

A Heinous Matrifocality: Transgenerational Repression in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

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Abstract

In the domestic landscape of early 20th century Mexico, the home was often seen as a sanctuary of maternal nurturance. However, in Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, the De la Garza ranch functions less as a refuge and more as a site of psychological warfare. This research paper analyzes the character of Mama Elena in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* within the framework of psychoanalytic feminism, specifically drawing upon Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow argues that mothering is not solely a biological role, but also a socio-psychological reproduction of gendered identity. This study argues that Mama Elena symbolizes the figure of the monstrous mother- a matriarchal figure who uses maternal power to nurture and control, thereby propagating patriarchal authority through her daughters. Her emotional repression, authoritarian control, and severing of maternal bonds signify a pathological reproduction of mothering that reinforces gendered oppression rather than providing nurturance. By examining Mama Elena's character, the paper exposes the maternal paradox, where motherhood becomes a medium for social regulation instead of relational empathy. Ultimately, this paper clarifies how "monstrous motherhood" is not simply a narrative monster figure, but a tragic reflection of transgenerational psychic inheritance shaped by rigid socio-cultural constraints.

Keywords: Maternal repression, Monstrous motherhood, Psychoanalytic feminism, Matriarchy, Patriarchy.

Matrifocality in Literature

For centuries, literature and mythology have split the feminine into a powerful duality. The 'nurturer' who is revered as a life-giver, and the 'monster' who is feared for her ability to destroy. These figures represent more than just characters; they are symbols of cultural anxiety. This division reveals how society has historically struggled to balance the idea of womanhood with the reality of power. This binary construction shows cultural instability toward maternal authority, especially when motherhood expands beyond nurturance into power and control.

The Divine Feminine, in particular, is an ancient concept rooted in the idea of the spiritual, selfless mother. The Divine Feminine, symbolizing the 'good mothers', appear in classical literature, Clytemnestra is depicted by Aeschylus as executing her partner, Agamemnon, upon discovering that he offered his daughter, Iphigenia as tribute to the deities. In Greek mythology Demeter is considered as goddess of agriculture and harvest, also represents for her nurturing, fertility, motherhood and the cycles of life and death. One of her most famous myths is the story of Persephone, her daughter abducted by Hades. Demeter's grief reveals how maternal emotion is legalized only when it coordinates with fertility and sacrifice, while maternal anger continues to be culturally uncomfortable. Shakespeare molds a few foster motherly figures who are nurturing and protective, such as Nurse in Romeo and Juliet, but the biological mothers are invisible, dominant, irrational, such as Gertrude in Hamlet. Similarly in *Like Water for chocolate* Nacha seen as a motherly figure who cares and nurture Tita rather her biological mother Mama Elena. This contrast reinforces a literary pattern in which emotional nurturance is displaced onto surrogate figures, while biological motherhood becomes associated with authority, discipline, and repression.

The monstrous feminine emerges early in literature through figures such as Euripides' Medea and Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. Medea and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy are notable examples. In the Ancient Anglo- Saxon epic Beowulf, Grendel's devilish mother almost achieves in murdering Beowulf before he suppresses, slays her. Mothers, who are interpreted as evil and monstrous in classical literature consider their descendants to fulfill their own desires or as hurdles to their satisfaction, without concern for their children. The portrayal of mothers is one of the most important topics in fairy tales. Fairy tales have a specific resistance between

mothers and step mothers. Among numerous fairy tales, stepmothers are usually portrayed as immoral, this is because the stepmother is perceived as taking the place of birth mothers. In many ways, Mama Elena reflects the 'monster mother' of fairy tales. Just as the Queen in Snow White fears displacement by youthful autonomy, Mama Elena perceives Tita's independence as a threat to her authority over the ranch. She turns motherhood into a weapon, stifling her daughter's life to preserve her sense of command. This transition from 'nurturer' to 'oppressor' is what makes her such a haunting figure in the novel. Mama Elena follows this narrative logic, where maternal authority is preserved through discipline and emotional suppression rather than care.

Author Introduction

Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel achieved global recognition through her first novel, *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1989) translated into English as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) by Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen. Laura Esquivel is a celebrated Mexican author. The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* is written under the genre of magical realism, and this genre originated in Latin America. Within the genre of magical realism, the novel blends everyday domestic life with the extraordinary incidents to express suppressed emotions and desires. The novel includes traditional Mexican recipes, enhancing its charm. *Like Water for Chocolate* is inspired by Esquivel's close relationship with her grandmother, who introduced her to cooking as a means of expressing emotion and memory. The novel consists of twelve chronologically arranged chapters, each named after a month and introduced by a recipe from Tita's cookbook. Set in twentieth-century Mexico, the novel explores themes such as love, family, tradition, and the power of food.

