

# ***LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE: The Rewriting of the Female Experience and Its Parallels in Philippine History***

■ **MARIKIT TARA ALTO UYCHOCO**

Marikit Tara Alto Uychocho is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English and Comparative Literature in the University of the Philippines Diliman. In the past, she has also taught in the Ateneo de Manila University, the De La Salle University and the University of Asia and the Pacific. She is studying for her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She is married and has three sons.

## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and reads the novel using the literary theories of the "new *mestiza*," postcolonial theories, feminist theories, and historiographic metafiction. It seeks to find out how this novel rewrites the female experience of the Mexican Revolution, and the various techniques used in the rewriting of history. It reads the novel from a "new *mestiza*" feminist perspective, which enables the Filipina reader to find commonalities in the Mexican woman's struggle in Mexican history and society, and finds ways to help her appreciate the Filipina's struggle in Philippine history and society. The theories of historiographic metafiction are grounded in Linda Hutcheon's theories about historiography, or the writing of history, and metafiction, or fiction that makes us aware of the craft of fiction. The theories regarding the "new *mestiza*" consciousness are from Gloria Anzaldua. This is a feminist theory that is contextualized on the historic oppression of women during Spanish colonization and its resulting patriarchal structures in society, and how women can seek to free themselves from such residual structures. Finally, the article touches upon a Filipina feminist perspective on the novel and what it signifies for the Philippine female experience.

Keywords: historiography, metafiction, feminism, new mestiza, Laura Esquivel, 'Like Water for Chocolate'

In every woman's life, there is a shadow woman waiting for her, a stereotype created by society and set by historical precedent. It is up to every woman to choose whether to follow the stereotype she was given, or to fight against it in different ways. In Laura Esquivel's book (1989), *Like Water for Chocolate*, this choice is illustrated in the actions of the female characters in the novel, and is further heightened in the rewriting of traditional women's roles in Latin American literature. I was struck by the many parallels between the women in the novel and the experiences of women in Philippine society. Filipino women can find many commonalities in the Mexican novel when it comes to our struggle against patriarchal structures and beliefs; this comes from our similar experiences of Spanish colonization and its accompanying Catholic dogma.

The *problematique* of this paper will tackle the following questions. How are Mexican history and the Mexican Revolution reclaimed for women in the novel *Like Water for Chocolate*? How are patriarchal structures in Mexican society explored and ultimately subverted in the novel? How can a feminist reading of *Like Water for Chocolate* move towards a postcolonial reading of the text? And finally, what can a Filipina feminist learn from the struggles that are part of the Latin American female experience, and how can these lessons be applied to the Philippine female experience?

### ***A Filipina Feminist Reading a Latin American Woman's Text***

The question regarding my positionality as a Filipina woman reading a Latin American text can be answered by Gloria Anzaldua's critical essay (1987), "From Borderlands/*La Frontera*: The New *Mestiza*." She writes that there is a need for a new consciousness among women, which she calls "a new *mestiza's* consciousness" (77). This new *mestiza's* consciousness is one which reads and appreciates the struggles of different women in different cultures. She writes that, "This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions.... She reinterprets history, and using new symbols, she shapes new myths...." (82). The new *mestiza* is able to juggle various identities, perspectives, and ideologies in order to make something new. Anzaldua also writes that, "The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power.... our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people" (87).

Related to this is Caren Kaplan's "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting on Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse" (1987). Central to this theory is the idea of the doubling of one's vision, which is the ability to see from the margins as well as from the center; this doubling of vision is also seen from one culture to another. According to Kaplan, this creates the following:

...an understanding of what connects us as well as how we are different from each other.... Exploring all the differences, keeping identities distinct, is the only way we can keep power differentials from masquerading as universals. We will have different histories, but we will often have similar struggles. To recognize with whom we need to work instead of against is a continual process. (364)

Kaplan also writes about Michelle Cliff's experience of finding this "postcolonial feminist space," and Cliff in turn imagines "an archive where historians [women] are restoring 'details of an unwritten past'" and "names the threat to this vision of postcolonialist feminist space: 'slicers/suturers/invaders/abusers/sterilizers/infibulators/castraters/dividers/enclosures...'" (Kaplan 367). Cliff's metaphor for this feminist deterritorialization is a garden, "where the parameters are fluid, there are no 'slicers' or 'dividers' here." According to Kaplan, this is a new location in feminist poetics, as it is "not a room of one's own, not a fully public collective self, not a domestic realm – it is a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements of in between....space where writing occurs without loss or separation. It is 'next-to' or juxtaposed, to the other plots of postmodern fictions and realities" (367-368).

