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The Way to a Man’s Heart Is Through His Stomach: Male Consumption
and Female Social Edibility in *Laços de família*

by Clarice Lispector

Marissa D. Jensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Way to a Man’s Heart Is Through His Stomach: Male Consumption and Female Social Edibility in *Laços de família* by Clarice Lispector

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Critics of Clarice Lispector often identify feminist themes relating to voice, gender, and the male gaze in her creative work. Lispector’s collection of short stories *Laços de família* demonstrates the way patriarchal society sets limits on the identity of women. Laura Mulvey’s concept of “the male gaze” provides a useful tool for understanding how men marginalize, objectify, and subordinate women through visual regimes of control, yet Mulvey’s concept does not fully encapsulate the scope of male oppression explored in *Laços de família*. In fact, Lispector draws upon a variety of senses and metaphors related to consumption through a mode I call food femininities to display how men consume their female counterparts in society. More specifically, Lispector’s collection *Laços de família* invokes, presents, and uses food, food imagery, food vocabulary, and food metaphors as a central way of defining gender roles determined by society and performed in accordance with the normative standards dictated by said society.

Keywords: food feminism, objectification, the male gaze, consumption, gender roles
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While women feature as protagonists in most of the stories in Clarice Lispector’s collection *Laços de família* (1960), the actions and presence of male characters frequently determine the trajectory of the plots. This tendency toward male-dominated narratives features in the critiques of many literary critics who have examined the themes of feminine voice, masculinity, and social denunciations in Lispector’s works. In her book *Passionate Fictions*, Marta Peixoto asserts that “*Family Ties* contains Lispector’s most celebrated, studied, and anthologized short stories, and yet the collection is rarely read in its entirety as a set of interacting texts” (24). In each of the thirteen short stories the protagonists, female and male, confront jarring truths through existential self-evaluation of their quotidian affairs. Each confrontation yields a unique perspective of the individuals’ situation, yet together these psychological encounters unveil an underlying critique of familial roles and the biased gender assignments dictated by societal norms. Maria Clark suggests that “for the feminist critic, the question arises why Lispector, who so aptly describes the negative function of family ties, does not conceive of a female protagonist who actively subverts the family structure” (20). Each story features people of different socioeconomic backgrounds with unique outlooks on their condition, but the result of each narrative seems similar: continued imprisonment within repressive patriarchal societal standards. In addition to these themes, some critics have analyzed the language Lispector utilizes.1 Undoubtedly, Clarice

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1 In her book *O percurso das personagens de Clarice Lispector*, Bernadete Grob-Lima dedicates a section to the language Lispector employs, considering it a cognitive choice (215).
Lispector employs a carefully selected lexicon to express her message about the female condition. Some of these attentively chosen words refer specifically to food to describe the relationships between it, men, women, and children while demonstrating the way that “food is a key part of how [people] ‘do’ or ‘perform’ gender” (Cairns 25). More specifically, Lispector’s collection *Laços de família* invokes, presents, and uses food, food imagery, food vocabulary, and food metaphors as a central way of defining gender roles determined by society and performed in accordance with the normative standards dictated by said society. These themes prevail heavily throughout the following short stories: “Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga,” “Amor,” “Uma galinha,” “A menor mulher do mundo,” “O jantar,” “Preciosidade,” and “O búfalo.”

Of the collection, Erico Verrissimo, a contemporary of Lispector, claimed that the short stories were “a mais importante coletânia de contos publicada neste país desde Machado de Assis” (Moser 337). Lispector published *Laços de família* in 1960 at the cusp of the second wave of the modern feminist movement in Brazil (Dinis 244). Alexandre Veronese observes that in the 1960s, Brazilian legal scholars and social critics were heatedly debating Brazil’s 1916 Civil Code, which was viewed as outmoded and in need of revision: “Os juristas brasileiros, a partir do momento da emancipação colonial, começam a acalentar mais um projeto de afirmação da nacionalidade por meio do quadro jurídico: a produção de um código civil brasileiro” (Veronese 299). The civil code of 1916 represented both the nationality of Brazil as well as the norms of

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2 A book entitled *A literatura e o gozo impuro de comida* by Maria José de Queiroz analyses various time periods of Brazilian literature, the use of food within the texts, and Brazilian food traditions in literature. Queiroz’s analysis focuses on authors Machado de Assis, Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, and Gilberto Freyre, among others. Her study does not address any texts by Clarice Lispector.

3 In his article, “A hora perigosa da tarde nos *Laços de família*: Clarice Lispector e o movimento feminista,” critic Nilson Dinis contextualizes the publication of the collection in the feminist history of Brazil. He explains that Lispector published *Laços de família* in the same year she returned to Brazil from the US, which also happened to be the same year in which the second wave of the feminist movement began. This second wave focused on questions of female rights and the ending of discrimination against women.
Brazilian society in the twentieth century. The code universally protected the rights of men over the rights of women. The law was written in such a way that men’s authority increased and women were required to submit to male mandates and ordinances. This subordination constitutes a form of female consumption in Brazilian society, particularly how the female desire and identity is supplanted by masculine regiments of control.

While Brazil faced backlash for its outdated law, other countries, including the United States, were rife with debates concerning the roles and rights of women during this time period. Writing in response to the film standards of the 1970s, Laura Mulvey published a psychoanalytic treatise addressing concepts of pleasure, desire, and gaze. In her work, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (1975), Mulvey discusses Freud’s ideas, specifically the arguments surrounding “scopophilia”—a concept that he associates with treating other people as things, objectifying them through the eye of the observer. Mulvey qualifies this look and calls it the male gaze, which she defines as the means by which women are objectified. According to Mulvey, women are more frequently objectified than men. She augments this reasoning when she explains that we exist in a world ruled by sexual inequality in which the pleasure of looking is divided between the man who is an active agent and the woman whose role is the passive object. She explains: “The male determination gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure. … In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed … so they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (62). According to Mulvey, the woman displayed as a sexual object is the recurring theme in twentieth century media. Furthermore, in her treatise, she asserts that there exist at least two avenues of visual consumption, listing
voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia (22). This is indicative that there are many ways to look and consume visually.

