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A Thematic Study on *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris

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Abstract

“Craving is a good thing. In matters of culinary art, craving creates wonders”

Literature is used to describe anything from innovative writing to more technical or scientific works, but it is most commonly used to refer to works of ingenious imagination. Literature represents a language of people's culture and tradition. Studying food in literature is one mode of studying history. Food is also a significant theme in literature. We have common setting that is related to food in literature. Combination of food and literature is very old as we see scriptures and writings by ancestors. Culinary art started when the ink was first emplace to paper. It also expressed in a plot were characters used to eat, drink and make merry. These aspects of culinary art played an important role in many novels, poems and other literary works. Most of the English and French writings have included bountiful supply of food with good health and festivity. One such English writer who used this culinary art is Joanne Harris, she is an English author. Her award winning novel *Chocolat* deals with the battle between church and chocolate. It is a darkly magical modern folk-tale thematically based on food. It also deals with evolutionary attitude of women and some magical elements. The researcher is going to highlight the conflicts that aroused due to chocolate in the novel *Chocolat* with the help of textual evidence.

Key words: Literature, Food, Culinary, Magic, Conflict

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Literature is the body of written works produced in a particular language, country or age. Literature is important in everyday life because it connects the individuals with larger truths and ideas in the society. It provides pleasure to readers. It helps the readers to develop thinking skills. In addition it reflects the various experiences, ideas, passion of human beings in our day to day life and it expresses several forms and style of literature works. It also provides value, message, and theme to readers. Literature becomes the voice of the man to convey messages to various common people. It creates a way for people to record their thought and experience. Through these thoughts the writers excel themselves by producing their work of art with various themes.

Literature is a hypernym term in which one among them is contemporary literature. It mainly comes after the

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World War II till the current day. Works of contemporary literature reflects on the society's social and political views. Contemporary writing also focuses on the aspect of food. Food literature is one way of studying history. Food is also a

significant theme in contemporary writing. Especially English and French writings have many a time associated with ample supply of food with good health. Food has a central place in human life. It isn't just necessary for body alone rather it is also has a tremendous impact both directly and indirectly on emotional and intellectual well-being (Somers⁵). Food can also be a symbol of love, concern, source of comfort and consolation. It is also the oldest and best form of medicine for mankind (Geary 3). The researcher tries to bring out the essence of food in literature and how it connects the human kind with love, emotion and in all aspects. This paper aims to bring out the thematic study in *Chocolat*.

Traditionally food has always had a great impact and intimate relation with women. One such author who expresses this culinary art in her work is Joanne Harris. She is a contemporary English writer who writes under mixed genres such as magic realism and gastronomy. Harris was born in Barnsley in Yorkshire, to an English father and a French mother. Her parents were both teachers of modern languages and literature at a local grammar school. Her first language was French, which caused divisions between her English family, where nobody spoke French, and her French family, where nobody spoke English. Harris began writing at an early age. She was strongly influenced by Grimms' Fairy Tales and Charles Perrault's work, as well as local folklore and Norse mythology.

Her first novel, *The Evil Seed*, was published in 1989, with only limited success. A second novel, *Sleep, Pale Sister*, shows the way in which her style developed from horror-pastiche to literary ghost story. In 1999 her third novel, *Chocolat*, a darkly magical modern folk-tale, thematically based on food and set in the Gers region of France, reached No. 1 in the Sunday Times bestseller list. The book won the Creative Freedom Award in 1999 and was shortlisted for the 1999 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award. Some of Harris's recurrent themes are issues of identity, mother/child relationships, the emotional resonance of food, the magic and horror of everyday things, the outsider in the community, faith and superstition, and the joy of small pleasures.

She wrote several novels but her third novel *Chocolat* gained her immense popularity. It is a magical modern folk-tale centered on a chocolate shop owner, Vianne Rocher. The success of this novel made her to write other novels. The novel *Chocolat* presents food as a symbol of temptation and desire which brings a spatter of color and comfort to the town. Food serves to provoke feelings and helps the villagers to evade from their routine. In *Chocolat* confectionary symbolizes the revival of sexuality and gender considerations. The main heroine, Vianne Rocher, a chocolate maker is presented in opposition to Francis Reynaud, a priest who is trying to suppress human fleshly desires and who impels the villagers to keep Lent (Harris 10).