As a Filipina feminist reading this Latin American text, I found several startling parallels between the history of the Philippines and Mexico, and I have found that there are common liminal spaces between us. This new location of feminist poetics helps us see the shared lineages and struggles of women, and reveals how they can go against their oppressors. Laura Esquivel's use of historiographic metafiction is a method that can help in the reimagining and recreation of Filipino history and fiction using a female perspective. This is especially true when one looks at the novel using Anzaldúa's "The New *Mestiza*" perspective.

### ***The New Mestiza***

There are many parallels between the female experiences of Mexico and the Philippines. Both countries have been heavily influenced by Spanish and American cultures, since they were both colonized by Spain for 300 years, and both have had close ties with the United States of America.

This influence can be seen in Anzaldua's discussion on "Cultural Tyranny":

Culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them.... The culture expects women to show greater acceptance and commitment to the values system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males.... For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. (16-17).

Another similarity can be seen in the close family ties found in both cultures, and how this can oppress women:

Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships. The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin – as sister, as father, as *padrino* – and last as self.... In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness is considered a virtue. (Anzaldua 18)

The cultural tyranny that Anzaldua describes applies to the Philippine setting as well. These tropes can be seen in *Like Water for Chocolate*. The novel's manner of illustrating and then subverting the cultural tyrannies stated above is an exercise of female empowerment found in several elements of the novel, such as character, point of view, and the use of historiographic metafiction.

### ***Postcolonial Readings and Historiographic Metafiction***

Several postcolonial critics have written that there is a need to have alternative views of the past. One such writer is Stuart Hall, who asserts that:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past.... Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.... It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. (225)

Secondly, Linda Hutcheon has written many important texts regarding historiographic metafiction. She posits that historiographic metafiction, or fiction that is aware of the writing of history and that is consciously rewriting history in fiction, does so to make a point about how history has silenced so many marginal voices in the past. She writes about the novel *Foe*, which retells the story of Robinson Crusoe from a female perspective, and writes that "*Foe* reveals that storytellers can certainly silence, exclude and absent certain past events – and people – but it also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century?" She writes that works of historiographic metafiction "openly assert that there are *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others' truths" (107).

She also writes that "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110). In direct contradiction to the historical novel, historiographic metafiction's protagonists are the "ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history...." (114). Historiographic metafiction "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" and "acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today" (114).

Furthermore, Hutcheon writes that "Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to write the past in a new context" (118). In effect, the rewriting of the past is a reclamation of it. The true importance of historiographic metafiction has to do with cultural representation and identity. As Hutcheon writes, there is the "issue of narrativity.... We can

only know 'reality' as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it" (121).

Lastly, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo clarifies the importance of historiographic metafiction as counter-memory. She quotes Brenda Marshall, who writes, "The postmodern awareness is that both history and literature are discourses, and thus not to be talked of in terms of truth, as much as 'whose truth'. History then, in Foucault's terms may become 'counter-memory': the process of reading history against its grain, of taking an acknowledged active role in the interpretation of history rather than chronicles it" (120).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel was able to reclaim the Mexican Revolution for women, whether they were in the battlefield or in the home. One of these reclamations is in the narration of the *La Soldaderas*, or the female soldiers of the revolution. Esquivel goes against the grain by giving them their proper place in history instead of seeing them merely as highly sexualized women. For a Filipina reader, this creates a "doubled vision," as this is similar to the historic misrepresentation and/or marginalization of *katipuneras* in the Philippine Revolution, and for countless other women in Philippine history as well.

### ***The Women of Like Water for Chocolate***

As cited earlier, Anzaldúa mentions that women are the chief transmitters of patriarchal culture. This is seen as their primary duty as both mother and/or wife. This trope is present in *Like Water for Chocolate* in the characters of Mama Elena and Rosaura. They both believe in, and try to implement, a repressive family tradition in which the last daughter of the family is not allowed to marry; it is understood that this daughter will be the person to care for their mother until she dies.

