



## Magical Feminism as A Discourse of Matriarchal Feminism

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### **Abstract**

This paper compares Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire. The theory of magical feminism and feminist discourse theory has been used as the methodology for the critical analyses. Laura Esquivel, born in 1950, is a well-known Mexican writer, *Like Water for Chocolate* is a big hit, and it was adapted as a movie in 1994. Her works incorporate creative concepts in telling the story through magical illustrations, musical disks and cookbook recipes. Easterine Kire, born in 1959, is the first English writer from Nagaland to write and publish poetry and novels in English. Her writing introduces the fa culture and tradition of Nagaland. The striking parallelism found is, especially regarding matriarchy and magical realism. Society, family politics, and a matriarch play a major role in confining the character's situational placements in the stories.

Keywords: feminism, magical feminism, magical realism, discourse, matriarch.

### **Introduction**

This article analyses the two works from the perspective of matriarchy theory. The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* is organised like a cookbook, with a monthly recipe. When studying

texts from different cultures, like Latin American and Naga literature, that focus on this element, the meaning of the magical realist genre becomes more nuanced and complex. To truly understand the magic realism of Latin America and Naga, one must immerse oneself in the matter-of-fact narrative infused with magic that becomes an important aspect of reality. This cultural landscape defines the larger cultural identity. A cultural fact and, above all else, a requirement for defining these marginal texts may be found in the prominence of superstition and the supernatural within them. Notably, the mothers in both works die after the stories and only appear again as ghosts, and the element of magical realism is found.

### **Literature Review**

Corwin, Jay (2010) studied the structure of *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and how the work is presented in a recipe book, each month illustrated by a new recipe. He says, 'After the culinary introduction begins in a simple prose style that feigns innocence. This paper analyses the structural form in which Esquivel has written the work. Selvarani & Hussain (2019) has studied magical realism's characteristics in the works of Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel. The study focuses on how magical realism helps to understand a particular female experience in the novels. Two novels taken for the study are *The House of the Spirits* and *Like Water for Chocolate* by Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, respectively.

Kharbe, A. (2019) has made a study on Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* to understand how patriarchy functions and how the colonial and postcolonial periods gave it new life, as well as to shed light on the societal and political factors that serve to reinforce patriarchy's underlying matrix and to shed light on how Naga women, as patriarchal matriarchs, unwittingly contribute to the exploitation of their kind. Gour, V., & Tripathi, S. (2021) has made a study on Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* from a feminist perspective through a postcolonial feministic view. Several critical studies have been done on Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* from a

feministic perspective examining the postcolonial element. And many studies have been carried out on Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, analysing its structure, themes and character analysis.

## Methodology

### Magical Feminism - Theory

The paper is analysed using the theory of magical feminism to understand the feminist discourse theory. Magical feminism is an idea that brings together feminist thought with various mystical and spiritual tenets. The basic premise is that females have a natural affinity for the mystical and spiritual, which they may use to enhance themselves and the world. To magical feminists, reclaiming women's magical abilities is essential to the feminist movement because these abilities have been suppressed by patriarchy. They may partake in ritual, divination, and spell-casting to harness their might and advance social justice. Some magical feminists also draw on the tenets of other faiths and philosophies, including Wicca, Goddess worship, and earth-based spiritualities. They look to these customs as a means to form a bond with the divine feminine and tap into their inner strength. Magical feminism has been criticised by some who believe it promotes negative gender stereotypes and essentialism. But its supporters say it can be a potent tool for social and personal change and help women feel more empowered.

Tita is the protagonist in *Like Water for Chocolate*; she adheres to the family's tradition, which is unrealistic. However, Tita never challenges her decision; instead, she blames others for the consequences of her actions. Mama Elena is a stalwart redoubtable mother figure, represents a powerful matriarchal leader of the household and challenges traditional gender roles. Mama Elena's innate attributes are so dominating that male characters in the narrative don't get much of a spotlight. The female characters, led by the matriarch, present themselves

as equals to the dominant male. It's a story about women gaining independence and a feminist one. And it's a story of struggle at all. In that case, it's a fight between and among women, rather than the woman struggling to demonstrate her equal standing with her counterpart, as in *Jane Eyre* and other novels of the nineteenth century. Esquivel portrays women as protagonists in a story of struggle and self-discovery.

