

## World Literature Assignment I

According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's The Social Contract, the family structure is the basis for the government structure. The father is the government and the children are the people. He argues that children stay with their father as long as they need him for their preservation but in exchange the children owe their father obedience. The children can decide to dissolve their bond with their father and both parties gain independence. If a child chooses to stay with their father than it is only by an agreement. In ancient Greek society, only males can choose to dissolve their bond with their fathers and gain independence. Females are denied this choice; they cannot dissolve their bond with their families and gain independence. Instead they were bound by their families and remained dependent upon their families, especially the male family members, for their preservation. This dynamic instills patriarchy in ancient Greek society; females must remain obedient to their family at the cost of their independence.

In the play "Medea" by Euripides and the novel Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel, the female protagonists rebel against the patriarchal society in order to gain their independence and their identities. In order to rebel against patriarchy, they must destroy the idea of family.

In the play "Medea" by Euripides, the titular character Medea seeks vengeance against her husband, Jason, because he has taken a second wife in order to gain status and power. She lives in a Greek society which oppresses women and treats them as mere objects. Women are

valued as either mothers or as a contract between men by the means of marriage. It is the patriarchy that places the value on the women. The women become objects the moment a value is placed on them; they lose their identity and become something less than human. In the play, the princess embodies this dynamic. With neither a face, name, nor appearance, she has no identity, only a value as a contract between Jason and King Creon. Jason was the heir to the throne of Iolcus, however due to Medea, he was exiled. He needed to “marry the daughter of a king” as to regain the status and power that Medea's actions had denied him (18). Although Medea wants revenge due the marriage between Jason and the princess, she confronts Creon, not the princess. The princess herself bears no real importance other than as a means to complete the contract between Jason and King Creon. The princess willingly submits to the value placed upon her because as King Creon's daughter she must submit to his will. Her value is determined by her father because she is dependent upon him for her preservation. She does not have the power to oppose him as Medea does because she was born into a society which denied her an identity the moment she was born.

Medea is in a different situation than that of the princess. Unlike the princess, she was not born into Greek society; she was born in the land of Colchis which did not put a value on her. Medea found her own intrinsic identity as a powerful sorceress that was not dependent upon her father. To flee with Jason Medea had to kill her brother and betray father. By betraying her father, she declared her independence, that she no longer needed him for her preservation. But when she moved to Greek with Jason, her self-founded identity was ignored and a value was placed upon her; Jason values her as both a trophy and a mother while Greek society devalues her as a barbarian. A value is put on Medea but her identity is not removed or negated. She does

not succumb to the Greek society's value of her as the princess did. She defies Creon's orders and successfully executes revenge against Jason through the murder of her sons. Through the murder of her children not only does Medea hurt Jason but she also attacks patriarchy. The children "died from a disease they caught from their father" (44). To attack Greek patriarchy, Medea must murder her children. In Greek society it was the men who carried on the family name, not the women. Killing her sons would ruin the "whole of Jason's house" (26). Jason's family name is eliminated through the murder of his sons. In various other cultures, women are always bound by men. When they are young they are bound by their fathers, when they are wives they are bound by their husbands, and when they are older they are bound by their sons. To break the perpetuation of patriarchy Medea eliminates her family. She is not bound by her father, a husband, or children; she has her own identity bounded only by herself.

In Like Water for Chocolate, by Laura Esquivel, Mama Elena perpetuates patriarchy through the family's traditions. The futures of Rosaura and Tita are predetermined; as the eldest daughter, Rosaura's marriage is prearranged and as the youngest daughter, Tita is to never marry so that she can take care of her mother. Gertrudis is able to deter from the family traditions but she is only able to do so by abandoning her family. Outside of her family Gertrudis makes a living as a prostitute. Although she is a prostitute, she feels a "great relief" because she is relying on herself for her own survival not Mama Elena (126). It is her first step in creating an identity separate of Mama Elena. She fully realizes her identity when she becomes a soldier in the Mexican revolution. Mama Elena enforced patriarchy by keeping her daughter in traditionally feminine roles: Rosaura as a mother and Tita as a cook. Gertrudis puts herself into a masculine role as a soldier in the rebellion. By assuming a masculine role, Gertrudis defies the family

traditions and rebels against patriarchy.

Rosaura, however, is obedient and compliant to Mama Elena. She marries Pedro and gives birth to his children; she makes her own decisions and she blindly follows Mama Elena.

She cannot oppose the patriarchy because she exists for the sole purpose to carry on the family traditions. Like Mama Elena, Rosaura is the physical manifestation of patriarchy. The patriarchal structure of the family is instilled through the family traditions. Even though Mama Elena dies, Rosaura subjects her daughter to the same traditions that Mama Elena had to Tita, making sure that the patriarchy survives.

Although Tita rebels, she is not as successful as Gertrudis and remains tied down by patriarchy throughout the novel. Tita never fully realizes an identity outside of what Mama Elena forced her into. When she was younger Tita sought protection from Mama Elena through the kitchen, inadvertently Mama Elena forces her into the role of a cook. Even when Mama Elena dies, Tita remains on the ranch as a cook. She never leaves the ranch, the one instance she did leave the ranch, she was weak and powerless and relied on John. Unlike Gertrudis, the moment she is removed from the ranch, she loses her power and becomes weak. Her whole life Tita had molded to patriarchy but even though she was “no longer at her mother's command” she didn't know what to do without patriarchy because “she had never decided for herself before” (109). She had a choice to marry John but she chose instead to stay with Pedro. Her whole identity is based around Pedro and her role of a cook on the ranch. She cannot have an identity outside of Pedro or the ranch even though they both represent patriarchy. When she and Pedro have sex for the last time, Pedro dies at the climax, and she begins to lose heat. To regain her heat “she would have to find some way, even if it was an artificial one, of striking a fire that would light the way

back to her origin and to Pedro” (244). Because her identity is based around Pedro, the moment he dies Tita begins to lose her heart, her substance. As he loses his warmth and his existence, so does Tita. Tita cannot successfully rebel against patriarchy because her existence is based upon it.

Medea is able to rebel against patriarchy because she effectively dissolved her ties to her family. However, Tita is unable to rebel against patriarchy because her identity is based on what her family molded her into. To abandon her family would destroy the foundations of her identity and strength, leaving her unable to effectively rebel against patriarchy. Medea, as in Rousseau's argument, chooses to relinquish her ties to her family as to gain her independence. However, Tita cannot make this decision for herself and due to this, she and her potential independence are bound by her family.

Word Count: 1,484