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Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee  
Assistant Professor, Department of English  
St Xavier's College, Ranchi, Jharkhand



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## **Food Imagery and the Postcolonial Discourse in the Novels of Merlinda Bobis and Laura Esquivel**

**John Andrew M. del Prado**  
Department of English  
Ateneo de Manila University

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the cultural significance of food imagery as a narrative tool in the novels of Merlinda Bobis and Laura Esquivel. Focusing on Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) and Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer* (2005), the analysis explores how these texts utilise food symbolism to convey both cultural identity and the postcolonial experiences of women. The article begins by establishing the pivotal role of food in culture, from its religious and communal significance to its capacity for social bonding. The novels' integration of food imagery is then situated within the broader historical and literary contexts. The article employs Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to demonstrate how food operates as a multi-dimensional signifier in literature, encompassing historical, anthropological, and sociocultural contexts. This theoretical framework enables a comprehensive examination of the intricate ways in which food symbolism reflects various aspects of life and society. The analysis then turns to the novels themselves. Esquivel's novel is examined in terms of its utilization of food as a lens through which the struggles of Mexican women in a patriarchal society and the broader postcolonial experience are depicted. The novel's blend of magical realism, history, and romance is facilitated by the centrality of food, which functions as both a narrative device and a cultural marker. Similarly, Bobis's novel employs Filipino delicacies as chapter titles, mirroring the life and experiences of the main character. The novel illuminates the postcolonial Filipino identity, poverty, and cultural traditions through food imagery.

**Keywords:** Food Imagery, Postcolonialism, Novels, Cultural Identity, Symbolism

### **Introduction**

The novel *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, 1989) is one of the most recognizable magic realist novels and has put Mexican writer Laura Esquivel's name in world literature.



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The novel utilizes the Spanish foundation and history of Mexico while also showing the struggles of Mexican women in a patriarchal society. The novel follows the life of Tita de la Garza and her tumultuous relationship with Pedro hindered by family traditions and her culture. The narrative happens during one of the most important parts of Mexico's history, specifically the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1917. Moreover, the structure of the novel is divided into twelve chapters, each of which is named after the months of the year. This follows the "monthly instalment" mentioned in the subtitle of the novel, "A Novel in Monthly Instalments and Home Remedies." The "home remedies" part refers to the accompanying recipe that opens each chapter. Like *Water for Chocolate* describes the life of a Mexican woman in rural Mexico and her actions against what is expected of her as a daughter, wife, mother and overall, a woman. What makes the novel memorable is the focus on food in relation to what is happening around Tita, turning the novel into a mix of cook book and a romance novel.

On the other hand, *Banana Heart Summer* (2005) marks the novel debut of Filipino-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis. Told in first-person point of view, the novel follows an immigrant worker named Nenita as she tells her story when she was twelve years old before she left the Philippines. One of the storylines of the novel focuses on Nenita's quest for her mother's love, which has been ruined by poverty. Her mother, who came from a rich family and who greatly valued her dignity, has always targeted her violent anger toward Nenita. Nenita is then forced to look for a job to help her family only to worsen her mother's wrath. It is through the twelve-year-old's eyes that we see the small Filipino community she lives in. Moreover, each chapter is titled with Filipino delicacies, which reflect the overall theme of the chapter or the situation the characters are in. Perhaps because Merlinda Bobis is first known as a poet, the language of the novel is full of symbolisms and metaphors that spice the full innocence of the child narrator as she grapples with the everyday reality of poverty and hunger alongside the traditions and superstitions of her community.

Upon reading the two novels, readers may think that the Filipino novel garners its inspiration from Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* due to food and women being central in the overall structure and narrative of both novels. However, *Banana Heart Summer* is uniquely Filipino and is independent of the aforementioned Mexican novel due to societal differences that can be gleaned in both novels. Thus,



this essay looks into how each novel portrays food as a cultural identity as well as the use of food imagery to depict women's and the postcolonial experience.

### **For the Love of Food and Food as Love: A History and Theory**

If I die, bury me not

At the cross of San Felix: bury me

Under your fingernails, that I may

be eaten along with every food you eat;

That I may be drunk along with every cup

you drink.

The above stanza is from the poem "Laji 97," which was originally written in Ibatan (one of the 120-187 languages of the Philippines) and was translated into English by Florentino Hornedo. The poem is called a "laji," which is a folk song sung by Ivatans typically during important occasions like weddings and birthdays. In the above stanza, we are led to imagine the persona wanting to be buried under the fingernails of their loved one so they may be "eaten along with every food you eat / That I may be drunk along every cup / you drink." Metaphorically speaking, the poem describes the desire to be one with the loved one via consumption and digestion. Thus, love here is portrayed to be nourishing like food, and this desire to be one with the lover also connotes the old adage, "You are what you eat." In a way, the act of love as consumption is also given a scientific image, because the body needs nutrient through food passing through the digestive system.

