From the Margins to the Mainstream: Magical Realism and Feminism in Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* and Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*

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Pro-gradu tutkielmassani käsittelen kahta tekstiä: Alice Hoffmanin *Practical Magic* sekä Joanne Harrisin *Chocolat* kirjoja. Tarkastelen kyseisiä tekstejä feministisestä näkökulmasta. Molemmat kirjat on kuuluvat maagisen realismin lajityyppiin ja tarkastelen kuinka nämä tekstit suhteutuvat lajityypin traditioihin ja sen historiaan kulttuurisen hegemonian vastarintaa tukevana kirjallisuuden lajina.

Maaginen realismi syntyi menestyksekkäänä kirjallisuudenlajina 1940- ja 1950-luvuilla Etelä-Amerikassa. Sen jälkeen se on siirtynyt muihin maanosiin saavuttaen suurta suosiota. Alice Hoffmanin ja Joanne Harrisin kirjat ovat esimerkkejä länsimaisesta kirjallisuudesta tässä lajityypissä. Tutkimuslähtökohtanani olikin analysoida nämä keskiluokkaisten valkoisten naisten kirjoittamat tekstit feministisestä näkökulmasta ja tutkia, sisältävätkö ne lajityypin perinteitä kunnioittaen patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan vastaisia elementtejä vai ovatko ne esimerkkejä siitä miten alun perin vastarintainen tyylilaji on sulautettu valtavirtaan vieden mukanaan sen hegemoniaa vastustavan potentiaalin.

Tuon tutkielmassani ensin esille maagisen realismin teoriaa ja sen historiallista taustaa. Luvussa kolme esittelen feminististä teoriaa liittyen erityisesti maagiseen realismiin ja sen teoreettisiin aspekteihin. Olen nostanut esiin teksteihin liittyen muutaman mielestäni relevantin teeman: ensinnäkin noituuden; miksi kirjoittajat ovat valinneet teksteissään esittää noitanaisia, mitä kulttuurista merkitystä ne representoivat. Toiseksi, olen ottanut esille uskonnon; miten hegemoninen organisoitu uskonto on suhtautunut naisiin ja vaihtoehtoisiin henkisiin katsantotapoihin, jotka poikkeavat vallalla olevista normeista. Tämä teema resonoitui erityisesti *Chocolat* kirjassa, jossa on vastakkainasetteluna ulkopuolisen, vapaahenkisen naisen taistelu epämiellyttävää vanhanaikaisen uskontokunnan edustajaa vastaan. Lisäksi olen ottanut huomioon kuinka molemmat kirjailijat ovat valinneet päähenkilöikseen normaalien sosiaalisten ympyröiden ulkopuolelle jäävät naiset, jotka eivät sovi patriarkaaliset yhteiskunnan normeihin ja heidät leimataan ulkopuolisiksi erilaisuutensa vuoksi.

Kummastakaan valitsemastani kirjoittajasta ei ole tehty paljon akateemista tutkimusta, mutta pelkästään heidän kirjojensa saamansa suosio mielestäni oikeuttaa heidän tekstiensä tarkempaan analyysiin; mitä sanomia heidän tekstinsä sisältää, ei pelkästään pinnallisesti vaan myös syvemmässä analyysissä.

Asiasanat: maaginen realismi, feminismi, noituus, noitanaiset, new age, uskonto

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1. Introduction

In this study it is my intention firstly to introduce and discuss the genre or mode called magical realism, to look at its history and background as well as its definitions. Secondly, I intend to analyse two texts: Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* and Joanne Harris' *Chocolat*. I plan to examine how these texts fit into the tradition of magical realism. The mode has been considered to be a subversive literary movement in the postcolonial regions of the world and I intend to investigate whether this nature of subversiveness has survived in the hands of two mainstream white middle-class female authors. Both books by both authors have been very successful and I will examine whether they can be considered as containing subversive elements in them from a feminist point of view or are they merely representations of how marginal phenomena tend to move from the sidelines to the centre and lose their culturally resistant aspects in the process.

Wendy B. Faris notes that magical realist fictions can be seen to be more clearly designed towards entertaining the readers with their unidirectional story lines (p. 163)[1]. She also notes that the genre has been extending into film, often through novels (p. 164). This has happened with both *Practical Magic* and *Chococat*. However, what interests me is whether any subversive elements survive with the unusual representations of reality, despite the possible entertainment value of the texts. There has been very little academic writing on either one of the authors I have chosen, which I have found somewhat surprising since both writers have gained much popularity. Which is one of the reasons I think it is relevant to analyse the texts of these authors.