Like Water for Chocolate

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel is a story about a girl named Tita, who faces many challenges in her life. Novel *Like Water for Chocolate* begins with an unnamed narrator, who tells the story of Tita's entire story, and narrator recounts that Tita born in the kitchen, and she is the protagonist of the novel. Her mother Mama Elena soon becomes a widow and unable to both nurse and manage the ranch, according to Mexican tradition the last daughter of the family should not get married and also, she has to take care of her mother until her death. Despite this, she falls in love with Pedro, but Tita's mother refuse to accept Pedro and Tita's marriage, and she explain the Mexican culture in detailed manner, instead, Mama Elena encourages Pedro to marry Tita's sister Rosaura, a decision he accepts to remain close to Tita. Throughout the story, Tita expressed her emotions through her cooking, her dishes

have magical effects and those who taste her cooking that magical effects reflect on them. The novel is filled with rich imagery and symbolism. The recipes woven into the narrative that represent Tita's emotions and desires. This novel shows that the food became a form of communication and expression, as well as she realizes that food is a source of console and healing her psyche. This novel unfolds Tita's struggles; she finds some happiness amidst the constraints of Mexican tradition and societal expectations. However, she ultimately finds liberation through her love on Pedro and her connection to food. Esperanza and Alex return to their ranch after their honeymoon and they got shock because the ranch turned into ash along with Tita and Pedro. only Tita's cookbook survives the fire, remaining untouched by the ash. The narrator says that this cookbook handover to Esperanza, she is mother of the narrator and later on this cookbook goes to the hand of narrator, at this moment the narrator's mother passed away. The narrator concentrates on preparing the Christmas rolls for her father, she learns this recipe from her great aunt Tita's cookbook.

Nancy Chodorow's Psychoanalytic Feminism

Nancy Chodorow is most known for her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* published in 1978, and for many of her other essays, in this work she sets out to undo many Freudian assumptions about women and femininity, and to theorize about motherhood from a feminist perspective. Nancy Chodorow's theory of the reproduction of mothering is a pivotal feminist psychoanalytic framework that explores how the mother-child relationship shapes gender roles and perpetuation of mothering across generations. Drawing from psychoanalysis, sociology and feminist theory, Chodorow's work challenges traditional understandings of gender identity and family structure. Her theory argues that the practice of mothering is not biologically determined, but socially constructed and reproduced through emotional, psychological, and relational patterns between mothers and children. Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* also has important implications to understand the relationship between gender and power. By highlighting how gender roles are reproduced through early family dynamics. Her theory shows how patriarchal structures are maintained not only through external social institutions but also through the intimate, emotional dynamics of family. This reproduction of mothering ensures that women continue to take on the primary responsibility for caregiving, creating emotional attachments and psychic conflicts in daughters. Freud centers paternal authority, but Chodorow highlights the maternal relationship as the foundation of subject formation. Chodorow also emphasizes how daughters may seek psychic

separation from their mothers to form independent identities. This struggle is evident in Tita's journey and it requires her to break free from the psychic control and emotional repression imposed by Mama Elena.

Heinous Mother as Mama Elena

Mama Elena, the formidable matriarch in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* is frequently recognized as a "monstrous mother" due to her harsh, authoritarian parenting style and emotional cruelty toward her daughters especially on Tita. When Tita reveals Pedro's marriage proposal to her mother Mama Elena's refusal of Pedro's proposal marks the first demonstration of maternal repression in the novel. Rather than acknowledging Tita's emotional needs, Mama Elena invokes tradition as an unquestionable law: "You know perfectly well that the youngest daughter, you know that is your responsibility to take care of me until the day I die." (Esquivel 14) While this declaration appears cultural on the surface, it functions as a method of psychic control. Mama Elena transforms tradition into a weapon that denies Tita sexual autonomy and emotional fulfillment. This instance reveals how motherhood, instead of offering nurturance, becomes a site of power that reproduces repression across generations. Chodorow argues that mothers often reproduce repression by restricting their daughters' independence in order to maintain authority and manage unresolved desires (134).

Mama Elena's authoritarian control is further manifested through silent treatment and enforced labor, particularly when Tita is compelled to prepare Rosaura's wedding banquet as punishment. The wedding cake episode externalizes Tita's repressed emotions through food, transforming her personal grief into collective affect. While preparing wedding cakes Tita cries into the cake batter until her tears are dry. Nacha finishes the icing and licks some of it. She is overcome with desire, remembering all of the family's weddings and fall sick. At the wedding, the guests eat the cake, they are all filled with the same longings for the lost love and there is a mayhem caused by vomiting and tears. "Everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing" (Esquivel 28). Mama Elena blames Tita for poisoning the cake to ruin Rosaura's wedding and gives her a severe beating.

