



## Dynamic Identity in Joanne Harris' *Chocolat*

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### Abstract

*The paper studies the view of dynamic identity of the self, in Joanne Harris' Chocolat using Henri Tajfel and John Turner's theory of Social Identity. Vianne Rocher's gift of a superpower and her arrival to a new town, sets way for conflicts among her and the villagers. The Chocolaterie she sets up, becomes a stimulus for the transformation of the villagers, enroute to the discovery of their self, and do they change as they interact with individuals is the study. This paper further explores the symbolism of Chocolate and its impact on the novel. Social Identity itself is an amalgamation of several combined perspectives which is explored in the paper. The paper examines, how an individual can identify himself more closely with the group, and be perceived by the group's beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Social, Individual, Group, Identity, Community

### Introduction

British writers from the medieval and early modern periods developed and refined a vast array of literary forms and genres. British Literature in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries focused on various themes such as a sense of alienation from society and readers, reaction to Victorian era, the loss of optimistic perspective, the rise of writings by recent settlers in Britain and the emergence of postmodernism. This period of British Literature had several works published by established authors such as J.K. Rowling, Zadie Smith, W.J.T. Mitchell and Neil Gaiman. The research paper aims at studying

the Joanne Michèle Sylvie Harris' Chocolat. Joanne is an English-French author born at Barnsley, United Kingdom in 1964. Many of her books are about women who challenge the status quo and the way in which women are perceived in the society. Joanne also regularly uses folklore and myth in her novels giving a modern, original spin to traditional stories. She shares on being influenced by the works of Ray Bradbury, Mervyn Peake and Emily Bronte. Her works can be widely categorized under the genres of Literary Fiction, Magic Realism, Fantasy and Psychological Thriller. Joanne has authored two Gothic novels, nineteen novels, two short story



collections, four novellas and her short stories were featured in fifteen anthologies.

This paper studies Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* to identify the difference and change in social identity of the characters, from the theoretical perspective of Social Identity, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1970. It deals with how a person's own identity, is an amalgamation of the group he is associated with, that leads to social classification.

*Chocolat* (1999) by Joanne Harris tells the story of Vianne Rocher, a young single mother, who arrives in the French village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes with her six-year-old daughter. The novel unfolds with Vianne and the new Chocolate Shop she opens opposite to the Church with the onset of Lent. The season of Lent where fasting and almsgiving are practiced, Vianne gradually influences and transforms the lives of people at Lansquenet-sous-Tannes with a combination of sympathy, subversion and a little magic. Vianne, very naturally seems to have the ability to feel, relate and understand people's preferences, likes and needs without them expressing it to her. Vianne's character unfurls with a fantastical description, yet it all happens in a real-world setting, where gradually sets up her chocolaterie, in the village, her circle of friends widens and her influence upon the villagers seem to increase. This on another hand, changes her identity as well as the villager's identity. As her shop attracts several people, and she herself becomes the popular, talk of the town, the village priest, Father Francis Reynaud's disapproval also increases. Along with some other conservative villagers, he tries to stop the villagers, from being associated with her, and gradually a personal conflict between Father Reynaud and Vianne is developed.

The self is a friend of its own transformed self. Human identity is dynamic, and bound to change when humans interact with several groups. As Vianne's chocolaterie unfurls itself, in a very attractive form, right across the Church, where it's very noticeable for all the villagers, Vianne, succeeds at grabbing a lot of attention from the villagers towards her shop. She is even able to get help from one of the villagers, Guillaume Duplessis, an elderly man in setting up her shop, and very easily and quickly forms for herself a lovely circle of friends, who now may no longer abstain from fasting

but be indulged in the tempted ecstasy of chocolates. The villagers fall under the spell of her unorthodox opinions, and Father Reynaud starts looking at her as a threat to the village. As Easter draws closer, the people's struggle becomes much more than a conflict between the church and chocolate.

Previously Joanne Harris' works have been chosen by researchers to study from the perspective of magic realism, clash of ideology, domestic violence, student identity within marginalized institutions and some more. Looking upon the previous studies on Joanne Harris, this paper precisely looks upon *Chocolat* from the perspectives that humans might encounter on a daily basis; the dynamic between identity and difference; tensions within communities; religious intolerance and "the magic of everyday things."

### Cultural and Religious Difference

Vianne's Chocolaterie, as she refers to has been her dream and it erupts as a symbol of breaking the traditional ties, the strict religious practices adhered by the community of villagers, and influences them to partake in the chocolate feast, while they confront with their own identities. The villagers, gradually give up on their values, as they give in to the temptation of sweets, and the shop becomes a symbol of indulgence and pleasure, opposing the philosophy of fasting and abstinence, during Lent. This also contrasts with the ideology of Father Reynaud, who insists on self-denial, abstinence and almsgiving during Lent. Yet when the villagers, start visiting Vianne's shop, this develops a conflict between Vianne and Father Reynaud.