What most people do not realize is that among the five senses of the body, the sense of taste is often ignored because most people might think that it's simply located in the mouth and is thus only important when eating. Compared to the senses of sight, hearing, smell, and even touch, we barely use the sense of taste outside of food consumption. However, food and the sense of taste do have a history that play an important part in our everyday lives. In religion, food is symbolic of faith. The most popular Christian belief of consuming the body and blood of Christ during a holy mass proves this point:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."



Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:26-27)

Moreover, one may consider the sense of taste as a socializing sense. Diane Ackerman, in her book *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990), dedicates a chapter on the Sense of Taste. She points out that “humans rarely choose to dine in solitude” and that food has always been part of important businesses and institutions, specially since events never take place without food, like birthdays, business meetings, and religious ceremonies. She also points out how the relationship of the mother and a newborn baby is strengthened through breastfeeding. The West also colonized the East in search of spice, thereby affecting the development and histories of many non-European countries. Food then, despite being taken for granted, is essential not only in keeping us alive, but also in so many other aspects. Ackerman writes,

If an event is meant to matter emotionally, symbolically, or mystically, food will be close at hand to sanctify and bind it. Every culture uses food as a sign of approval or commemoration, and some foods are even credited with supernatural powers, others eaten symbolically, still others eaten ritualistically, with ill fortune befalling dullards or skeptics who forget the recipe or get the order of events wrong. (172)

It is no surprise then that food plays a significant role in literature. Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard argues that food is fundamental both to life and literature: “If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture” (5). However, despite the abundance of food imagery in literature, “Food has not always been deemed a subject worthy of literary study, despite its omnipresence in literature” (6). So this study is an addition to the growing number of literary studies that look at food imagery in literature.

Like many other examples imagery, food in literature stands as a cultural metaphor, as it is easily recognizable and memories can be triggered just by mentioning and describing food. Rüdiger Kunow sees food in literature as perpetually a “representation” because “ethnographers and cultural studies specialists have long been demonstrating how food only feeds but also organizes us, how the making, taking, and disposing of aliments are socially and culturally inflected” (151). Food is essential and natural to life, and





therefore symbolism can flourish from it. Besides, food as a representation contains meanings that reference anything in life from race, culture, gender and even sexuality. As pointed out by Diane Ackerman, food has always been connected to sex just by the very existence of using food imagery to describe potential sexual partners. There are also food items that are considered aphrodisiacs like carrots, leeks, cucumbers, eels, asparagus, oysters and so much more, because of their physical likeness to male and female reproductive organs. Food itself is created through the “sex” of plants and animals via cross-pollination. Ackerman also points out how the bulboid corpuscle, a neural receptor on lips and tongue can also be found on the genitals.

Food then has an innate universality as a metaphor. Mark Stein contends that through its very commonality, food forges a bond among all individuals, regardless of distinctions. The act of consuming food, an external substance that becomes internalized and eventually expelled, highlights the intricate dynamic between humans and their environment, as well as the intricate interplay between texts and their broader contexts (147). Thus, by looking at food imagery in Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Banana Heart Summer*, we understand the identities and cultures of the characters via the food they cook, eat and serve. It is important then to understand Roland Barthes’ theory on food as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (24). Food, for Barthes, is no longer just about nutrients and consumption because every food has “an ‘attitude’, bound to certain usages, certain ‘protocols’, that have to do with more than food” (23). Food then is a sign, according to Barthes: it “sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies... it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication” (24). Barthes sees food as a sign because of all the things that are done to items, substances, and ingredients, as well as the people involved and the rich history behind the recipe to create food. By looking at advertising, Barthes uncovers three themes wherein food stands as a sign: 1) food as “commemorative” or “nostalgic,” which talks about the historical quality of food, which is very much linked to its preparation and cooking; 2) food within “anthropological situation,” in which Barthes uses as an example, the supposed assignation of masculinity and femininity in certain kinds of food, bringing forth this theme as caused by “pseudo causal relationship;” and 3) food in relation to health, in



which health is “the alibi food gives to itself in order to signify materially a pattern of immaterial realities” (27). Barthes finds food as beyond what it was originally intended, which was to provide nourishment to the body:

...food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means for a way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed, by it. To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign. What are these other behaviors? Today, we might say all of them: activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, celebration—every one of these situations is expressed through food. We might almost say that this “polysemia” of food characterizes modernity; in the past, only festive occasions were signaled by food in any positive and organized manner. But today, work also has its own kind of food (on the level of a sign, that is): energy-giving and light food is experienced as the very sign of, rather than only a help toward, participation in modern life. (28)

When culture changes then, so do food, so to look at the development of food in a culture is to understand the culture that has produced it.

