

“Kitchens Will Be Abolished”

An Exploration of How Traditional Female and Societal Norms Are Resisted Through Food in Brigitte Reimann’s *Franziska Linkerhand* and Karin Struck’s *Klassenliebe*

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Abstract

This paper explores how traditional societal and female norms are resisted through food in Karin Struck’s *Klassenliebe* (1973) and Brigitte Reimann’s *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974). The role of food will be investigated through the lens of foodwork, which refers to all the practices associated with planning, purchasing, storing,

cooking and preparing food. The 1970s in East and West Germany were marked by a (re-)negotiating of the role of women in society, in which female writers played an active part. This paper argues that practices around food play a vital part in the everyday resistance of traditional norms.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the beginning of the second wave of feminism in West Germany. Especially younger women were dissatisfied that even though they now had access to the job market and many more women went to university, they still were not equal to their husbands. Women still earned less and had to do most of the household and child-raising work (Hertrampf). During this time, many emancipatory works by female authors were published. Key authors were, amongst others, Verena Stefan, Karin Struck, Christa Reinig and Gabriele Wohmann (Jambor 96). Around the same time in East Germany, a women's movement was deemed unnecessary as under the socialist system women had supposedly already achieved emancipation. Yet also in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), working women were seen as responsible for the child-raising work. Serious societal discussions about combining a job with parenthood or sharing household tasks were, however, restricted (Ferree 91). Since the 1960s, many female authors in the GDR published on women's issues to challenge the notion that emancipation was achieved, among them Christa Wolf, Irmtraud Morgner, Maxie Wander and Brigitte Reimann (Kaufmann, Dargatz, et al. 19). The 1970s in both the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR were thus marked by a (re-)negotiating of the role of women in society—of which practices around food will show to be a vital part in resisting these female and societal norms.

In this article, I explore how traditional female and societal norms are challenged through food in Karin Struck's *Klassenliebe* (1973) and Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* (published posthumously and unfinished in 1974).¹ These books constitute important works in women's literature of the GDR and FRG, both in terms of readership and literary relevance. Both books have been widely read and reviewed and are considered significant for the literary movements of their time: the New Subjectivity in West Germany and the experience novels in both East and West Germany (Peschel). Food is considered in the broadest sense possible to also include what Angela Meah calls "foodwork": a "complex of practices, here understood as referring to all the tasks

¹ *Klassenliebe* translates to class love. The translations of the citations from the two novels are by the author of this article.

associated with planning, purchasing, storing, cooking and preparing food” (672). As I am looking at social norms in my literary analysis, it is relevant to focus on food practices rather than just food as a product, as in food practices the relations between individuals and between individuals and society are shaped. Although food in women’s writing has been at the heart of many literary studies, in particular feminist ones,² food has so far not been the topic of analysis when looking at women’s writings from East and West Germany in the 1970s.³ Comparing ideas about food and drink in East and West Germany tells us more about how socialist and capitalist ideas about food are negotiated in women’s writings. Like food studies, much of the women’s writings in the 1970s focus on the ordinary experience of everyday people (Avakian and Haber 2). As food is not the main topic of *Klassenliebe* and *Franziska Linkerhand*, focussing on food and food practices highlights what the female characters in the books subconsciously thought of them. In the following paragraphs, I will first look at the roles women were supposed to occupy in both East and West Germany, before looking at how these roles are resisted—often unconsciously—through food practices by Karin and Franziska, the main characters of the two novels.

The Superfrau vs. the Hausfrau—Women’s Roles in East and West Germany

In the 1970s, the division of Germany had become normal for many Germans in both parts of the country. This normalisation of two Germanies also becomes apparent in the two dominant societal stereotypes of women: in East Germany the socialist *Superfrau* (super woman) was to be someone who was qualified, enjoyed working, happily married, politically active and the loving mother of several children (Weise

² For examples see: Adolph, Andrea. *Food and Femininity in Twentieth-Century British Women’s Fiction*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2016; Lane, Maggie. *Jane Austen and Food*. Lume Books, 2015; Mazzoni, Cristina. *The Women in God’s Kitchen: Cooking, Eating, and Spiritual Writing*. New York, Continuum, 2005; Sarah, Sceats. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

³ A notable exception is a 1998 article by Beth Linklater, in which Linklater highlights how food and sex together with humour and the fantastical are used to resist and subvert both socialist and gendered realities.

