

WGS.S10: Latina Voices

Feminist Ideology Expressed in Latina Works

The feminist ideology is a dynamic and developing notion throughout various works such as novels, art, and film. Moreover, feminist ideals vary depending on the culture or society it is associated with. For example, the development of feminism in western countries is considerably different from the development in the eastern world. While feminist ideals in western culture often involves the redefining the role of the women in the workplace, feminist ideals in the eastern hemisphere often center around the ability of repressed women to break free from their oppressor and allow self-expression. In Latina culture, the feminist ideology is also distinctive in its own way. Often times Latina voices encompass a variety of feminist ideologies that must be given its own set of criteria. Although this criterion is still broad and dynamic even within the context of Latina culture, there are three main spheres in which feminism can be expressed within selected works. The feminist ideology is often expressed with respect to a woman's desire to work in a traditional male dominated role, her interest in a romantic relationship with a forbidden person, and her rebellion against an oppressor in her life. These three criteria are not exclusive to Latina feminist ideology but certainly compose a large part of the doctrine. There are four specific works that can be placed on a spectrum of varying degrees of feminist ideology based on these three criteria set forth: *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, *Dreaming in Cuban* by Christina Garcia, *Real Women Have Curves* by Patricia Cardoso, and *Girl Fight* by Karyn Kusama. The first two works are novels (*Like Water for Chocolate* has also been adapted into a film) while the last two pieces are films. Regardless of the mode of expression, these works all lie along a spectrum of feminist ideology according to the three criteria that are essential to defining Latina feminism. While the two novels, *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Like Water*

for Chocolate exhibit some aspects of feminist ideology, the two films *Girl Fight* and *Real Women Have Curves* more obviously illustrate a Latina feminist presence through the plot of the story.

Like Water for Chocolate – Laura Esquivel

This novel, adapted into film, fulfills two out of the three criteria of feminist ideology. The protagonist of the story, Tita de La Garza has a determined destiny set forth by her mother who insists that she remain unmarried so that she can take care of her in old age. As such, Tita's life becomes defined by the role she plays in taking care of the house by cooking and cleaning for the family. Tita's upbringing and special bond with the family cook, Nacha, teaches her to cook delicious food and even express her desires through the meals she prepares. However, throughout the plot Tita does not move beyond her traditional defined role as a domestic woman. Even when she moves to Dr. John Brown's house and away from the clutches of her mother, Tita still does not have any desire to express herself in a manner that would require her to take up a career outside of the home. On the other hand, Tita's older sister, Gertrudis, becomes a general in the Mexican Revolutionary War and finds herself on a path towards a political revolution. In this sense, Gertrudis expresses herself by taking on nontraditional career and defying the social standards that her mother and other family members had expected of her. Thus, although Esquivel does not immediately illustrate the protagonist defying social norms in the workplace, she does include a secondary character that has made this possible in the context of the story. As such, Esquivel partially fulfills the first criteria of feminist ideology that promotes the rejection of the woman as a domestic housewife inhibited from a career outside the home.

The storyline of this novel centers on the romantic triangle between Tita, Pedro, and Tita's older sister Rosaura. Since Tita is forbidden from marrying by her mother, Pedro decides to marry her sister Rosaura so that he can at least be close to the true love of his life. Tita partially disobeys the rules set forth by her society by continuing to lust after Pedro even after his marriage to her sister. Instead of overtly showing her feelings towards him, Tita expresses her love through the food that she cooks and thus subtly engages in a romantic relationship with Pedro. As the novel progresses, Tita eventually sleeps with Pedro even though she is engaged to Dr. John Brown. This overt disregard for the sanctity of marriage and social norms illustrates the feminist ideology of Tita in Esquivel's work. Although Tita's mother and the rest of society dictate that the protagonist remain unmarried, Tita redefines her destiny by maintaining a secret yet strong relationship with Pedro. Esquivel furthers this concept by even adding that Tita's mother also had an affair with a man she was not married to that eventually produced her firstborn child, Gertrudis. Thus, Tita is not the only woman in the novel that defies social norm in the name of a man that she loves.