According to another critic, Emily R. Douglas, the male gaze is more than looking at the woman as an object, but also seeing the woman as figurative food—something edible and subsequently subordinate. She argues that the “analysis of woman’s edibility has the potential to unsettle the objectivization of women” (244), thus objectification is the first step towards the consumption of a woman. Douglas also discusses the woman’s edibility outside of the realm of sexual desire.

The theoretical arguments offered by Mulvey and the additional insights tendered by Douglas on the male gaze provide a useful frame for understanding the gendered expressions of other senses manifested in the work of Clarice Lispector beyond simply the visual. Throughout Laços de família, each of the five senses is utilized during the act of consumption. Eating food requires the use of one’s eyes, hands, and mouth. The process starts with the sight of a perfectly plated prato principal whetting the palate of the eager recipient. Once the sight of the meal has intrigued the recipient, perhaps the smell wafts through the air into his nostrils further increasing the anticipation of consuming the meal. Now the comilão digs in, whether with cutlery or simply with fingers, using his sense of touch to familiarize himself with the food before touching it to his lips, sinking his teeth into it and feeling the cuisine with his tongue. While chewing he may hear a snap, sizzle, or crunch until finally swallowing the food, completely consuming it.

The men in Laços de família exercise a similar yet more metaphorical practice of consuming the women themselves, not the products of their baking or meal preparation, as made evident by the lexicon Lispector employs to describe the relationships between her male and

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4 Mulvey defines scopophilia: “arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (18).
female characters. The concept of the male gaze contaminates the language used to illustrate the
gendered social dynamics in these relationships in ways that prefigure Mulvey’s critiques of
cinema. However, the objectification of Lispector’s female characters supersedes mere ogling. In
Lispector, women are additionally trussed, plated, and tasted. The terms and verbs that describe
the act of eating reveal male appetite, which designates women as edible, consumable, and
subordinate objects. An English idiom stresses the reality of women pleasing men through food:
the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. This cliché lightly hints at the dark truth that
men are satisfied through consumption—whether the consumption of food, the sexual
consumption of women, or sheer cannibalism. In one of her publications in a periodical for
women, Lispector unironically asserts that “bolo prende marido,” (140). This colloquial phrase
in Portuguese mirrors the claim of the English idiom. Lispector is not advocating for female
suppression, instead through this phrase, she asserts her awareness of the women’s condition
during her time period. Men are consumers through their stomachs and the men in Laços de
Família satiate their carnal needs only after completely gratifying each individual faculty.

Throughout this text, I will use the word objectification when referring to the idea first
laid forth by Mulvey of women being sexualized through sight; men putting women on a
pedestal to be devoured visually for sexual stimulation. In contrast to Mulvey’s use and
definition of “objectify,” which is sexually loaded, I will use “thingify” to refer to the non-sexual
objectification of women. Therefore, thingify refers to women embodying their roles as cook,
maid, and caretaker while being constrained to these roles as if by a leash. This verb does not

5 In her book Clarice Lispector jornalista: páginas femininas & outras páginas, Aparecida Maria Nunes clarifies
why Lispector would use such a title: “Os textos da colunista são curtos, claros objetivos. Quase todos vêm
introduzidos por títulos pequenos, de fácil assimilação, com a função de resumir o enunciado ou de chamar a
atenção da leitora. A prosa amigável, de que se dispõe a ser confiante e conselheira, gira em torno dos papéis
vivenciados no espaço dentro de casa” (123).
6 Not to be confused with the Marxist term reification, or coisificação in Portuguese, which is to refer to an abstract
concept as a concrete thing.
sexualize the woman, instead it strips the woman of her humanity, changing her identity from a living, breathing being to an insentient system. Lastly, I will use the neologism foodify and its variations to describe specifically when women are debased and put on a proverbial plate to be eaten. This verb is neither necessarily to sexualize nor gratify, instead to foodify a woman is to view her literally as a dead and cooked animal.

The relationship women have with food has been studied through various critical lenses. Wanessa Asfora, in her article dedicated to the relationship between gender and food, expounds on the roles and responsibilities of women in Brazil during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She explains that daughters learn from their mothers to “gerir a alimentação do outro” as well as the “virtudes que deve ter uma boa mulher. Em termos práticos, isso se traduz principalmente em tarefas como a provisão de comida à família (amamentação, abastecimento de alimentos e preparo culinário)” (437). The roles of wife, mother, cook, maid, table setter, nanny, homemaker, etc., define women in the eyes of patriarchal society. However, these titles do not sufficiently depict women’s subordination. Through the adjectives and metaphorical descriptions of women throughout Laços de família, Lispector emphasizes the pessimistic reality of the feminine condition. These women are not merely objectified and thingified, they are foodified: men place them on pedestals, leashes, and plates. The adjectives that equate these women to food underscore women’s edibility. Men can and do consume their female counterparts. Some of the specific nouns, adjectives, and adjective clauses in Lispector’s short stories include: galinha, ovo, coração num prato, sonho, vaca, and other animals.

Because of the consistency with which Lispector uses these terms throughout the collection as metaphors for female subjectivity, this analysis will follow the words not in story order but thematically, starting with the strongest story example and sprinkling in the evidence
from the remaining narratives. Firstly, I will analyze the adjective and noun phrases Lispector uses to compare women to food. Next, I examine men’s role as hunter followed by the social conditioning forced upon the children of a chauvinistic society. Another portion of my study focuses on the comparison Lispector makes between the gallo and the galinha as well as the common byproduct of the chicken—namely, the egg. Lastly, through a close reading of the short story “O jantar,” I analyze the verbs Lispector uses that display the different senses in the process of consumption to demonstrate how the male appetite subordinates the woman through all five faculties.