[1] Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 163-190.

I will next briefly introduce the authors of the two texts I have selected for analysis. Alice Hoffman is a North-American writer born in 1952. She got her masters degree from Stanford University in creative writing. Her first novel was written when she was 21 years old and she has now written altogether 25 novels. *Practical Magic* was published in 1995. It has also been made into a major motion picture (http://www.alicehoffman.com/biography.html)[1]. Joanne Harris is a British author born in 1964. She studied Modern and Medieval languages in Cambridge and worked as a teacher for fifteen years. She has written 13 novels, of which *Chocolat* was published in 1999 and was subsequently made into a popular motion picture (http://www.joanne-harris.co.uk/pages/aboutgeneral.html)[2]. Both these writers represent highly educated women on both sides of the Atlantic and therefore it is fair to assume that they are aware of the more academic and theoretical sides of magical realism. Therefore they are very well suited for this kind of study.

Practical Magic tells the story of the Owens family. To be more exact, it tells of three sets of sisters in three different generations. The story focuses mostly on the two middle sisters, Sally and Gillian. Later on it starts to include Sally's two daughters, Kylie and Antonia. In the course of events, both Sally and Gillian decide to leave their Massachusetts home where their family has lived for centuries. The major event in the book happens when Gillian's boyfriend Jimmy suddenly dies and she thinks she is responsible for it. She runs to her sister Sally for help and they decide to bury him in Sally's back garden. He, however, begins to haunt the household where Gillian, Sally and Sally's children live. In the end, all the generations of women must come together in order to banish the threat.

In *Chocolat* the story again touches on three generations of females of the same family. Similarly, the story focuses on the middle generation and the character of Vianne Rocher. She

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[1] Alice Hoffman – The Official Site, 2008. *Biography.* Available from http://www.alicehoffman.com/hoffman-bio.htm. [Accessed on 16.2.2008].

[2] The Joanne Harris Website. *About Joanne Harris: Biography.* Available from <http://www.joanne-harris.co.uk/pages/aboutgeneral.html>. [Accessed on 16.2.2008].

has led a travelling life with her mother all her life and continues the tradition by travelling around with her daughter Anouk. They move into a rural community of Lansquenet and found a chocolate boutique. Vianne and her daughter are labelled outsiders in the community, not just for being born elsewhere, but also because of a difference in quality in them. In both books these outsider women have been labelled as ‘witches’ and Harris adds to the mix the threat of religion or religious authorities in the character of Father Reynaud, the Roman Catholic priest in the parish. Vianne ends up in an unofficial power struggle with the priest, him representing a negative force and she the element of positive change. The story is set in France in an unidentified era, but the author is still clearly British and represents the Western culture and way of thinking despite the lack of Anglo-American setting.

2. Magical Realism; History, Background, Definitions

2.1. Definitions

Magical realism has been referred to among other things as a genre, a mode or literary movement, trend or form. Amaryll Chanady says in her seminal work on magical realism that she considers it to be a literary mode rather than a specific, historically identifiable genre (16)[1]. A literary mode being a broader term, whereas for example a genre adheres more strictly to form and conventions[2]. For this study, I will also refer to the concept as a literary mode. Critics cannot fully agree on which characteristics are essential to magical realism, but certain traits are, however, mentioned frequently. One essential feature is the occurrence of the supernatural, or anything that is contrary to our conventional view of reality. What that conventional view is, is of course extremely depended on the surrounding culture. Gonzalés Echevarría notes that magical realism depicts a world view that does not depend on natural or physical laws, and is not based on objective reality (quoted in Chanady, 18-19). The fictitious world is, however not entirely divorced from reality either:

> Magical realism is thus characterized first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an ”enlightened” and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality (21-22).

However, since the natural and the supernatural are inextricably interwoven in the fictitious world, according to Chanady, there is no hierarchy of reality (104).

Chanady states that in magical realism there is a coherent code of the supernatural, or a set of norms, which guide the characters' interpretation of their surroundings according to a

[1] Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy. New York: Garland, 1985.
[2] The Writers Web. *A List of Important Literary Terms*. Available from <http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/terms.html>. [Accessed on 15.1. 2009].

world view that differs from that of logic and reason (21), or what we might consider logic and reason in western society. In the narrative, the supernatural must not be regarded as such or there would be no magical realism (Chanady, 22). The perspective in magical realist texts is an ordered one, as opposed to for example surrealism in which irrational combinations are brought together in an artificial way. Luis Leal also goes about explaining magical realism partly in its opposition to other types of literature:

> . . . magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that Ortega describes. Unlike superrealism, magical realism does not use dream motifs; neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does in emphasize psychological analysis of characters, since it doesn't try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to express themselves (121)[1].