### **Food as Central Image**

Readers cannot avoid seeing food as the most important image in Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* and Merlinda Bobis’s *Banana Heart Summer*, specially since both novels utilize food imagery in the very titles of the novels. As noted by every scholar that encounter Esquivel’s novel, the title “como agua para chocolate” refers to the boiling water needed to melt chocolate to make a hot chocolate drink. This brings the reader to realize that because the novel focuses on Tita’s love for Pedro, the title may refer to the passion, or the “boiling water” needed to consummate the love between Pedro and Tita. This is further supported in the scene where Tita watches John making a match using phosphorus after she finally escaped from Mama Elena. John tells her what he learned from Morning Light, his grandmother:



As you see, within our bodies each of us has the elements needed to produce phosphorus. And let me tell you something I've never told a soul. My grandmother had a very interesting theory; she said that each of us is born with a box of matches inside us been seen before. For a long time phosphorus was obtained by vigorously heating the residue from evaporating urine in an earth retort the neck of which was submerged in water. Today it is extracted from the bones of animals, which contain phosphoric acid and lime. (78)

This image of a single match within every human being returns near the conclusion of the novel. Because of Tita's history, she believes that her match may no longer be lit because it has been wet by the struggles she faced throughout the novel. However, as seen in the ending, after Pedro and Tita "rekindles" their love for each other, now that they are finally free. Unfortunately, Pedro dies out of a heart attack, which has led Tita to commit suicide by swallowing matches. This in turn causes her body to burn and the fire spreads, engulfing the entire house. This is a callback to the title of the novel because fire is needed to reach the boiling point of water. Tita swallowing matches and combusting is proof that the match within her soul is not dampened and that she is capable of creating metaphorical fire.

Another thing that shows us that food is central to the novel is the whole structure of the novel itself. Each chapter of the novel begins with a recipe for the food symbolic of the entire chapter. For example, in the second chapter, aptly titled "February," which is also referred commonly to as a month of love, is about the wedding between Pedro and Rosaura, Tita's sister. The chapter opens with a recipe for a wedding cake, which also stands as a central piece not only in the wedding reception happening in the chapter but in the entire chapter. The recipe is broken down into several parts, like the cake batter, the icing, and the garnish, and is spread evenly throughout the chapter until the people at the wedding have eaten the cake. Because Tita, the cook, has experienced a lot of emotions (i.e. anger, despair, depression, love, happiness) while she makes the cake, all of these feelings are transferred into the cake via a teardrop that accidentally falls into the cake. So when everyone has eaten the cake, each person has a different experience:





The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing. Even Pedro, usually so proper, was having trouble holding back his tears. Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. But the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication—an acute attack of pain and frustration—that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person, fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time those who didn't join the collective vomiting that was going on all over the patio. Only one person escaped: the cake had no effect on Tita. (28-29)

Everyone at the party has started crying for a love that they never lost themselves. They are all experiencing Tita's emotions as she watches the love of her life marry her sister, even Mama Elena, the tyrant in Tita's life, sheds a tear because of the cake. Meanwhile, Rosaura falls sick after eating the cake and starts vomiting. This kind of centrality of food as the thematic image happens in each chapter of Esquivel's novel.

On the other hand, the title of Merlinda Bobis's novel, *Banana Heart Summer*, is immediately referenced in the first chapter of the novel. The narrator, Nenita/Nining, refers to her experience one summer when she ate "the heart of the matter." The idiomatic expression "the heart of the matter" is multilayered because of its plurality of meanings, but the clearest image being referenced by the phrase is the heart of a banana tree. Of course, the banana heart is not the literal heart of a banana tree. Most commonly referred to "banana blossom," the banana heart is a purple flower that is shaped like a teardrop and it grows at the end of a cluster of bananas. Because of its maroon-purplish color and shape, it is thought as the "heart" of the banana tree.

The chapter then references a Filipino belief that says one may never be hungry again if they follow the steps involving a banana heart. Nenita remembers how Nana Dora, an old woman considered in the whole town of Remedios as the best dessert maker, once told her that at midnight, one may wait underneath a banana tree and stick their tongue out to catch the first dew drop that will fall from the banana heart. To catch the dew with one's tongue is to "never grow hungry again" (Kindle Location 44).



The first chapter sets the overall tone of the novel. Because the whole novel is the reminiscences of a Filipino immigrant about her life when she was young, the reader is provided a world where fantasy and reality are mixed together thanks to the innocent observations of the protagonist, Nenita. Food then, throughout the novel, are treated both literally and metaphorically, especially in a setting where myths also pervade the minds of the young.