Laura Esquivel has discussed the characters in terms of patriarchy, female oppression, and empowerment. In an interview with Claudia Loewenstein, she mentioned the following:

I chose the mother to represent this hierarchy that you speak of. As the head of the family, she transmits the tradition, because I find it extremely important that the mother is the one who transmits traditions and values to the children. Some people think of the mother, Elena, as being a repressive figure, but instead I see the mother as being equal to the masculine world and masculine repression, not feminine. (n.p.)

Esquivel further explained the importance of each of her female characters, and that “I wanted the three sisters to represent three different attitudes...” (n.p.) which parallel three different ways of handling the cultural tyranny found in Mexican culture. In the novel, Mama Elena heads the family of three sisters – Rosaura, Gertrudis and Tita. Rosaura is the second daughter, and she believes in her mother’s traditions and obeys her mother, even when it comes to marrying her sister’s sweetheart. After she gives birth to a daughter, Rosaura also wants her daughter to take care of her until the day she dies. Because of this, she carries on the oppressive tradition and is part of a patriarchal system that transmits oppressive beliefs and practices through the unit of the family.

Gertrudis, on the other hand, is the oldest daughter. After Mama Elena dies, Tita finds out from her mother’s diary that Gertrudis is actually her half-sister, as Gertrudis’s father, José Trevino, was a mulatto. When Mama Elena’s parents found out about the affair, they were horrified and forced Mama Elena to marry Juan De la Garza, Tita’s and Rosaura’s father. Gertrudis is a strong character in the novel. She is first caught by her strong desires, fuelled by a dish cooked by Tita, and becomes a prostitute in order to quench them. She then joins the rebel army of Pancho Villa, and by virtue of her heroism and courage, goes up the ranks to become a general. She is a character fuelled by her strength and her desire, which could easily be misrepresented and condemned as selfishness and lust. In her interview, Esquivel says that “Gertrudis represents the first stage of feminism, breaking away, total sexual liberation, in fact a masculinization. She goes out and becomes a part of the revolution...” (n.p.).

Tita, the youngest of the sisters and the daughter doomed to take care of her mother until she dies, is the protagonist of the novel. In the end, she finds a way to create change within the system of the family. Her cooking is magical and has an effect on the people who eat her food. Somehow, this is a commentary on how domestic chores in the house can affect the household in a significant way, creating a magical liminal space within the confines of the kitchen. In the same way, her inner strength and creativity make her victorious over Mama Elena and Rosaura, and, as Esquivel mentioned in her interview, “Tita makes her own revolution in the family environment...” (n.p.). She does not emerge solely as a romantic figure, but also as a woman who cares deeply for her family and everyone’s welfare. She is able to find her own power in the kitchen, and then in the whole family, despite the patriarchal structures that have ruled it for so long.

### *Mixed Genres and Like Water for Chocolate*

A combination of genres and the mixing together of tradition and novelty can be seen in *Like Water for Chocolate*. According to Janet Jaffe, these two genres are geared specifically for women, an audience in Latin American culture negatively called *loctores-hembra*. Although this is usually used as a derogatory term, prone to patronizing sentimental and romantic writing, Laura Esquivel was able to subvert the expectations of the genres, hence empowering the female characters in her novel (218).

Jaffe writes that the novel brings together two genres, the *folletin* and the cookbook. The *folletin* is a serialized romance found in women's magazines, which has episodic romantic plots and melodramatic effects. Every chapter concludes with a crisis resolved and a meal completed "only to precipitate another unforeseen occurrence and accompanying dish" (221). "To be continued" closes every chapter and mentions the next recipe, as if it were the event in the next chapter.

The cookbook, on the other hand, is used in an innovative way; the genre itself reaches out to women in different cultures. According to Jaffe, one cannot truly understand the novel unless one has been in a woman's shoes or, alternatively, her kitchen, and this is seen in the example of the opening chapter, which discusses the annoying phenomenon of eyes tearing up due to the chopping of onions. Because of this tapping into a common experience that women go through, it is as if Esquivel is reaching out towards women of all classes and races. According to Jaffe, the use of the cookbook is "embedded discourse," and that this is a "predominantly feminine narrative strategy that like recipe's root in Latin, *recipere*, implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver" (222). She writes that Esquivel's use of this genre in her novel creates "a loose community of women that crosses the social boundaries of class, race, and generation" (Leonardi, qtd. in Jaffe 222). *Like Water for Chocolate* also calls itself "A Novel in Monthly Installments," which according to Jaffe alludes to the *folletin*, and to menstruation as well.

