

Darkly Gleaming Sunken Treasure:
Reclaiming Chocolate's "Mythical" Role through Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*
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Abstract

To date, cacao, or chocolate, has drawn our interest because of its journey across the Atlantic. Initially, it was a mythically and culturally important food in Mesoamerica and later came to convey even further meaning under ideologies such as imperialism, colonialism, and consumerism. Over the past few decades, there have been some significant studies on cacao and its sociocultural significance. Tracing the role of cacao in society, how it was accepted, and deviations from this cultural position specifically can shed further light on the significance of cultural myths and role of chocolate in an international context. This study relies on Joanne Harris's novel *Chocolat* (1999) to re-examine the mythical representation of chocolate in terms of women's social roles. This source is worth citing given the way in which chocolate's meaning is reclaimed by an obscure member of society rather than any authority.

Keyword ; English Literature, cultural history, chocolate, multiculturalism, mythical representation

1. Introduction

Cacao has long been considered an essential food in Mexico, and rich culture has grown up around the plant. While the country may not be the very birthplace of the food¹⁾, it is still important to understand how this food became so essential and its mythology within Mexican culture. Additionally, not only within Mexico or Mesoamerica but in Europe also, another myth about the food has been evolved. Cacao, cocoa or chocolate, has come to convey further meaning under ideology such as imperialism, colonialism and consumerism.

Specifically, tracing the role of cacao in society, how it was accepted, and deviations from this cultural position can help us better understand the significance of cultural myths and the cultural role of chocolate in an international context. Post-colonial researchers have tried to analyse the mythologisation of the food and its results putting them in the framework of cultural history, systematically surveying the trades between the Old World and the New World. Through these various points of view, reframed history sheds light on new actors, even those who were obscure.

In this paper, I rely on Joanne Harris's novel *Chocolat* to re-examine chocolate's mythical representation concerning women's social roles. It is worthwhile to cite because reclaiming chocolate's meaning depicted in this work is not attempted by any authority, but by an obscure member of society. Through reading closely, I would like to argue that now a chocolate myth regains its original role to empower the people throughout the novel.

2. Robbery of Gods' gifts: From the cacao bean to chocolate

The origin of cacao is still unknown, but in Mexico, its usage dates back at least to the time of the Mayans. During this time, cacao was thought to be one of the foodstuffs from which the gods created human beings and became a symbol of fertility in Mayan culture. Such mythology led to the Mayan "cacao goddess."²⁾ Elaborative concentration to process cacao made it ritualised for religious purpose.³⁾ Cacao beans had economic significance also: they were common currency during that time (Coe and Coe, ch.1).

The Aztecs inherited cacao, and in the 16th century, the food was discovered by Spanish conquerors. As mentioned in Bartolomé de las Casas' report⁴⁾, it is easy to imagine that the Spanish soon spotted this luxurious offering to the Aztec gods. It was then that the cacao bean gained another role: as a gift for the West. The so-called Atlantic "Triangular Trade" is known as a symbol of the aftermath of the Western conquest of the New World, though right now the connection is very unclear⁵⁾: Europeans bought raw goods like sugar and cacao and carried them back to their country for sale. They then exchanged these for manufactured goods, which they brought to Africa and sold for enslaved people. The slaves were brought to the Americas and forced to produce cacao beans, starting the process over again (Takeda 32–33).

Even if there is no direct relationship among these transactions, it is quite important that eventually there are certain economic exploitations by the European countries *against* Africa and the Americas.⁶⁾ There is little doubt that the history of chocolate is inextricably linked with Western imperial expansion and exploitation. Chocolate then completely lost its positive social symbolism once—in Mayan and Aztec times—it had, and the memory of the humiliation of the slavery would be entrenched from then on: the separation between the producers and the consumers began, and it means the deprivation of the mythical role of cacao.

Coe and Coe analyse a Western view against cacao tree in the 18th century as below.