The concept of social edibility becomes literal in the short story “Uma galinha” through the personification of the chicken as the maternal woman and her eaten fate. At first glance, this narrative outlines the story of a typical Brazilian family. An analysis of the narrative’s rhetoric reveals, however, that this story is an allegory of the suppression of women in Brazil in the twentieth-century. The narrator explains the relationship between the chicken and the kitchen, describes the chicken in terms of food, and illustrates the fate of the chicken in those same words. These images figuratively clarify the situation of women as consumable commodities in twentieth-century Brazil and the miserable fact that no escape exists for them.

At the beginning of the story, even though the chicken resides in a corner of the house, she is not a part of the family nor do the members of the family consider the chicken to be a female animal. Instead, she is viewed as a future meal. When the cook calls the family with a cry and they all rush to investigate, the narrator explains that the family “viu o almoço junto de uma chaminé” (Lispector 30). From the beginning of their relationship, all members of the family identify the chicken by her role—she is lunch. Society has engrained in them through years of evolutionary history and practices of domestication the truth that chickens are to provide food,
whether by laying eggs or offering up the meat from their own bones. The narrator continues this food metaphor by describing the chicken’s heart in comparison to a plate. “Seu coração, tão pequeno num prato, solevava e abaixava as penas, enchendo de tepidez aquilo que nunca passaria de um ovo” (Lispector 31). Chicken heart is a popular lunch menu item in restaurants throughout Brazil. The narrator also points out that this fear that the hen holds within her heart would never affect an egg. An egg is insentient, whereas a chicken can feel fear. The immediate shift of comparing the living heart with the dead heart signals the reader that the protagonist, as much as she identifies as a mammal and yearns to live freely, is destined for the prato principal. Her desires are superseded by those of the family who live within the regime of a male-dominated society, the prejudice of men’s needs and opinions supplanting those of women saturates society. The chicken’s situation reflects how women have historically been assigned a place in society and receive criticism if they try to resist their proverbial role as cuisine. A chicken cannot leave the plate, just as a woman cannot leave the kitchen. The woman’s desires and feelings are insignificant and often ignored in a chauvinistic world.

Lispector further explores the insignificance of women and their opinions in conjunction with stature disproportions made evident in male-dominated societies in the short story “A menor mulher do mundo” where the pygmy woman, Pequena Flor, is measured, judged by her size, and leashed to certain spaces in Western society. Her size is of paramount importance to the explorer. She represents the unattainable thing of his imagination and from the beginning of his encounter, the hunter uses culinary terminology to describe the smallest woman in the world: “Nos tépidos humores silvestres, que arredondam cedo as frutas e lhes dão uma quase intolerável doçura ao paladar, ela estava grávida” and “ali estava uma mulher que a gulodice do mais fino sonho jamais pudera imaginar” (Lispector 36). In the first sentence the narrator mentions his
taste buds and in the second sentence he uses the phrase sweet tooth to describe his encounter with Pequena Flor. With his masculine gaze focused on a “necessidade imediata de ordem” the man tries to qualify this woman according to his society’s beliefs, in particular Pequena Flor’s edibility. Taste refers to gustatory pleasure, and sweetness is most often related to the indulgence and decadence. The explorer thinks about the woman in terms of food because in his society women are continually associated with edible products. The fact that this woman is pregnant ignites an almost intolerably sweet hunger within the explorer, the sight of her whets his palate. His thoughts do not merely objectify Pequena Flor, but, more specifically, they foodify her. Marcel Pretre condenses his desires for the pygmy woman to the size of his plate. He then uses an oxymoron to describe how his gluttony, a term related to overeating, yearns to devour this tiny dream of a woman. She is so small it is overwhelming for him; he is the hunter, the carnivore who stalks his tiny prey.

By comparing Pequena Flor to different food items, Pretre metaphorically transforms her body into the food he desires to consume. Her flesh and blood become sugar and pastry. Critic Michel Colvin defines the explorer’s reaction as a cannibalistic attitude. He analyses the social edibility of the pygmy through Marcel Pretre’s eyes, explaining: “The coincidence between the Portuguese word for dream and an ‘intolerably sweet’ pastry, resembling a custard-filled doughnut, is not fortuitous. . . .The metaphor’s intention to awaken the taste sense, by exploiting the double meaning of the word ‘dream’ is confirmed by the noun ‘sweet tooth,’ appropriate when describing a pastry” (Colvin 89–90). The carefully chosen words employed to describe the explorer’s reaction show how Pretre’s society habitually devours women. The explorer, in posting images of the smallest woman in the world, perpetuates the consumerism and the objectification of women by other men in his society. Her picture entertains and delights her
viewers as it appears throughout Europe. The society uses their sight to determine how she best fits in the schema already established. Everyone—man, woman, and child—imagines how to best reduce and fetter her.

As seen in “Uma galinha” and supported by “A menor mulher do mundo,” both animals and women are forms of food and entertainment. Lispector amplifies this comparison by likening women to animals in other stories in the collection. In “Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga,” the unnamed drunken protagonist compares herself to a cow, “E aquela vaidade de estar embriagada a facilitar-lhe um tal desdenho por tudo, a torná-la madura e redonda como uma grande vaca” (13). Her drunkenness matures her, rounding her, just as a cow’s utters once full are round. Producing milk to feed their young unifies women and cows. Only a woman who has given birth and nurses her child knows the full feeling, the roundness that the protagonist describes. Somehow this woman draws a parallel between the intoxicated effects of alcohol and the feelings felt during motherhood, as confirmed when in the next paragraph she refers to pregnancy. These same feelings of roundness temporarily liberate women within their subordination because both intoxication of alcohol and the first stages of motherhood offer brief distraction from her designated role. By failing to fulfill her role as homemaker the day following her drunken excursion, the mother in “Devaneio e embriaguez duma rapariga” is temporarily unfettered from her societal constraints.