Moreover, just like how *Like Water for Chocolate* shows recipes in each chapter, *Banana Heart Summer* also introduces how to cook certain delicacies in each chapter. However, unlike the Mexican novel, each chapter does not provide the recipes in the same way a cookbook would. Nenita, the narrator, simply describes the cooking process as she witnesses the person who cooks them or as she cooks them herself. Similar to how the recipe reflects the theme of the chapter it is in in Esquivel's novel, *Bobis* utilizes specific food as a metaphor for the themes of the chapters. For example, in the sixth chapter of the novel, the Filipino delicacy "palitaw" (literally "the floated one") is described by Nenita as follows:

Palitaw, the floated one: Tiya Coring's floating faith of pounded sticky rice shaped into tongues and sunk into a pot of boiling water. When they float, they're cooked. This you take on faith. Then you retrieve the tongue-cakes from the water and sprinkle them with coconut cream toasted into crisp, brown granules, and of course, shreds of freshly grated coconut, sugar and sesame seeds. Ay, the scent alone was enough for anyone to take on faith Tiya Coring's claim that hers was the best palitaw in the world! (Kindle Location 209)

Although the talk of faith is not a pervading theme throughout the novel, it does reflect the Filipino attitude toward faith. The "palitaw" being a white and circular food is also likened to the Catholic communion wafer or "hostia," which represents the "Body of Christ." In one sentence, the act of asking for a piece of a palitaw is even compared to that of asking for the Catholic host ("Basilio Profundo held this plate reverently, like an acolyte bearing the Body of Christ," Kindle Location 209). Nenita then reflects on how the palitaw must float as the sign that it is cooked and how it is similar to one's faith:



Faith always floats, keeps us afloat. As it is in swimming, so it is in cooking, so it is in falling in love. We always believe we'll rise to the surface. None of Tiya Coring's palitaw stayed down. None remained intimate with the pot's bottom. Faith is too light to stay down, and it smells. We can't hide it. (Kindle Locations 221)

The chapter then ends with Nenita's mother finding out that Nenita and her siblings "begged" Nana Dora for the palitaw that they ate. Feeling ashamed, the mother starts beating Nenita, screaming, "We are not beggars, you hear? We are not beggars!" (Kindle Location 225). But then Nenita realizes that for her mother, "Dignity may be lean, but more filling than faith" (Kindle Location 225), which may be seen as how the mother would rather let the children go hungry rather than be given food out of pity.

### **Oppression and Liberation: The Kitchen as a Liberating Space**

Throughout history, the image of the traditional woman in the kitchen has been an image that relegates women within the domestic sphere. From the sexist quip "Make me a sandwich" to the stereotypical suburban housewife, women's space has always been the domestic sphere within the heteropatriarchal society. As noted by Linda K. Kerber, numerous studies have already looked into the connection between gender, food and the workforce, as well as the social spheres that isolate women within the domestic sphere. And because women have been traditionally situated within the home, the kitchen seems to be a more specifically-female-gendered space in the comforts of her home.

Moreover, according to Michael Symons in his book *A History of Cooks and Cooking*, history shows that women in the kitchen had been an image that is nothing sort of noteworthy because "cooks have always been in the background--both ever present and unnoticed. Their contributions have seemed too common, pervasive, trivial, unproblematic. Cooks generally have been women, and their achievements overlooked as inglorious and private" (x). However, Symons discovers that in ancient literature, specifically in Greek plays, cooks who were admired were men. The difference between male and female with regards to cooking is also obvious: male cooks work on special events and often with meat, while women are relegated to everyday food. Symon also states that this is very much similar to today's cooking, in which there are similar gendered cooking system that undermines women.



This reserved space for women is then both an undermining space and an unsafe locale for them. By looking at how men justify domestic abuse, Rhian Ellis notes that wives' failure to satisfy their desire in food often lead to violence. Marjorie DeVault also sees that because men already expect their wives to serve them, serving food is just part of women's subservience. DeVault also says that even though cooking seems trivial, women do not wholly like cooking, often because they are forced to do it while also receiving almost no praise for it. Thus, the image of a housewife has been an image that often presents itself as a symbol for powerlessness and subordination instead of an image of power, independence, and even creativity. The work sphere then, being a space reserved mostly for men, is often preached as an ideal sphere for women to achieve if they want to escape the traditional space relegated for them. However, as seen in *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Banana Heart Summer*, the domestic sphere should not only be seen as female-centric, but also as a space for power.

An interesting perspective on the roles of each character in *Like Water for Chocolate* is by Rosa Fernández-Levin in her analysis on the Mexican novel. By looking at Mama Elena as a representative of the patriarchal society, we can see how Tita's struggles coincide with that of women in general. Fernández-Levin notes that despite Tita being exiled within the kitchen, Tita contests the Mexican women stereotypes because "Not only do Tita's actions reveal how important the function women perform is, but also aims to eradicate the proclivity to dictate a woman's social, personal, and spiritual worth according to what activity she performs in society" (108). Thus, for Fernández-Levin, the kitchen is not a space that is not as oppressive as Mama Elena may have hoped to contain Tita, but it has become "a refuge, a place where solace, camaraderie, and freedom are possible" (108). What we also see happening in Tita's kitchen is the formation of her relationship with Nacha, the household's old Indian servant. Fernández-Levin adds that when women share this space (the kitchen), they "forget their differences and begin to share something much more meaningful," (108) which is their shared experiences as women. This is notable specially in the case of Tita and Nacha because of the uneven power relations between them, in which Tita is the daughter of the owner of the house, while Nacha is a simple servant. Moreover, unlike Mama Elena, it is with Nacha that Tita becomes free to express what needs to be expressed, and this is even reflected in



her cooking. Tita's liberation in the kitchen then can be seen, as per Fernández-Levin, as a way to challenge the norms of society.