The face-off between the two worlds is nicely illustrated by the scientific name of our tree: *Theobroma cacao*, given to it in 1753 by Carl von Linné, the 18th-century Swedish scientist The binomial system by which we now classify all living things was invented by him, to replace the clumsy descriptive Latin sentences used by his predecessors. The first part of this particular binomial, the name of the genus to which cacao (the "chocolate tree") belongs, is from the Greek and means "food of the gods." It is not clear exactly whose gods Linnaeus had in mind, although he himself is known to have been fond of chocolate. The New World name cacao—which ... provides a

clue for the unravelling of chocolate's earliest history—he found barbaric, and thus put it in second place as the specific name. (Ch.1)

Carl von Linné named the exotic tree *Theobroma cacao*, which symbolises the Western ambiguity to the indigenous myth, which is barbaric but something sacred. Some lightly think that the Europeans were able to enjoy the food in a Westernised way, as Emma Robertson mentions that such adaptation was necessary for chocolate's success. Yet, Marcy Norton illuminates that, "the material forms of tobacco and chocolate first consumed by Europeans closely resembled Indian concoctions" and "[n]ew tastes emerged out of the social matrix created of Atlantic Empires" (9).⁷⁾ So, it is even more noteworthy to see the process in which chocolate's indigenous myth became skewed, rather the superficial fact that chocolate is a product of imperialism.

In the first half of the 20th century, famous chocolate *boutiques* eliminated the hue of its ingredients' myth, advertising their purely European shop names. During the course of global consumerism, however, this direction changed to some extent. World's leading boutiques and global companies especially cannot overlook the criticism against their "economic colonialism," thus today, they advocate some workers life's protection.⁸⁾

Tracing the history of changes in chocolate's meanings is equal to observation for such a social change. In the next section, I will focus on gender roles and chocolate after the 16th century.

3. Gender roles and chocolate

By the early 17th century, chocolate, which Mexican men and women drank on a daily basis and saw as a holy food, had become a novelty product and strong signifier of social status for Europeans. Members of the Spanish upper class used cacao as medicine. By the 18th century, chocolate was seen as an "exotic" drink and was often preferred by upper-class women, who were attracted to chocolate's connections to the mystique, 'pagan' culture.⁹⁾ Cacao, once literally local production for the local people, became a commodity, and then finally mysterious luxurious items from overseas.

While in the 19th to mid-20th century chocolate was considered a beneficial food for workers and soldiers, overall the food quickly became affiliated with images of seductiveness, intemperance, and effeminacy. Chocolate developed a negative image and was often seen as a reflection of women's supposed weakness and historical gender roles. These stereotypes remain until the present day; sweets, including chocolates, are often marketed toward women and children. Some romantic imagery with chocolate has been reinforced uniquely in Japan, since the majority of Japanese enjoy Valentine's Day custom in which a woman gives chocolate to the man whom she loves. However, these associations are, of course, nonsense: women do not succumb to the temptation of chocolate or other things any easier than men, and gender has nothing to do with the food one eats.

More importantly, to fully grasp chocolate's role in signifying contemporary gender roles, it is necessary to better understand women's contributions to its production and dissemination. It is not true, as many assume, that only men participated in imperialistic expansion. Emma Robertson, in her book *Chocolate, Women and Empire* (2009), points out that women participated in both the agriculture and manufacture of chocolate, highlighting another aspect of women's societal roles and encouraging us to reconsider the meaning of chocolate throughout history. Unlike the perpetuated image, it is not a simple dichotomy of the men who introduced the cacao and the women who consumed it. Strictly, in this respect, cacao has actually been staying in women's hands all the time. According to Robertson's consideration, British confectionary Rowntree may have bruited women's dedication to raising cacao to emphasise its gracefulness. (82)

In the next section, therefore, through these intricate mythical images and its correlation to women's societal roles, I would like to analyse the novel *Chocolat* closely.