38), whereas in West Germany the image of the *Hausfrau*, the traditional housewife, prevailed. In 1968 in the GDR more than 80% of women were employed, and although the state promised relief when it came to childcare and household burdens, this did not happen in reality (Kaminsky, Ferree 96). Women's politics was often reduced to promoting and protecting family and focussed on women as providers of food, love and care to their families.

In contrast, in West Germany especially the conservative Christian Democratic political party (CDU/CSU) sought to implement a "traditional" family model. The social democrats and the liberals took the need for working women to sustain their family into account, but also viewed the traditional family as ideal (Ruble 427). Until 1977, women in West Germany needed the approval of their husbands to go to work. As a result from this in 1968 only 36,6% of women were employed (Kaminsky). In both Germanies—despite their differing ideologies—family and traditional family values were encouraged by the state, a policy increasingly challenged by women in the 1970s.

Resisting Traditional Female and Societal Norms Through Food

In both the GDR and the FRG it were female writers that played an important role in criticising and resisting gendered roles imposed on women by society. With their novels, this often took the form of experience reports in which they described the lived realities of women in East and West Germany. In the following section I will delve deeper into how traditional gender and societal norms are resisted through food in the examples of Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* and Karin Struck's *Klassenliebe*. Food is an interesting lens to study this resistance through because of its association with the everyday, the ordinary (Fitzpatrick 122).

In Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand*, the main character Franziska was born in the Eastern part of Germany just before World War II. Having grown up in the GDR, she has emancipated herself from the role of having to prepare food. She consciously decided to not become a New Socialist Woman, the *Superfrau*. Franziska has a job

and is very fulfilled in her career, but has no children and consciously decides not to marry again after her divorce at the age of twenty-two. This becomes apparent in Franziska's relations with other women: she looks down on other women who, unhappy with their partners and lives, complain instead of change something (87). She regards housewives from the outside, with a distance:

During those ten or fifteen days [at the end of the month, when she is short on money] she also noticed the hunter's eyes of the housewives, who examine the bones of the meat and choose between two types of sausage those that were four pfennigs cheaper [...] On wage days, the department store was overcrowded with triumphant huntswomen, shopping fever in their keen eyes... (185)

Franziska regards the fervour with which the housewives engage in their 'hunt' with distaste. Whereas she finds fulfilment and enjoyment in her work, other women are more concerned with their shopping than with fulfilling and improving themselves. Franziska also resists the norms imposed on women in her own home. Having grown up in a bourgeois middle-class family, she was raised by her mother to become a good housewife. Yet, in her 'foodwork,' that is, in how she prepares and eats her food, she resists the idea that this is the role envisioned for her.

When she got home from work, she ate her supper hastily and carelessly while reading the newspaper or a book; she had fits of ravenous hunger and spooned pineapples from a tin can, she devoured half a pound of sausage and wiped her fingers on her pants, and she tossed the greasy paper into the basket with satisfaction as if she were revenging herself for her mother's drill [...]. (466)

This quote shows that subconsciously, in her everyday habits, Franziska challenges the gendered norms she grew up with and that are imposed on her by society.

Franziska also challenges the idea that she should provide and take care of others in her relationship with men. When her lover Trojanowicz reprimands her teasingly for having empty spice jars, dented pans and the general sloppiness of her kitchen, she responds: “It doesn’t matter, kitchens will be abolished” (465). Franziska does not believe that women are responsible for the household tasks, but instead believes that in the future household tasks will be solved through canteen kitchens and restaurants. In an earlier scene, Schaftheutlin—Franziska’s boss and then lover—sits in Franziska’s kitchen and watches her prepare food. While sitting there he thinks about his mother, whom he spent time with mostly in the kitchen. Yet also here, the mother is contrasted with Franziska: Schaftheutlin’s mother is grounded, Franziska is not; his mother knows how to budget, Franziska does not. However, this rejection of traditional femininity by Franziska is evaluated positively (Weise 86). She is considered exceptional by the men in her life precisely because she is not weighed down by the everyday demands on women (Weise 87). Her femininity is not developed by being a wife or a mother, but through her intellect and her humour. This point is highlighted through Franziska’s practices with food—the lack of cooking, the sloppiness of her kitchen, which breaks with the ideal image of the East German “superwoman.”