There is a world of difference between the ideas and motifs of *Like Water for Chocolate* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*. However, there are a couple of similarities between the two books. First, the place of women in traditionally male-dominated civilisations is a central theme in both *Like Water for Chocolate* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The oppression of males in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is mirrored in *Like Water for Chocolate's* female protagonist, Tita, who is restrained by her family's customs and expectations. Both works critique patriarchal power structures and conventional ideas of being a woman or a man. Second, magical realism is used as a storytelling device in both works. Unlike *A Terrible Matriarchy*, which employs magical realism to build a magnificent universe where women are in charge, *Like Water for Chocolate* uses it to investigate the emotional and psychological world of the characters. Both works use magical realism to convey nuanced feelings and experiences by blending fantastical and real worlds.

Finally, both works are deeply rooted in their respective cultures. Both books address cultural norms and customs; however, *Like Water for Chocolate* is deeply rooted in Mexican culture due to its emphasis on food and family, whereas *A Terrible Matriarchy* is set in Nagaland, India. The authors of both stories were inspired by their cultural backgrounds, and they both deal with issues of heritage, identity, and belonging.

While there are many ways in which *Like Water for Chocolate* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* differ, they both share an interest in investigating the place women hold in contemporary

society, employing magical realism as a mode of storytelling and probing the meaning of cultural identity and tradition.

### **Feminist Discourse Theory**

Feminist discourse encompasses many different kinds of talks, arguments, and studies on feminist ideas, movements, and policies. Feminism is a social movement that challenges patriarchal institutions that perpetuate the oppression of women and other oppressed groups. Gender-based violence, reproductive rights, intersectionality, Queer studies, anti-discrimination policies in the workplace, and many other issues are all part of feminist discourse. Popular culture, media portrayal, and the impact of language and communication on our views of gender and authority are also the subject of critical analysis.

Feminist discourse may range from theoretical arguments and academic studies to grassroots organising and social media campaigns. It aims to build a more fair and equitable society for everyone by challenging and transforming prevailing narratives and institutions that support gender-based oppression challenge and transform dominant narratives and structures that reinforce gender-based oppression and to create a more just and equitable society for all.

The stereotype of women as being confined to the home is not novel. But it has been repeated so often that it has lost all novelty. However, the suppression in this novel is not by a dominant patriarch but by a matriarchal head who, despite being a strong female character, is constrained by her strict conventional adherence to cultural norms. Esquivel draws our attention to this almost immediately from the novel's beginning. Tita has no chance to develop or rebel against Mama Elena's control of the hacienda because of the strict matriarchal law that prevails there; instead, she suppressed emotions and retaliation against Mama Elena's stifling of her freedom are only expressed through the food she cooks.

To a lesser extent, Gertrud and Tita want to break free of the constraints imposed on them by tradition because they are against Mama Elena's matriarchal fringes. Mama Elena's estate is the authoritative environment in which her supremacy flourishes. Now, not only are the women of Mama Elena's family confined to the house, but Mama Elena is hemmed in by the fortified perimeters of the house. Mama Elena's authority never seems to extend beyond the house. Even the confrontation between Mama Elena and the soldiers who have come to plunder her house and food stores occurs inside the house's four walls. This, however, upholds the novel's central argument that matriarchy is strong.

Like Tita, Esquivel's creative energy and inventiveness seem confined to the kitchen. The gender roles are reversed, and the victim becomes the abuser. Tita and Dielieno, the protagonists of *Like Water for Chocolate* and *A Terrible Matriarchy*, are limited to domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning. Their matriarchs have complete control over their lives at the expense of their love and independence. As time passes, customs and traditions harden, allowing people to push the boundaries and blur the lines between family members. Women are not just shown as victims of male violence but also that of matriarchal hegemony in both works since female characters deal with violence in various ways, frequently rejecting gender standards by becoming the aggressor. Both novels' protagonists suffer at the hands of a controlling mother.

In Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Dielieno is taken to live with her authoritarian grandmother, who teaches her to become a respectable woman in Naga society by instilling the values expected of a wife and mother. This grandmother rejects the feminism that would see women treated equally to men in all walks of life by teaching her granddaughters that they have no need for education, love, or affection and should be trained to take over the kitchen, household duties, and loyalty to their husbands. Although these novels are set in vastly

different cultural contexts, the social truth they embody is universal to the human experience and nature and deserves a response.

### **Matriarchal Feminism**

The feminist author and activist Sally Miller Gearhart seem to have coined the phrase 'Matriarchal Feminism' in her 1979 book *The Womanization of Rhetoric*. To attain genuine gender equality, Gearhart argues in this book, we must construct a society where women hold power and influence (Sally 1979). The anthropologist and feminist thinker Marija Gimbutas (2000) inspired Gearhart's concept of matriarchal feminism by studying the role of women in prehistoric cultures and speculating that some of these societies may have been matriarchal.

Matriarchal feminism has been discussed and contested at length by feminists and academics from various fields since Gearhart first coined the term. Many see it as a possible solution to patriarchal structures that have historically marginalised women.

Matriarchal feminism is a school of thought within the feminist movement that emphasises the value of matriarchal societal structures and the efficacy of women in decision-making positions. It aims to undermine patriarchal power structures and advance a more egalitarian society by instituting matriarchal values and structures. According to proponents of matriarchal feminism, women and other oppressed groups have suffered at the hands of patriarchal regimes, whereas the formation of matriarchal principles and structures would lead to more equality and justice.

Women in matriarchal civilisations often occupy leadership positions, and these communities' social, economic, and political structures are geared towards ensuring the happiness of all citizens. Promoting matriarchal ideas and institutions, according to its detractors, may not always result in greater gender equality since it may neglect the experiences and demands of

other marginalised groups in favour of the aspirations of women in positions of power. They also claim that the matriarchal focus might encourage essentialist views of gender and restrict opportunities for those who don't fit the binary gender norm. Overall, matriarchal feminism is one of many feminist strategies for combating patriarchal structures and advancing a more equitable social order.

Esquivel and Kire reclaim the maternal component by turning the traditionally disciplined and unquestioned female obedience to societal, conventional and cultural policies. These two works describe a society where the conventional picture of a mother caring for her children is shattered as society's conceptions and practises muddle the feeling of care and devotion. The protagonists in both works are the girls who are the youngest of their siblings; in both cases, they are subjected to dominance. Instead, the female character oppresses the female character within an atmosphere of misandry.

Matriarchy represents a systematised version of femininity. Cultures in which the feminine is supposed to be strong, to fend for herself, and to serve rather than to be sheltered and served are shown in the works of Laura Esquivel and Easterine Kire. The novel's main characters are young women oppressed by an overbearing matriarch and compelled to suppress their ambitions and dreams. Both works explore how male power changes the dynamics between women. It discusses matriarchal societies, yet their depictions of these societies are quite different. The matriarchy shown in *Like Water for Chocolate* is one in which the woman assumes a more significant role in the household. The protagonist is strong and independent but also quite self-centred. Tita had to sacrifice her joy to care for her mother, a woman.

In contrast, Dielieno's grandma treats her harshly in *A Terrible Matriarchy* since she is a female and hence not as valuable as a man. Because Dielieno is a young girl, she is silenced



and prevented from furthering her education. The novel's female matriarchs tragically teach their young girls these ideas.

Even though both novels primarily feature matriarchal elements, male dominance plays a significant role in both works. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, male dominance is shown more overtly and violently, particularly when the bandits assault the ranch, Chenchu is raped, and Mama Elena is attacked. This proves that no matter how powerful a woman may be in her sphere, she will always be subjugated by men. The repression in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is less overt but no less powerful for its subtlety. Men in the narrative don't physically assault their women of the house but control every aspect of their lives, even whether a grandma may abuse her grandchild.