4. Reclaiming chocolate's meaning in *Chocolat*

The late-20th-century novel *Chocolat*, written by British novelist Joanne Harris, exemplifies some of the stereotypes and history I have described above, and reflects today's changing environment also. Indeed, I argue that this novel both depicts women as strong and

independent and “rehabilitates” chocolate, reintroducing its mythical role lost since the Mayan and Aztec eras.

The novel is set in an imaginary French rural village, Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, and centres around the figure of Vienne, an outsider who moves into town to open a chocolatier during Lent. The summary on the novel’s back cover provides an overview of the plot: an “exotic stranger”, Vienne, appears and the villagers think her shop poses “serious moral danger” against the Church, due to the “sinful pleasure of a chocolate truffle”. I am going to demonstrate that, through this conflict, how Harris uses the chocolate as a social antidote, and upends the conventional imagery of it in the end.

Vienne is an unmarried woman who moves to Lansquenet with her daughter, Anouk, to open a chocolate shop. Father Reynaud is an antagonistic village priest who conceals a dark past. Armande is an old woman suffering from diabetes who supports Vienne. Josephine is married to Paul-Marie, owner of the local café, and after her husband abuses her, she finds work in Vienne’s shop. Roux is a river gypsy who appears in the middle of the story. Caroline, Armande’s daughter, is Father Reynaud’s most ardent supporter. Throughout the novel, Vienne dispels these characters’ prejudices, boastfulness, and miscommunications, saving them and bettering their lives. It is worthwhile that this paper includes images from the film adaptation; while the movie has some differences, its ending is largely the same, as Harris herself has commented on her website.¹⁰

The book draws on many of the mythologies surrounding chocolate. For example, Vienne’s chocolate shop is named ‘La Céleste Praliné/Chocolaterie Artisanale’, a name which recalls pagan religions and even cacao’s Mayan roots, since celestial imagery is often linked to Mayan culture.¹¹ In the film, this connection is made even more explicit: the store is simply called “Maya” and is home to several seemingly pagan items, including a fortune-telling plate. In other ways, however, Harris draws on stereotypes of chocolate as decadent and seductive. Vienne’s character, meanwhile, is portrayed as witch-like, even being symbolised by a broomstick. This, too, draws on stereotypes of sexual licence. Father Reynaud, the book’s main antagonist, expresses these clichés as he walks by the shop one morning:

And at the beginning of Lent, the traditional season of self-denial? . . . I looked into the display window this morning. On a white marble shelf are aligned innumerable boxes, packages, cornets of silver and gold paper, rosettes, bells, flowers, hearts and long curls of multicoloured ribbon. In glass bells and dishes lie the chocolates, the pralines, Venus’s nipples, truffles, mendiants, candied fruits, hazelnut clusters, chocolate seashells, candied rose-petals, sugared violets . . . Protected from the sun by the half-blind which shields them, they gleam darkly, like sunken treasure, Aladdin’s cave of sweet clichés. (34–35)

The passage containing flooding of glittering abundance makes a good contrast to Lent, the season of self-denial, which implicitly urges Reynaud to address his past wrongs. Enumerated colourful things in the store, such as a “marble” shelf, rosettes, flowers, mendiants (naturally nuts and/or fruits are on them), chocolate seashells and others, all imitate or represent nature, and it is as if the readers can smell them, touch them, and perceive them sensually, through Reynaud’s eyes. They certainly tempt the abstinent Father and dazzle him with their vigour.

On the other hand, Vienne’s suffering from the sense of alienation is also emphasised. Vienne feels invisible, set apart from the lives of the other villagers. She says, “No one looks at us. We might as well be invisible; our clothing marks us as strangers, transients. They are polite, so polite; no-one stares at us” (13). Reynaud, meanwhile, is described as having a “small, tight smile [like] an oyster, milky-white at the edges and sharp as a razor” (54). In this way, Harris sets Reynaud’s opaqueness against Vienne and Anouk’s “invisibleness”, which can be regarded as the contrast between the Church and chocolate. Vienne and chocolate, at the beginning of the novel, is something mere exotic, seductive, thus to be ignored; however, it does never conceal something as opaque Reynaud does.

