage ties and independence, freedom and restraint, love and passion surge within her body and mind and, eventually, she liberates herself from all the trappings of a woman's life and indulges her every whim. Edna begins a journey of self discovery that leads to several awakenings that are unacceptable in a woman: an awakening to her separateness as a "solitary soul," (the original title Chopin chose for the novel); an awakening to the pleasures of "swimming far out" in the seductive, sensuously appealing sea; an awakening to a passion for painting; an awakening to the romantic longing for Robert; an awakening to living on her own; and, finally, an awakening to sexual desire.

Moving out of her husband's house and establishing herself in a small cottage she has acquired with her gambling wins and the sale of her paintings is a radical act. Edna has a strong desire to be independent. She by all means refuses to remain her husband's property; she is to be the master of herself: "*I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose*" (Chopin 1986: 167). Discarding familial bonds and duties, she now will live for herself: "*she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up*

the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (Chopin 1986: 175). Later in the novel, she refers to her children as "*antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days*" (Chopin 1986: 175). Edna enjoys her new-found freedom and her new abode. She eats solitary, peaceful meals, visits her friends, does a lot of painting, throws a small dinner party, has an affair with Arobin, though with a mixture of emotions but no shame, and passionately professes her love for Robert when they meet again.

Edna has violated patriarchal gender roles. Viewed in this light she is a bad girl, a fallen woman, an unfaithful wife and an irresponsible mother. When compared to Adèle, Edna becomes a devil, a witch, a bitch and thus, deserves fatal punishment. Although she is not killed, like the fallen women in the other two novels, she cannot survive in patriarchal society. Edna makes her own decision to let go of her life and merge with nature: "*she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her*" (Chopin 1986: 175). As her feet touch the foamy wavelets, she feels like some "*new-borne creature.*" While the sensuous sea is enfolding her body in its soft, close embrace, she thinks triumphantly about how she has escaped her family and their claim on her: "*They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul*" (Chopin 1986: 176). Emily Toth (1999: xx) commends Edna and calls her "*a heroine of fantasy as much as rebellion.*" Although Edna is a precursor of female sexual revolution and has tasted life's independence, she inescapably comes to a final awareness that she has awakened to a world in which she has no place. She, thus, returns

herself naked to the sea in an act of suicide that puts an end to both her unfulfilling life and futile search.

Of all the fallen women discussed, Edna is probably the most defiant of the cult of true womanhood. Chopin, though rebellious in many ways against the patriarchal narrative tradition, is still unable to escape societal control and her central character inevitably finds herself constrained within it. Edna's failure to rise above the patriarchy within the text is a direct reflection of the author's own inability to write beyond the boundaries of her own reality.

Esquivel, Harris and Flagg, though dealing with similar themes of female identity, sexuality and autonomy, challenge social norms and the code of sexual respectability. They have concertedly debunked the theory of women as binary, deconstructed traditional and pervasive images of women and legitimized alternative notions and forms of female behavior. In their novels, they restructure the relationship between men and women and redefine sexual morality, liberty and equality.

These contemporary authors undermine traditional gender stereotypes and discard culturally-constructed myths of femininity, marriage and motherhood. They look upon sexual desire as separate from romantic love and procreation. These authors affirm, as Anna Katsavos (1997: 5) believes, "*sexual impulses are in no way gender-specific.*" Male as well as female characters can play out their desires equally. For these writers, the so-called "fallen woman," as Stephanie Lore Bower (1995: 7) writes, "*has outgrown the constraints of the traditional plot previously designed for her,*" the plot that determines her downfall and death. New narratives, therefore, must be invented to

accommodate fallen women. In these new narratives, these contemporary authors, rather than condemning and penalizing fallen women, reward them and, in many cases, allow them to prevail in the end.

New narratives acknowledge female mobility and sexual desire and appropriate a space hitherto denied to fallen women. Fallen women are no longer outcasts but are at home in the world that bred them. The patriarchal notion of bodily-fallen women is rejected and the boundary between the ideal and the fallen woman is eliminated. The fallen woman is depicted as a self-conscious and heroic figure. The fallen woman, traditionally a secondary character who is considered a threat to the virtuous heroine, emerges as a central or major character and embodies a revolutionary power which both conquers and heals the community to which she belongs. Furthermore, female identity is more often than not represented through the merging of the fallen woman and the modern woman.

