



Mini Review

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Food Anthropology and National Identity in Mexico, Analysis of the Literary Work of Laura Esquivel

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Abstract

In Mexico, both the field of Anthropology and Gastronomy are fundamental elements in the construction of national identity. Patriotic pride is represented, on the one hand, in the National Museum of Anthropology and History, located in the Chapultepec Forest, and on the other hand in the nomination of the United Nations Organization, in 2010, of Mexican food as heritage Intangible of humanity.

This article will analyze the representation of said identity construction in Laura Esquivel's literature, and how her female characters appropriate spaces and functions traditionally considered as inferior, to support elements considered as superiors such as participation in the construction of the nation.

The Kitchen as a National Space

In the western division of labor, traditionally, domestic spaces are considered to be inferior to public spaces. Food preparation is simply a necessary function for the satisfaction of basic needs. It is also a task that within the family is the responsibility of the feminine elements and generally does not receive any social recognition or financial compensation. Therefore, food preparation belongs to the field of the feminine, the domestic. And the private. In opposition, there are public occupations, particularly policies, which traditionally correspond to the superior masculine element. One of the subversive factors of Laura Esquivel's work constitutes, precisely, the conversion of the kitchen into a battlefield and the affirmation of political identities, displacing the traditional consideration of a private domestic action space, to an action space National public Women who participate in food preparation are part of the active agents that build the Mexican national identity, through the preparation and intake of food.

As can be seen both in *Como agua para chocolate* [1], as in *As Fast as Desire* [2] cooking is the place where women responsible for food preparation exercise their power in defiance of the traditional forces that seek to maintain food preparation within the framework of purely domestic and inferior chores. In *Como agua Tita* uses her power to transform raw materials into exquisite delicacies, as a quasi-magical, but totally corporeal, power in a

constant challenge to her mother's dictatorial attitude. For its part in *So fast*, the kitchen is, again, a battlefield between the pre-Columbian forces and the European colonizers, through dialogues between the Mayan grandmother and the Spanish wife. This constant, veiled battle between women with different levels of power, or between the importance that society artificially attaches to the activities assigned to the sexes, and therefore to the sexes themselves, and equally between cultures considered superior and inferior, constitutes one of the most significant elements in Laura Esquivel's literature. According to Lillo and Sarfati-Arnaud, this management and subversion of roles constitutes a "twist" - in the sense of distorting or distorting understood concepts - that plays with the traditional concept of space and gender and confirms Laura Esquivel's intention to marginalize the center and centralize the margins. It also confirms its intention to grant women occupied in food preparation a central role in the constitution of national identity.

In other words, the author converts the sacred figure of the country and the feeling of citizens for their nation, patriotism, into an entity that is prepared in the kitchen. Laura Esquivel moves the kitchen to the National Museum, or vice versa. When food preparation is constituted in an identity producing artifact, food preparation is positioned at the same level as the National Museum

of History Anthropology. The private, what is car in the pot, in the darkness of the kitchen, becomes part of the public. When food becomes a forging element of national identity, all the elements that make up that nation become part of the nation's political and public space. Traditionally marginalized women, and members of the original nations that prepare food in the Sierra de Oaxaca now form part of those who worldwide contribute to the appointment of Mexican food as a world heritage site.

In other words, this insertion of gastronomy into the national space, right next to the Anthropology Museum, relocates to the domestic space, and particularly to the kitchen, and to the table, at the level of the central spaces. If, as Yankelevich says, the process of preparing food, "meets the double human condition of biological and cultural beings", in the treatment that Esquivel makes of this process, the natural loses the socially assigned negative connotations. The process of preparing food goes from inferior action and close to the natural activities of the human being, to becoming a superior action as is the construction of national identity. This subverts the dualities of Western thought, such as man-woman, positive-negative, high-low, white black, right-left, public-private, civilization-nature, where the first element of duality has an immanently superior character.

Food as a Liberating Agent of the Female Body

On the other hand, along with this subversion of spaces, the subversion of the female body through food is observed. While in the western tradition the prostitute occupies one of the lowest steps of the social ladder, in the Esquivel proposal the escape from Gertrudis and his subsequent entry to a brothel are due to conscious decisions of the character and are cause for annual celebration by Tita. The dish prepared with quail and roses impregnated with the burning blood of Tita, become "pleasure of the gods" [3], motivate the textually overwhelming passion of Gertrudis, and Tita makes it an "offering to the freedom that his sister had achieved" [1].

The return of Gertrudis years later, turned into Generala of the Mexican Revolution, can be considered a kind of alchemical juggling, which Esquivel practices in his work. Since with this conversion Esquivel decreases the pejorative burden that society assigns to prostitution. In addition to making the prostitute a general, by making use of the word "offering", related to gifts and presents that are offered to gods, saints and the spirits of the dead on November 2 in Mexico, it also leads us to think about the syncretic Christianity that exists in Mexico, as well as the confrontation between the Church and the Revolution during the Maximato de Calles, during the years 1928 to 1934. Again, elements considered traditionally low, and unworthy, such as prostitutes, constitute Esquivel, bearers of the highest national value, such as the sacrosanct Revolution, which even today more than 100 years later is a political bulwark and basis for the fourth transformation of the current president of Mexico. With this, I might think that Esquivel For Esquivel, as for Tita, "Gertrudis represented what would be a synthesis between an angelic and an infernal woman" [1]. In addition, he awards as a prize for his release living in a fairy tale, since it is the only one of the

three sisters: (Rosaura, Tita, and Gertrudis herself) who can really be said that her story has a happy ending. She and John Alejándrez, the villista who takes her and with whom he later marries, "lived forever together and spending more time happy than angry" [4].

