



## LAURA ESQUIVEL: AN UNPARALLELED MEXICAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Laura Esquivel, a woman of versatile genius and achievements, is one of the contemporary and the most prolific Mexican women novelists of the twentieth century. Esquivel merged folk stories, magical realism, culinary elements, sensuality and strong Hispanic feminist perspective in her writing by individualizing her style and story. Laura Esquivel has amalgamated Mexican women's chronicle in her works through the optic of a prior linked always with the present; women's critical role in the survival of communities through food preparation, knowledge of ecology, natural healing and women's confrontations with collective and individual trauma.*

*This paper entitled "Laura Esquivel: An Unparalleled Mexican" analyses Laura Esquivel's progressive rebellion of the concept "New Man". On the other hand it expresses how the author foregrounds an abstract idea of New Man in her novels. The New Man is the prototypical individual could be identified as neither man nor woman but represents wholeness and unity of the human community as well as the gendered stigmas of the past and the present. To put in other words, this unique term reveals the remedy for the individual and society to reconcile from the atrocities of cultural heritage. Through this creative concept, Esquivel inspires human how to accomplish mental balance and imparts certain facts regarding resiliency. On the whole, this paper integrates the positive attitudes to the reader's community by explicating such empowering roles.*

### INTRODUCTION

*No one who loves life can ignore literature and no one who loves literature can ignore life.*  
- Esquivel

Laura Esquivel, the Princess of modern Latin literature, is one of the contemporary and the most prolific Mexican women novelists of the twentieth century. She mainly wrote in Spanish and translated her creations into English. Her English renderings is called transcreations. Laura Esquivel's novels, essays, screenplays are permeated with a rich fund of



creative imagination. Esquivel is fraternized with the boom femenino, a profusion of writing by Mexican female authors about subjects related to women that reached its peak in the 1980s. Laura Esquivel, a woman of versatile genius and achievements, move beyond the domesticity of boundaries.

Laura Esquivel was born on September 30, 1950, in Mexico City, the daughter of Julio Caesar, a telegraph operator and Josephine Esquivel. Laura Esquivel began writing when she was working as a Kindergarten teacher. Esquivel became increasingly involved in Children's theatre workshops and wrote plays for her students. Famed Mexican director Alfonso Arau, who was then husband, encouraged Esquivel to continue writing and trained her to write screenplays.

Laura Esquivel, an award winning novelist, has amalgamated Mexican women's chronicle in her works through the optic of a prior linked always to the present; women's critical role in the survival of communities through food preparation, knowledge of ecology, natural healing; women's confrontations with collective and individual trauma, and the importance of knowledge production located in female-gendered domestic spaces responsible for familial, community and national cohesiveness. Esquivel merged folk stories, magical realism, culinary elements, sensuality and strong Hispanic feminist perspective in her writing by individualizing her style and story. She often explores the relationship between men and women in Mexico. Mexico plays a central role in all of Esquivel's books. She still lives in Mexico City and often writes about Mexico's culture, history and women. In Mexico she became a noted writer due to the success of the film *Chido Guan* (1985), for which she wrote the screenplay.

By the time of the publication of *Como Agua Para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate)*, Esquivel had achieved a major critical success, and the work was widely celebrated as one of the best-selling novels in Mexico. It became a number one bestseller in Mexico in 1990, and its English translation enjoyed a lengthy stay on the New York Times Review Best Sellers list in 1993. *Como Agua Para Chocolate* has been translated into many different languages, and the release of the film of the same name brought her more commercial success and international acclaim.

The film version broke several American box-office records to become one of the highest grossing foreign films released in the U.S. The movie won ten Ariel Awards, the Mexican equivalent of the Oscar, including best screenplay for Esquivel. Esquivel won the candidacy for Mexico City's Party of the Democratic Revolution in 2009. She remains an official candidate for the PRD.

She followed her first success with the novels *La ley del amor* (1995; *The Law of Love*), *Ten Veloz como el deseo* (2001; *Swift as Desire*), and *Malinche* (2006). She has also written a



collection of short stories and essays, *Intimassuculencias* (1998; *Between Two Fires*), the children's story *Estrellita Marinera* (1999; *Estrellita Marinera*), and the nonfiction *El libro de las emociones* (2000; *The book of emotions*).