Eva Bates in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and Gertrudis in *Like Water for Chocolate* defy the edicts of Church and science and reject Victorian sexual ethics of chastity and fidelity. The novel's portrayal of female sexual desire and the eroticized female body in these two characters is a direct challenge to the sexual double standards long accepted and commonly practiced. A female desire for personal independence is realized through these characters' sexual freedom and a woman's need for space is triumphantly fulfilled. In so doing, Flagg and Esquivel reverse the popular myth of the fallen woman and disrupt the narrative pattern of falling and dying. Both characters satiate their sexual lust and practice prostitution. In contrast to traditional narratives, Eva and Gertrudis are favorably portrayed as

female characters of remarkable strength who prove worthy and competent members of their communities. Eva Bates in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* embodies sensuality and indifference to social convention. She is depicted as “a big, buxom girl with a shock of rust-colored hair and apple-green eyes” (Flagg 1987: 51) and she “had the extreme luxury in life of not caring about what people thought of her” (Flagg 1987: 95). Eva has sexual experience with countless men: “she had slept with a lot of men since she was twelve and had enjoyed it every time” (Flagg 1987: 94). Eva never has a feeling of guilt or shame: “she didn’t know the meaning of the word shame and was indeed a friend of man” (Flagg 1987: 94).

Even though Eva Bates is a prostitute who enjoys having sex with numerous men, Flagg neither condemns nor judges her. On the contrary, Flagg gives her a true lover; Flagg makes Buddy fall in love with Eva and he intends to marry her. Buddy is uninterested in her unconventional sexual behavior. He takes Eva to his home and introduces her to his family. Although Eva has multiple sexual partners, she has only one love. Flagg portrays Eva as possessing an admirable quality—being true to the love of her life: “she had slept with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased; but ... when she loved ..., she was strictly a one-man woman. Eva belonged to Buddy” (Flagg 1987: 95).

Eva is also a woman of sympathy and understanding. When Idgie is devastated because Ruth leaves the Threadgoode’s home to marry Frank, Eva consoles her during this time of sadness and great disappointment. Eva “couldn’t stand anything hurt that bad” (Flagg 1987: 98). Down by the river at her Wagon Wheel Club and Camp, Eva comforts Idgie and

keeps her company whenever she is needed: “Hush up now ... it’s gonna be all right ... Eva’s here” (Flagg 1987: 98).

Above all, Flagg makes Eva function as a practical instructor who gives sex education to Stump. Having lost one of his arms, Stump has no confidence in his sexuality; “Well, I’m kinda afraid I’ll fall on her or lose my balance because of my arm” (Flagg 1987: 266–267). Besides, Stump is ignorant of sexual activity “I just don’t know how to do it right ... I might hurt her or something” (Flagg 1987: 27). Idgie helps him out by taking him to Eva who is probably the best teacher to give him sex lessons. Flagg apparently discards the patriarchal treatment of the fallen woman. Her favorable portrayal of the character of Eva Bates as a fun-loving, sympathetic, self-fulfilled woman, and capable instructor demolishes traditional expectations. Eva is not punished for her supposedly serious “crime of passion,” instead, Flagg rewards Eva by allowing her to emerge as a worthy and competent person (Chatraporn 2006: 46).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel depicts Gertrudis as an extremely sensual woman who unashamedly satisfies her sexual desire without limit. Gertrudis is the illegitimate child of Mama Elena and her mulatto lover and this probably accounts for Gertrudis’s voluptuous nature. Tita’s innovative dish, quail in rose petal sauce, stimulates Gertrudis’s sexual desire. “On her the food seemed to act as an aphrodisiac; she began to feel an intense heat pulsing through her limbs” (Esquivel 1995: 94). She sweats and fantasizes about making love to a soldier. Esquivel describes her uncontrolled lustful desire: “Naked as she was ... her pure virginal body contrasted with the passion, the lust, that leapt from her eyes, from her every

pore” (Esquivel 1995: 55). The scent of the roses emanating from her body captivates Juan, a soldier in the revolutionary army, and leads him to her. “*Without slowing his gallop,*” Juan “*lifted her onto the horse in front of him, face to face, and carried her away*” (Esquivel 1995: 55–56). They passionately make love on horseback. “*The movement of the horse combined with the movement of their bodies as they made love*” (Esquivel 1995: 56) produces a vivid erotic sensation.