As the book goes on, chocolate is portrayed as a medicine connecting people and often contrasted with uncompromising religion. The church and Vienne’s story stand at opposite ends of the town square and both Reynaud and Vienne try to solve villagers’ problems in

their own ways. Yet Reynaud fails each time he chains himself to a dogmatic view of God. When Josephine flies from her husband after an episode of domestic violence, Reynaud blames her, telling her that marriage is a sacrament and must be preserved at all costs. Vienne, meanwhile, gives Josephine a place to live in her store and clothes to wear:

As she refuses to return to the Café de la République I have lent her some of my own clothes. Today she is wearing a blue jumper and a flowered sarong, and she looks fresh and pretty. (240)

Vienne gives Josephine colours and energy to live; namely, she gives Josephine a voice.

Similarly, over the course of the book, Vienne helps each and every villager. Her method is simple: to look each individual in the eye, select the perfect individual chocolate for them, and give it to them for free. For Vienne, chocolate is a medicine.

Even more specifically, chocolate is a medicine that ends loneliness and isolation. Vienne's use of chocolate can be contrasted with her mother's use of morphine, on which she relied while suffering from terminal cancer. While Vienne also faces the possibility of living alone, like her mother, her approach is much different: whereas her mother's choice of medicine trapped her in the cage of loneliness, Vienne's brings her out. Harris depicts this view of chocolate in a scene where Roux and Vienne search for medicine for Armande, who is dying from diabetes:

Roux, . . . seeing Armande's door open, decided to call on her and found her sitting half-conscious in her rocking-chair. He managed to rouse her enough for her to speak a few words. Medicine . . . fridge. . . . On top of the refrigerator was a bottle of brandy. He poured a glassful, forced some of the liquid between her lips.

It is not brandy, though, Armande wants to take. There are insulin and chocolate almost alone in the fridge.

She keeps insulin with the eggs. A tupperware box contains six ampoules of insulin and some

disposable needles. On the other side a box of truffles with La Céleste Praline lettered on the lid. Otherwise there is hardly anything to eat in the house. (254–55)

Eventually, the two find insulin and the old lady survives for another few days. However, it is chocolate that reunites her with her family—her grandson and her own daughter—and allows her to die happy. Through this scene, we can find it clear that which of the two in the fridge, insulin or chocolate, is the true cure for her life.

Vienne's approach to the village's boycott of strangers is another example of chocolate's power to bring people together. Caroline, one of the last villagers to remain on Reynaud's side, tries to persuade Vienne to refuse to serve gypsies and to pin a poster in the store's window that reads: "NO HAWKER, VAGRANTS OR PEDLARS (sic) THE MANAGEMENT RETAINS THE RIGHT TO REFUSE TO SERVE AT ANY GIVEN TIME" (110). When Vienne asks her, "Can we refuse to serve them? ... If they have the money to spend, can we refuse?", Caroline replies "impatiently", "Of course we can. Who's to stop us?" (110).

Later in the book, Caroline takes on a similar boycotting campaign, this time directly against Vienne. The following quote demonstrates both the town's exclusionary nature and the connection of chocolate to *pagan* practices:

The New Revivalists: Corrupting the Spirit of Easter.

There will always be a small minority of people who attempt to use our Holy traditions for personal gain. The greetings card industry. The supermarket chains. Even more sinister are those people who claim to revive ancient traditions, involving our children in pagan practices in the guise of amusement. Too many of us see these as harmless, and view them with tolerance. Why else should our community have allowed a so-called Chocolate Festival to take place outside our church on the very morning of Easter Sunday? This makes a mockery of everything Easter stands for. We urge you to boycott this so-called Festival and all similar events, for the sake of your innocent children.