Since Tita's domain in *Like Water for Chocolate* is the kitchen, her recipes take on a historical quality, as according to the narrator, her recipes are a family legacy that have endured "since pre-Hispanic times." According to Jaffe, "The tradition which Tita carries on is an oral one, learned experientially; however, with the death of Nacha [her beloved Indian cook], Tita recognizes the fragility of a dying art" (223). She also writes that, "Implicit in Tita's salvaging of Nacha's recipes in their context is a sense of the art of recipe narration as 'embedded discourse'" (223).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, the kitchen, according to Jaffe, is symbolic of “confinement and escape” (224). Tita is angry that she is being confined in the domestic sphere, as the daughter who is tasked to take care of her mother until death, and yet, her skill and inventiveness in cooking empowers her and, to a certain extent, is a way to escape her mother’s domineering clutches. Hence, according to Jaffe, “Under Tita’s dominion, then, the kitchen evolves as a space not only of domestic activity but of feminist rebellion” (225).

### ***The Use of Historiographic Metafiction in Like Water for Chocolate***

The last paragraph of the novel reminds us that this story was read from Tita’s cookbook by her great grandniece, with Tita’s marginal notes about the events occurring around the recipes. This use of the cookbook as embedded discourse also gives way to an alternative history about Mexico and the Mexican Revolution from a female perspective. Hence, the importance of Tita in the novel is that she is not just a carrier of the oral history of past recipes, but she is also a historian writing her own notes about the events that happened at that time.

This embedded discourse then opens up an alternative view of history. Through the use of Tita’s cookbook, we are able to see the events before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution using a female perspective. In addition, the novel is an example of historiographic metafiction because it constantly alerts the reader about what may or may not be true when it comes to official historical records. The novel explicitly mentions that there are many truths, and that there are varying interpretations of an event depending on where you stand. When Gertrudis realizes her sexuality and is literally taken away and is made love to by one of Pancho Villa’s men, Juan, the narrator writes:

They were going so fast that the escort following Juan never caught up with him. Liars tell half-truths and he told everyone that during the battle the captain had suddenly gone crazy and deserted the army.

That is the way history gets written, distorted by eyewitness accounts that don’t really match the reality. Tita saw the incident from a completely different perspective than the rebel soldiers. (52)

In this way, the novel is being self-reflexive about history and narrativity, and since it is Tita's version which is being told, it is history told from a female perspective. This metafictional element underscores the postmodernist stance regarding layered truths, which can also be seen in how Tita lies to Mama Elena about what happened to Gertrudis: "She settled on a version in which the Federal troops, which Tita hated, had swooped down on the ranch, set fire to the bathroom, and kidnapped Gertrudis" (55).

There are also many truths and lies told about the revolutionaries, and although in the plot they are portrayed as noble and occasionally funny when it comes to their actions, the stories surrounding them paint them very differently. For example, Chenchu, Tita's maid, regales Tita about how vicious the revolutionaries are: "she might have enjoyed getting carried away by Chenchu's ridiculous story, and wound up believing her lies, even the one where Pancho Villa removes his enemies' bloody hearts so he can devour them, but not today" (66). According to Mama Elena, "No one had ever had anything good to say about these revolutionaries – and obviously what she had heard could scarcely be unreliable, since she'd gotten it from Father Ignacio and the mayor of Piedras Negras. They had told her how the rebels entered houses, destroyed everything, and raped all the women in their path" (84-85). It is interesting to note that Mama Elena trusts the traditional sources of history – the church and the government – which are traditionally written and recorded by males, furthering her function as a transmitter of patriarchal ideologies.

Finally, Gertrudis, who has moved from being a prostitute to a general in the revolutionary army, tells Tita, "The truth! The truth! Look, Tita, the simple truth is that the truth does not exist; it all depends on a person's point of view" (184). In *Like Water for Chocolate*, the truths that prevail, and hence the history that is narrated, come from the female characters, which is a way to reclaim history for Mexican women.