However Vianne's mysterious appearance in the villagers revives the celebration of taste and infuses people with sense of life. Through this we find food as gift of love and understanding. It helps the people to re-evaluate their positions in society. The word food is personified in character's thoughts, feelings, Judgments and needs. Vianne Rocher distinguishes life as being full of color, bright imitations where chocolate is one of means for infusing mere existence with unforgettable moments (Harris 78). Therefore it shows the philosophical interpretations of food.

In particular Harris puts forward the idealistic view on food that serve as means of inspiration and enrichment of social life. Being a good example of magical realism it showcases the unconventional approaches to describe the role of food in society. Food is a symbol of recharged spirituality that provides motivation to resolve conflicts and establish new relationships. The shop opened by Vianne in the novel is associated with something unwavering and mysterious. In this shop, the villagers can find the right chocolate for healing their broken hearts and for solving their spiritual and amorous affairs. The shop "opens in such small village there is a strict code of behavior governing such situations, and people are reserved" (Harris 18).

In the novel *Chocolat*, food functions as the title, the main theme and dominant imagery. The chocolate is symbolically a rich delicious feast for the body as well as for the soul. It satisfies physical craving and brings about spiritual delight. The main theme of the novel is the remarkable impact of chocolate upon the townsfolk. Ansen states: "The novel makes a plea for passion and pleasure as opposed to repression and denial" (Ansen 77).

Joanne Harris unfolds a tale of life, love, death, and bereavement, of fear and violence, and also happiness

through the imagery of confections. At her chocolate boutique, La Céleste Praline: Chocolaterie Artisanale, Vianne excessively decorates the display window with a variety of multicolored chocolates and sweets.

In glass bells and dishes lie the chocolates, the pralines, Nipples of Venus, white rum truffles, mendicants, candied fruits, hazelnut clusters, chocolate seashells, candied rose petals, sugared violets (Harris 33)

At Easter, her chocolate parlor features a giant chocolate statue of Eostre with a corn sheaf in one hand and a basket of eggs in the other, to be shared between the celebrants. Images of delicate liqueur chocolates, the rose-petal clusters, the gold-wrapped coins, the violet creams, the chocolate cherries and almond rolls, plump chocolate hens, piebald rabbits with gilded almonds, and nests of spun caramel waft across the pages. The smells of “vanilla essence and cognac and caramelized apple and bitter chocolate fill the house” (Harris 245) and fragrance the novel. All these chocolates seem to join in the chorus “Try me. Test me. Taste me” (Harris 310). In addition, food functions as distinctive figures of speech. Francis Reynaud, Curé of the parish, who assumes the role of the didactic pillar of church and community, is furious at the “Grand Festival du Chocolat” which poses a grave threat to Lent, a season when town people are to give up all kinds of sweets. Harris describes his fury using food analogy, writing that his anger was “rising like boiling milk, uncontrollable” (Harris 137).

Food is obviously central to the novel. The chocolate boutique has been the talk of the town. Its presence in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, a rigid, tranquil town, is deeply felt by each member of the community, with some being lured by and giving in to its dazzling sights and tantalizing smells. The chocolate parlor looms large in their minds, “Curé Reynaud preached such a virulent sermon on the topic of abstinence that the opening of La Céleste Pralin had seemed a direct affront against the Church” (Harris 55). Through this the researcher found even emotion plays vital role in connection with food.

Vianne's delicious chocolate in Chocolat depths the forces of liberation and renewal against those repression and rigid tradition and awakens the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's pleasures and ecstasy. Her life-affirming attitude, generosity, and the elegances she prepares enable her to have magical power. Her chocolate shop in the plain town becomes a place where secrets can be whispered, grievances cured and wishes fulfilled. With its healing power, her food erases conflicts and prejudice and inspires happiness and harmony in the strict religious community.

Constraining the role of the woman to being the cook cannot remove her of her creativity, individuality and artistic expression. With her acquired knowledge of food, her accumulated experience of cooking, and her culinary art, the female cook can uplift her status and can bring about changes to the world around her. Here in the novel Vianne, who appears initially weak and inferior in status, grows to be powerful and indispensable. Her food serves as both physical nourishment and spiritual sustenance. Having derived her power from food, the female cook eventually assumes the roles of an artistic chef as well as savior of body and soul. Thus from this paper the researcher conveys the thematic approach through various themes and how food is related in the novel *Chocolat*.

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