She remains in bed even after her husband returns from work. Her first thought is to dismiss dinner, neglecting one of her routine functions as cook for the family. The next time this woman awakes she claims not to know what her husband will do for breakfast without her to cook it, but she continues to lounge carelessly hungover. A day later, this unnamed mother returns to her trussed role as homemaker. “Acordou com o dia atrasado, as batatas por descascar,
os miúdos que voltariam à tarde das titias, ai que até me faltei ao respeito!, dia de lavar roupa e cerizar as peúgas, ai que vagabunda que me saíste!, censurou-se curiosa e satisfeita, ir às compras, não esquecer o peixe, o dia atrasado, a manhã pressurosa de sol” (12). She uses the Portuguese word miúdos to refer to her children which is also the same word used to describe the entrails of animals. Her children were born from inside her body, they represent the gizzards and are part of her, yet she is glad when they are gone because it is one less responsibility for her. Women in this time period carried the brunt of the responsibility of housework and raising children. Perhaps most importantly and most commonly, women in this period were valued according to their ability to cook. This ability locates women in the kitchen. Wanessa Asfora asserts that this concept is “uma ideia longínqua, aquela que posiciona a mulher em um locus considerado ‘natural’: a cozinha com todas as atribuições que dela decorrem” (438). According to this logic, a woman’s greatest responsibility is to feed others, to prepare and provide food, whether the food comes from her kitchen to the man’s table or her own body to the man’s mouth.

Further into the evening, the drunken woman compares herself to a lobster: “Sua carne alva estava doce como a de uma lagosta, as pernas duma lagosta viva a se mexer devagar no ar” (13). The moment she describes elicits the image of a lobster, still alive, writhing, above the pot of water that will kill it in preparation for dinner. The lobster’s legs are described as sweet, an adjective used in relation to the paladar. The sweetness refers to the meat of the lobster’s legs after it is cooked, prepared, and plated. This image reminds women that their destiny—regardless of class, marital status, and life ambitions—is the pot followed by the plate. Women are food for men. Their legs are sweet. Their bodies are round, full of meat.

Lispector continues the comparison of women and meat through the narration of a woman’s hunt through a zoo. “Lágrimas encheram os olhos da mulher, lágrimas que não
correram, presas dentro da paciência de sua carne herdada.” (128). The story, “O búfalo,” describes the approach of “a fêmea desprezada” (134) as she seeks to kill, to become the hunter rather than the hunted. As the woman in the brown coat confronts each caged species, she simultaneously reveals her underlying reason for yearning to assassinate something. The lions who are in love cause her to avert her eyes in revulsion. The woman thought she possessed love, but instead her lover left her. The virgin giraffe causes her to become sick yet unable to determine where or why she is so sick. The hippos, which she calls “O rolo roliço de carne, carne redonda e muda esperando outra carne roliça e muda” (127). These animals are moist, plump, and mute; the attributes of an ideal housewife or any other subordinate: “Pois havia tal amor humilde em se manter apenas carne, tal doce martírio em não saber pensar” (127). She relishes their ability to remain meat, calling their inability to think a sweet martyrdom. The naked monkeys incite her to violent thoughts. Seeing the camel eating causes her to cry and lament her carne. She then focuses on her stomach which “contraiu-se em cólica de fome a vontade de matar” (128). The woman names her hunger as the motivation for her desire to kill. She considers herself “uma velha assassina solitária” as she wanders through the zoo seeking the perfect kill (131). She is a spurned woman, yearning for revenge on the man who does not love her, trying to invert her role as the subordinate, objectified, and consumed. She wants to be the hunter, the killer, the dominate, the foodifier.

Hunting demonstrates a power over nature and gender. Speaking of the history of most cultures in reference to meat, Carol J. Adams asserts: “If men were hunters, then the control of this economic resource was in their hands” (34). Men have constantly controlled the flesh, the animals, and thereby nature. In addition, they control the woman’s condition because of their hunger. In the story “Amor,” Ana comes to the realization that her worldview is skewed by the
ego-centric demands of chauvinistic society. She reflects on male hunger: “Quando Ana pensou que havia crianças e homens grandes com fome, a náusea subiu-lhe à garganta, como se ela estivesse grávida e abandonada” (Lispector 25). This physical reaction shows Ana’s new awareness of the situation of women in her society. Men with great hunger, like her husband, represent all men who perpetuate the norms of a male-dominated society. They desire to consume the women around them. The hunger she describes is the masculine desire to force women into being objects for display and even worse, for consumption. She is pregnant and feels abandoned, a specific kind of nausea. This nausea is maternal and singular. Only a pregnant woman can feel this cold in her belly. Ana’s previous understanding that she is integral to the husband’s happiness changes. She is merely the meat with which her husband sustains himself. His appetite is his only concern. Referring to Adams, Douglas explains how “the many representations (visual and linguistic) of women as meat, and of animals whom we eat as feminized . . . makes it easier for man to treat both parties as consumable and subordinate” (245). Language builds and destroys women’s identity in a male-dominated society. By equating woman to animals, men guiltlessly assert their dominance over the feminine, and as a result easily plate their counterparts.

Both the father in “Uma galinha” and Marcel Pretre, the explorer in “A menor mulher do mundo,” are described as hunters. Yet, whereas Lispector describes the father as “um caçador adormecido” (17), the narrator describing the explorer uses the phrase “caçador e homem do mundo” (68). Both characters are male expressions of the societal evolution. Men are sleeping hunters, awaiting the crucial moment when they are awakened to their privileged role as hunter.

