Boy loves girl; girl loves boy; so boy marries girl’s sister to prove undying love! *Like Water for Chocolate* is not a conventional love story. This film, directed by Alfonso Arau, is an adaptation of Laura Esquivel’s novel of the same name. Rose Lucas (1994) suggests that the conventionality and subversion of an individual’s socially accepted development occurs simultaneously in *Like Water for Chocolate*, by focusing on the preparation, cooking, serving and consumption of food. At first glance, this film looks to convey the hegemonic position for women by supporting the dominance of patriarchal society. However, the subversiveness of the female character’s actions indicates otherwise, as does the representation of men as secondary or unimportant characters in this text.

Food imagery in cinema is a technique used for characterisation and thematic development (Blodgett 2004). This can be seen in *Like Water for Chocolate* as Tita substitutes an unfulfilling appetite for one that she can control. Through his use of food imagery Arau creates a delicious, passion-filled arena for Tita to function in, thus consoling her for her lost ‘love’ and giving her a space in which to escape the confines of her life. Food, its preparation and consumption is an integral part of societal hegemony. Arau uses an excess of food, as a cinematic style to create meaning beyond the narrative in *Like water for Chocolate*. This simple love story is overlaid by Tita’s ability to inject her emotions and passion into her cooking. This combination of reality and fantasy invites the audience to look deeper into the narrative to discover the rebellion and transcendence of Tita’s behaviour in a conventional setting. Tita’s desires are made manifest in her preparation of food as well as in the reactions experienced by those who consume her cooking. The visual excess is a subversive technique to evoke strong emotions and outplay the simple story (Jaffe 1993). This can be seen in Tita’s ability to inject her emotions and passion into her cooking. This combination of reality and fantasy invites the audience to look deeper into the narrative to discover the rebellion and transcendence of Tita’s behaviour in a conventional setting. Tita’s desires are made manifest in her preparation of food as well as in the reactions experienced by those who consume her cooking. The visual excess is a subversive technique to evoke strong emotions and outplay the simple story (Jaffe 1993).

Women cannot escape the connotations of being ‘a woman’, as constructed by society. The female character in a text either supports or transgresses the connotations of socially accepted behaviour for ‘a woman’ (Downey 1997). However, in the film version of *Like Water for Chocolate*, the normal gendered oppression of women is frustrated by the actions of the women characters. Smelik (2000 p.123) agrees, adding that the film attempts to ‘undo and transform the meanings, images and representations which masculine culture has made of the signifier Woman’. As Lucas suggests (1994), the film embraces traditional images of women and uses them as a transgressive statement.

The kitchen in *Like Water for Chocolate* is paradoxically, an escape and a confinement (Jaffe 1993). This can be seen in Tita’s predicament as the kitchen is an escape for Tita to freely express her emotions and creativity, a place where she is loved, appreciated and nurtured. However, as she is condemned to spend the majority of her lifetime in servitude, the kitchen also acts as her place of confinement. Tita is predestined by tradition never to move from beyond her home, she is condemned to a life of familial servitude. Valdes (1995) contends that marriage is likewise a type of ‘indentured slavery’ for women, and that to survive, women have to transcend the cultivation of their body which means to put aside all the love and passion that their bodies were made for (Jaffe 1993). Tita’s journey of self-discovery is one of subtle subversion. Her sister Gertrudis leaving home to join the fight for independence is an obvious parallel. Tita maintains an outer veneer of obedience to her mother (or the rules of society) while harbouring transgressive thoughts and actions that manifest in her cooking and recipes (Jaffe 1993). The effect of this cooking allows her to reach places that are forbidden to her by her mother and society, from within the confines of conventionality.

Food is recognised as a form of expression, power and control in modern society (Christensen 1992). Food has primal connotations of nurturing and substance, it also carries a variety of psychological, physiological and societal meanings (Harbottle 1997). Mothers who supply mountains of food for family and friends exemplify the use of food as affection and power. In *Like Water for Chocolate* the abundance of food and the elaborate meals denote social status and a form of control. Tita’s sister Rosaria competes for Pedro’s attention by cooking for him, much to the dismay of the family as Gertrudis states “who ever told her she could cook, she has given us all the runs”. The paradox of having the power to satiate hunger and the enslavement caused by the perpetual demand of that hunger aligns with Lucas’ suggestion of both convention and permeability in the preparation of food and cooking in *Like Water for Chocolate* (Blodgett 2004). This paradox can be seen in Tita’s efforts to please her Mother by abiding by her rules but never being able to live up to the demands placed upon her.