Gertrudis, in particular, is a character that shows how Esquivel is participating in the rewriting of history from a female perspective. Gertrudis is a rewriting of the role of *La Soldaderas*, or soldier-women, in the Mexican Revolution. According to Jandura, *La Soldaderas* helped the men in the frontlines and also helped by doing the other "thankless" tasks needed in fighting, but, "because of women's lower class standing, male historians have often omitted information about many of these spectacular women. The legends of these women have been [popularized and] romanticized by male storytellers, making them seem more like sexual beings rather than heroes" (n.p.). However, this romanticization of the soldier-women took

away their just due. According to Jandura, these soldier-women “were *mestizas* or Indian women, including schoolteachers and wives of soldiers who had nowhere to go. They were both educated and uneducated, rich and poor. Many *soldaderas* went into battle with their children on their backs. *Soldaderas* showed just as much courage as their male counterparts during combat” (Jandura n.p.).

Gertrudis emerges as an important character in the story, who eventually becomes famous for her courage in battle, and settles happily with Juan, whom she met in Pancho Villa’s army. Furthermore, Gertrudis had an uphill battle when it came to finding her place in Mexican society. As cited earlier, she was secretly fathered by a mulatto, and, early in the novel, her unquenchable desire had relegated her to becoming a prostitute. It was by sheer courage and personal strength that Gertrudis was able to join and eventually become a *generala* in Pancho Villa’s army. This is an important development, as Esquivel flips the condemnation towards female lust and selfishness (which portrays woman as prostitute) and turns it around to feminine courage and strength (woman as warrior).

This reclaiming of the past through the character of Gertrudis rewrites history for women and places the female experience at the center of history rather than in the margins. *La Soldadera* is not merely sexual, but is portrayed as a strong female who is ready to fight for her country. This is revolutionary, as the female’s strength is seen through the lens of history and nation rather than being confined solely to the home.

Hutcheon also writes that we can only know the past from “its traces, its relics,” and this is also shown in *Like Water for Chocolate*. In the novel, Tita finds out why Mama Elena has been so harsh after reading Mama Elena’s diary and a packet of letters from José Trevino:

Tita put them in order by date and learned the true story of her mother’s love. Jose was the love of her life. She hadn’t been allowed to marry him because he has Negro blood in his veins. When Mama Elena’s parents discovered the love that existed between their daughter and this mulatto, they were horrified and forced her into an immediate marriage with Juan De la Garza, Tita’s father... During the funeral Tita really wept for her mother. Not for the castrating mother who had repressed Tita her entire life, but for the person who had lived a frustrated love. (134-135)

This compassion which Tita extends to her mother comes from the alternate history she is able to resurrect from her mother's diary and letters. It is also interesting to note how this alternative history saves Gertrudis's marriage with Juan, as she is the daughter of the mulatto and gives birth to a mulatto baby: "Then Tita, to save the marriage, told them everything. It was fortunate she had not dared to burn the letters since now her mother's 'black past' served to establish proof of Gertrudis's innocence" (177). In the characters of Tita and Gertrudis, we can see how history is rewritten for those in the kitchen and in the battlefield of the Mexican Revolution.

Rosaura, on the other hand, as the sister who desires to carry on the oppressive tradition of youngest daughters taking care of their mothers, stands in as a patriarchal woman. However, with the affair between her husband, Pedro, and her sister, Tita, in the same household, she also insists on an alternative history. She gathers what dignity she has left when she says, "As far as I'm concerned, I couldn't care less if you and Pedro go to hell for sneaking around kissing in every corner. From now on, you can do it all you want. As long as nobody finds out about it, I don't care....but here's the thing: in this house I intend to go on being his wife. And in the eyes of everyone else, too" (208). Again, this is a play between what may be true or false in official documents. Officially, Pedro and Rosaura are husband and wife; however, in truth, Pedro and Tita are lovers and true partners in the household. This interplay between what official records say to be true and what is actually true in real life is a way to subvert official versions of history.