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7 Other studies have highlighted the parallel between feminism and veganism in response to the idea that animals that we eat are feminized. Critics Lorena Lúcia Cardoso Monteiro and Loreley Gomes Garcia focus on this relationship specifically in Brazil in their study titled “Veganismo, feminismo e movimentos sociais no Brasil” (2013).
This description proposes that the nature of man is to be a hunter and a consumer, thereby placing woman in the role of hunted, and if hunted then in turn skinned, gutted, cooked, and plated. While the subordination of women may not be explicitly or consciously taught, it is a subconsciously conditioned practice inculcated in children through the example of their parents.

In the short episodes of people watching the pygmy woman, Pequena Flor, on television, a boy’s experience explains how this consumption saturates society, being taught both explicitly and implicitly from generation to generation. First, this boy tells his mother: “[A] gente então brincava com ela! A gente fazia ela o brinquedo da gente, hein!” (Lispector 37). According to this boy, Pequena Flor serves as a toy, transforming the world’s smallest woman into an object that he can own, play with, or make to do his bidding. Her body serves as a form of entertainment for the boy. This idea echoes the attitude of the father in “Uma galinha” who thinks about doing sports while having lunch and the chicken’s body entertains the father. These two males exemplify the application of looking and touching—consuming both physically and metaphorically. The narrator creates another striking image when explaining the evolution from boy to man. “Assim olhou ela, com muita atenção e um orgulho inconfortável, aquele menino que já estava sem os dois dentes da frente, a evolução se fazendo, dente caindo para nascer o que melhor morde” (Lispector 38). This quote implies that evolution teaches male children that machismo, and therefore the consumption of women, is natural. According to the social expectations for men in Brazilian society, this implication would make it true. The boy is growing into a man as seen by the loss of his two front teeth. When his adult teeth grow in, he will be better equipped to bite and chew on the women he encounters.

Ana, the mother in the story “Amor,” tries to disrupt this cycle of machismo by talking to her son: “A vida é horrível, disse-lhe baixo, faminta” (Lispector 26). Starving is synonymous
with emptiness. Understanding her condition as a woman in her society, Ana acknowledges that she has been disappointed. She no longer has the pleasure of meeting the expectations required by society. On the contrary, she feels nausea and revulsion. This bodily reaction reflects her body’s disgust at being eaten by men. These same men, including her husband, teach their children the principles of consuming women. Ana cannot escape her assigned role, but maybe she can help her son evade the cycle. Like Ana, the mother of the boy without his two front teeth recognizes the danger inherent in her son’s reasoning, “olhou para o filho esparto como se olhasse para um perigoso estranho” (Lispector 37). At this moment, the mother experiences the instant when the child breaks the connection with the feminine. Mulvey provides a brief summary of this phenomena in relation to the male gaze or how the sight affects how men view woman as penis-less versions of themselves:

[T]he function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic … Woman’s desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it …

Either she must gracefully give way to the word, the name of the father and the law. (14 – 15)

The narrator in “A menor mulher do mundo” introduces this fissure through the mother’s point of view. For her, her son is something different, he is no longer an innocent child but an awakened hunter, ready to consume the female other. Ana, in “Amor,” suffers similarly when her son gives her “o pior olhar que jamais receberia,” leading her to wonder in response to his gaze why he so aggressively glares at her (Lispector 26). Ana tries to change her son’s conditioning and he rejects it. When the narrative ends, Ana submits again to the standards in her society,
again becoming the complacent object and easy food. Men have been conditioned in a certain way, and in turn, they condition their children to look at women in the same way. Boys are to grow up and become hunters while girls are bred to grow up to be hunted. Another way that Clarice Lispector draws attention to the disparity between men and women is through the extended metaphor of the struggle inherent between the *galinha* and the *galo*.

During the hen’s escape in “Uma galinha,” the narrator makes a point of comparing the chicken with her male counterpart, the rooster, characterizing her as “Estúpida, tímida e livre. Não vitoriosa como seria um galo em fuga” (Lispector 31). The rooster, the male of the species, would respond differently when fleeing because his gender is conditioned to respond differently. The adjectives describing the chicken are associated with a passive agent, the woman in a chauvinistic society. This same society demands that men dominate and that women submit to the dominance of these men: “[T]he concept of being eaten is erased from the ideal of masculinity: men are portrayed as and disciplined to be the consumers, not the consumed. Men are praised for a voracious appetite and devouring nature” (Douglas 246). The husband in “Deveneio e embriaguez duma rapariga” is described as prowling like a rooster when seeking the sexual handouts from his wife. She tries to refuse but is swiftly accused of being unwell. In his home, the husband reigns. He dictates when things are to happen, how things are to happen, and what things his wife can do, thereby, thingifying her. While the kitchen and the house are feminine domains, the rooster must rule his roost—men must dominate in their own homes.

In contrast, when this husband leaves his house, he concedes his power to the man at the restaurant who assumedly is more macho because of his social status: “E se seu marido não estava borracho é que não queria faltar ao respeito ao negociante, e, cheio d’empenho e d’humildade, deixava-lhe, ao outro, o cantar de galo” (Lispector 12). In other words, a man will
always command, yet there is a pecking order that must be followed. A chauvinistic society demands that women remain at the bottom of the food chain, yet men are permitted and encouraged to navigate their position on this same food chain. Lispector includes another demonstration of this pecking order in “Mistério em São Cristóvão” where the ringleader of the group of adolescent men wears the mask of a galó because he has all the ideas. “Um era alto e tinha a cabeça de um galó … Quando passaram pela casa escura da família, aquele que era um galó e tinha quase todas as ideias do grupo” (113). He assumes a place of power because of his ability to think and to scheme. The other masked male characters, the touro and the demónio, yield to his intelligence.