Alternatively, in Karin Struck’s *Klassenliebe* the main character Karin grew up in West Germany in a small town. Coming from a working-class background, she has never had the liberty of being able to choose the life of a housewife. Yet, she has also emancipated herself from a traditional gendered role. She has done this both in her marriage by openly having an affair with another man (Z.), and through emancipating herself from her class background and instead becoming part of the cultural scene in West Germany. She, however, regards this with a certain unease. This is exemplified by Karin’s memories of her mother, whom she remembers making breakfast for her in the morning—a baked egg—and fiddling in the kitchen. In her descriptions of her mother, Karin is filled with a longing for simpler times, for times when identities were clearly defined; where it was clear that she would find her mother in the kitchen, preparing the food of her childhood. This contrasts with Franziska, who looks down on women who see the kitchen

as their main space. Contrasting with the character of Franziska, in *Klassenliebe* there is no outright rejection of gendered norms. It is especially Karin’s pregnancy with her lover (not husband) and her insecure social status between two classes that make her nostalgic for more traditional gender norms.

More prevailing than resisting gendered norms is the resistance of societal norms, especially those revolving around consumption, consumerism and capitalism. Karin feels that life under capitalism—and under communism—is only bearable through the small pleasures that make life enjoyable: tobacco, coffee, chocolate, sugar, and white bread. “Without the pleasures that make life worth living, this life worth living cannot be endured” (41). The working class can imitate the lifestyles of the ruling classes without actually having any power themselves. This imitation takes place via food items that the working classes could not afford before, such as white bread, chocolates and sweets. “When we could permit ourselves to eat chicken, man, this ‘chicken’ was as if paradise started, freedom, the land of milk and honey, the time of the revolution” (41). For Karin then to resist this appropriation, she becomes a “health fanatic” in the words of her friends (57). Karin comes to this realization after a tooth ache she experiences during her pregnancy. She runs from doctor to doctor, but no one can tell her the cause of her tooth ache. Later it turns out that the ache is caused by her rotten teeth as a result from eating too many sweets. Karin feels that food is underacknowledged as the cause for many diseases, because acknowledging this would stand in the way of making money from unhealthy foods—pointing to large advertisements for the chocolate *Mon Cherie*. Karin blames the availability of prior luxury food items—such as chicken—for the failure of the working class to work for the revolution, both in West Germany and in East Germany. While Franziska in *Franziska Linkerhand* is less concerned with the revolution of the working classes, she also blames the occupation of women with the everyday, particularly in getting the best deals, for the failure of women to emancipate themselves. In comparing both novels it becomes clear that for both Franziska in *Franziska Linkerhand* and Karin in *Klassenliebe* food, and particularly foodwork, informs their resistance to traditional female

and societal norms. Especially Karin consciously identifies food as one of the key sites of resistance, informing her decision to resist capitalist marketing and instead eat healthier.

The Cost of Resistance

In both novels, there is a cost to resisting traditional societal and female norms. In *Klassenliebe*, Karin's obsession with food consumes all of her energy, or in the words of Karin herself: "I eat too much. Eating is tangibly sensual" (196, 257). In another scene, she feels bad for constantly over-eating, for burdening her stomach with all these "substitute rites" (228). Food here stands for both adapting to the world and appropriating the rites of a different class, for example by going to restaurants to eat steak and serving white bread at dinner parties. Food, however, also signifies the search for security and identity. This is what she finds in the food of her childhood as explored further below. Food being a signifier for all these things leads Karin to constantly think about food and the use of it as a replacement for failing to combine her different identities, needs and wants. She feels like she no longer belongs to the working class, but she simultaneously does not belong to the academic middle class of her partner Z. She wants to be a good mother to her daughter, but feels inadequate, in part because of her choice to start a new relationship with her lover. This reflects for example in her despair that results from her daughter no longer wanting to be fed by her (151). By failing to combine these different identities, needs and wants—that are both hers and generated by society—Karin uses food as a replacement for her inner struggles.

Later in the book, Karin finds herself craving the food of her youth, of her class background: fries, carrots and peas with fried liver and onions, *Schwazwälderkirchtorte* and *Schwarzsauer*, the latter being a stew made from duck blood, prunes and dumplings. How contradictory Karin feels about herself is made clear by on the one hand her disgust of the smell of the duck blood, her feeling nauseous every time she walks past a butcher, and on the other hand her still eating that *Schwarzsauer*. In her own words Karin is not eating the duck liver, the duck blood,

but her own “memory of a sense of security” (231). Karin describes her friend Jutta, also coming from a working-class background, who after quitting university, a middle-class institution, could not stop eating fresh cream. Growing up in her village, butter was made weekly, so as a child she would get to eat fresh cream every week (230). Having been churned out by a middle-class institution, she uses the food of her childhood to re-affirm her sense of self. In both these examples, food serves as a signifier of class and as a marker of identity.

Karin’s longing for the food of her youth is caused by her position between the working class (represented by her husband H.) and the university educated middle class (represented by her lover Z.). Karin feels like she belongs to neither. This discomfort of never feeling to belong to either class becomes evident in several food-centered scenes. In one scene, Karin is dismissed by a female artist, who argues that Karin could never understand the book of her husband. The artist and other artists—friends of her lover Z.—then go on to sit at the table that Karin has set, eating white bread and steak (103). This can be understood as a criticism of the university-educated liberal left, who in the 1960s claimed to fight with the workers, but were really looking down on them, which is signified by the failure of the liberal left to realize their privilege. The food served—steak and white bread—serves as a marker of that privilege. Karin also complains to her husband H. that she is fed up with her origins. She uses the German word *satt*, being full, to describe her feelings about her origin, even though in her words: “[b]eing full is meant to be nice” (151). She is aware of using a lot of food-related terms to describe her situation: *satt sein*—being fed up; *gesättigt sein*—being satisfied, and calls that perverted (151). This shows how food and food terms have been appropriated into everyday language, away from their original meaning. It also relates back to how food terms are used to make sense of everyday life, without one being necessarily aware of this. Karin’s awareness and opposition to the appropriation of food terms shows how she uses food to resist everyday societal norms.

For Franziska in *Franziska Linkerhand*, the cost of resisting gendered and societal norms is loneliness, those “lonely Sunday afternoons” (465). Often, she goes to the local restaurant, not to eat but to see people. Yet

she is an exception—the restaurant is almost empty on Sundays, when families are enjoying their freshly cooked food at home after having to eat in the canteen all week (248). While Franziska resists traditional gendered norms, a part of her is also sad about her inability to create a home—as well as her inability to prepare food well. This shows that she is not unaffected by the demands put on her by society. Realizing that she has cooked inedible food for her boss, Schafheutlin, whom she begins an affair with shortly afterwards, she calls out: “Unheard of ... You don’t take me seriously ... Either you have no taste –’ ‘Or?’ said Schafheutlin softly” (225). In this scene, it becomes clear that Schafheutlin is not interested in her as a woman who prepares food, but because she is different than the other women in his life, including his wife. In a later scene she is ashamed at the sight of the table she has set for her last lover Trojanowicz. “I normally eat alone,” she gives as an excuse, leading Trojanowicz to call her a “poor child” and comfort her (466). Alcohol is one of the things Franziska uses to cope with her feelings of loneliness. Franziska’s relationship with alcohol started in her abusive marriage when, while looking for her husband every night in the pubs of the town, she found her own favourite pub. After an attempted rape—although this remains very covert in the book itself—and Franziska’s divorce, her relationship with alcohol becomes more permanent. Franziska’s loneliness and alcohol consumption show that although she is proud to be different from the other women in her life, she remains affected by the norms put on her by society. Yet she feels unable to have both a loving home and remain free in her career and life choices.

Conclusion

Karin and Franziska have turned to food and alcohol to deal with setbacks, discomfort and crises in their lives. Food and foodwork act as a replacement for the many contradictory wants and wishes of the protagonists: it is used to create a feeling of belonging, of safety, and of identity. At the same time, food and foodwork also act as class appropriation.

One of the ways for women in the 1970s Germanies to escape the gendered divisions of their homes was to reject the traditional image of a woman as someone with a lifelong partner and a loving mother of children. However, it is important to mention that this rejection of traditional norms also has a cost: it often results in loneliness, the lack of a loving relationship or acceptance from society. What is interesting is that food is specifically mentioned in the context of rejecting or referring to the political system in which the protagonists live, as is the case with Karin and her chicken, which acts as a replacement for worker’s emancipation.

The women’s literature in the 1970s in both West and East Germany is characterized by the development of independent, smart, reflective and sensual women, who challenge, confront and clash with traditional gendered and societal norms. In *Franziska Linkerhand* and *Klassenliebe* these challenges, confrontations and clashes take place through food, because food is crucial to understanding how human society is structured. In both novels, food acts as a signifier or replacement for the struggles of the female protagonists. Comparing novels from both West and East Germany also highlights the different ways in which Franziska and Karin are shaped by their respective societies. Further analysis of a wider range of women’s literature about women from the FRG and GDR from different decades is needed to fully understand the role food practices play in shaping female and societal norms. In my article I have highlighted how food, and especially food-work, informs female resistance towards these norms, as well as the cost of this resistance.

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Biography

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