Using the tools of historiographic metafiction, Laura Esquivel is able to rewrite the experiences of the women in the kitchen and the women in the frontlines of the Mexican Revolution. For Tita, this is reclaimed in the embedded discourse of the cookbook, and she becomes the historian of the family. For Gertrudis, this is reclaimed in the actual telling of the story and the issue of narrativity; when we think of the women in the frontlines of the Mexican Revolution, we think of brave Gertrudis and her impressive skills as a *generala*. This works admirably well in creating a counter-memory to the male historical view that would marginalize the soldier-women of the Mexican Revolution.

She also shows us alternative views of history gleaned from non-traditional sources of history, such as the cookbook, marginal notes, diaries, and letters, therefore showing us how it is possible to resurrect history from the margins, and, in particular, a female perspective of history from varied and often marginalized sources.

### *Doubled Vision: A Filipina Feminist Reading of the Novel*

Reading *Like Water for Chocolate* with a *La Mestiza* perspective, it is interesting to note the many commonalities between the female experience in the Philippines and the female experience in Mexico. Like *La Soldaderas* of Mexico, the female fighters of the *Katipunan* are marginalized in our own history books and popular culture. They are mostly remembered as the wives of the *katipuneros* (the Philippine revolutionaries against Spain) rather than the fighters that they were.

For example, Teresa Magbanua was one of the first people to join the revolution when it broke out in Iloilo in 1898, and she was given command of a bolo battalion to fight against the Spaniards. She was the commander of many battles, such as the Battle of Barrio Yatin and the Battle of Sapong Hills (Quizon n.p.). Teresa Magbanua, according to Aida Santos, “wielded her bolo (a short-bladed weapon associated with the revolutionary forces) courageously against the Spanish and procured arms for the revolution; inevitably, she bore the unusual-sounding sobriquet *babaing-lalaki* (the female man)” (28). She joined the actual fighting and was eventually appointed as quartermaster by no less than General Emilio Aguinaldo himself (Santos 29).

Even before the Philippine Revolution, there were female freedom fighters who went up against the Spaniards. One of the most inspiring was Gabriela Silang who, after her husband, Diego Silang, died, continued the struggle for freedom and led an army of 2,000 men (Martinez n.p.). According to John Witeck, she “established the ‘Free Government of the Ilocos’ in northern Luzon” (7). She won and lost many battles against the Spaniards, and her men were considered to be “the most defiant among the rebels” (Martinez n.p.). She was tortured and publicly hanged in 1763, after watching her own men go through the same (Witeck 7). According to Martinez, “Gabriela is referred to as the ‘Joan of Arc’ of the Philippines. But, sadly she is not that well-known or highly venerated in the Philippines like Rizal or Bonifacio. Except for a group advocating women’s rights bearing her name, Gabriela is known merely as Diego’s wife and a woman general who took over when he died” (n.p.).

In fact, the Filipina as woman warrior has a long history, beginning with the *babaylan*, who started out as “priestesses skilled in the healing arts and often acting as matriarchs” (Witeck 6) and who eventually led rebellions against the Spaniards from 1596 to 1780. According to Milagros Guerrero, among the *babaylans* that led these battles were that of Dapungay of Cebu,

Negros, and Panay in 1599, and Yga, alias "Santa Maria," in Gapan Nueva Ecijia in 1648 (qtd. in Araneta). These babaylan were eventually vilified and oppressed by the Spaniards, but some believe that they have survived in certain religious sects in Mount Banahaw, such as the "Cuidad Mistica de Dios" that was founded by Suprema Maria Bernarda in 1915 (Araneta). This same female fighting spirit was also ignited when women joined the guerilla fighters against the Japanese in World War II (Lanzona 3-5).

These images of Filipinas as fighters for the nation have not been given the same status of the Filipina as mother and wife. It has not even reached the status of the Filipina woman as prostitute or nun, the other two options delineated by Anzaldua in her discussion of cultural tyranny.

This doubled vision of *La Soldadera* and the Filipina freedom fighter shows us how women can reclaim territories which have been claimed by men in history, through a reimagining and recreation of history in historiographic metafiction. *Like Water for Chocolate* and its use of historiographic metafiction can show the way, so to speak, of how one can reclaim history for the Filipina as well. Philippine fiction and history would profit from the reimagining and reclamation of history through a female perspective; this would include but not be limited to the pre-Hispanic priestesses or the *babaylan*, the *katipuneras* against colonial Spain, the innumerable female underground fighters against martial law, the female guerillas of World War II, the nuns who stood in front of tanks in the 1986 People Power Revolution, and other women who have gloriously participated in Philippine history only to be pushed to the shadows of the nation's memory. This female reclamation of history would not only be their just due, but would fulfill an important need for a change of ideology from the still conservative ideologies of many men and women in Philippine society.