Opposite the galó, women are praised for their ability to provide physical or figurative nourishment whether from their kitchen cupboards, on a table, or from their own bodies. Unsurprisingly then, when the chicken in “Uma galinha” ceases to provide eggs for the family “[eles] mataram-na, comeram-na e passarem-se anos” (Lispector 33). Women are destined to die like the chicken after living in a prison that offers only this fate. They live without the option of fulfilling roles in society other than that of consumable object. The chicken’s sex defines her. Two things are certain: if the chicken were a rooster, her fate would not end in a pan, and laying that egg only postponed the inevitable event. Women in a society driven by macho ideologies await the same fate. If a woman were a man, she would experience more freedom. At the same time, a woman who enjoys motherhood is only postponing the inevitable event: being eaten or in other words being consumed, devoured, spent, depleted, and subordinated by those who have power over them.

In conjunction with the comparison of the galó and the galinha, Lispector further explores the metaphor between women, chickens, the most consumed meat in the world, and
eggs. Men devour the byproducts of the chicken and then eat the very flesh of her body. In the story “Amor,” the protagonist Ana, following her confrontation with the blind man, verbalizes this comparison when she exclaims, “O mundo se tornara de novo um mal-estar. Vários anos ruíam, as gemas amarela escorriam” (Lispector 22). The egg yolks falling to the ground personify Ana’s body that certainly feels her stomach drop or the cold in her belly the moment she sees the blind man. Igor Rossini adds, “rompem-se os ovos. A forma primeira perde o invólucro aparente e permite que aflore a gema, o núcleo, a substância originária, vital e matriz genealógica da vida” (141). Her eggs lose their vital substance as they crack open and spill onto the street. Ana can do nothing to fix what has been broken. Her eggs no longer serve her or her family. Women, like chickens, serve as food for men. They are thingified as they create future generations who will be conditioned to fulfill the same role. They are consumed by the objectifying gaze of men as well as the foodifying faculties by being put onto these men’s plates. Patriarchal society creates and sustains a continual cycle of social edibility. The young protagonist in “Preciosidade” highlights the duplicity of her society when she concludes, “Ha uma obscura lei que faz com que se proteja o ovo até que nasça o pinto, pássaro de fogo” (Lispector 93). This is the moral of her story. Society protects the egg until a chicken is born, then that chicken passes through the fire, becoming a firebird. Marta Peixoto interprets this moment of clarity from the protagonist as “the girl’s recognition of her true vulnerability as a woman” and explains that “the suffering of violence brings with it inner progress and social adaption, turning ugly chick into ‘bird of fire.’” (87). This progress and adaption are what women must do in order to survive in a male-dominated society. Inwardly the women grow, yet outwardly they must adhere to societal dictates.
In *Laços de família*, Lispector scrutinizes these societal dictates, bringing to light the flaws within the chauvinistic society of twentieth-century Brazil. One protagonist, however, lives apart from Western society entirely. Pequena Flor, “A menor mulher do mundo,” lives in a society afflicted with the threat of being eaten by outside forces: “Os Bantos os caçam em redes, como fazem com os macacos. E os comem. Assim: caçam-nos em redes e os comem” (Lispector 69). Pequena Flor, with all the other Pygmies, lives in the persistent fear of being eaten physically by a rival tribe. This fear extends to Marcel Pretre during the pygmy matriarch’s first encounter with the explorer. This same fear represents the fear all woman share of being sexually assaulted by men, of being subordinated and sidelined. When she realizes that the explorer Marcel does not want to eat her, Pequena Flor reflects: “Não ter sido comida . . . Não ser devorada é o sentimento mais perfeito. Não ser devorada é o objetivo secreto de toda uma vida” (Lispector 74). Women rebel against the sense of being devoured and objectified just as Pequena Flor fixates on the idea. Whether calling it cannibalism or social edibility, it is the same thing—deplorable. Men in a chauvinistic society look at women as objects they can manipulate according to their desires, whether placing them on a pedestal to appease their visual sexual stimulation, binding them to certain roles and responsibilities, taking advantage of their servitude, or lastly, putting women on plates to consume them. This secret desire that Pequena Flor has is a generalization of women in a male-dominated society trying to leave these proverbial stages and plates. At the same time, Pequena Flor identifies herself as the woman who escaped from this stage, “ela que não estava sendo devorada” (Lispector 74). She is defined by her survival of the encounter with the foreigner. Through her laugh, Pequena Flor victoriously declares that she has overcome the threat of being devoured.
While Pequena Flor rejoices at the thought of not being devoured, another protagonist, namely the narrator of “O jantar,” laments his current position in patriarchal society. This story deviates from the norm by having both a male narrator and male protagonist. The male eater in this narrative exudes prominence, machismo, and insatiable hunger. This story expounds on the brief metaphor made earlier of the process of consumption, as the figure is described throughout each course of his meal.

Porque agora desperto, virava subitamente a carne de um lado e de outro, examinava-a com veemência, a ponta da língua aparecendo—apalpava o bife com as costas do garfo, quase o cheirava, mexendo a boca de antemão. E começava a cortá-lo com um movimento inútil de vigor de todo o corpo. Em breve levava um pedaço a certa altura do rosto e, como se tivesse que apanhá-lo em voo, abocanhou-o num arrebatamento de cabeça. Olhei para o meu prato. Quando fitei-o de novo, ele estava em plena glória do jantar, mastigando de boca aberta, passando a língua pelos dentes, com o olhar fixo na luz do teto. (Lispector 76 –77)

Before this old man eats his meal, he examines it. Using his sense of sight, he judges the meat, to see whether or not it is delicious. This visual examination parallels that of the confrontation between the male explorer and the pygmy woman in the short story “A menor mulher do mundo.” The first sense employed by a consumer is their sight. While the explorer, Marcel Pretre, does not devour Pequena Flor physically, he participates in her social consumerism with his gaze. When “Pequena Flor coçou-se onde uma pessoa não coça. O explorador—como se estivesse recebendo o mais alto prêmio de castidade a que um homem . . . ousa aspirar—o explorador, tão vivido, desviou seus olhos” (Lispector 70). This prize, only granted to men, is the agency of looking or not—the agency of being able to consume another being or not. Men in a
society controlled by male-dominated norms retain their agency while these same men control the women choices and ability to choose. Men objectify, thingify, and foodify women through their gaze and other faculties, while the opposite is rarely depicted. According to Mulvey’s analysis, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (20). At the same time, men are given the option to not participate in the process. The old man eating his meal in “O jantar” first subjects his meat to his examining gaze, but at other times his eyes are closed as he experiences the meal with blind pleasure.