Corporal Punishment recures as a central theme in Mama Elena's methods towards upbringing her children. Mama Elena enforces a conservative tradition that the youngest daughter cannot marry yet she herself harbored a forbidden love, evident

in the later revelation that Gertrudis is not her husband's child. Her monstrous repression is not simply cruelty, but a form of psychic projection. This repression intensifies through corporal punishment, which replaces emotional communication in Mama Elena's parenting. Chencha, another maid from the ranch, arrives from San Antonio with the bad news of the death of Roberto. Mama Elena commands Tita to not weep, Tita suddenly gets enraged and refuses to follow her orders. Mama Elena slaps Tita with a wooden spoon, breaking her nose and Tita runs away to the dovecote. "Mama Elena went to her, picked up a wooden spoon, and smashed her across the face" (Esquivel 68). This act symbolizes the silencing of grief and the violent suppression of emotional expression. Through this event, Mama Elena's oppressive nature is clearly evident. Mama Elena's character is defined by repression, violence and an obsession with discipline. According to Chodorow, such maternal behaviour reveals how women who internalized repression often express care through control rather than empathy (112). Mama Elena's violence is not arbitrary cruelty; it is the outward expression of a motherhood shaped by denied desire and emotional isolation. Mama Elena dies after the tragedy which was happened in her life and Tita didn't feel sadness. When she unlocks one of the private boxes of her mother and finds a letter which informs her the tragic story of her mother. Tita now weeps feeling that her mother had lived a long life of frustrated love. This is the primary cause behind her harsh behaviour. Mama Elena's past explains her monstrosity.

Even after her death, Mama Elena's authority continues to haunt Tita, emphasizing the transgenerational persistence of maternal control. Her ghostly appearance in the kitchen, followed by cold winds and bodily pain, portrays the internalized nature of maternal repression. While preparing King's Day Bread, Tita suddenly confronted by the ghost of her mother. It was depicted as, "...a strong gust of wind banged the kitchen door wide open, causing an icy blast to invade the room" (Esquivel 157). "The mother's influence is so intense and so primary that it becomes almost indistinguishable from the self" (Chodorow 94). Tita discusses with Pedro about her pregnancy. That night, the ghost of Mama Elena appears, repulsed by the sight of Pedro drinking and singing with Tita. Mama Elena's ghost confronts Tita aggressively, commanding her to leave the house. Tita challenges the ghost, forcing her out with resolute words "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! I hate you; I've always hated you!" (Esquivel 180). This moment signifies psychic

separation where liberation is achieved through physical escape but through the rejection of inherited maternal domination. This confrontation expels the spectral presence of Mama Elena, symbolizing Tita's psychic separation from inherited maternal authority. At the same time, Tita feels transition in her body. Her bloated stomach deflates; her breasts are soothed "The inflammation in her belly and the pain in her breasts began to subside. The muscles at the center of the body relaxed, loosening violent menstrual flow" (Esquivel 180). The ghostly figure of Mama Elena enacted it when she knows the truth of Tita's pregnancy. This ferocity is a visible representation of the perfect power of Mama Elena's retaliation towards Tita when Mama Elena uses her ultimate power is used toward the demolition of Tita's love.

Mama Elena internalizes the patriarchal system and wields it against her own daughters, ensuring that the next generation remains entangled within the same pattern of submission and silence. This reveals how monster mother is not a typically a cruel figure, but a physically and socially constructed one- a woman who has engrossed the traumas and constraints of her culture and transferred them on in deformed, harmful forms. In this way Mama Elena is not simply oppressor but a tragic symbol of inherited repression.

Conclusion

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Mama Elena represents the figure of the monstrous mother, not as a grotesque creature but as a product and perpetrator of patriarchal oppression concealed within matrilineal authority. Her heinous matrifocality is not rooted in inherent cruelty but in the internalization of repression, denied desire, and cultural rigidity. Through Mama Elena, Esquivel exposes the paradox of motherhood as a site of continuity and control where love is displaced by discipline and tradition becomes a mechanism of oppression. This duality makes her both protector and custodian of the domestic space, turning the home into a site of repression rather than residence. Chodorow's theory clarifies that such maternal cruelty is not inborn but socially and psychologically reproduced across generations. Mama Elena's portrayal complicates the maternal ideal by exposing how mothering, under patriarchal and ideological residues, becomes a performance of power rather than nurture. Ultimately, she serves as a tragic symbol of transgenerational trauma, revealing how unresolved maternal suffering is inherited, repeated, and resisted within domestic spaces.

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