The same thing can be said in the case of Philippine society. In her reading of *Like Water for Chocolate*, Marikit Tara Alto Uychoco defends her positionality as a Filipino woman reading a Mexican text by first borrowing Gloria Anzaldua's notion of the "new mestiza's consciousness," which is the "one which reads and appreciates the struggles of different women in different cultures" (96). Thus, the importance of reading a text from a different culture in this new consciousness because, as Uychoco quotes Anzaldua: "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" (96). Uychoco then borrows the idea of "doubling of vision" from Caren Kaplan's "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting on Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse" (1987). Uychoco explains this as the "ability to see from the margins as well as from the center" (97). The idea of doubling of vision is important because, as Kaplan posits, the "power differentials" are often seen as "universals" especially in the west. Thus, in doubling of vision, we acknowledge that even though there are various histories, specially the ones silenced, there are times when the struggles are familiar. Uychoco also highlights Kaplan's idea of a new location in feminist poetics in which, quoting Kaplan, it is "not a room of one's own, not a fully public collective self, not a domestic realm," but rather a "space in the imagination, which allows for the inside, the outside and the liminal elements of in-between" (97).

Similar to how Uychoco sees the similarities between Philippine history and the Mexican historiographies depicted in Laura Esquivel's novel, it cannot be avoided then to see that the similarities between *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Banana Heart Summer* go beyond food. For example, the emotional hostility between mother and daughter is also depicted in the aforementioned Filipino novel. Although the emotional distance and silence often seen between Mama Elena and Tita can be likened to that of Nenita and her mother, the difference in the age makes the dynamics a lot worse, because it now involves child labour and child abuse, both topics may be ignored by the reader because of how innocent and carefree Nenita sounds in her narration.





Moreover, the domestic abuse Nenita experiences in her home is often rationalized by her mother as an act of love. For example, when Nenita accidentally burned the fish, her mother threw the wok at Nenita, and hot oil caught her feet, she was more worried about the expected beating from her mother rather than the pain in her toes:

Only the left foot, only the left, I consoled myself, and not that hot really, compared to Mother's rage. It was always silent but full of fire, like a house burning down. Burnt fish, burnt house. Later, as always, Mother scavenged through the ruins for something 'saveable'. She sat me down and talked to me as if I were her favourite child. 'You know why we hit you? Because we love you. Parents must do this, because they want their children to be good.' (Kindle Location 137)

As seen in the quote above, Nenita already knows what will happen afterwards, not because she is narrating about it as an adult, but because it is a common occurrence in their household. Throughout the novel, all Nenita wants is her mother's love, and throughout the narrative, we see her associating her mother's approval with that of financial security, or more specifically, having food on the table. Thus, as a twelve-year old girl, she looks for a job in their village. She is taken in by a kind young nurse, Miss VV. Although Miss VV is hesitant because of Nenita's age, Nenita's pleading forces Miss VV to take pity on the young girl.

After cooking with Miss VV, Nenita goes home after buying sweets for her siblings using her first wage. However, she comes home late and her parents are worried. They are surprised to learn that instead of going to school, Nenita has started working for Miss VV. The mother charges at Nenita and slaps the young girl, throws her unto the ground and kicks her several times. The father tries to stop his wife from beating the girl, and the mother begins to cook. Nenita thinks, "As always, we kept ours simple... My parents hit me, then fed me, and loved me again." Her father bandages her back and we do see the mother approaching Nenita with some pork adobo to feed her, saying "Eat, eat, it's good for you," as if the bruises in Nenita's chest and body were not caused by her.



Throughout the novel, similar scenarios come up where Nenita would be punished for trivial mistakes. Moreover, although Nenita is not forced to work for Miss VV, her parents also do not verbally oppose it, even though the mother clearly does not like the idea that their young daughter is supporting them financially. As noted by Sherill Gilbas, child labour and child abuse in the novel are caused by poverty resulting in a domino effect. Although Gilbas believes that the domino effect has both positive and negative effects, I do not subscribe to this idea. Gilbas states that one example of a positive effect happens when Tio Anding, whose family is considered the poorest in the neighbourhood, is driven to suicide after losing his job while having a sick wife and starving kids. Gilbas sees the positive effect of how the whole community comes together and donates to the bereaved family. However, I still see this as a negative effect, because the donations are just a temporary financial solution for the family. They have lost the breadwinner in the family, and the remaining parent is ill. However, I still agree that this is still coming from the domino effect caused by poverty.

Going back to Nenita's abuse and her mother, it is evident that the mother beats Nenita because of the history behind her birth. Being the firstborn, Nenita is a living reminder to her mother of a life that she has turned her back on. We discover near the middle of the story, that her mother comes from a middle-class family in the city, but her life has changed due to falling in love with a mason. Likened to a "rice cooked too soon" or "rice not cooked properly," Nenita's mother has always beat Nenita for burning the food while cooking because not only it reminds her of how dark Nenita is compared to her light-skinned mother (just like how white rice is far too different from overcooked or burnt rice), it is also a waste of money.