After this graphic scene Gertrudis wanders aimlessly from one place to another. She finally ends up working as a prostitute in a brothel. Gertrudis writes a letter to Tita unabashedly describing her insatiable sexual desire:

I ended up here (brothel) because I felt an intense fire inside; the man who picked me up in the field in effect saved my life ... He left because I had exhausted his strength, though he hadn't managed to quench the fire inside me. Now at last, after so many men have been with me, I feel a great relief.

(Esquivel 1995: 126)

Even though Gertrudis has insatiable sexual desire and works as a prostitute, Esquivel neither labels her as a fallen woman nor punishes her. On the contrary, the woman author rewards her by making her successful both in life and in career. Gertrudis is reunited with Juan and they become happily married with one son. Gertrudis is also promoted to general in the revolutionary army. In giving Gertrudis the rank of general, Esquivel allows her female character not only to intrude into the male domain but also to thrive in a career that is normally reserved for men.

Gertrudis would be branded a fallen woman and condemned in a traditional narrative but in Esquivel's work Gertrudis is allowed her achievements and attains happiness and satisfaction in her life (Chatraporn 2006: 46–7).

She (Gertrudis) has come back (home) with the intention of showing Mama Elena how she had triumphed in life. She was a general in the revolutionary army ... moreover she was coming back happily married to Juan ... what more could a person ask!

(Esquivel 1995: 178–179)

The contemporary narrative pattern portrays the New Woman who repudiates the cult of true womanhood. Victorian sexual ethics have no relevance to the life of the New Woman. Similarly, the idealized conception of womanhood which sanctified and glorified female sexual purity and propriety has also lost its significance. The New Woman liberates herself from male domination and discards all restrictions that hinder her pursuit of self-realization and personal happiness. With her spirit of rebellion, the New Woman refuses to observe feminine ideals handed down from generation to generation and embraces independence and freedom, particularly, sexual freedom. The New Woman acknowledges her erotic impulses and sexual urges and does not consider female sexual experience and desire for sexual pleasures as misconduct or guilt. The double standard in judging sexual behavior, is, thus, revoked. The New Woman asserts individuality in her livelihood and personal relationships and achieves self-fulfillment through experience and growth. The New Woman with her demand for sexual freedom and her expression of female sexual desires could, in a sense, be labeled

a sexually transgressive woman in the traditional narrative.

In the traditional narrative that associates the sexually transgressive woman or the ruined body with the ruined narrative, the fallen woman is generally created a secondary character who represents the threat of “ruin” to the heroine, the main character. As Amy L. Wolf (2001: 4) affirms: *“During a literary shift towards respectability for the novel ... it became even more important for central heroines in novels to be pure, the fallen woman becomes a necessary secondary character.”* Both Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate* and Vianne in *Chocolat* are bodily-fallen women as Tita commits adultery and Vianne is an unwedded mother. Rejecting traditional practice, Esquivel and Harris alter the literary treatment of the fallen woman. The two novelists make their fallen women no longer foils to virtuous female characters but central heroines of the novels. Furthermore, their heroines are allowed to be conscious of their individual needs and act upon their specific desires. In these bold heroines, the two authors have created central female characters who challenge the cult of true womanhood, embody the sexualized New Woman and possess personal strength and power which make them indispensable to their communities.

Tita is the central heroine around whom the story revolves. Experiencing the most miserable of childhoods and unloved by her mother, Tita, thanks to her culinary gifts and skills in the kitchen, grows to be a competent adult and becomes an artist and inventor, whose cooking can bring joy or sorrow to those who partake of it. Once she discovers her culinary talents, Tita emerges as the central figure on whom the novel’s other characters depend, not only in terms of food but also life in general.

Tita 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 she gives to the children, her nephew and niece come to look on Tita as their mother.