Her works blend two separated aspects and delights in breaking boundaries, which emphasis the interactive and actual experience with ebullient exemplification. The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* blends food and domestic realms, in which the author used the skillful interweaving of serial novel standards, recipes, history and myth to create a seamless and original story of love, desire and edible seduction. The novel *The Law of Love* combines science fiction and romance, exploring the use of music and illustrations as tools to influence the reception of the literary text. Then the novel *Swift as Desire* explores the power of love and the truths of the human heart, in which a telegraph attached to a computer with software that automatically translates Morse code into Spanish, is a device that allows the character's ailing father to communicate his own story of longing and love gone astray.

On the other hand these novels induce the expectations of everyone by using magical realism, a style popularized by such prominent Latin American authors as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Paulo Coelho. In all of these novels, elements of popular culture and the past recombine with the new, reflecting Esquivel's own desire to experiment, to renew old-fashioned story telling both by revitalizing the past and by engaging the reader in ways that can be considered non-traditional to the contemporary act of reception.

Esquivel expressed the thought that like many other women she had believed that time spent in the home was a wasted one and then she stated that the kitchen was a place to be "disdained, along with household activities that one sees as simple acts with no transcendental significance, that could only hinder our quest for greater knowledge, public awareness and personal achievements" (*Between Two Fires* 16). She realized the fact that these intellectual achievements and revolutionary accomplishments from outside of the house had not brought about the social and spiritual balance for women. Later she believes that the kitchen is the most important part and heart of the house and characterizes it as a source of knowledge and understanding. This aspect enumerates the influence of her writing. At the same time, she inspires the unity among human through her novels.

As a novelist, she mentioned not only the backgrounds of suppression but also she progressed the aspect of psychology through the unique vision of New Man. In an interview with Claudia Loewenstein, she inaugurates, "We wanted a New Man who would value things differently, who would value life, who would value every act in the home" (601). When Laura Esquivel was recognized as Mexico's 1992 woman of the year, she used the opportunity to share her apparition of feminism and its progressive rebellion in search of the "New Man" (Esquivel *Between Two Fires* 9). This prototypical individual could be identified as neither man nor woman but represents wholeness and unity in a border-free space between the social

roles of man and woman and the gendered stigmas of the past and the present. In her work *Between Two Fires*, Esquivel states that

“The New Man is the individual that is able to integrate into his or her life the past and the lessons of the past, lost flavors, forgotten music, the faces of our grandparents, and the memory of our dead. It is the person who never forgets that the most important thing is not production, but the individual who produces; that the well-being of people—all people – should be the principle objective in the development of human society. The New Man is a complete person who has been able to rise above the curse that haunts us and that has made us mutilated, unhappy beings” (9-10).

Esquivel’s New Man eradicates the existence of discrimination among gender effectually, when the New Man of Esquivel’s fiction still hopes for an expanded consciousness by the inclusion of male and female roles. Esquivel has recreated the feminine space and the inner psyche to address contradictions of gender paradigms or patterns. Within this mode of writing Esquivel revolves around the concept and desire for national reconciliation and to be the mark of reconciliation itself.

In her novels, Esquivel foregrounds an abstract idea of New Man, which makes the mind be amazed to disengage from traditional gendered social expectations. In each, the author respects demonstrated gender roles that promulgate female subjectivity and female source of empowerment developed under the patriarchal repression of family and nation. It traces the patriarchy and reestablishes gender relationships as men are no longer their originator and women become their promulgators. In this free flow of locality, Esquivel explores that the gender is no longer a line of contrast, but a means of shared consciousness. This shared consciousness envisioned and suggested a new elucidation of history within the feminine sphere. The New Man arises and undergoes renovation with each novel.

In the novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* Esquivel’s utterly charming interpretation of life in turn of the century Mexico begins with a recipe and centers on the kitchen. *Like Water for Chocolate* is a romantic, poignant tale, touched with moments of magic, graphic earthiness and bittersweet wit. A sumptuous feast of a novel, relates the bizarre history of all – female De La Garza family. Tita, the youngest daughter of the house, has been forbidden to marry, condemned by Mexican tradition to look after her mother until she dies. But Tita falls in love with Pedro, and in desperation he marries her sister Rosaura so that he can stay close to her. For the next twenty two years Tita and Pedro are forced to circle each other in unconsummated passion. Only a freakish chain of tragedies, bad luck and fate finally reunite them against all the odds.