Even the ways the mother and daughter eat are quite different:

Mother ate like a rich woman, of course. She hardly opened her mouth, she chewed delicately, took small helpings, held the spoon and fork lightly. I gripped and clunked my cutlery; I ate with my hands. I slurped, I spilled, I chomped and spoke even when my mouth was full. Sometimes she looked at me as if I belonged to someone else. I did not have her graces. Was this the cause of her shame? I often wondered then. (Kindle Locations 724)



The difference between the dining etiquette of the mother and the daughter reflects their upbringing, which in turn echoes the social divide. The mother, being embarrassed with a daughter who does not look and act like her, has stopped bringing her to visit her relatives in the city. Earlier it was mentioned that the mother beats Nenita when she begs for some sweets, and this is also a reflection of her own pride when it comes to asking her rich relatives for help. Nenita remembers how difficult it was for her mother to ask for help, especially during a time of crisis:

My mother's marriage to my father had collapsed the social order beyond restoration. The 'rich relations' in the city, except her only sister, did not wish to know about their kin who ran away with a mason during her first year at high school. Much later, it was Aunt Rosario she'd run to, but only when the more-water-than-rice gruel became our staple for weeks.

It took a long time before Mother gathered enough humility to beg for help. Humility was like those scraps of rice that she picked from the bottom of the pot and saved for the next pot of gruel. Don't get me wrong. Humility was not about loss of dignity, she told me once. Her kind of humility, which saw her running away to the city with her brood (which never included me after the rice disaster), earned them wonderful meals which they boasted about for days. (Kindle Locations 737)

Here we see the camaraderie between her mother and her Aunt Rosario. Because her rich maternal relatives are ashamed of being seen with Nenita's mother, it was difficult for the mother to be "humble" to ask for help. However, this humility finally emerges when the mother has decided to ask her sister for help. Although this results in city visits and bountiful meals when the family visits Aunt Rosario, Nenita is told to stay at home and wait for her mother and her fortunate siblings. Nenita also notes how these visits actually dissipate the rage that she commonly sees from her mother, perhaps because the short visits remind the mother of her past life before running away with a poor man.

As seen above, Nenita becoming a housemaid for Miss VV's family is both a source of oppression and liberation. As a site of oppression, it is two-fold: 1) Nenita is a minor and should not be working at all, but the drive to help her family forces her to look for a job; and 2) this agitates the mother's rage (which,



in turn, becomes domestic violence) because it further reinforces the current financial status the mother lives in: she and her husband can barely provide food, and now their young daughter, despite being the eldest, is experiencing child labor. On the other hand, her job also provides a space for her to be free from domestic abuse. Fortunately for Nenita, Miss VV's family is kind to her and she is fed well. At some point in the story, her siblings point out the visible change in Nenita's appearance, specifically having more "meat" in her body.

Because abundance of food is seen as having a good life, skinniness then is evidence of poverty. This is why Nenita strives hard to be a good cook. Cooking then in this novel is a metaphor for Nenita's desire to improve her life and her family's: "Desire is a house with infinite extensions, even renovations, like my little prayer of want after that household conflagration: 'I only want to cook good, I only want to eat good, I only want to be good.'" (Kindle Locations 163). So if the kitchen in *Like Water for Chocolate* is a site of liberation because Tita can freely express her creativity, freedom and passion, the kitchen in *Banana Heart Summer* is a site of liberation because it helps Nenita achieve her dream to be loved again by her mother. Although one can admonish the mother for the abuse has done to Nenita, Nenita seems to see it, albeit perhaps because of her own innocence, as being caused by effects of poverty and not by inner malice. Perhaps this is why Nenita continues to cling on the happy memories she has had with her mother, and all of which involve food:

It was not so much the pleasure from the taste, there was so little of it, but the ritual of eating that kept us going. Too much trouble for some, I realise, but satisfyingly companionable. We always ate melon seeds with company. I loved *Fat & Thin*. Long ago, when it was just Junior and me, and Mother still laughed, she'd buy a packet and we'd sit around learning these tricks of eating, of companionship, of delight. Ay, she did it so well. There she sat with her patrician features in perfect repose, our melon-seed-eating queen whose lips never, ever turned white. (Kindle Locations 599).