### Challenging Authority

Vianne unknowingly, challenges Father Reynaud's hold upon the villagers, by ways of supressing their individuality, and Vianne by selling sweet harmless little temptations, she rekindles the spirit of individuality within the villagers. Also, the chocolate shop becomes a place where each of the characters, freely is able to attend to their own individual needs where they get hold of the sole authority upon their own life. Armande, an elderly woman who is the very first woman to identify Vianne as a witch, gradually gets closer to her day after day as the both



start meeting in the Chocolate Shop often. When Armande is restricted by her daughter to meet her grandson, she secretly meets him at the chocolate shop, where she gets hold upon the authority over her own life. Also, when she is diagnosed with diabetes, and is restricted from having sweets, at her old age, she barely lets anyone take hold of her life and she just does what she wishes for by which, she takes authority upon her own life.

### Discovery of Self

Vianne's bold attempt at setting up the chocolaterie encourages the community of villagers to let go of self-denial and indulge in their true desires which refines their individuality. This leads to one's transformation into a different identity, which brings in a new identity for the self. Vianne very easily leads the villagers into this transformative journey, as they become transformed individual selves, because she has this gift of a super power which she uses to effortlessly read through people's minds, to feel, relate and understand people's preferences. Thus, she easily, knows what people think and need when they visit her shop, so she easily greets them with what they need and until they surprisingly realise how was she able to do that, they have already walked away from abstinence.

She nodded approvingly. 'It's been years since I had anything like this,' she said. 'I'd almost forgotten this sort of place existed.' There is an energy in her voice, a forcefulness to her movements, which belies her age. Her mouth has a humorous twist which reminds me of my mother. 'I used to love chocolate,' she declared. ...

'This is the real thing, isn't it?' She paused for a moment, bright eyes speculatively half-closed. 'There's cream and – cinnamon, I think – and what else? Tia Maria?'

'Close enough,' I said.

'What's forbidden always tastes better anyway,' declared Armande, wiping froth from her mouth in satisfaction. 'But this' – she sipped again, greedily – 'is better than anything I remember, even from childhood. I bet there are ten thousand calories in here. More.'

'Why should it be forbidden?' I was curious.  
(Harris 81 and 82)

Vianne builds her circle of friends very quickly and one among is Armande Voizin, an elderly woman who very quickly identifies, Vianne to be a witch, for the magical superpowers she possesses. When Armande once happens to visit Vianne's chocolaterie, she happens to mention of having forgotten such a place ever existed, and of even forgetting her love for chocolates. Such were the villagers, and Vianne's chocolaterie, seems to have revived, the villagers to be their real true self on having interacted and indulged in with Vianne, and her dishes. Vianne purely enjoys cooking and is a very empathetic person, which makes it easy for her to understand and help her customers.

### Healing and Connection

As the Chocolaterie, becomes a place of social gathering, it also becomes a place for connection. And as Vianne serves her soul nourishing food, it helps, in fostering harmony and removes prejudice. It heals them off the differences they have had within themselves so far within their own self. Yet this connection and bond, challenges Father Reynaud, the village priest, as he initially disapproves, Vianne's entry into the village, and followed by the opening of the chocolaterie, he wishes to break the community she is building, yet he doesn't succeed into it.

When Roux, arrives in the village with his group of travellers, Father Reynaud, yet again disapproves the group because, their way of living does not coincide with that of the church's practices and doctrines. But Vianne, welcomes them. During one of the celebrations at Roux's boat, Muscat, one of the villagers, starts a fire which forces the travellers to move on. And Muscat's wife Josephine, decides to finally leave her abusive husband, and she moves in to live with Vianne. As a symbol of gratitude, Roux, stays near Vianne's Chocolaterie, and helps with odd jobs for Vianne while she plans to prepare for Easter and the festival of Chocolate. Thus, the chocolaterie, becomes a place of connection for Josephine and Roux as well.

### Chocolate – Redefines Cultural Identity

The cocoa bean's historical association has been with that of exploitation, royalty, luxury in a cosmopolitan world. Vianne's Chocolaterie, erupts as a symbol of



social rebellion and cultural change, as more and more villagers, keep visiting the chocolate shop, the more they start to rebel from the village's and the church's traditional practices, while also all these occurrences happen during the season of Lent. Thus, Harris very craftfully employs Chocolate as a symbol with an infusion of magic, to transfer one's individual self, and identity. Chocolate rightly as a symbol, at last even distracts Father Reynaud, and pulls him to indulge in the exotic, flavours of chocolates. On the morning of the chocolate festival, when Father Reynaud, plans to disrupt the chocolate shop, he himself ends up giving in into the indulgence of the chocolate.

### Conclusion

The Chocolaterie helps Vianne to establish loyal customers, which leads her to both financial independence and a personal friendship. Her gift of being able to read people's feelings, know their needs and emotions, helps her serve custom-made dishes, which attracts several customers. Though it is not certain, if Vianne is a witch or just a human, with the superpower of senses, the beautiful balance between magic and reality makes the plot gripping. Social identity is formed with a contrast between, oneself and the difference between others. Human identity is not fixed, it is dynamic, bound to change when in a group or community. Cultural Identity is formed, with interactions, with others across cultural

lines. It evolves, based on the need to feel belonged, included, valued and maintain consistency with how others perceive a human. Thus, as we see the characters of Harris' Chocolat evolve into a different identity, when grouped with Vianne, and the other villagers, at the Chocolate Shop, their identities, take a turn, and they evolve into new selves.

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