Le Count (2001) asserts that the ritual of feasting creates and replicates societal norms and that the nature of mealtime is patriarchal. In *Like Water For Chocolate*, this ritual seems to be reversed, as all food, its preparation and serving is related to, and controlled by women. Every culture features food sharing as a way to signify collective identity and commonality (Harbottle 1997). Furthermore, food is a means of simultaneously indicating both inclusion and exclusion, supporting Lucas’ statement that food can suggest a paradox. This film depicts the subversive event of characters actually eating and savouring food, this consumption is abundant in *Like Water for Chocolate* (Romney 1993). The characters not only sit down to eat, they savour the food Tita has prepared, the audience sees them chewing, tasting, swallowing and reacting to the food, in most films the characters sit at a table, but are rarely seen actually eating or reacting to the food before them.

Food is an integral part of Tita’s sense of self. Due to growing up in the kitchen and surrounded by a loving cook Tita links every emotion to food or its preparation (Christensen 1992). Tita repeatedly tells her Mother’s spiteful friends that the most important ingredient in any recipe, as in life, is ‘love’ a simple fact that they have difficulty understanding (Mondello 1993). Tita explains the ‘feel’ of Pedro’s gaze in culinary terms (the only term she understands), ‘it was then she understood how dough feels when it is plunged into boiling oil. The heat that invaded her body was so real she was afraid she would start to bubble… like batter’ (*Like Water for Chocolate* 1993).This identification with food is a device which represents a female character who is trapped in a society that prohibits the freedom of choice but who uses food and recipes to transgress the norms in her society (Jaffe 1993). Tita’s obsession with food can also be read as an identity problem due to the obsessive nature of her domineering Mother (Blodgett 2004).

This film sees women successfully subverting the patriarchal norms from within this epistemological system (Stavans 1993). Elena, an authorial matriarch, acts to support patriarchy and societal norms, even though she has transgressed them by having an interracial affair. She also transgresses patriarchy as she runs the ranch without men. ‘I’ve never needed one, I’ve managed the ranch and my daughters by myself, besides, men are not that important to the living…’ (*Like Water for Chocolate* 1993).

Chenchca and Nacha are servants with minds and opinions of their own. These women are seen as intelligent and hedonistic, while maintaining a traditionally passive ‘mothering’ quality, usually made insignificant in patriarchal texts (Kaplan 1992). Gertrudis is the most blatantly subversive character. She experiences life as a
The kitchen has long been a site of magic for children, how mothers cooking unites magic and reality, creating magic realism (Stewart 1999). This ‘new way to communicate’ for Tita and Pedro transgresses the norm of the domestic being seen as trivial (Blodgett 2004). In the entire film the only impacts felt from the war are a rape (from which Chencha finds sexual freedom) and the death of Elena (which then allows Tita the freedom to marry). This elevation of women’s rhetoric legitimizes and supports Rose Lucas’ argument. Like Water for Chocolate illustrates Lucas’ belief that she would have accepted Pedro’s feeble explanation. Given the result of elaborate interweaving of memories, actual recipes and historical events (Stewart 1999). In Like Water for Chocolate, Tita’s intimate interaction with food reaches magical magnitude at a rhetoric level (Sanjines 2001). Tita’s cooking serves as a source of power, her food sustains those who love her and poisons those who oppress her (Time 1993). All memories are subjective to the person recounting them, exaggeration and embellishment in family histories is common. Tita’s recollections of the events that resulted from people eating her food are fanciful and indulgent, perhaps the events are exaggerated in the film to provide a contrast to Tita’s controlled and ordered life. However, this magic memory serves to undermine the strict confines of Tita’s life and offers an escape for similarly trapped women. Through, this recollection, Tita again crosses accepted boundaries in society (Stewart 1999).

Tita’s relinquishing of power to her Mother, Pedro and family, is paradoxically a way to validate her individual power at the same time (Downey 1997). Tita’s acceptance of her situation allows her to transgress the limitation from within that situation. Unlike Gertrudis who is outcast from the family, Tita is able to enact her own independence and the independence of Esperanza from within the family. Although Tita returns to serve the family and seemingly to fulfill her duty (thus relinquishing her power), the film suggests that she returns to Pedro as his mistress and to act as an advocate for freedom and independence for Esperanza, thus acting on her individual power to effect change (Jaffe 1993). This transgressive display of speaking out against patriarchal tradition and expectation strengthens Lucas’ stand on the potential for conventional passages to be also be subversive (Kaplan 1992). Like Water for Chocolate has the rebellious heroine embrace her creative expression in the kitchen and step out of this patriarchal trap simultaneously.

The Mexican Revolution for independence of 1910 acts as a backdrop to the main allegory. This is also a parallel discourse to the ‘real’ struggle of Tita to find an independent identity from the one tradition has decreed. The focus on women preparing and cooking food and their domestic conflicts while war rages, transgresses the norm of the domestic being seen as trivial (Blodgett 2004). In the entire film the only impacts felt from the war are a rape (from which Chencha finds sexual freedom) and the death of Elena (which then allows Tita the freedom to marry). This elevation of women’s rhetoric legitimizes and supports Rose Lucas’ argument. Like Water for Chocolate illustrates that the oldest and perhaps most profound revolutions are those that women have been creating in the kitchen since the beginning of time (Time 1993).