Esquivel fulfills the last criterion of feminist ideology when Tita eventually rebels against her mother. After the death of her nephew, Roberto, Tita feels an immense sense of anger towards her mother who had separated Tita from her nephew and even blames her mother for the passing of the child. Since Roberto used to drink the milk that Tita produced while in Mexico and then dies of malnutrition, Tita believes that her absence caused the eventual death of Roberto. Tita's resentment towards her mother because of this culminates in an outrage towards her at the dinner table and results in her mother beating her with a wooden spoon for her disobedience. However, this does not change Tita's attitude toward the person who oppressed her. As a result, Tita continues to defy her mother by moving in with Dr. John Brown and

refusing to live on the farm again. Tita's rebellion against her oppressor is a defining moment for her character because it allows for much awaited self-expression of her true feelings. This feminist ideology is also observed through the oldest sister, Gertrudis, who also runs away with a man and rebels against the wishes of her mother. Thus, Esquivel uses the rebellion of Tita and Gertrudis against their mother in order to illustrate an essential feminist ideology of freedom and independence from a captor.

Dreaming in Cuban – Christina Garcia

Garcia uses the passage of time through generations in order to illustrate the evolution of feminist ideology in her work. She starts with Celia Del Pino who unfortunately falls in love with a man that does not stay with her. However, her daughter Lourdes does manage to break free of the traditional housebound status of a woman and eventually opens a bakery and becomes quite a successful businesswoman. In fact, Lourdes becomes the primary breadwinner of the household at one point – a rarity in traditional Latina culture where the man is supposed to financially support a family. However, out of the women in this novel, Lourdes is the only one who completely creates a new career path for herself outside of the socially defined role of a housewife. Towards the end of the novel, her daughter Pilar is suggested to follow in her mother's footsteps but it is too early to tell. Thus, Garcia illustrates the gradual liberation of women from their housebound status through the passage of generations.

The romantic relationships in this novel also vary depending on the generation of the woman involved. For Celia, her true love (Gustavo) is thousands of miles away from her for most of her life when he moves to Spain. Thus, Celia resorts to writing unsent letters to Gustavo expressing her love to him even while she is married to Jorge Del Pino. Celia is also left in the

hands of her mother-in-law and sister while her husband embarks on long business trips. Thus, Celia is the most powerless over her situation compared to the women in later generations. Garcia allows more freedom for Lourdes who marries Rufino Puente against the wishes of her mother. Her rejection of her mother's expectations gives her the freedom to engage in a passionate relationship and even travel outside of Cuba to the United States. However, Garcia partially weakens this notion of a strong relationship between Lourdes and Rufino by including that Rufino cheated on her with another woman while in New York. Thus, although Lourdes defies the expectations set forth by her mother, she eventually is betrayed by the man whom she trusted. Another instance of betrayal occurs when Felicia's husband, Hugo Villaverde, gives her syphilis by sleeping with another woman. Thus, although Garcia allows both Lourdes and Felicia to engage in romantic relationships with him originally deemed unfit for them, she still taints each relationship by betrayal of the husband. The feminist ideology of sexual freedom is ever present in the generations after Celia, but the true relationship between the husband and wife never seems to match the passion that Celia harvests for her forbidden love, Gustavo. As a result, the feminist ideology of freedom to love is present albeit limited in nature.

Garcia includes rebellion against a women's oppressor to exhibit the last criteria of feminist ideology. In response to Hugo's betrayal, Felicia throws a burning rag on his face, causing him to run away. This represents Felicia's revolt against the repressiveness of her husband. Although this is a harsh reaction against infidelity, Garcia illustrates a woman's uprising against a man who betrays her through this violent action. Thus, the feminist ideology of revolting against a repressor is partially illustrated but once again is tainted by the questionability of whether Felicia's actions were an appropriate response.