Tita learns to free herself from the heartless domination of her own mother and demands her rights and freedom as an independent woman. As a New Woman, Tita determines her own role and claims the freedom to express her own wishes and act upon her own desires: *“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;”* (Esquivel 1995: 199). Tita becomes the master of her own life, her own heart and soul. Her greatest desire, which is now being achieved, is overcoming the prohibition against love and marriage and sharing her life openly with Pedro, the legal husband of her sister. Moreover, Tita overthrows 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 challenges the cult of true womanhood by maintaining an emotional bond and having a sexual relationship with Pedro, Rosaura’s husband, with no feeling of guilt or remorse. Tita embodies the sexualized New Woman by unabashedly expressing her love and satisfying her sexual desires. Nevertheless, Esquivel does not impose a punitive ending. On the contrary, Esquivel equips Tita with personal strength and power. In the end, it is Tita who has authority and influence over others. Tita, who would be the condemned and ostracized fallen woman in a traditional ruined narrative, becomes the pillar upon whom all those involved with

her depend. Tita is rightfully and legitimately the central character of the novel not only in her omnipresence but also in her pivotal role.

Similar to Tita, Vianne is the central heroine around whom the novel revolves. Vianne wanders like a loose woman into the town of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, a rigid, religious community. Vianne Rocher is an unwedded, single mother who, with her daughter, roams across the country and moves from place to place guided by the change of the wind and the turn of a card. As an unwedded mother, an atheist and an outsider, Vianne is unsurprisingly greeted with disrespect and hostility. Curé Francis Reynaud, the town's patriarch, sees Vianne as a temptress who deliberately comes to lure his pious parishioners. Intentionally disregarding the onset of Lent, Vianne daringly opens a chocolate store right opposite the Church. To many the quiet austere life of the town seems to be disrupted by the arrival of this young, proud and independent-thinking woman.

Vianne challenges the cult of true womanhood; she has a child out of wedlock and, worse, her daughter never knows who her father is. Later in the novel, Vianne has a one-night sexual relationship with Roux, a river gypsy, and it is implied that Vianne may have another child as a consequence of this one-night stand. Vianne, like Tita, embodies the sexualized New Woman who lives her life as she pleases. Vianne fulfills her individual needs and desires and never experiences a morsel of shame or guilt. Nonetheless, Harris neither judges nor condemns Vianne. In contrast, the woman author empowers Vianne and makes her emerge as a healer and savior of these emotionally-starved villagers, who have been taught

and trained to deny life's abundance and ecstasy.

Vianne enthusiastically welcomes each person unreservedly to her chocolate parlor and offers them all her generosity: "*In my profession it is a truth quickly learned that the process of giving is without limits*" (Harris 2000: 39). With her culinary skills and secret chocolate recipes, her friendliness, 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 desire and, more significantly, life's pleasures which they have long overlooked and renounced. Vianne, the wrongly-accused pagan force of darkness and, more specifically, the fallen woman, has turned out to be the source and bearer of light who brings life and love to the town of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes with her sparkling and sensuous confections: "*I can feel satisfaction in its place, a full-bellied satiety ... In homes everywhere ... couples are making love, children are playing, dogs barking, televisions blaring*" (Harris 2000: 318).

In both Vianne and Tita, contemporary popular fiction witnesses a vivid representation of the fallen woman as a central and heroic figure. Furthermore, female identity is defined through the merging of the fallen woman and the New Woman. This modern blend not only blurs the boundary between the ideal woman and the fallen woman but also redefines female sexuality.

In these three novels, Esquivel, Harris and Flagg provide a contemporary narrative pattern to contrast with the myth of the fallen woman by daring to let their fallen women live and prosper. Although their protagonists commit adultery, prostitute

themselves or have illegitimate children, the three authors portray them as self-conscious heroic figures who embody a revolutionary power which both conquers and heals the community where they are no longer outcasts but prove to be worthy and competent members. The novels do not end with penance, repentance or punishment but reverberate different degrees of hope and integration for their fallen protagonists. These best-sellers featuring bad girls as heroines deconstruct the myth of the fallen woman and redefine female sexuality as it truthfully and realistically is. These novels subvert the theory of woman's nature as binary, suggesting that women must not be judged in terms of their conformity to a patriarchal code of sexual behavior but rather in terms of more worthy signifiers such as ability, strength or compassion. As best-selling novels, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* are ideally situated to shape public consciousness and encourage their diverse audiences to question the legitimacy of feminine ideals and redefine female identity and sexuality.

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