Rosaura, Tita’s sister, insists Esperanza’s future is to be the same as Tita’s: unwed to care for her mother. Tita swears that she will not allow this to happen again and the education and



liberation outside of the home. After Rosaura's death, Tita and Pedro raise Esperanza as their own and only after Esperanza's marriage the two lovers finally consummate their love sexually. In the end Esperanza proves to be the symbolic daughter of desire envisioned in the national romance as well as the New Man that Esquivel has promised. Esperanza appears as a natural bi-product of the union of the female and male forces. With the amalgamation of old and new, Esperanza is educated at the best of schools, while learning "something just as valuable: the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen" (239).

The kitchen door of the De La Garza ranch becomes a psychological threshold between the outside, empirical and historical world and the incommunicable world of desire and emotion. Esquivel enlists the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution, homogeneity of women and psychological field, magical exchanges of the emotion and the creation of female psyche. In addition Esquivel contrasts categorized world outside of the home and the mystical experiences occurring within the home.

The mystical exchanges of emotion and memory occurring inside the kitchen and the home prove much more revealing of a Mexican state of consciousness and the effectual desire. Through Tita's recipes and shared epiphanies Esquivel communicates the revelations necessarily born of the intimate female sphere and carried into the male world. The Mexican Revolution becomes a perfunctory allegory for the changing Mexican consciousness, and the kitchen becomes a forum for the creation of a new national identity.

Throughout the novel history lurks in the shadows of the feminine figure represented by oral storytelling, personal memories and constructed truths. History is replaced by memories; patriarchy is sustained by women; and communication is replaced by feelings, thus constituting a reconfiguration of the national imaginary from the inside out. To reinforce the model of the national romance, Esquivel symbolizes the political conflict and family ranch which hovers outside and inside of the home. She creates a new psychological aspect and national romance in which national unity is drawn from cumulative emotions and from the history. On the whole Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, exaggerated unrequited romance and domestic triviality. She creates a new psychological aspect and national romance in which national unity is drawn from cumulative emotions and from the history.

Esquivel's second novel *The Law of Love* creates a similar psychological labyrinth that paradoxically maintains chronology and essentially constructs history through karma driven reincarnation that stretches an individual's consciousness over centuries of strife and understanding. This intensely anticipated novel is set in Mexico City three centuries hence, when the humanity has discovered that everyone goes through fourteen thousand reincarnations in order to achieve a perfect fusion with their twin soul. The heroine Azucena, is an astroanalyst, a sort of highly evolved Psychotherapist who, with the help of her Guardian Angel, using the power of music to reacquaint her patients with their past lives. As





an astroanalyst and an enlightened soul, Azucena has finally been allowed to meet her twin soul, her true love, Rodrigo. She encounters many obstacles and adventures in her search and finally restores harmony to the galaxy.

The novel grows into a murder- mystery melodrama to open the floodgates of dammed memories. By recovering memories, Esquivel shows the significance of relationship and the realization of love to the cosmos. The shared memories create the present national consciousness. Isabel is the only one who knows that love is the password that will access all related memories, make things right. At the end of the novel the power of the pyramid of love is re-released, Old Tenochtitlan is restored and fused with modern Mexican City and “the other person was oneself” (255).

With the invention of televirtual news broadcasts, aeroplane transportation, photomental cameras, plant speakers that translate electric waves to language, among other inventions Esquivel introduces an absurd pragmatism in which magic realism is over-explained to flaunt itself as technology and technology lends itself to an abstract world of resurrected memories. But just as Esquivel embraces differences between men and women to show their connectedness, here she raises rational science to a level where it is synchronized with unexplainable miracles. In a 1996 interview with Joan Smith, Esquivel claims she designed this absurd system of technology so that all objects, animate and otherwise, would be given literal voice by which to express an otherwise unrecognized consciousness and memory within the external world (Smith 2). In addition Esquivel stresses the view of Mammon in an interview that “The Universe cannot allow order to become a permanent condition. To do so would mean its death. Life emerged as a need to balance chaos. Thus, if chaos ends, so does life itself” (168). While answering these requirements *The Law of Love* calls for recognition of a collective consciousness and the union of souls.