Tita returns to conventionality when the ranch is attacked by revolutionaries and when Chencha is raped and her Mother is killed. Downey (1997) contends that Tita is unable to reject the conventionality of her life and society without losing an important part of her identity. Latina women empower themselves by first embracing and subsequently expanding their cultural restrictions. Like Water for Chocolate affirms that women have an essential role in the creation and continuation of society, not just men and the patriarchy (Downey 1997). Throughout the film Tita’s life’s desire is to be a wife and mother. Arau uses this normally traditional restriction as a site of freedom for Tita, again supporting Lucas’ theory.

The men in Like Water for Chocolate are rarely seen, have limited character development and are presented as ‘decorative objects of desire’ (MacLean’s 1993). This film contains subtle ridicule of machismo (Stavans 1993). The hero Pedro is naïve and weak, instead of a dramatic eloacement with the love of his life, he shrugs and marries her sister. Brown (1993) contends that if Pedro was a stronger character the romance narrative would have a bigger impact, as would have the climatic ending. Of course had Pedro been more dominant Tita’s development of identity would have been impaired.

If Tita were a contemporary woman it would be extremely unlikely that she would have accepted Pedro’s feeble explanation. Given the
era in which the film is set, (the 1900s), and the extreme social pressure to conform to the patriarchal law, Tita’s unswerving love for Pedro does have integrity. It is interesting that when she meets and spends time with another man she is diverted and happy. The doctor is a worthy match for Tita; he is supportive and takes her away from her domineering Mother (Christensen 1992).

However, the Doctor’s affection for her food may be the driving force of his passion, as most of his conversations concern how well she cooks, as opposed to his current housekeeper, ‘you haven’t eaten… I don’t blame you… she is a terrible cook’. His Aunt comments on Tita’s value as a wife when she says ‘you are lucky… Tita is not only intelligent but a good cook… you may even gain weight.” This comment may reveal the true focus of his attention (Like Water for Chocolate 1993). The overall portrayal of men in Like Water for Chocolate undermines the traditional and pervasive view ‘of women existing in the margins of a patriarchal society where men occupy the central position’ (Downey 1997 p.140).

The narrator in Like Water for Chocolate, addresses the viewer directly, an unusual form for film (Sanjines 2001). This creates a bond between the text and the audience. Tita (or her recipe book) links the narrator (her niece) with the wisdom and knowledge of her female ancestors. This tradition of passing recipes though the family links the narrator (her niece) with the wisdom and knowledge of her female ancestors. This tradition of passing recipes through the family is found to be acceptable in conventional society (Jaffe 1993). Tita encourages her heirs to add to and create individual recipes of life with the personal and revealing recipe book. The re-appearance of the narrator at the end of the film establishes that this has been a constructed allegory rather than a re-enactment of reality (Sanjines 2001).

Tita’s explicit descriptions of the events following the ‘success’ of her recipes in the recipe book is subversive (Jaffe 1993). It would not be seemly for a young girl to know that her Aunt Gertrudis, after being affected by a particularly erotic dinner, ran naked up the road to be picked up by a soldier, and then made love to him on horseback. This strange scene is surreal and humorous at the same time, creating a space for Gertrudis to embrace her sexual liberation and celebrate her independence (Smelik 2000). It also acts to highlight Pedro’s inability to act, and Tita’s strength in staying in a repressed environment while finding her identity. The recipe book provides the childless Tita with a way to leave a legacy that does not require the services of men. Women have traditionally passed on knowledge through diaries and cookbooks, in this film this action is subversive and a clear threat to the patriarchal society. Instead of children to carry on her ‘legend’, Tita relies on the ‘life’ recipes in her book (Blodgett 2004).

Rose Lucas’ (1994) assertion that the focus on food and cooking in Like Water for Chocolate creates a paradox where conventionality and transgression can simultaneously occur, is well supported by a broad range of experts. Most literature and film critics concur with Lucas’ suggestion that the cinematic styles and visual excess support the subversion of food and its preparation as a conventional oppressed role for women. The kitchen once thought to be a prison like sentence for creative, ambitious women is shown as a place where women come together to empower one another across social class and generational boundaries.

The characters in Like Water for Chocolate also break the rules of traditional connotation, the female characters do not find identity in relation to male characters, they find it in relation to one another and the broader society. The male characters, on the other hand, play the minor and objectified roles that are usually reserved for women. The main character and her development epitomize Lucas’ main argument. Tita’s development within the restrictions of conventionality is the sight of a subtle yet determined fight for freedom and independence.

The rights she fights so hard for, paradoxically, support the patriarchal society of marriage and family for women, but in this film are a site of transgression of familial tradition. This passage of individual growth in Like Water for Chocolate indicates the conventional passage of subjectivity though a social and epistemological system as much as the same process signifies transgression, permeability and a breaking of the rules.

References:


