

CONFLICT BETWEEN THE APOSTLES AND APOSTATE- THROUGH THE LENS OF
JOANNE HARRIS'S *CHOCOLAT*

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Abstract:

Joanne Harris, born in Barnsley, to an English father and a French mother is an English-French writer who has written acclaimed novels in different genres of literature. She has tried her hands out in genres such as mythology, fantasy and psychological thrillers. Many of her works revolve around the theme of identity, food, occultism and relationships.

The *Chocolat* sequel is one such a series that contains the mixture of all the above mentioned themes. The sequel has been widely extolled by the audience internationally. The first novel in this sequel entitled *Chocolat* (1999), gained her more popularity when compared to her first novel *The Evil Seed* (1989). The novel was also adapted as a movie which is nominated for Oscar Award in the year 2001.

The major focus in the novel is on the relationship between mother and child and the friction between religious patriarchy and apostate matriarchy. The story revolves around the life of Vianne Rocher who comes to the village, Lansquenet-sous-Tannes in the season of Lent. She opens a chocolataire for her living which makes an evil seed in the eyes of Francis Reynaud, the priest of the community, for he felt that she has come to corrupt and tempt the congregation in the season of abstinence.

On that account, the proposed research paper intends to highlight the events of dissonance between Vianne Rocher and Francis Reynaud, that is, the conflict that betwixt the apostles and the apostates.

Keywords: Apostle, Apostate, Conflict Theory, religious patriarchy, subjugation in marriage.

There's something so special about a woman who dominates in a man's world.
It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and
the nerve to never take no for an answer.

-Rihanna (Underwood)

Joanne Harris, an English-French writer who has been tagged as the writer of food and domestic magic has written more than twenty five novels on various themes. Some of her recurring themes are food, magic in everyday life, self-identity and mother-child relationship. In many of her novels, she explores the conflict between religion and women. In particular, she pictures the ways in which religion is used in negative attributes and to oppress the woman of the community wherein there is a conflict between the two.

The Conflict Theory was first put forth by the famous German Philosopher, Karl Marx. According to Karl Marx the state or the society will always be in conflict as there is a never-ending competition for limited resources. The theory nearly suggests that, people who possess wealth would strive hard to protect those possessions, while people who do not have will do anything to attain them.

Furthermore, there are also other philosophers who adapted the theory of conflict proposed by Karl Marx where Max Weber was one among them. Max Weber, a German Philosopher and Sociologist,

not only adopted the idea but also refined some of it. Unlike Karl Marx he believed that there are various kinds of conflicts exist in every society at any given moment. Weber silhouetted three facets of stratification in a society as class, status and power. According to him, people who belong to a particular group possess status as a sense of honour as they belong to a specific group with distinctive lifestyle and prerogatives.

Adam Hayes, an Economic Sociologist, in one of his article in Investopedia, entitled *Conflict Theory*, discusses about the assumptions of conflict theory in which he highlights about one of the major assumptions termed structural inequality which can be seen as another term for status. He states that,

An important assumption of conflict theory is that human relationships and social structures all experience inequalities of power. In this way, some individuals and groups inherently develop more power and reward than others. Following this, those individuals and groups that benefit from a particular structure of society tend to work to maintain those structures as a way of retaining and enhancing their power. (Hayes)

Hayes propounds that a particular group who has unique power and privileges, tends to retain and to enhance it, which results in dominating the other side of the society.

Joanne Harris also pictures this kind of behavior in the society through her characters in *Chocolat*. She brings out the conflict between the religious patriarchy who enjoys the power of controlling the people in the name of religion and a woman who turns out to be a threat factor to the religious patriarchy and society as she brings in temptation in the season of abstinence.

Harris on discussing her stance on religion and woman, in one of her response to Sara Marshall-Ball, states that, “Historically it’s about the systematic suppression of indigenous beliefs by the early Christian Church” (Harris). There has been a conflict between Christianity and witchcraft or magic after the collapse of the medieval church in England. Keith Thomas, a Historian, in his work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, mentions that, in the sixteenth century, “Protestantism thus presented itself as a deliberate attempt to take the magical elements out of religion ... for those Protestants who believed that the age of Christian miracles was over, all supernatural effects necessarily sprang from either fraudulent illusion or the workings of the Devil” (Thomas, 87, 304). This act eventually led to the hunting of witches of the seventeenth century. Therefore, the Church gets involved to eliminate the strange force which drives occultism.

Besides, the conflict which is emphasized is between the apostles and the apostasy. According to *Merriam-Webster*, an apostle is the “one who advocates an important belief or system” (“Apostle”), and apostasy is, “an act of refusing to continue to follow, obey, or recognize a religious faith” (“Apostasy”). The person who effectuates apostasy is called an apostate. In the novel, Reynaud is presented as an apostle who follows the norms of religion perfectly and Vianne Rocher as an apostate who does not follow the aspects of the religion. Therefore, there is a conflict between the apostle and the apostate.

Furthermore, the researcher tends to demonstrate the way in which Harris uses her concerns with the conflict between religion and woman in the novel *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris. The novel *Chocolat* was published in the year 1999. It has won Creative Freedom Award (2000) and the Whittaker Gold and Platinum awards (2001, 2012). The novel is set in the fictional village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes in the Gers region of South-Western France.

Chocolat tells the story of a single mother and her six year old daughter who arrives in the French village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes at the beginning of Lent, a season of abstinence. Vianne Rocher, the single mother and Anouk, her daughter opens a Chocolataire named La C eleste Praline on the square opposite to the church. Though it is a season of fasting and self-denial, Vianne changes the lives of the villagers with an accumulation of subversion, sympathy and little magic. This threatens Francis Reynaud, the village priest because of which a high tension runs between Father Reynaud and

Vianne. As Easter approaches, the ritual of the church is pitted against the indulgence of Chocolate and both the main characters face an inevitable showdown.

Harris in her *Introduction to the twentieth anniversary edition of Chocolat*, comments about the novel as, “*Chocolat* was my reaction against that (demonizing pleasure); a plea of tolerance of others but also of ourselves, reminder that to be fallible is both natural and allowed; that self-indulgence isn’t bad; that testing people to destruction isn’t the way to make them better people”(15).

Correspondingly, through her two main characters, Reynaud and Vianne, she emphasizes that being weak to temptation is never wrong and it is an accepted behaviour. Towards the end of the novel when Reynaud submits himself to his temptation, where Vianne finds no wrong in the act of the priest. His action has never been accused by her. Instead, she throws a smile at him and helps him to survive his guilt. In the words of Reynaud, “She is waiting for me, watching from behind the bead curtain. I have no way of knowing how long she has watched me. A tiny smile curves her lips. Very gently she takes the cudgel from my hand” (364).

Furthermore, she highlights the actions of the patriarchy in the name of religion which tends to have the supremacy over the people. The actual conflict that takes place is between the patriarchal attitude of not accepting anybody out of their religion and the matriarchal attitude of accepting anybody with no regards of religion. Reynaud being the priest of the community, never willingly accepts people who does not come to church on Sunday. Hence he is against the river gypsies and Vianne.

Vianne describes Reynaud as,

A black figure brings up the rear. At first I take him for a part of the parade – the Plague Doctor, maybe – but as he approaches I recognized the old-fashioned soutane of the country priest...I see that he too is a stranger, with the high cheekbones and pale eyes of the North and long pianist’s fingers resting on the silver cross which hangs from his neck. Perhaps this is what gives him the right to stare at me, this alienness; but I see no welcome in his cold, light eyes. (21)

Through the name of religion he casts an upper hand over the people of Lansquent-sous-Tannes and uses it to make them obey his words. It is a practice for the clergy to visit a new-comer of the village and Reynaud also does so but the ultimate motive of him was to know whether the newcomer belong to their religion. Therefore, he visits Vianne and feels startled when she reveals that she does not attend the church. Vianne explains, “ ‘...we wouldn’t have been at church this morning anyway, Monsieur le Curé. We don’t attend, you know.’ It was kindly meant, to show him where we stood, to reassure him; but he looked startled, almost insulted” (28). He also gets agitated on seeing the pagan symbols and practices and underestimates her by saying, “Give her two months, and she’ll be back to the city where she belongs (32), because he felt that people like her have nothing common with the people of the village and hence cannot sustain long. He also compares her to dandelions as she sold Chocolates during the Lenten season. Because Reynaud felt that dandelions affect the growth of other crops by suppressing it and Vianne corrupts the people by selling Chocolates wherein suppressing their religious attributes.

On the other hand, Vianne in spite of being a stranger who does not belong to the religion of Lansquent-sous-Tannes, tries to get along well with the people by helping the ones in need and through giving them their favourite flavors of chocolate. She especially helps Joséphine, who was subjugated to violence by her husband, through which Harris portrays the conflicts in thoughts between the patriarchal and the matriarchal attitude in the case of religion and oppression.

Reynaud, being the clergy thinks about the marriage vows and being a patriarchy thinks about the security given by men. Therefore he tries to convince Joséphine to reconcile with her husband. He condemns her by saying, “You have never needed the Church as much as you need it now. You have allowed others to lead you astray” (237). Contradicting the priest, Vianne thinks over Josephine’s sufferings, self-respect and freedom that she deserves. Vianne stands as a moral and emotional support

and thereby encourages her to live a dignified life with self-respect and deserving liberty. She also protects her against all odds and violence brought by her husband, Mr. Muscat.

Similarly, for Reynaud, people who are against religion are rebels and evil. Throughout the novel, he pictures Vianne as an evil woman who has come to corrupt the people with magic and Chocolates in the season of abstinence. Whereas for Vianne, evil is not about religion but about people. She defends that, "I don't think there is such a thing as a good or bad Christian ... Only good or bad people" (215). She sets an example on accepting strangers and on widening the thoughts and actions of people over religion which can also be seen in the sequel novels of *Chocolat*.

Harris in this novel mainly focuses on the way in which religion and patriarchy is aligned in the society. She demonstrates the manner in which religion is traditionally seen as a patriarchal system which is dominated by the male members of society both in sociological as well as in literary terms. Religion, in the novel is frequently shown as a negative and controlling force. Reynaud uses religion to justify his action towards the people especially to the women of the society. Whereas, the character Vianne, with her power of occultism is depicted as the changing force that brings in the attitude of defensiveness and acceptance. On the whole, the novel *Chocolat* itself represents the dissension between resistances from the apostles to accept the apostasy.

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