Real Women Have Curves – Patricia Cardoso

This film clearly exemplifies the feminist ideology in a Latina context. The protagonist of the film, Ana Garcia (played by America Ferrera) first defies social norm by applying to college with the possibility of leaving her family and her home. Traditionally, her older sister and her mother expect her to simply get married and bear children after she finish high school. Ana's mother is especially interested in Ana working in her sister's dress factory. However, Ana finds herself with other plans for her future and applies to Columbia University with the help of her teacher (played by George Lopez). Through this plot, director Patricia Cardoso illustrates the fundamental ideology of breaking the traditional role of the domestic woman. Ana's desire for higher education and eventual acceptance into a collegiate program allows for her to break out of the path that her mother and other family members had decided for her.

Another aspect of feminist ideology is vividly illustrated through Ana's relationship with Jimmy. Throughout the film, Ana seems to be in control of the relationship and decides how far she wants the relationship to continue. For example, Ana makes the decision to have sex with Jimmy for the first time and even brings the condom so that they are safe. Although she is initially apprehensive about the perception of the curves of her body, Ana learns through Jimmy to be proud of voluptuousness. As such, Ana's relationship with Jimmy allows her to become a more confident woman. Even after the two have sex, Ana is the one who decides their future by telling Jimmy that he does not have to call her the next day and she does not expect a relationship from him. What makes this relationship even more aligned with feminist ideology is Ana's mother, Carmen's, firm opposition. As a traditional Latina woman, Carmen is opposed to sex before marriage and probably also does not like the idea of her daughter dating a non-Latino. Regardless of her mother's opinions, however, Ana pursues and continues the relationship until

she feels the need to move on. Thus, the feminist ideology of independence and freedom to choose relationships is emphasized in this film.

Although it is not completely evident, Ana's rebellion against norms in her sister's dress factory represents a revolt against what society defines as her fate. When Estela and Ana visit her boss in order to ask for an advance on their pay, Ana goes against the grain by imposing on the owner of the factory company. This represents Ana's refusal to obey the social standards set forth when they conflict with personal interest. This is contrasted with the timid nature of Estela who dreams of becoming a dress designer but is instead simply the manager of a dress factory. Another instance in which Ana displays feminist ideology is during an especially humid day at the factory where she takes off her clothes in order to feel more comfortable. Initially the other women in the factory are astonished at this bold move but eventually Ana convinces the other women to follow suit. Thus, not only does Ana rebel against the traditional customs, she even convinces her peers and coworkers to follow her. As a result, Cardoso creates a feminist leader in the character of Ana who not only realizes her own potential as a woman, but also convinces other woman around her to do the same.

Girl Fight – Karyn Kusama

This film is thought to exhibit feminist ideology the strongest out of the four works. The main character, Diana Guzman (played by Michelle Rodriguez) is a boxer – a profession that is usually associated with more men than women. However, regardless of the social perception of this choice, Diana continues to train with a local trainer using the money her father gives to her brother to train. An ironic part of the plot occurs when the audience learns that Diana's brother, Hector, enjoys art and drawing instead of fighting. This role reversal is an interesting twist to the

plot and goes beyond feminist ideology by demonstrating that gender equality goes both ways. By portraying Diana as a tough boxer and a fighter, director Karyn Kusama displays feminist ideology that defies the perception that women should not engage in physical confrontations, especially as a career path.

Diana's relationship with Adrian Sturges (played by Santiago Douglas) also illustrates feminist ideology. Although Adrian is dating another girl at the time he meets Diana, he is immediately intrigued by her. It is interesting to note that the girl that Adrian dates represents the opposite of Diana's personality: she mainly wears dresses, make-up, and can usually be seen sitting on Adrian's lap. Although Adrian momentarily remains with his current girlfriend, he eventually approaches Diana and 'courts' her. Kusama makes it a point to portray the relationship between these two characters as equal as possible. In fact, it can be argued that Diana is more in control of the future of the relationship than Adrian. When Diana is arranged to match up against her love interest, Adrian is hesitant about the idea. Only when Diana forces him to enter the ring does Adrian agree to the match. However, throughout the whole process, Kusama makes it clear that Adrian is uncomfortable with the position he has been put in. This suggests that Adrian could be more invested into the relationship than Diana who is more invested in proving her worth as a boxer.

The last manifestation of feminist ideology in this film occurs when Diana revolts against her oppressive father. Throughout the film, Diana's father discourages her from pursuing her dream to become a boxer and is instead interested in his son to become physically capable of defending himself. When Diana and her father get into a heated argument during dinner one night, the conflict eventually ends with her pinning her father on the floor. This open rebellion

against the oppressor in her life that limits her potential is a clear expression of the feminist ideology that encompasses the film.

In conclusion, the four works, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, *Real Women Have Curves*, and *Girl Fight*, all fulfill varying degrees of the feminist ideology that is characteristic of a Latina voice. In the novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita does not seem to break free of her traditional role as a domestic housewife, but her sister represents the capability of a woman to do so. Tita's maintenance of a secret affair with Pedro displays the feminist ideology of freedom of romantic involvement while her rebellion against her mother illustrates her independence from her oppressor. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Lourdes becomes the only woman who ventures into a career outside the home and chooses to marry a man whom her mother does not approve. These two actions are contrasted by her mother's lifestyle and illustrate a generational change in feminist ideology. Felicia's rebellion against her husband who gave her syphilis also represents a partial portrayal of feminist ideology but is tainted by the questionability of the appropriateness of the response. Although both novels display a certain degree of feminist ideology, it is the films that truly highlight the features of feminist ideology. In the film *Real Women Have Curves*, Ana's desire to go to college and her relationship with Jimmy demonstrates the feminist ideology of gender equality in the workplace and sexual freedom. Ana's rebellion against the social norms her mother and sister put forth also represent her freedom of self-expression that eventually inspires her peers in the dress factory. Lastly, the film *Girl Fight* is thought to compose the most feminist ideology throughout the plot. The protagonist engages in a traditionally male-dominated sport as a potential career and even dares to compete against the boy she is dating with the intention of triumphing over him. Diana even

rebels against her father in a physical confrontation which shows her freedom of self-expression and desire to break free from the throngs of her oppressor that is limiting her potential. Thus, these four works can be placed on a spectrum where the novels represent a partial portrayal of feminist values and the two films more directly show feminist ideology. Although these criteria are not sufficient to define the entirety of feminist ideology, they are essential for understanding the role of feminism in a Latina voice, whether she be an author or a film director.

Works Cited

1. Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. New York: Random House, 1989. 1-246. Print.
2. Garcia, Christina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992. 1-245. Print.
3. "Girl Fight." Karyn Kusama. 2000.
4. "Real Women Have Curves." Patricia Cardoso. 2002

Bibliography

1. Dima, Todor. "Feminist Ideology and Contemporary Epistemology." *Romanian Academy* 1-53. Web. 5 May 2010. <http://cogito.ucdc.ro/en/nr_3_en/5%20-%20FEMINIST%20IDEOLOGY%20AND%20CONTEMPORARY%20EPISTEMOLOGY%20_eng_.pdf>.
2. Gonzalez, Maria C. *Contemporary Mexican-American Women Novelists: Toward a Feminist Identity*. 1996.
3. Nelson, Lynn. "Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science." *Kluwer Academic Publishers* 256. (1997): 1-236. Web. 5 May 2010. <http://books.google.com/books?id=dbrQ4R7zWpwC&pg=PA244&lpg=PA244&dq=Feminist+ideology+criteria&source=bl&ots=5a4Zyri2PV&sig=23YgBfVa47Al42HEKdpvho13uhQ&hl=en&ei=tinrS6WaDibGIQe929ycBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>.
4. Sandoval, Anna. "Toward a Latina Feminism in the Americas: Repression and Resistance in Chicana and American Literature." *University of Texas* (2008): 1-129. Web. 3 May 2010. <http://books.google.com/books/utexaspress?id=DzkkxB8w-_VYC&printsec=frontcover&cd=1&source=gbs_ViewAPI#v=onepage&q=Laura&f=false>.
5. Vidal, Mirta. *Chicanas Speak Out*. Pathfinder Press, 1971.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.S10 Special Topics in Women & Gender Studies Seminar: Latina Women's Voices
Spring 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.