

Gender Performativity and Resistance: A Reading of Power Structures in Joanne Harris' *Chocolat Series*

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Abstract

This article investigates how Joanne Harris's Chocolat series: Chocolat (1999), The Lollipop Shoes (2007), Peaches for Monsieur le Curé (2012), and The Strawberry Thief (2019), redefines female identity and resistance through the intersection of food, gender, and power. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of Gender Performativity and Michel Foucault's discourse on power and resistance, the study adopts a qualitative method of close textual analysis. The analysis foregrounds how culinary practices in Harris's novels function as sites of subversion against patriarchal and religious authority, with food emerging not only as a medium of pleasure but also as an instrument of agency.

Characters such as Vianne, Josephine, Rosette, Morgane, and Zozie embody different dimensions of resistance, disrupting societal norms of gendered roles and reshaping the dynamics of community and identity. The article suggest that Harris portrays women as active agents who resist societal oppression through everyday practices, especially cooking, caregiving, and self-expression. The novels emphasize culinary resistance as a feminist strategy, highlighting how women reclaim power and autonomy within restrictive cultural and religious frameworks. Harris demonstrates that gender roles are socially constructed and can be resisted through performative acts that transform ordinary practices into tools of empowerment. This study concludes that Harris's narratives critique rigid structures of power and propose an alternative vision of female agency grounded in food, creativity, and communal care. Future research may extend this inquiry by exploring culinary resistance in global women's writing, situating Harris within broader literary food studies.

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Introduction

Joanne Michele Sylvie Harris is a writer from the United Kingdom. Joanne's bestselling novel *Chocolat* (1999) made her famous. She has the heredity of both French and English. Her culinary way of writing makes her famous among other writers. Her *Chocolat* is a series that includes other novels: *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure*, *The Lollipop Shoes*, and *The Strawberry Thief*. The major themes in her novels are motherhood, societal norms, religion, and culture. *Chocolat* is on the shortlist for the USC Scriptor Award, Whittaker Gold Award, and Whitbread Novel of the Year Award. In 1999, *Chocolat* was released. In 2000, it was turned into a movie. *Peaches for Monsieur le Curé* (2012) is the third of the *Chocolat* series. This novel was retitled *Peaches for Father Francis* in the U.S. It revisits Vianne Rocher, the protagonist of *Chocolat*. The setting was set in 2010, France, at the beginning of Ramadan. This novel gives importance to the festival ritual. *The Lollipop Shoes* was published in 2007. It brings out the temptation and manipulation through food. *The Strawberry Thief* brings out the importance of motherhood and olfactory communication. This *Chocolat Series* has culinary arts as a common theme. The series is connected to themes of power and gender resistance. Harris uses food and femininity as an agency to resist and expose patriarchal and religious authority. Butler's Gender Performativity (Butler 33) and Michael Foucault argue that power is never absolute but always entangled with resistance. (Foucault 95) It can be applicable to the characters in the novel that bring out the power and resistance.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach. It has the close textual analysis of Harris's *Chocolat series*. This series includes *Chocolat* (1999), *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure* (2012), *The Lollipop Shoes* (2007), and *The Strawberry Thief* (2019). The theoretical framework is drawn from Butler's notion of Gender Performativity and Foucault's discourse on power and resistance. Food studies provide insights into the intersections of identity, resistance, and culinary practices. This analysis focuses on the women characters Vianne, Josephine, Rosette, and Morgane. They resemble the resistance through food and performance.

Analysis and Discussion

One of the most significant domains of meaning embodied in food centers on the relation between the sexes, their gender definitions, and their sexuality. In many cultures, eating is a sexual and gendered experience throughout life. Food and sex are metaphorically overlapping. Eating may represent copulation, and food may represent sexuality. (Counihan 9)

Culinary subversion of patriarchal control is seen in the novel *Chocolat*. There was a religious clash between the priest Reynaud and Vianne Rocher, who keeps a chocolaterie in the village. Vianne Rocher came as an outcast in the village. Her act of making chocolate is a pleasure-giving material and is often considered an

act of sin. Reynaud follows a strict procedure of attending church without fail in morals. Vianne, one who never attends church, resembles her resistance against the religious practices. "When an exotic stranger, Vianne Rocher, arrives in the French village of Lansquenet and opens a chocolate boutique directly opposite to the church, Father Reynaud identifies her as a danger to his flock – especially as it is the beginning of Lent" (Harris, *Chocolat* 2). This line clearly expresses the power system of the village, but Vianne acts as a resistance against all of them. She develops a kind of attraction towards the village people through making chocolate. Vianne can understand people's feelings, and she offers a variety of chocolates to console the villagers. Her way of attracting people seems to be a sin for Reynaud. She also empowers the submissive woman, Josephine. Josephine Muscat is abused by her husband, and she does not have the power of resistance to pull herself out from him. Josephine visits Vianne Chocolaterie, and it creates a space to express feelings. "I'm offering Josephine a job here with me". (Harris, *Chocolat* 140). Vianne wants to help Josephine, so she offers her a job and provides her with a place to stay.