Just like how food symbolizes good life in the novel, hunger is a sign of poverty, not only because without money, one cannot buy food, but also because scientifically speaking, hunger can lead to anger or



aggression because the brain needs food to regulate emotions, and according to psychologist Brad Bushman, as quoted by Markham Heid, “anger is the emotion people have the most difficulty regulating.” Perhaps the rage Nenita’s mother experiences are both physical anger and metaphorical anger, because she can barely provide food for the family and because she has realized that her life choices have led to her suffering and her family’s hunger. We can see that Nenita refuses to look at her mother’s domestic abuse towards her as anything but hatred towards her. At one point, she notes that perhaps because of her mother’s “lihi”:

Mind you, I charged her rage to lihi. A pregnant woman can irrationally like or dislike someone or something, which is the object of her lihi. This dislike can be extreme, mercilessly splenetic. Like, on the other hand, can be almost amorous. Usually it is an obsessive desire of the palate for mostly sour things. She must have them, even if you have to steal them; she might even prefer that you steal them. Once, rumour had it that Tiyo Anding stole a green mango when Tiya Asun was pregnant with Chi-chi. ‘Certainly not!’ Chi-chi protested when the story was told. ‘Father bought the mango and Mother knew from the taste that it was bought!’ (Kindle Locations 1075)

“Lihi” is a Filipino cultural concept wherein a Filipino pregnant woman experiences various changes, including emotional change. During “lihi,” the pregnant woman often looks for food, which is then believed to affect the physical outcome of the baby. Commonly, a pregnant woman would look for food that are typically hard to find, just like the story of Tiyo Anding and the stolen green mango. Hormonal changes are also commonly associated by many Filipinos to “lihi,” and this is what Nenita also believe to be the reason behind her mother’s rage.

Fortunately for Nenita, changes do happen since she started earning money. Quite some time after Nenita started working for Miss VV’s family, Nenita no longer sees her mother’s rage, so the dream Nenita is metaphorically cooking in the kitchen has somewhat come true. She even reflects about how she misses the “kindness” the mother gives her (preparing food and feeding her) after beating her up.

### **Food and the Postcolonial Experience**

As seen in this chapter, as well as in the previous chapters, magic realism as a genre is broad enough to open its doors to other literatures outside Latin America and the Caribbean. In terms of popularity, most





popular magic realist texts that are non-Latin American are from countries like Nigeria, India, and perhaps a surprising addition, Canada. What literary scholars see as a similarity among these countries is that they are part of what is considered as Third World or developing nations, with the exception of Canada. However, as many critics have noted the contribution of magic realism in world literature, magic realist texts are produced by those who are “living on the margins” (Kroetsch and Kenyon 15), thus making the genre as a literary resistance against imperialism and colonialism. This is probably why most scholars ignore magic realist texts written in English as the English language is typically seen as an imperial tongue. However, even language can be ignored as long as it is written by marginalized individuals, which not only include people of color but also queer individuals.

Due to magic realism being a product of the marginalized, Stephen Slemon sees magic realism as a site of post-colonial discourse, which he notes can be primarily seen in the language of the narration done in three separate ways:

The first involves the representation of a kind of transcendent or transformational regionalism so that the site of the text, though described in familiar and local terms, becomes a metonymy of the post-colonial culture as a whole. The second is the foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath. And the third involves the thematic foregrounding of those gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the text's disjunctive language of narration. On this third level, the magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centres, and to work toward destabilizing their fixity. (12-13)

So magic realism as a post-colonial discourse lies in its metonymical representation of the region's post-colonial culture, in the condensed history of colonization depicted in the text, and the “gaps, absences, and silences” that can be gleaned when the literary subject experiences anything connected to colonialism. Both Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Merlinda Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer* situate



themselves as texts that are open for post-colonial discourse, and it is often revealed in the traditions and social values embedded in the respective texts.

For example, in Esquivel's novel, the recipes have strong connection to the pre-Hispanic past ("All at once she seemed to hear Nancha's voice dictating a recipe, a prehispanic recipe involving rose petals," 22-23). With the native Nancha teaching Tita the recipes, this reflects how culture and tradition are passed on orally. One may see then that writing the cookbook and passing it on to Tita's niece at the end of the novel is Tita's way of salvaging this dying art of cooking.

Moreover, the cookbook contains not only the recipes, but also certain parts of history as well as a rewriting of it. Because Tita talks about historical events throughout the cookbook while writing down the recipes, the cookbook becomes an alternative look at Mexican history that listens to the experiences of Mexican women. With her cookbook, Tita then is both a cook and a historian. Tita's reflection on certain events reveal how history is typically told:

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. (27)

Here we see different sides of the story, regarding what happened with the rebel soldiers and Gertrudis. On one hand, the story goes with Gertrudis being unable to control her lust, so she accidentally sets the bathroom on fire and escapes with the rebel captain. On the other hand, we see Tita lying to Mama Elena in which she tells her that the "Federal troops... had swooped down on the ranch, set fire to the bathroom and kidnapped Gertrudis" (28). This plurality of stories actually gives Tita the agency to control the narrative she wants others to know. She has the freedom to choose what becomes the truth, while also staying true to the essence of what has happened. On the other hand, Mama Elena stands as an oppositional character to Tita as the truth-teller, by believing more in what the government says.