CHURCH, not CHOCOLATE, is the TRUE MESSAGE of EASTER! (294)

However, this leaflet merely shows Caroline's inconsistency. She demonises Vienne by associating her and her *pagan* beliefs with symbols of capitalism like the "greetings card industry" and "supermarket chains", but personal gain clearly does not motivate Vienne. Vienne does not sell her chocolate but gives it away freely. She also, unlike the village's *good* Christians, is the only person to sell her products to the river gypsies, outsiders of the community.

Through this Vienne's constant resistant to capitalism, chocolate becomes no longer a symbol of colonial exploitation, but instead of something essential to live in society, as it once was in ancient Mayan and Aztec culture. In a free capitalist market, needlessly it is the very outcome of imperialistic expansion, transactions require sellers to receive sufficient money for their product. While both Vienne and Roux, a gypsy, serve as outsiders to this system, they differ in their attitudes toward it. Vienne constantly resists prevailing commercialist values, refusing to sell her sweets as mass-market products, whereas Roux does not know how to survive outside of this mindset. Roux cannot do anything but to curse the society:

Sanctimonious bastard . . . Knows nothing about us—nothing! The way he talks, we're all thieves and murderers. I've always paid my way—I've never begged from anyone, I've always worked— (145)

This quote does not indicate that men are all capitalist, of course. I just rather would like to point out that, Harris overlays the stereotype imposed on a woman, Vienne, and that of chocolate, with dexterity. By the delineation of the woman besieged with conventional, male-centred conventions in the society and her liberation, Harris reclaims the lost meaning of chocolate simultaneously.

To sum it up, contrasting with the Church and chocolate is successful in respect of criticising traditional social hierarchy keenly. Still, in terms of community inclusion, all the Vienne's efforts are not enough yet. Roux sings a French Song to her and her daughter.

V'la l'bon vent, V'la l'joli vent
V'la l'bon vent, ma mie m'appelle . . . (346)
The good wind blows, the pretty wind blows
The good wind blows, my sweetheart calls me . . .
(my trans.)

Vienne found that within her the wind blows, but at the centre, there is "a small still space, miraculously untroubled" (346). However, this miracle will not last so long. At the very end of the story, she sings this song, and hope that "this time it will remain a lullaby" and "this time the wind will not hear". Reynard's leaving was not her *triumph*. She remains in anxiety about being excluded from society.

Her steady efforts to liberate villagers from any suppression using chocolate is, at the same time, to achieve her own liberation. Although it is seemingly successful, her achievement is actually just a brief rest. To fight against huge power or exploitative social structure there are so many yet to do be accomplished.¹²⁾

5. Conclusion

In a scene from the film version of *Chocolat*, Roux asks Vienne, "Which idea are you selling?" Her daughter, Anouk, replies, "Chocolate". Money, in effect, is no longer currency in the world of *Chocolat*, but chocolate, as it was in Mayan times. Throughout the book, Harris upends conventional stereotypes of chocolates—as sensuous or seductive and as a product of imperialism. Such clichés fade into the background, while chocolate's vital role in society shines forth, allowing a woman to turn a rigid, conservative village into a flexible and vivacious one.

Nevertheless, chocolates still left in the wave of economic colonialism. Some companies and chocolate manufacturers recently build a strategy to sell colonial commodities such as cocoa or coffee under the idea of fair trade or with ethical brand marketing, while there are so many journalistic research reports on child labour in plantations.¹³⁾ Reclaiming a mythical role of these colonial goods would encourage us to reconsider our culture and others once again hereafter.

