

Culinary Inclinations as a Reflection of Identity in Joanne Harris's 'Chocolat'

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Abstract

"Tell me what you eat, I'll tell you what you are." : Brillat-Savarin.

Literature has always been the mode of reflecting human psyche representing the language of people's culture and traditions. The culture of food is age old and it shapes the individuals as well as a society's culture. Complex human issues have been analysed using food images on a metaphoric level to represent cultural identities. Importance of food in literature and the role it played in gender studies asserting women's suppressed individuality and identity is an upcoming area of study. Apart from observing that women are reduced as a kitchen maker, in today's society kitchen and cooking are a means of expressing one's identity before the world and is well expressed in various literary forms. Food and its related concerns with feminine identity and domesticity patriarchal oppression, and repressed sexual desire. have been given a central place in many works of women's literature. One such English writer who used culinary art in her work is Joanne Harris who's novel Chocolat deals with the magical powers of chocolate and how it works on the people of a particular town attacking the cultural and traditional beliefs of that place rewriting a cultural identity.

Key words: Culture, tradition, literature and food, individuality, identity.

Introduction

Food plays a significant role in the life of human beings reflecting one's individuality, likes and dislikes, and socio-cultural circumstances and can even define one's family, class and ethnic identity. The objective of this paper is to the significance of food and the role it played in asserting a women's identity and individuality which is continuously being crushed in this contemporary patriarchal society giving special focus on British author Joanne Harris's novel Chocolat. Food carries multiple meanings that serve to drive the action of the plots, especially in works written by women. Woman's approach to food in literature and how it affects feminine identity and domesticity are central concerns in many works of women writers like Virginia Woolf in her To the Lighthouse and Mrs Dalloway, Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman, Elizabeth Gilbert's Eat, Pray, Love, Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary etc. Interdisciplinary relation between food studies and women's literature is a current trend in cultural studies which throws light into various means by which women reproduce, resist and rebel against gender constructions.

Cultural studies scholar Deborah Lupton took a post structural approach to food and the construction of identity, expressing how food act as a key role in implicating who we become. Saying 'we are what we eat' in her work Food, Body and the Self, Lupton identifies

Food and eating...[as] intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings...central to individuals' subjectivity and their sense of distinction from others. (Lupton, Deborah 1996 pg. 36)



Culinary Comforts of Confectionary as Delienated in Chocolat

In Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*, the chocolate shop of the protagonist, Vianne Rocher "La Celeste Praline Chocolaterie" was considered more than a confectionary and as a place of emotional and spiritual comfort to the people of Lansquenet who led a dull spiritual life. Vianne Rocher's knowledge about human nature and her deeper understanding of human emotions enable her to make good friends among the strange villagers and thus she became a new solace in their isolated lives. Vianne, a good reader of human psyche through the magical qualities of her luscious chocolates understands people well than the village cure, Francis Reynaud who later became Vianne's arch enemy. (Harris, Joanne 2019)

Food Preferences Indicates Culture

Food is intricately entwined with culture, symbolising various aspects of a society's preference. The relation between food and a person is so well interrelated that it creates an identity to the person and reflects the culture of the place where he is living. For instance, Vianne's association with chocolates in the novel brings her back to the nomadic childhood, where she associates places with certain food items that define them:

Cookery cards anchored us, placed landmarks on the bleak borders. Paris smells of baking bread and croissants; Marseille of bouillabaisse and grilled garlic. Berlin was Eisbrei with Sauerkraut and Kartoffelsalat, Rome was the ice cream I ate without paying in a tiny restaurant beside the river. (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 73)

Food also has a great connection with religious practices carried out in different religions all over the world. Fasting of Muslims during the month of Ramadan, Practice of Kosher diet followed by the orthodox Jews mentioned in the Jewish scriptures, fasting of Christians during the Lent before Easter and Christmas and the practice of vegetarian food by Hindus during festival seasons throws light into the relation between food and religious activities practised by the society across cultures symbolises their cultural identity. In *Chocolat*, the fast performed by the villagers during Lent constitute the backdrop of the novel. Vianne's arrival with her Chocolate confectionary into the town makes her nothing less than a devil who creates temptation to lure the fasting people of the village into the worldly pleasures of chocolate:

The battle of good and evil is reduced to a fat woman standing in front of a chocolate shop, saying, 'Will I? Won't I?' in pitiful indecision. (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 34)

Vianne does not follow the Christian faith and her attitude towards religion is expressed when she says: "I sell dreams, small comforts, sweet harmless temptations to bring down a multitude of saints." (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 62) Her attitude to religion and her shop's attaining more public interest makes the priest Reynaud feel threatened and he considers her a threat to the discipline of the church. Vianne realises this irrational fear of Reynaud and associates it with his fear for chocolate:

Perhaps this is what Reynaud senses in my little shop; a throwback to times when the world was a wider, wilder place. Before Christ- before Adonis was born in Bethlehem or Osiris sacrificed at Easter- the cocoa bean was revered. Magical properties were attributed to it. Its brew was sipped on the steps of sacrificial temples; its ecstasies were fierce and terrible. Is this what he fears? Corruption by pleasure, the subtle transubstantiation of the flesh into a vessel for debauch? (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 75)

Food practices of a place provide an overview of the culture of the place and the traditions and beliefs followed by people of that place which is much evident in the beliefs and actions of the priest Reynaud in the novel. For him the rules of his religion form a tighter noose around him and his blind adherence to religion and his vows forced him to believe that his religious faithfulness would be best proved through his abstention from food. He even went to the extent of blaming his parishioners for eating chocolates and later finds himself inappropriate for showing such a rage which is unsuitable in a priest.