As this old man continues to scrutinize the cut of beef, he can almost smell it. The olfactory sense influences the man’s mouth to twitch in anticipation, but before he takes his first bite, he touches the steak with the back of his fork, just as the men in “Preciosidade” poke, prod, and invade the body of the young protagonist. While relating her experience of walking to and from school, the teenage girl in “Preciosidade” explains the negative impact touching hands can have. This narrative is a sort of Bildungsroman for a young teenage girl who is now “precious or interesting to men as a brand-new sexual object, untouched and touchable” (Peixoto 85). Her body is changing and as she matures the realities of the chauvinistic society become apparent to her. As she walks to school that fateful morning, she is confronted by two men who first look then touch her. Mulvey claims that “Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox” (Mulvey 19). Men once conditioned to look at a woman how they want, are free to satisfy their remaining senses without suffering the negative consequences that women endure. Due to this young girl’s appearance, these two vile men grope her. Again, the sense of sight is displayed as simply the first step in consuming the female other. After being violated by their four hands, the teenage protagonist realizes “Ela possuía tão pouco, e eles haviam tocado” (92). This young girl
identifies the glaring truth—women in her society have very little they can call their own. These men take away her only true possession, her virginity, her preciousness, as the title suggests. A woman possesses nothing else for herself in a society dominated by male aggression and female repression.

Yes, women are allotted certain spaces within the home, yet male-dominated societies often use the work of these spaces to govern women rather than liberate them. As stated previously, the home is the where the wife resides and belongs but only under the domination of a ruling rooster. Within the home, the kitchen is the most common room within which men sequester their women. Before the chicken escapes in “Uma Galinha,” she is confined to the kitchen: “Desde sábado encolhera-se num canto da cozinha” (30). The kitchen is the place in the house where women have been relegated over the centuries. Not surprisingly, the chicken, Lispector’s symbol for the role of women in Brazil, is also framed in the same space: the kitchen.

After the hen escapes, is recaptured, and subsequently lays an egg, she is granted a little more freedom than she had previously: “A galinha tornara-se a rainha da casa. . . Continuou entre a cozinha e o terraço dos fundos” (32). However, despite being queen of the house, she is still the prisoner of that same house albeit under less confining restrictions. She can now roam the kitchen freely as well as the backyard. “Confined to the ‘ar impuro da cozinha’. . . women, like the anonymous hen, are made to lead to prolonged life-in-death” (Alonso 75). The kitchen is stereotyped as a woman’s place and this unclean air represents the toxic expectations that women are required to adhere to. Staying in the kitchen poisons the hen’s experience. The space granted to her, despite being hers, is tainted by male dominance. At the same time, the impure air Lispector names could also refer to the toxicity prevalent in the air of a kitchen using gas to cook everything. The fumes themselves slowly poison the women over years. In “Preciosidade,” the
narrator again hints at the dangerous fumes within the kitchen when describing the protagonist and the cook, “As duas descalças, de pé na cozinha, a fumaça do fogão” (86). The fumes are literally poisonous as the two women prepare food, the smoke coating their lungs with filth and effectively killing them slowly. This smoke, or the toxic expectations these women must adhere to, blinds them to their reality. Similarly, blind at the start of her story, “Amor,” Ana describes her home life by saying: “A cozinha era enfim espaçosa, o fogão enguiçado dava estouros” (Lispector 19). Ana is content with her spacious cage given to her despite having a stove that does not work well. At least it is a place she can claim for herself. Ana being contentedly caged mirrors the woman accompanying the man in “O jantar” as she sits at his table impervious to his exuberant consumption.

In “O jantar,” after touching the meat on his plate, the old man takes the next step in eating his slice of beef, cutting off a piece and putting it in his mouth. The narrator describes his subject’s chewing as vigorous and mechanical, potent and frantic. The manner in which this man eats frightens the narrator. In “Amor,” Ana confronts a similar chewing scare when her eyes alight upon the blind man chewing gum on a street corner. She confronts a man who at first glance does not possess the ability to look and objectify a woman, for he is blind. Yet, it is only after facing the blind old man, in an epiphany, that Ana realizes the pedestal on which society places her through their objectification. “Então ela viu: o cego mascava chicles . . . Um homem cego mascava chicles” (Lispector 21). Ana repeats various times that she saw an old man chewing gum alerting readers to her unease. Certain food items, such as gum, disrupt the normal progression of consumption. Gum is not meant to be swallowed in order to enjoy it like the steak the old man savors in “O jantar.” Instead gum is best enjoyed by chewing on it as long as the flavor lasts. The contrast between the blind man chewing the piece of gum and the old man
devouring a piece of meat shows how some men in patriarchal society consume women by swallowing her, ultimately ridding the world of her existence. This is also done by men diminishing the woman’s importance to her function as child-bearer and homemaker. Then the other men, instead of eliminating her completely, simply want to chew on the woman until her essence has been exhausted. The main difference between the feminized steak and the gum is that the latter continues to be the active recipient of male abuse.