Tita cannot marry since she is the youngest, and it is customarily expected of her to care for her ageing mother until her passing rather than have a family. After attempting to reason with her, Mama Elena finally provides a decisive conclusion about her marriage to Pedro:

No matter what you think, I don't care to hear it from you. No one in my family has ever dared to challenge this custom, and I certainly won't let one of my daughters be the first (Esquivel p 14).

Even after her death, Mama Elena's unwavering belief in this truth manifests itself when she comes to Tita as a ghost to scold her for having an extramarital affair with Pedro. Over Tita, the matriarchal shadow has grown so large that it has taken on dictatorial overtones. Mama Elena is quite particular about the tone of speech used while addressing her. At her sister's wedding, the cake infused with Tita's tears finds an outlet through the people with loud reverberations of nausea and unrequited love due to Mama Elena's cruel decision to marry off Rosaura to Pedro instead of Tita.

Grandma contrasts the gender in Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, arguing that men deserve greater respect and benefits than the defenders of their families. Dielieno, the protagonist, is a young girl who dreams of achieving all those things considered "unwomanly" by her grandmother, such as getting an education, which her grandmother disapproves of because she believes girls should be "educated" at home in the traditional way. In most tribal societies, women have significant social status and authority, and matriarchy coexists alongside patriarchy. It is equally true, however, that women in these cultures, like women everywhere else, are submissive to males. Kire reveals that the free idea of women proclaimed in the Northeast is a fantasy. Women's servitude is as real there as it is everywhere else globally, especially when sanctioned by matriarchy. In both works, the protagonists face bias and injustice treatment, but in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Dielieno is especially aware of the male-dominated society around her. The following exchange takes place:

I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg... I wasn't asking you, silly girl... That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat other portions. (Kire pg 1)

The novel's prologue lays the groundwork for the story's central premise and the subsequent development of the plot. Women in tribal stories are often seen working hard in the fields and being devoted spouses and mothers. Equality in status should be a right and not a luxury, and this is what Kire attempts to address by arguing that women are not static vessels of culture and tradition.

Girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learnt the housework. Then we went to the fields and learnt all the fieldwork as well. That way, one never has a problem with girl-children... I do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves, and they forget their place in the family. (Kire pg. 23)

In Kire's work, the matriarch seeks to instil moral values in Dielieno by resorting to extreme tactics, reflecting the values she was taught as a child. Motherly love is diminished since it is not absorbed to its full potential under these conditions. Kire, in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, delves into the matriarchal realm of the tribal environment and reveals its actuality, an approach strikingly similar to Esquivel's investigation.

*Like Water for Chocolate* depicts love as a mystical power that transcends reality, and it is through love that protagonist Tita is ultimately set free. When mundane components are combined with those of a magical nature, another dimension is created. Because of the novel's structural component, Tita can find release through magical and supernatural interventions and a love that ultimately comes in a full circle. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, overcoming her grandma, attending college, and getting married is a major step towards Dielieno's freedom. After much internal debate, Dielieno decides to forgive her grandma. Love is shown in contrasting ways in both novels, but ultimately, it plays a crucial role in setting the women free.

Considering that Esquivel and Kire's works were published almost a decade apart and in completely different parts of the world, it is truly fascinating to analyse how they both draw from a realistic picture of matriarchy and characters in similar predicaments.

Understanding the Latin American community requires familiarity with the literary genre of magic realism, a defining characteristic of the region's literature. The cultural and social significance of enchantment in their writings is palpable from Miguel Angel Asturias and Borges to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel. Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* presents a metaphysical and physical world by blending magical realism with a realistic narrative that defies the constraints of space and logic. This property of magic which locates itself in the tangible world, is not an original idea in Naga text or circumstance.

Naga society is just as grounded in folklore, superstition, and belief in the supernatural as in Latin American literature and culture.