Like the women in *Like Water for Chocolate*, the women in the Philippines also live in a patriarchal system inherited from Spanish colonization and its accompanying Catholic norms and beliefs. This is seen in hard realities, as the Philippines is the only country that has not legalized divorce. This is seen in the current heated debate on whether Filipinas should have access to reproductive health and education, as espoused by the reproductive health bill, and the Church's impassioned stand against artificial contraception and sex education. Patriarchal norms and beliefs are still alive and well in Philippine society, despite how far women have progressed in this country. This is seen most particularly in the home, where mothers and daughters can become transmitters of patriarchal beliefs, and where female oppression is still felt by the silent majority. This use of the home as patriarchal institution

is tackled in *Like Water for Chocolate*, in which the institutionalization of patriarchal beliefs in the home uses the function of the mother. This can show many Filipinas that this takes place in their own homes.

In the end, the subversion of this patriarchal system in Laura Esquivel's novel shows us how to subvert the patriarchal systems in our context as well. It is in the mixing of genres, the self-knowledge and self-reflexivity about the nature of history, and, finally, the fitting in the gaps of history that empowerment can begin. This then becomes a recipe for all women to attempt to allow those who have been traditionally silenced to speak. Instead of being content with the stereotypes foisted upon them by society, women can instead subvert these stereotypes and rewrite their fates for the benefit of female empowerment. Instead of ignoring and relegating Filipina heroism as the function of the wife/mother, we should be able to give new life to their heroism in reimagined stories, and let them speak and reclaim their places in history.

As a Filipina mother, wife, and teacher, I have seen and heard many true stories about female oppression in the home. I can testify that the mother is an important transmitter of culture, and in many cases, this culture happens to be patriarchal in nature. In the end, it is every woman's choice to become a Mama Elena, a Rosaura, a Tita, or a Gertrudis. Each of these women tells us that we have the power to shape our destinies, to mold our children, and eventually, to influence a nation. Reading *Like Water for Chocolate* shows us the limited choices that our culture has given us and how we can expand and shape them into more empowered choices in society.

#### **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being... we would argue that post-colonial studies are based in the 'historical fact' of European colonialism, and the diverse material effects to which this phenomenon gave rise" (2).

## WORKS CITED

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- Araneta, Gemma Cruz. "Landscape: Silencing the Babaylan." *Global Balita*. 13 Aug. 2008. Web. 15 June 2012.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. "Introduction." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. Trans. Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1989. Print.
- . Interview with Claudia Loewenstein. "Revolucion interior al exterior: An interview with Laura Esquivel." *Southwest Review* 79.4 (1994): 592-607.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Jaffe, Janice. "Hispanic American women writers' novel recipes and Laura Esquivel's *Como Agua Para Chocolate*." *Women's Studies* 22.2 (1993): 217-230. Print.
- Jandura, Tereza. "Revolutionary Mexican Women: Women and the Mexican Revolution." Web. 22 March 2011.
- Kaplan, Caren. "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 187-98. Print.
- Lanzona, Vina. *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex, and Revolution in the Philippines*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. Print.
- Martinez, Manuel. *Assassinations and Conspiracies (From Rajah Humabon to Imelda Marcos)*. Pasig: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2002. Print.
- Pantoja-Hidalgo, Cristina. *A gentle subversion essays on Philippine fiction in English*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998. Print.
- Quizon, Mona Lisa. "Teresa Magbanua: The Visayan Joan of Arc." *National Historical Commission of the Philippines*. 2011. Web. 15 June 2012.
- Santos, Aida. "Do Women Really Hold Up Half the Sky?: Notes on the Women's Movement in the Philippines." *Gender, Culture, and Society*. Ensha Womans University Press, 2004. Web. 15 June 2012.
- Witeck, John. "Women as Warriors: The Philippine Revolutionary Context." *Navigating Islands and Continents: Conversations and Contestations in and around the Pacific*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000. Web. 15 June 2012.