Meanwhile, in *Banana Heart Summer*, the post-colonial discourse can be seen as a metaphor in the setting of the narrative: "You see, we lived between the volcano and the church, between two gods. The smoking peak and the soaring cross faced each other in a perpetual stand-off as if blocked for a duel"



(Kindle Locations 261). One may interpret these two pervading structures (one of which is natural, the other, man-made) as representations of pre-colonial traditions and colonial cultures. All throughout the novel, we see the contradicting beliefs of the people, from the aforementioned banana heart myth to the Lihi belief system. Despite being Catholic, the people of Remedios still follow pagan beliefs mixed with Catholic ones, like how they believe that the volcanic eruption is a punishment towards the village because an unmarried couple decided to elope.

Moreover, similar to how history is revisited and revised based on the female perspective in *Like Water for Chocolate*, Bobis's novel also seems to tell us the same thing but in the guise of storytelling and in relation to food:

Every story has its own taste. Every storyteller has her own taste; so does every listener. So when I speak in a particular flavour, I know my words taste differently on your tongue. While it is the ear that receives a story, the main event happens in the tongue repeating it, a contention that was proven right among the guavas and bananas. (Kindle Locations 1122)

History then has flavor that changes depending on the person listening (or tasting) it. And because Nenita sees (his)storytelling as similar to cooking, she tells the reader that "So we arm ourselves with herbs and spices, and we consider ourselves improved as a species" (52). This may mean that individual perspectives of certain truths are people's way to change what they do not want others to perceive or know (or taste). Perhaps this also explains why Nenita keeps rationalizing the domestic abuse she experiences throughout the novel and why Nenita clings to the love that comes after the beating: It was not to convince herself that the abuse is done out of love, but rather it is for the reader to see that in her perspective, the problem is not her mother, but the culture that they grow up in—the culture in which the poor are shamed for being poor, thus dignity becomes secondary. Nenita sees her mother as a brutal woman who is also a victim of the society that dictates that dignity comes first.

Another door to the post-colonial discourse is the status of Nenita as an adult storyteller who works abroad. As a migrant worker reminiscing about her childhood in the Philippines, Nenita unknowingly opens up to the new reality of many Filipinos nowadays: being forced to work abroad for better



opportunities and having the desire to return home. The fact that a migrant worker looks back to her childhood and her storytelling is peppered with magic realism may be a literary depiction of what Eric J. Pido calls “transnational subjectivity,” which results in the impact of globalization to displaced individuals like Nenita. San Juan explains that to come home “fundamentally challenges the ontology of modernity” (131). He sees the “actual” act of returning as a kind of complication, because the home in question is “no longer a fixed endpoint to this cycle” (131). He further adds that “Return disorients perceptions and assumptions around home” (131), and perhaps this is why the whole narration of *Banana Heart Summer* is a bit disorienting to readers. Are the magic realist aspects of the novel due to the naivete and innocence of Nenita? Or are we see a distorted reminiscence of an adult woman wanting to return home?

The answers to those questions are all part of the post-colonial discourse. Pido states that “Balikbayans [migrants who return to the Philippines] remake their homes and lives from a particular nostalgia of their childhoods lived in the Philippines. At the same time, they merge these lifestyles with customs, beliefs, and traditions fabricated and innovated while acculturating to life” in another country (132). This results in “homes that are in constant flux: irregularly inhabited, continually modified, and with familial proximity at the center of their function. They are material artifacts of a precarious modernity” (132). Thus, Nenita’s reminiscence of childhood and the use of magic realism in the depiction of certain memories are part of this continual modification of what they see as home.

### **Conclusion**

One cannot deny the obvious similarities between Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* and Merlinda Bobis’s *Banana Heart Summer* while both also being vastly different from each other. Both writers interweave magic realism in the novels, utilizing food imagery to represent not only the emotions of the characters, but also the cultures and traditions they come from. Both novels reimagine the image of a woman in the kitchen as an empowering image, rather than an image of subservience. Food imagery then in both novels are there to characterize the characters, help the readers understand the narrative and further express the emotions need in the novels. Food then is a cultural signifier, as they not only contribute in the richness of the texts, but they stand as a kind of cultural identification for the cultures depicted.



Moreover, thanks to magic realism, Esquivel and Bobis reshapes the lived realities and histories of the female characters in the novels through metaphor and symbolism that open up a post-colonial discourse within the female perspective. These novels present alternative truths about how we look at our colonial past and about how we should open our eyes (or perhaps to borrow from the novels, our mouths) to truths that are deep within what we are initially seeing. Just like Esquivel's match, each one of us has our own light to shine on the truth that we must strongly protect, lest we will be enslaved by propaganda or by histories provided by those who rule. And just like the banana heart myth, we must patiently wait for that dew of understanding that came from the "heart of the matter," so that we may see the truth behind the illusion created by the very social reality we live in.

Both *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Banana Heart Summer* are metafictional spaces that open themselves up to a depiction of women from different cultures represented by the very recipes that they cook, and this further widens our perspectives about the world through its fantastical depiction, because through the unreal, we further understand what is real.

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