After watching the old man attack a plate of bloody meat, the bystander narrating “O jantar” asserts: “[E]u não como. Não sou ainda esta potência, esta construção, está ruina. Empurro o prato, rejeito a carne e seu sangue.” (81). The narrator, a man sitting in the same restaurant, eating the same meal recognizes in this moment the vileness of the masculine regime within which he lives. By pushing the plate away and refusing to eat it any longer, he denies the conditioning of twentieth century chauvinist society. He rejects the idea that “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other” (Mulvey 15). Women are not subordinate to men nor are they their natural prey. His refusal also indicates he will yield from temptation and refrain from touching, chewing, and eating the female figure, the marginalized. By pushing his plate away, he physically separates himself from the assumption that women, or men for that matter, belong on a plate. This physical separation intensifies the examination of the five senses used in Laços de família as the framework for understanding how women in twentieth-century Brazil were objectified more than solely through sight.

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8 Years after the publication of Laços de família, Clarice Lispector wrote a chronicle entitled “Medo da eternidade” (1970) that features a young girl’s first encounter with chewing gum. She is overwhelmed by the idea that gum can last for eternity. In the end, the girl loses the gum and feels relieved without the weight of eternity hanging over her. This girl’s fear of chewing gum for eternity parallels Ana’s fear in “Amor” of being chewed on eternally just like the gum with its long lasting elasticity.
Unlike the male protagonist in “O jantar” who recognizes the wrongness inherent in foodifying women, certain female characters in the collection fail to see the harm caused by the cycle of objectifying, thingifying, and foodifying women and instead propagate the teaching and implementation of these abhorrent societal norms. The women of European society reject Pequena Flor and call her an animal and a monkey to distance themselves from her, manipulating their language to objectify, fragment, and consume the other. By considering her an animal they target her as prey. In “Uma galinha,” the mother is cast as the greatest antagonist for it is only after the pleas of her child that she decides to let the chicken live. While there are not as many blatant examples of the woman perpetuating the cycle, they exist. They exist in the obvious lack of feminine unity as shown through the broken friendship in “A imitação da rosa” and the fragmented relationship of the mother and daughter in “Laços de família.” They exist in the mother’s inexistence as shown by the hardly felt presence of the mother in “Começas de uma fortuna” who remains a fly on the wall during familial discussions instead of correcting her son’s behavior. She is constantly depicted cooking, serving food to her husband and son, and trying to convince these same men to eat her cooking. She is present in the kitchen during the conversations yet holds no sway over her son’s actions. This short story does not feature the mother questioning her place in the household, instead she is portrayed as the passive and submissive idealized wife, the perfectly plated and presented *prato principal*.

Another counterpoint Lispector writes into her collection is the obvious role reversal evident in the confrontation between Pequena Flor and the explorer. The pygmy woman reverses the gendered norms of the explorer’s cannibalistic society when she begins to view him as food. The narrator includes the pygmy’s thoughts about Marcel when he reacts to her laugh. “Tornou-se uma cor linda, a sua de uma rosa-esverdeado, como a de um limão de madrugada. Ele devia
ser azedo” (Lispector 37). She compares him to a lemon, claiming he must taste sour. After thinking about it, she declares, “é bom possuir” which proposes that Pequena Flor understands that by looking at the man with the objectifying gaze, then further by foodifying him, she is reversing the power dynamic during a time period where she should not have been able to do so. Asfora explains that during this time women were taught “com quem comer, quando comer, como comer e, acima de tudo, quanto comer. Os manuais recomendam claramente que a mulher coma pouco, uma vez que mostrar apetite voraz era sinal de má educação, inaptidão social e falta de bom gosto, noção importante para a época” (438). Pequena Flor does what no other female protagonist does within the collection, she removes Marcel Pretre from his privileged place of power, submitting him to a stage to be watched, plated, and tasted, although this ability could stem from Pequena Flor’s already established place outside of Western society.

Whether it is a male explorer describing an indigenous woman as a delectable Brazilian pastry or a drunken woman describing herself as a lobster, the concept remains consistently present throughout Laços de família. In these stories, women are not merely objectified or placed on a pedestal to be ogled. They are also thingified; they are bound and constrained, forced to adhere to societal dictates through their roles in a patriarchal society as cook, maid, and homemaker—or in other words as houseslave. Even more concerning, these women are put on a proverbial plate to be consumed. The attitude of society is represented by the old man with a vigorous appetite, the family that eats the chicken, the blind man chewing gum, and the people who react to Pequena Flor. Lispector comments on the unavoidable continuation of this treatment by the characters in stories whose situations do not change permanently. These narratives act as a critical analysis of the state of society in which these women live. Yes, the chicken extends her life and for a while enjoys the freedom to walk around the kitchen and
terrace of the house. But she does not rule the roost. Despite having her own concubine and being pregnant, Pequena Flor hides from the Bantos due to the eating habits of the enemy tribe and is only reassured after learning that the male explorer will not eat her. Finally, it is true that when her story begins, Ana is happy with her spacious kitchen, her dysfunctional oven, and her family. Yet she was only living up to the expectations of the machista society in which she lived. Eventually, she re-desensitizes herself after a day of enlightenment, again submitting to the norms of male-dominated society.

By invoking, presenting, and using food, food imagery, food vocabulary, and food metaphors, Lispector defines the gender roles determined by society. These roles are then performed by each gender in accordance with the normative standards dictated by said society. This culinary terminology lends to the expansion of the male gaze. The sense of sight is merely the first step in the recipe for male consumption. The visual examination of the female body only gratifies one male sensorial faculty, but, as shown by the lexicon Lispector employs in *Laços de família*, men yearn to gratify all five. Once conditioned by their chauvinistic society to look at a woman as food, the jump to use the other senses is quick and easy. Women are not only suppressed through the regimes of visual dominance but are also subjected to the ears, mouths, noses, and hands of their male counterparts. Lispector crafts a collection of short stories that explore this reality, the reality of women as food, metaphorical societal cannibalism, the women’s social edibility.


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