There's a line across Lansquenet' – demonstrating on the counter with a callused finger – 'and if you cross it, if you don't go to confession, if you don't respect your husband, if you don't cook three meals a day and sit by the fire thinking decent thoughts and waiting for him to come home, if you don't have children – and you don't bring flowers to your friends' funerals or vacuum the parlour or – dig -the – flowerbeds!' She was red-faced with the effort of speaking. Her rage was intense, enormous. 'Then you're crazy!' she spat. 'You're crazy, you're abnormal and people – talk- about – you behind your back and – and – and-' She broke off, the agonized expression slipping from her face. (Harris, *Chocolat* 48)

There was a belief in the village that women in Lansquenet should obey their husband, need to do all the household work, and take care of the children. Women also visit the parlour to beautify themselves to attract their husband. If a woman does not fit into it, then she will be treated as crazy and abnormal. The above performance is considered the Gender Performativity of women by the villagers. Women are not meant to do those entire categories to prove themselves. These practices, established by the ancestors, became the routine for women. These patriarchal societal norms are broken by the character. Vianne, as a single mother, enters the village with a daughter. She lives her life as an independent woman without a male life partner. Vianne does not adhere to society's conventions. Josephine, with the help of Vianne, moves out from her abusive husband and learns to lead her life without him. Here, the resistance of the female gender to live independently is a resistance against the patriarchal power of society.

Her ability to seduce and influence others through food highlights the transformative power of culinary expertise as a form of resistance. Her culinary prowess grants her autonomy and positions her as a catalyst for changes within the community, subverting the power dynamics and empowering individuals. (Bobaru 38–39)

In the novel *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure*, Harris brings out the tension between the culture and religion. Muslim women embody the complexities of gender and power. The community of Muslims settled as migrants in the village of Lansquenet. A new religion with a different cultural basis is presented. The women wearing their black niqab seem to be different from the other people. "I couldn't see her face; just the eyes, kohl-accented under the *niqab* " (Harris, *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure* 19). The village has now been dominated by two authorities: Muslim and Catholic people. The clothing, morality, and social roles of both religions mirror each other. It has become a sign of oppression for Muslims. Vianne does not connect with others through religious activity. She creates a relationship with women by using food, hospitality, and empathy. Muslim women share their food, baklava, with Vianne, who belongs to an outcast. She also shares her peaches with them. There was an intersection of cultures through sharing food, and it also developed a means of communication. "Food is the only shared language" (Harris, *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure* 93). Even though the Muslim women do not show them off outside the house, they visit the chocolaterie of Vianne and share their thoughts. It is a form of gaining one's own freedom. During the festivals of Ramadan, women are used to work in the kitchen without coming out. "Most of the passers-by were men - at Ramadan, women will often stay behind to prepare iftar" (Harris, *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure* 120). Women resist by sharing the joy of cooking. Sharing food leads to developing a relationship between the communities. Vianne and the Muslim women of that community developed a good neighborhood in the village. They do not think cooking food is a burden but a proud accomplishment. Muslim women resist not through confronting but by appropriating everyday practices like eating and dressing, reclaiming them from patriarchal meaning.

At Ramadan, everyone fasts, but we think about food all the time; we buy food, we prepare food, we offer food to our neighbours, we even dream of food - that is, if this wind allows us to sleep. I will bring some Moroccan sweets; some macaroons, and gazelle's horns, and almond meringues, and chebakia. And maybe then you can share with me the recipe for your chocolate. (Harris, *Peaches for Monsieur le Cure*, 199)

Sharing food across cultural boundaries, such as Vianne and Muslim women exchanging their recipes, resonates with Ahmed's notion of feminist survival through everyday acts of care (Ahmed 27). Food is an unavoidable thing in human life; without eating, one cannot live. Cooking food with care and love is an art. Women do the art of cooking without any resistance because they consider the act of cooking as a tool to express their independence.

Manners and habits of eating are crucial to the very definition of community, the relationships between people, interactions between humans and their gods, and communication between the living and the dead. Communal feasts involve a periodic reaffirmation of the social group. (Counihan 13)

In *The Lollipop Shoes*, the arrival of Zozie de l'Alba brings out a strong female power towards manipulative seduction. She attracts others especially her red-colored shoes become a symbol of resistance. Zozie also resists the societal pattern of doing domestic work for women; she is not a submissive female role but a resisting woman with independent roles. In the novel, Vianne transforms into a fearful character, suppressing her identity to evade persecution. She moved to Paris with her daughter. Paris is a city with a rigid structure of rules. She follows a survival strategy of hiding her identity and healing power to live there. She does not want people to judge her based on her activities in relation to the rigid structures. Here, Vianne is portrayed as the ideal woman that society expects. Here, Butler's Gender Performativity is seen through Vianne's behaviours. Anouk, as an adult, resists her mother's overprotection. Her resistance to identity and autonomy brings out a new generational struggle in the competitive world. Anouk gets attracted towards Zozie because she likes the free spirit of independence in her. Anouk's resistance is not only against society but also inside her family.