Chanady states that the author of a magical realist narrative implicitly presents the irrational world view as different from his or her own by situating the story in present-day reality and showing that they are familiar with logical reasoning and empirical knowledge:

> The term "magic" refers to the fact that the perspective presented by the text in an explicit manner is not accepted according to the implicit world view of the educated implied author (Chanady, 22).

This can be seen very easily in *Practical Magic* (or PM). The first section of the book is named *Superstition* and the narrator of the story introduces little titbits of old superstitious beliefs into the midst of the narrative. In addition, one of the main characters, Sally, is described as follows: "She never believed in anything that could not be proven with facts and figures" (PM, 6). It is as if the author tries to gradually convince the modern rational reader first to identify with Sally's character and her rational worldview, but at the same during the course of the narrative she hints at the possibility that these old superstitions may have some truth in them after all. A similar thing can be observed in *Chocolat*, when Vianne and Anouk

[1] Leal, Luis. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 119-124.

move into a new house: they start by making a lot of noise to banish the ghosts that live there. However, Vianne states that: " I know it's only a game. Glamours to comfort a frightened child. There'll have to be work done, hard work, before any of this becomes real" (17). But Harris also sprinkles her narrative with old superstitions that Vianne clearly believes in almost despite herself. Both books also contain clearly supernatural events; however, as is consistent with magical realism, as Chanady argues, the author does not ever intrude with a rational explanation of an irrational event (41).

Faris has also tried to establish certain characteristics common to magical realist texts. In addition to some unexplainable event of 'magic', magical realist texts often contain strong, detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world (169). This goes to establish the realism in magical realism and according to Faris, also distinguishes it from many fantastic and allegorical texts. At the same time Faris states that the detail is freed from a traditionally mimetic role to a greater extent than before. The details function principally as markers that do not necessarily tell the reader any other information other than that the story is real. At the same time, the magical details can lead to the opposite direction, signalling what might be imaginary (Faris, 169).

Amaryll Chanady argues that the author of a magical realist text abolishes the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural on the level of textual representation causing the reader (while recognising the two conflicting logical codes) to suspend their judgement of what is rational and what is irrational in the realm of the fictitious world (25-26). In addition, the narrator transforms reality and estranges the reader from it by creating a world that we cannot integrate within our normal or conventional codes of perception. In my opinion, this suspension of judgement and transformation of reality are important effects when looking at Hoffman's and Harris' texts from a feminist point of view. I will go further into this in chapter 3 of this study.

The biggest problem with the concept is its vagueness. Kenneth Reeds notes that the high (or low) point in the deliberation of the term came in the 1973 congress at Michigan State University where the declared intention was to resolve once and for all the question of magical realism's definition and its role in Latin American literature (185)[1]. Needless to say, no definite conclusions were made. Christopher Warnes does note, however, that it seems that magical realism as a literary critical concept is here to stay. Warnes states that:

> There exists a large body of fiction—whether from Latin America, derivate of the Latin American style or having nothing to do with Latin America—that combines realism and fantasy, yet does this in such a way that the resultant mode or genre cannot be described as fantasy, science fiction, the uncanny, the fairy tale, the baroque or as any other of the categories with which magical realism overlaps. The key defining quality of magical realism is that it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth. (3)[1]

What muddles the already murky waters of trying to define the mode, is that a distinction is often made between two types of magical realism. Firstly there is the so-called scholarly type, which is mainly concerned with European writers and secondly there is the mythic or folkloric type, which is mainly found in Latin America (Faris, 165) or other postcolonial parts of the world. It is, however, often very difficult to distinguish between the two strains. Faris also states in her article that if magical realism was headed in the recent past by Latin American writers, the mode has extended beyond that region and is now on the map of world literature almost everywhere (167). The spreading of the magical realist "movement" would therefore make any division into two types basically moot.

[1] Reeds, Kenneth. "Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition." *Neophilologus* 90 (2006), 175-196.