In Esquivel, the supernatural blends in with the mundane without eliciting any reaction from the locals. Tita's emotional repression is alleviated, and she can connect with people and events outside her home life and emotional prison. The novel's remarkable occurrences might boost its credibility as a fantasy depiction of love. But the power of these occurrences comes from their role as bridges between the real and the fantastic. The interventions allow for the potential loss of reality. Magically beginning to lactate and giving birth to a kid with a tenuous connection to Tita and Pedro serves to modify and convey Tita's unrequited love for Pedro in many ways. Because of therapeutic intervention, she can now communicate with other people and the world by channelling her feelings and emotions into the cuisine she prepares. Magical interventions create a chasm in the bridge built by human effort and constraints.

Tita's plight is largely due to the supernatural interventions made by Nacha's and Mama Elena's spirits. When Tita is in a predicament, the spirits of Mama Elena and Nacha emerge from her subconscious to help her out. Therefore, the apparitions trope becomes crucial in helping Tita work through her difficulties and ambiguity. One similarity between *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Like Water for Chocolate* is the afterlife apparition of the matriarchs' spirits. There are spectral appearances by both Mama Elena and Grandma. In *Kire*, the grandmother returns as a ghost to torment the tenants in her home so that her unwed daughter might inherit the land. In Tita's case, Mama Elena continues to be a barrier for her even in death, appearing aggressively by assaulting and cursing her. By denying the right of single women to hold property after death, the grandmother effectively rejects the patriarchal society she helped establish during her lifetime in *A Terrible Matriarchy*.

## Conclusion

This paper's study adds a new dimension to our knowledge of the value of cross-cultural readings and the narratives they inspire in varied social settings. The brilliance of Laura Esquivel as a writer resides in her ability to combine love, cooking, magic, reality, and human nature into a seamless whole that entertains and enlightens.

*Like Water for Chocolate* is a novel that blends magical realism and feminism to explore the life of Tita, a young woman living in Mexico during the early 20th century. Throughout the novel, Tita's struggle against the oppressive patriarchal system is interwoven with magical elements that highlight the power of female bonding, the importance of women's creativity and the repressed desires of women in a traditional society.

The novel centres around Tita's love affair with Pedro, a young man who is set to marry her older sister, Rosaura. Due to the cultural norms of the time, Tita is forced to remain single and care for her mother until she dies. Through her cooking, Tita expresses her emotions, and the food she prepares has a magical quality that affects those who eat it. Tita's magical ability to influence others through her cooking can be seen as a metaphor for women's power in a patriarchal society, where they are often relegated to domestic roles.

Additionally, the novel explores the relationships between women and the power of female bonding. Tita's relationships with her sisters, mother, and the women who work in the kitchen with her are significant aspects of the story. These relationships provide Tita with emotional support and allow her to rebel against the societal norms that seek to suppress her desires.

Although elements of magical realism can be found in both works, *Like Water for Chocolate* features them more prominently, Esquivel's use is less restricted, and her characters use the fantastical components of the story like they're just another part of life. The use of magic in A

*Terrible Matriarchy* is controlled since, most of the time, it is just mentioned briefly, yet it still has an impact.

Radical logicity is a hindrance to the growth of magical realism, but this is contained and transformed into a more inclusive reading in these works; this is because, alongside the presentation of the fantastical, absurd, or magical, there is a presentation of truth and reality, which serves as an impetus to advance human incentives. Gertrudis's sexual awakening, prompted by a dish of quail in rose petal sauce, helped her break free of Mama Elena's suppression and establish herself as a confident, self-sufficient woman. Despite occurring in a different setting, Kire demonstrates the importance of traditional beliefs and cultural antecedents in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Similar to how Esquivel's inscription of magicity is drawn from a source of cultural history that pre-existed in the Latin American situation, the belief system that essentially defines the Naga society is a collective of traditions, cultures, customs, practises, all imbued with a tinge of superstition and supernaturalism, and this is what is required in the dynamic of its cultural study.

The work's focused elements are preoccupied with mundane problems. Novels' trajectories in presenting their truths and perspectives evoke contradictions and similarities that allow disclosed understanding of the spectrum of themes and aspects that embody the texts. While doing so, Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* echoes and rhymes with Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*.

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