In the novel *The Strawberry Thief*, Rosette resists through her silence. "But her silences are often more telling than words" (Harris, *The Strawberry Thief* 68). She rebels against the social structure of normal people. Rosette behaviours do not come under the norms of gender. People blame Rosette as a mistake, but she does not care about the words of others. In society, silence is considered a weakness for women, but Rosette breaks that belief through her act. Rosette uses strawberry as her language of resistance. Narcisse gave his strawberry land to Rosette after his death, the people feel that as a wrong decision, but Rosette never fails to visit the land as a small girl takes the responsibility of the land. In this society, men are expected to take care of the land and family; however, Rosette assumes responsibility for the land instead. Narcisse showcasing Rosette as his heir to take care of his property is an act of resisting the legitimacy law of society.

First, there is the power that society allocates or denies to men and women through their access to and control of one essential resource: food. Men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute, and consume food is a key measure of their power. This ability varies according to their culture, their class, and their family organization, and the overall economic structure of their society. (Counihan and Kaplan 1-2)

Morgane is a teenager who lives as a tattooist in that village. She lives independently with her income from the tattoo shop. Morgane has a brave behaviour to tolerate the rumors of the villagers. She was considered an outcast, but not for much longer. Her tattoo attracts everyone in the village, especially men. Reynaud is the priest who follows a rigid structure, often considering tattoos sin, but he was attracted to her tattoo. Morgane has the power to tattoo the inner feelings of people; she brings out Reynaud's inner struggle between repression and desire through her tattoo. A tattoo is a permanent mark that symbolises men submission to her power.

Men's role in the narratives of Harris also hit some differences; Reynaud, Roux, and Muscat are not powerful characters to meet the societal expectation of men's activities. Roux, being a father to Rosette and husband to Vianne, does not support her in every situation; he wanders in the sea and visits her at times. He also does not spend much time with Rosette. He does not financially support her. Vianne and Rosette used to live independently without him. Muscat abuses his wife, Josephine, and expects her to live a submissive life under him. He embodies the expected male chauvinism of society. Josephine's act of living independently represents resistance to the male power of dominance. Reynaud, as a priest, follows a strict religious code and considers the desire to create a woman as sin, but at last he also likes chocolate and receives tattoos. This episode shows that a woman has the power to create changes in men. Harris's women characters do not expect a man to console and take care of them. A woman heals herself without expecting someone. Women are represented as stronger characters throughout the novel than men. Harris resists the Gender Performativity of women differently.

My mother's domain, as the juniormost, now become the impromptu food room upstairs, with a kerosene stove. She cooked her rebellion on a high flame: she began adding onion and garlic even to vegetables. Strains of Rajasthan and Mrs Beeton's Cookbook entered our now unpredictable meals. (Roy 96)

Together, the narratives of Harris illustrate that resistance is multifaceted through Judith Butler's Gender Performativity and Foucault's Power and Resistance. Gender roles are created by their daily practices and patterns, where females are supposed to do their household chores and to live a suppressive life. The women portrayed by Harris live their lives independently through their daily habit of cooking. Gender Performativity becomes a tool for their resistance to social power. Vianne, Rosette, Zoë, Morgane, and Anouk exemplify how women can live independently in opposition to societal practices. Women resist throughout their lives. She uses many things to resist day-to-day life. Harris portrays women as working and independent ones. Even though some women depend on men, they resist bringing out their rights through daily activities like cooking. Not only does cooking become a resisting tool, but also their act of taking care of the property and keeping an individual shop is also a form of resistance. Harris redefines power through the female protagonists, who use culinary resistance to challenge societal power dominance. Women are not oppressed through the act of cooking but rather use it as a tool to oppose dominance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Joanne Harris redefines female identity by portraying women as resistance agents rather than submissive figures. Food emerges as a communication tool of resistance, empowerment, and performative identity. Foucault's discourse on power and resistance is expressed through the characters in Harris's novels; Vianne, Josephine, Morgane, Anouk, and Zoë are the

characters in her narratives, and they reshape the identity through resistance. Butler's depiction of gender performativity in Harris's narrative demonstrates how social construction shapes gender roles and their resistance. Her narratives suggest that feminist agency can enact resistance not only through rejecting societal expectations but also through everyday acts of care, cooking, and creativity. By intertwining food and social interaction, Harris not only constructs the space of personal and communal agency but also critiques the rigid structures of power and gender. In the future the research may explore how culinary resistance is depicted in other global women writers, positioning Harris within a wider context of literary food studies.

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