The concept of the ideal priest in the religion, forces him to do penance for his action: “Certainly there has been no repetition of the incident. As a precaution I have reduced my evening meal still further, to prevent the digestive troubles which may be responsible for this.” (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 210)

A person’s attitude towards food shows his individuality and is also an expression of his unconscious, showing characteristic traits of his personality that he himself may not be aware of. Similarly, Reynaud in the novel *Chocolat* shows his unconscious desires through the Freudian concepts of projection, transference and condensation. Thus, his likes and dislikes towards food items exhibits his own psyche. The enmity between Vianne and Reynaud always spur from the background of food choices they adopt and make Vianne as a bewitching confectioner who attracts the pleasure starved villagers with her mouth melting bonbons, steaming mugs of liqueur cocoa and flaky cream- filled patisserie. Reynaud on the other hand strictly impose rules of the religion exhibiting strict Lenten vows of self-denial upon the villagers and thus consider his self- indulgent neighbour with doubt and contempt. In the novel food is thus taken as a symbol of urge and desire which gives a new life to the townfolk and is a new experience for them to escape from their dull monotonous life. Chocolate also provides a symbol for expressing a re- establishment of sexuality and gender equality foregrounding one’s personality in the middle of a group of people who are strictly following the rigid rules of religion.

Vianne Rocher, the chocolate maker and her chocolate confectionary are presented as a mysterious opening to the villagers which gives them an opportunity to expose their hidden inner desires and gives them a new life of freedom and quest. Her chocolate is a new experience to the people which bring to life the celebration of taste and lends them a new approach to life filled with love and enjoyment. Though the people did not welcome her at the beginning later her fresh ideas and mouth melting chocolates presented her with new friends among the unfriendly townsfolk, one among them being Armande, a rebel in the town. Armande constantly avoids going to church and keeps herself away from the rules and beliefs of the church. Reynaud constantly dreams of transforming her into a faithful parishioner but Armande is steadfast in her individuality and beliefs. “Christianity opposed the values of the spirit to the natural and sensual; the erotic, the aphrodisiac became the forbidden fruit” (Jackson 42). This original sin of forbidden fruit is what Armande declared in *Chocolat*:

“Do you know, I think I might manage another of those chocolate specials of yours. How about another? ...Sodom and Gomorrah through a straw. Mmmm. I think I just died and went to heaven. Close as I’m going to get, anyway.” (Harris, Joanne 2019 pg. 102)

Food – Indicator of Position and Society

Thus, we see each character relating to food in a significant way with food playing an important role- sometimes as a personification of their own thoughts, feelings and judgements, similar to Vianne or Armande who are willing to reflect their philosophy of life and their individual likes and dislikes in front of the society which comprises of strict followers of religion like Reynaud. Vianne here follows her philosophy of life that is full of bright colours and give heed to her own interests and tries to follow her own rules in her life and finds happiness in the midst of her individuality and identity. Hence food in this novel help people to ascertain their positions in society and shows the philosophical interpretations of food and shows how food acts as a means of love and understanding to people.

Food culture and its significance in reinstating one’s identity and individuality is a developing field of study as it is a manifestation of the predominant culture of a particular place. Food culture especially finds place in women’s literature as women have been long associated with food and kitchen. Some women’s literature try to portray the dejections and exploitations of women in a patriarchal society through food culture while others like Joanne Harris celebrates domesticity and women’s attitude in foregrounding herself amidst many difficult situations through her portrayal of Vianne Rocher in her novel *Chocolat*. Harris thus successfully portrays the female identity and world view in her heroine, Vianne Rocher through her approach to food in the novel. Vianne, thus brilliantly establishes herself through her chocolate confectionary in an essential puritan neighbourhood during the period of Lent challenging the overarching personality of the priest Reynaud. Harris also assembles

the elements of magical realism in the novel by providing chocolates with magical qualities which act as a weapon for Vianne to reinstate her ideas in people's mind supporting their life choices.

Conclusion

Harris thus portrays each character's psyche and individuality through the medium of food in this novel *Chocolat*. From the character Reynaud's disinclination to chocolate, Harris contrasts Vianne's positive attitude to life through establishing her chocolate confectionary in the town challenging the dominant religion in the town and the diabetic Armande's zest for life and chocolate who at the end of the novel even sacrifices her life living to the extent of fulfilling her happiness with the support of Vianne. Food thus becomes a statement of the character's relationship with their lives. To sum up, food as a manifestation of one's individuality and culture and vice versa is portrayed in Joanne Harris's work *Chocolat* in the most brilliant manner. Thus the novel manifests food as a backbone for supporting and asserting individual attitudes towards life in the contemporary society. We see how Joanne Harris uses food and eating habits to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and conservation of culture, as well as symbols of memory, emotions, narrative history, relationships, power, and consumption. In short, the power of the physiology of taste becomes the signature of proclaiming one's individuality to the world outside.

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