Here Esquivel recognized the New Man through intricate connections to the other as finding the place in the whole. Expanding her premonition that feminism must return to the kitchen, to the intimate realms of life, in order to be truly understood and achieved by those demanding it, the intricacies of a nation must be recognized as the intricacies of the self; change comes from the inside out.

Laura Esquivel’s third novel *Swift as Desire* explores the power of love and the truths of the human heart. It is the story of a loving and passionate man who has the gift of bringing happiness to everyone except his own wife. The hero of this novel is Jubilo Chi, a telegraph operator who is born with the ability to hear people’s true feelings and respond to their most intimate, unspoken desires. His life changes forever the day he falls deeply and irrevocably in love with Lucha, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy family. She believes money is necessary to ensure happiness, while for Jubilo, who is poor, love and desire are more important than possessions. But their passion for each other enables them to build a happy life together –



until their idyll is shattered by a terrible event that drives them bitterly apart. Only years later is his daughter able to unravel the mystery behind her parent's long estrangement and bring about a surprising reconciliation.

The importance of tradition, the strength of family, the mysterious ways in which people connect – these are the things occurred in *Swift as Desire*, a bittersweet, ultimately uplifting tale about living life to the fullest and learning to hear the words of love. Jubilo, a man rooted in the spirituality of his Mayan past, and Lucha, a woman moved by the technology of a modern nation. Through the novel Lluvia's experiences and discoveries lead her to realize that desire alone will not result in a new nation; just as essential is a shared vision of the future that comes with a proactive fusion of the past and present, tradition and modernity within herself.

As the couple moves through stages of passion, civility, jealousy, and guilt, their daughter who enter their home serve to meter the family-nation's stability. Lluvia stays close to her father, and becomes his caretaker when his Parkinson's disease becomes so advanced that he can no longer move or speak. During this time she learns of her parents' passionate love for one another. Lluvia begins to listen to the pulses of desire that beat softly between her parents, mediating a reconciliation between her parents as she adopts her father's gift of perception and communication.

When her father can no longer speak, she finds an old telegraph machine which "appeared as the great savior, the great consolidator of hope and affection" (99). Lluvia is excited to learn Morse Code so that she too can "decipher the mysteries inside that beautiful Mayan head" (66). This exposure allows her to make the connections between telegraphy and numerology.

By the end of the novel, Lluvia brings reconciliation not only between the estranged parents but between the future and the past. As Lluvia begins to understand these connections between technology and spirituality and eventually her father's language, one can see that her trek is a regressive one. Whereas her father came to know technology through Mayan numerology, Lluvia uses computer technology to understand these ancient pulsing. Lluvia becomes the most proactive of the novels' New Man who embodies the desire and action to preserve both the native traditions of an ever present past within the modernity that embraces it.

Like the food of the first novel and the shared memories of the second, this fusion comes through a magical sort of communication dependent on pulses from the natural world, which is similar to the functions of modern telegraphy. It expresses desires, emotions and intentions in the purest form, creating a psychological web between the lovers and among the community beyond the external world. If the national romance was intended to bring together

people of different heritages, memories, and loyalties, this story becomes a national romance of the second generation.

In addition to its wide acclaim, Esquivel's novel was embraced by feminist scholars as a unique and significant contribution to the burgeoning field of Latin American women's writing. The fact that Esquivel has chosen discourses not merely outside the canon but specifically associated with women's values and experiences that allows her to set forth an alternative to the hegemonic standard, based upon real women's lives. Esquivel cleverly uses the backdrop of the war, magical realism, New Age philosophy, the propounded term of New Man and science fiction to explore the individual lives and their struggle to attain the goal for themselves in order to find peace and establish harmony.

On the whole the core of magical realism in Esquivel's work creates a similar set of internal contradictions between individual characters as well as conflicts within the individual. Esquivel's unique term of New Man reveals the remedy for the individual and society to reconcile from the atrocities of cultural heritage. On the other hand Esquivel inspires human how to accomplish mental balance and imparts certain facts regarding resiliency. Thus, Esquivel integrates the positive attitudes to the reader's community by explicating such empowering roles in the literature. Instead of searching a freedom from outside the world, Esquivel presents the thought of accomplishment from internal aspects.

*Literature tells us how to live, puts on record and makes visible what we fail to see in our own lives.*

- Weinstein

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