Notes

- 1) Marcy Norton in her 2008 book refrains from pointing to the very birthplace describing "the origins of the human use of cacao" as "mysterious and contested" (7). A research published in *The Guardian* in 2018 found that cacao "was being used in South America centuries before it was exploited by civilisations in Mexico and Central America". (Davis)
- 2) Some of the goddess's ceramic figurines still remain. See Dreiss and Greenhill 9–10.
- 3) "... the enormous effort necessary for just one cup of cacao drink demanded an almost religious commitment. No wonder the drink acquired elite status during ritual and feasting events, as the beverage of choice for the gods." (Dreiss and Greenhill 105)
- 4) Cacao, like gold and silver, was firmly associated with the lord's power. "The cups for drinking chocolate were not golden, as claimed by Díaz, but of calabash, and were painted inside and out; Las Casas states that 'any lord would drink out of them as if they were gold and silver.' Such cups, called *xicalli* in Nahuatl, were the usual vessels for quaffing chocolate throughout Mesoamerica. Las Casas then goes on to say, 'The drink is water mixed with a certain flour made of some nuts called cacao. It is very substantial, very cooling, tasty, and agreeable, and does not intoxicate.'" (Coe and Coe, ch. 3)
- 5) Some introductory books to chocolate published in this century give an explanation using the Triangular Trade model. However, as early as in 1973, Gilman M. Ostrander tries to debunk the "myth" of this model, pointing out that it is a mere invention in the 19th century.
- 6) Norton notes that it is not the Spanish who first started long-distance trade of cacao, and this makes contrasts between cacao and tobacco. However, they absolutely disarranged trading: "Once they [=Tenochtitlan conquistadores] achieved the conquest of Mexico, it required no imagination on the part of colonial officials and settlers in New Spain and Guatemala to take over existing production and trade networks, and little imagination to set up new cacao plantations when over-exploitation and Indian deaths led to the demise of earlier ones." (105)
- 7) Robertson considers "[o]ne final imperial ingredient was necessary to ensure chocolate's success in the west: the addition of sugar made chocolate more palatable to the Europeans." (67) Whereas, in addition to Norton, Sarah Moss and Alexander Badenoch observe: "Chocolate was consumed in Europe in much the same form as in Mesoamerica for at least the first half of the seventeenth century. The traditional chocolate spices, vanilla, chilli, the colourant annatto and 'ear flowers' . . . were all imported with the cacao, which usually came in its solid, processed form." (Ch. 2)
- 8) One of the global companies, Nestlé, known for Kit Kat bar, manifests its attitude toward the problems about cacao farming and trading on the "Nestlé Cocoa Plan" website. "To make great chocolate, you need great cocoa. But life can be challenging where cocoa is grown. That's why we developed the Nestlé Cocoa Plan: better farming, better lives – and better cocoa."
- 9) Grinding cacao bean is women's work in Mayan times, but once across the Atlantic, women have turned to be mere consumers, enhancing its sexual images. Moss and Badenoch highlight this in the section of "Women, Indulgence and Sex: Beyond Good and Evil?" touching the description seen in *Chocolat*, which is the work I will later argue.
- 10) On Harris's official website, there is a favourable description of the film as below: "It has been sweetened to some extent, and simplified to meet the needs of a cinema audience, but I think the adaptation is fair and remains close in spirit, if not always in detail, to the book. . . . the inclusion of a Mayan fairytale (sic) backstory works very well alongside the 50s French nostalgia."
- 11) Mayan people worshipped heavenly gods, Oxlahuntik'uh. See Sharer and Traxler 730.
- 12) In fact, as of 2020, Harris has published three sequels to this book as the *Chocolat* series: *The Lollipop Shoes* (2007), *Peaches for Monsieur le*

Curé (2012), and *The Strawberry Thief* (2019).

- 13) Around 2010, fair trade of chocolate garnered great attention (“Panorama - Tracing the Bitter Truth of Chocolate and Child Labour”). A decade later, “ethical” chocolates have become in fashion (Henderson). However, there is no sign of letting up in the exploitation by large chocolate companies against plantation workers (Athreya; JICA; Whoriskey).

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