

Culinary Rebellion and Embodied Dignity as in *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel

Ms. V. Abiseka¹, Dr. M. Vaijo Latha²

¹Research Scholar, S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012

²Associate Professor, Arignar Anna College, Aralvaimozhi, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012

*Corresponding author: Ms. V. Abiseka, Research Scholar, S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

Received: 01st July, 2026; Revised: 08th July, 2026; Accepted: 15th July, 2026; Available Online: 20th July, 2026

ABSTRACT

Human dignity is one of the most important discourses in literature, particularly in frameworks that deal with oppression, resistance and identity formation. Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* frames the domestic kitchen as a stage, where patriarchal tradition collides with female dignity. Struggle for human dignity due to the early 20th century Mexican family codes is personified through food, recipe and emotion by Esquivel in the novel. Through the character of Tita, the novel explores the psychological trauma and emotional struggles of women trapped within tradition and patriarchy. This paper analyses how Esquivel changes domestic space into a ground of struggle and empowerment through feminist studies, food studies and magical realism. The study states that Tita's struggle represents a universal struggle for human dignity.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Magical Realism, Feminism, Patriarchy, Food, Emotional Resistance.

How to cite this article: Abiseka V, Vaijo Latha M. Culinary Rebellion and Embodied Dignity as in *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(63s):1280-1281. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.63s.126

Source of support: Nil.

Conflict of interest: None

Literature is life and life is literature. Literature often reflects human struggle for dignity against oppression. Magical Realism is a major tool in Latin American narratives to portray emotional suffering and injustice. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel brings magical realism and domestic narrative together to explore the state of women within patriarchal Mexican culture. The novel revolves around Tita De la Garza, whose life is controlled by rigid family tradition. As the youngest daughter, according to Mexican tradition, she is prohibited to marry and is expected to dedicate her life to take care of her mother. Tita's freedom is denied and this becomes a denial of human dignity. Tita is destitute of emotional independence and personal identity.

Tita's suffering is allied with emotional excess and silence. Esquivel states that "Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears." (Esquivel, "January Christmas Rolls"). Tears become emblematic of emotional suppression and suffering that is not recognized. Esquivel presents dignity not as an idea but as an embodied experience. This paper studies how Tita's struggle exposes the theme of human dignity. Through food symbolism, emotional expression and magical realism, Esquivel criticizes matriarchal oppression, while foregrounding female resistance and selfhood.

The most important conflict in the novel is the repressive family tradition imposed by Mama Elena. According to this custom, the youngest daughter of the family should not marry and must take care of her mother till death. This diminishes Tita's existence to domestic enslavement. Mama Elena immediately rejects, when Pedro asks Tita's hand in marriage. "Being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die" (Esquivel, "January Christmas Rolls"). This statement establishes how tradition acts as a device of control. Traditional authority prefers obedience to human dignity and so Tita's wishes and individuality are overlooked. Tradition and custom deny her personal choice and her life is decided by social expectations.

The article, "Feminist Assertion through Magical Realism in Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*" claims that the novel depicts women as scapegoats of patriarchal systems that suppress identity and emotional independence. This study argues that Tita's suffering echoes the wider state of women whose individuality is obliterated through firm social customs. Silenced female experiences are expressed through the approach of magical realism. Mama Elena's controlling behaviour mirrors internalized patriarchy. Being a woman, she reinforces oppressive structures that

reject female

autonomy. Mama Elena tells Tita, “You have no opinion about anything” (Esquivel, “June. Northern Style Chorizo”). Rejecting Tita’s opinion is nothing but denial of human dignity. To deny someone the right to express is to deny their humanity. Mama Elena continuously humiliates Tita and creates trauma and psychological isolation.

Food occupies a major role in the novel and functions as a language of

emotional communication. Tita expresses herself through cooking, when her emotions are denied and silenced. Resistance against authoritarianism is evident through her

recipes. Tita is engulfed with grief during the wedding of her beloved Pedro with her own sister Rosaura. While preparing the wedding cake, Tita’s sorrow enters the cake through her tears. Whoever eats the cake experiences extreme sadness. “The moment they took their bite of cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of

longing” (Esquivel, “February. Chabela Wedding cake”). Food becomes a medium through which Tita’s concealed suffering is transferred collectively.

The article “Food is an Emotion: A Reading on How Food Influence Our Mind in the Novel *Like Water for Chocolate*” explains that food in the novel operates as psychological and emotional language. The novel uses culinary practices to embody repressed feelings and emotional trauma. Despite external subjugation, Tita’s individuality is preserved through her cooking. Similarly, the article “Food as

Signifier: A Semiotic Analysis of *Like Water for Chocolate*” interprets food as an archetype of expressing emotional and cultural meaning. Domestic labour is

s (IJELLH), vol. 6, no. 9, 2018.

transformed into a form of self-expression. Tita retrieves her dignity by expressing her feelings that have been suppressed by her family and society.

Like Water for Chocolate presents a powerful exploration of human dignity within society. Tita’s experiences establish, how emotional suppression, enforced obedience and repudiation of autonomy lead to psychological suffering and loss of identity. Nevertheless, the novel also reveals that dignity can be cultivated through

emotional expression, resistance and self-realization. The novel transforms domestic space into a site of empowerment and food becomes the language of humanity,

magical realism and freedom. Therefore, Tita’s struggle represents a universal human quest for dignity, freedom and identity.

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Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanitie