

COMPARISON BETWEEN “LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE” & “THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS”

Both Laura Esquivel, author of “Like Water for Chocolate,” and Isabel Allende, writer of “The House of the Spirits,” are Latin American women (from Mexico and Chile respectively) who vividly portray oppression by parents in these two books. The stories evolve around two heroines (Tita in “Like Water for Chocolate,” and Blanca in “The House of the Spirits,”) who first respond to parental oppression by tolerance, hoping that this virtue will be the salve that will overcome the harsh dominance. When it fails, they rebel against the oppression and conquer it admirably, aptly epitomizing Robert Kennedy’s sage words: “Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lots of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, these ripples build a current that sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (Coolquotes.wordpress.com).

Blanca is subjected to oppression by her tyrannical father Esteban Trueba, while Tita is dominated by her authoritarian mother Lena de la Garza. Esteban flies into a fury when he hears about Blanca’s romantic alliance with Pedro Terceso, banishes her from Tres Marias, and goes to the extent of trying to kill her lover – all because Pedro’s lowly position as the son of Tres Marias’ foreman makes him an unsuitable suitor to status-conscious Esteban (Valens). In Tita’s case, the marriage she craves with her lover Pedro Muzquiz is denied because of the de la Garza family tradition, where the youngest daughter is destined to remain a spinster looking after her mother in later life (Rhodes-Pitts).

Both dominating parents continue their oppressive attitudes towards their daughters throughout the major part of both stories. When Blanca returns from her long banishment, Esteban forces her to marry Jean de Satigny, who turns out to be a sexual pervert; even after his wife Clara’s death and Blanca’s divorce from Jean de Satigny, Esteban does not give her any money for household expenses, so much so that Blanca is forced to run the house single handedly through the sale of her ceramics (Valens). Mama Elena continues her harsh domination of Tita by arranging to move Rosaura’s family to San Antonio, thereby devastating Tita who had developed a deep love and attachment for Rosaura’s son Roberto (Rhodes-Pitts). When Roberto dies as a result of estrangement from her, Tita blames her mother for the calamity, only to be viciously attacked with a wooden spoon by Mama Elena, infuriated that the girl dared to blame her for Roberto’s death. When Tita starts behaving unnaturally in response to her continued oppression (like creeping into the attic and remaining there for a long time, feeding a baby pigeon), her mother attributes her unusual behavior to lunacy, and instructs Dr. John Brown to institutionalize the girl (Wikipedia.org). Mama Elena continues her oppression of Tita even after death; her ghost comes to curse Tita and her unborn baby when she is pregnant with Pedro’s child, and returns again to curse her and Pedro when the latter, gladdened by the news of Tita’s pregnancy, drunkenly serenades his lover from below her window (Rhodes-Pitts).

Both domineering parents oppress their other children as well, albeit to a lesser degree than Blanca and Tita. Esteban Trueba refuses to acknowledge his illegitimate son (Esteban Garcia) born as a result of his rape of the peasant girl Pancha, condemning them and their descendants to a lifetime of humiliation, hardship and misery. Blanca, Jaime and Nicolas are continually cowed by Esteban’s violent nature and unpredictable temper tantrums. They are humiliated and vexed by their father’s sexual exploitation of poor peasant girls as well as his open sexual liaisons with prostitutes, especially Transito Soto (Valens). Mama Elena’s fierce temperament inspires fear in all her daughters. Unable to bear the oppression any more, Gertrudis elopes from the ranch with a rebel soldier. Rosaura is so cowed by her mother that she does not dare to blame Mama Elena for the death of her son Roberto (Rhodes-Pitts).

By the end of the books, both heroines succeed (to quote Robert Kennedy), “in sweeping down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (Coolquotes.wordpress.com). Blanca continues her romantic liaison with Pedro in defiance of Esteban’s wishes, and ultimately triumphs over her father by saving his life from the peasants. Her reward is a new vista of happiness that opens when Pedro and she escape to Canada (Valens). Tita defeats her mother’s plans to institutionalize her by successfully recuperating in Dr. John Brown’s house, resolutely refusing to return home to her domineering mother, and only doing so briefly before the latter’s death. After Rosaura’s death, Tita and Pedro are at last free to openly express their love, which they do both physically before carrying it forward into the afterlife (Rhodes-Pitts).

References used:

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