Regarding the appropriation of the female body as a container of liberating foods, it is of particular importance to mention that some critical studies, such as Claudine Potvin, mistakenly assign Tita health problems related to eating disorders, such as Tita's lack of appetite, and the bulimia that the latter causes in its guests. Potvin attributes these problems to: "The functions of women in Como agua para chocolate are limited to reproducing an economy based on the exploitation of a group, which ensures domestic production centralized in the kitchen metaphor." However, who writes this has sought the source from which these statements arise, and the only reference found is the vomit scene during the wedding of Pedro and Rosaura, which cannot be considered as bulimia, since it is not a self-act caused. Nor is it a repetitive action, nor a pattern of behavior, nor a habit, but something that happens only once. As for the lack of appetite that Potvin mentions, the novel makes multiple mentions to the contrary, precisely to Tita's good appetite, as well as to the importance that food has for her, some examples are enough: "[Tita] confused joy of living with eating" [1]; "For Tita there was no penalty that she could not disappear while eating a delicious Christmas cake" [4]; "Tita [...] always ate very well and not only ate [...] the usual, but also ate jumiles, maguey worms, harassers, tepezcuintle, armadillo ..." [1].

If, with regard to the above, regarding Tita's good appetite, and the absence of bulimia, we add the mentions to Tita's body, starting with the term "monumental" [1] that is used to define a body not precisely Slender, it is possible to think that Potvin makes the mistake of applying current concerns regarding thinness and its consequent digestive disorders (such as anorexia and bulimia) to a historical and social context in which they did not exist, which at the end of the century XIX, and early twentieth century, during the Mexican Revolution, it is definitely appropriate to say that they did not exist. If the conditions of the Mexican population are documented during the Revolution, it is possible to know that most of the civilian deaths were due to lack of food. They would hardly have suffered problems such as lack of appetite or bulimia mentioned by Potvin.

In fact, in Mexican popular culture, a woman "still" even today, is considered more attractive than a very thin woman. Following the novel, the adjective that follows that of "monumental" is precisely "attractive" [1]. Similarly, when Peter imagines Tita's body, he compares it to the only one he had seen naked, Gertrude's: "it sure looked like Gertrude's, not for nothing were sisters" [3], which was round and voluptuous. In the same tonic, the image of the anorexic woman that Potvin condemns Tita does not correspond to the "round piece of calf" [1] that Peter feels like touching [1]. And, it is visible, thus, the vindication of the woman's body: an object of sin, ornament, or simply bearer of pleasure for the man, becoming a subject that generates sensations and pleasure for the

woman herself. In Gertrudis the woman materializes that not only appropriates her body, but also of her sensuality and sexuality, and who decides to become a prostitute until she quenches the thirst for pleasure that has produced the intake of food that contains both unsatisfied desires from Tita as from Pedro. It is Gertrudis the woman who does not have to hide her body, or be ashamed of it, but, on the contrary, she accepts and allows herself to enjoy it. The most curious thing, for the subject of this work is that different researchers, feminists or contrary to feminism, and despite being apparently on different sides of the debate, agree not only to perceive the kitchen space as marginal, but in the need to continue considering it marginal. On the contrary, Esquivel reevaluates this space and proposes to raise it to the level of affirmation and rebellion.

Conclusion

In his works, through the preparation of food, Esquivel not only looks at history, and in particular the National History, with capital letters, from perspectives that are traditionally considered private and inferior: the home, and the kitchen, but, precisely, through the preparation of food, participates and engages those who prepare them as active actors in the construction of national identity and subversion of spaces, by converting the domestic-feminine space, traditionally considered as a space of oppression and submission, in one that serves women for resistance. In this way, both Esquivel and his characters appropriate these spaces and reconstruct them, turning them into spaces for change and transformation. By reevaluating both the kitchen and the action of preparing food, Esquivel builds heterotopies in the sense assigned by Foucault as heterogeneous spaces where different identities coexist and that thanks to this confluence can serve for change and to dissolve or deacralize binary spaces mentioned above and destroy intangible oppositions artificially created by contemporary western thinking. In *Como agua y Tan veloz*, we find the conversion of this space, the kitchen, a feminine space of service to others, into a battlefield. All women who participate in food preparation fight for the preservation of their identity and for the

Hegemony of their needs, their beliefs or their origins: For Doña Itzel, this union, [that of her son with a Spanish woman] was a danger. And the proof was that his grandchildren, with the exception of Jubilee, did not speak Maya, and liked to drink milk chocolate instead of water. Anyone would like to hear the heated discussion that these women were having in the kitchen [...] The most incredible of all was that neither woman was arguing because of chocolate. That was just the pretext [1].

It is obvious that what Mrs. Itzel and Lucha were discussing was precisely the construction and revaluation of their identities, especially those that had been relegated from European colonization. In the case of the Mayan grandmother, Itzel, the kitchen is the only space where she can show her superiority. And again, Anthropology mixes with gastronomy when he tells Lucha: -Look at my girl, for your information, my ancestors built monumental pyramids, observatories, sacred places and knew long before you about astronomy and mathematics, so you don't leave me to come to teach anything, much less how chocolate is taken [2].

Finally, as we have seen, in Esquivel's work, the kitchen is the battlefield where his characters build nation, national identity, and subvert spaces. It also reflects another element of the Mexican national identity, such as the vision of a bronze race, colored like [5-8] that of the land, proudly mestizo and the product of three great aspects, the European, the indigenous and the African. Just as the food is a product of miscegenation, the identity is mestizo and is reflected both in the anthropological monuments, as in the archeological ones, as in gastronomy.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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