2.2. History and Background

Suzanne Baker notes in her article that although the term magical realism has been around for over 60 years, there is little critical consensus concerning its definition (1993, no pagination)[2]. The term ”magic realism” first appeared in the context of art. The German art critic Franz Roh used it to describe the work of post-Expressionist artists in the mid 1920s (Baker). To Roh, magical realism (or Magischer Realismus) was a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it (Chanady, 17). The term migrated across the Atlantic Ocean, and in Latin America in the nineteen-forties it became a means of expressing the authentic American mentality and developing an autonomous literature for the continent (this has been commonly referred to as the Latin American Boom of magical realism). Irene Guenther speculates that the effect of the Second World War might have been crucial for the migration of the term since many cultural luminaries travelled from Europe to South America in the wake of those events (61)[3]. After the appearance of Angel Flores' article on magical realism in 1955 (the essay was first published in a Venezuelan newspaper in 1948), the term became a concept in literary criticism and has been applied to authors who have adopted certain themes and techniques in their writing. Flores does, however, also state that magical realism does not cater to the popular taste and is addressed more to the sophisticated (116)[4], which has certainly been proven untrue since he wrote his text in 1955, not only in the two texts of this study, but in addition in a multitude of other magical realist texts all around the world.

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[1] Warnes, Christopher. “The Hermeneutics of Vagueness” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41; 1 (2005), 1-13.
[2] Baker, Suzanne. ”Binarisms and duality: magic realism and postcolonialism.” SPAN 36 (1993).
[3] Guenther, Irene. ”Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 33-73.

[4] Flores, Angel. ”Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 109-117.

One of the major works cited as the definitive novel of the mode at that time is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Stephen M. Hart states that the criticism written about the movement in the 1960s and 1970s was mostly concerned with clarifying the formal mechanics of the mode (307)[1]. According to Hart, the 1980s were a decade of transition for both the critical analysis and creative writing of magical realism and in the 1990s new theories of magical realism began to emerge, ones that were inspired by cultural studies and postcolonial theory. These new theories provided new readings that brought to the forefront the portrayal of cultural boundaries, the cross-mixing of cultures, race issues and the mixing of high and low cultural styles (Hart, 307). The final stages of the internationalisation of the movement also occurred in the 1990s and the term no longer only referred to Latin America. Nowadays magical realism can be found in literature all around the world, for example in North America, Australasia, Europe and Africa.

According to Warnes, despite the many failings of magical realism, it is the only term in wide critical circulation that is capable of providing a name for this category of literature (3). The crucial issue in all magical realist criticism is, however, that the concepts of natural and supernatural, real and fantastic depend for their meanings on a stable point of comparison, a shared notion of reality (Warnes, 6). Reeds notes that Amaryll Chanady bases her separation of the fantastic and magical realism on a cultural basis. According to him, her view presented "a bi-cultural dichotomy" (190). Reeds presents as an example the book *Magical Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories* (1985) to illustrate that magical realism was departing from a Latin America centred analysis and heading towards "an examination of hybrid cultures" (190). How these hybrid cultures can be seen for example in Hoffman's *Practical Magic* or *Chocolat* remains an interesting question, since they can be seen as part of mainstream culture, not a representation of minority or colonised communities.

[1] Hart, Stephen M.. "Cultural Hybridity, Magical Realism, and the Language of Magic in Paolo Coelho's *The Alchemist.*" *Romance Quarterly* 51; 4 (2004), 304-312.

The term ‘magic’ in itself refers to a notion that humans have the ability to control the natural world through supernatural, mystical or paranormal means. The belief in magic is considered to be in competition with religious and scientific belief systems. The Encyclopaedia Britannica says on the topic of magic:

> Magic essentially refers to a ritual performance or activity that is thought to lead to the influencing of human or natural events by an external and impersonal mystical force beyond the ordinary human sphere. (298)[1]

The main view of the hegemonic religious and especially scientific belief systems in the Western world is that all magic is superstition.

> This [. . .] is largely a consequence of 19th century views on cultural and historical evolution that set magic apart from other religious phenomena as being especially prevalent in archaic and primitive societies and as merely a form of superstition without cultural or theological significance. (EB, 298)

The lines are, however, sometimes difficult to draw between what is considered as superstition and what is not, and many refrain from doing so. This is due to the fact that the lines are often drawn from an emotional point of view and not based on knowledge. As such, they are also highly depended on individual beliefs although general and “official” beliefs can be noted. As I assume most readers are aware of these scientific based notions of reality, I will not separately point them out on each occasion, unless necessary to further illustrate a point.

Baker comments in her article on the relationship of magical realism and postcolonialism. She speaks of “dual spatiality” where a reader of a magical realist text is offered two systems of possibility, one that aligns with European rationality and another which is incompatible with a conventional Western world view. The opening up of this “hybrid space” in magical realism makes it difficult to conceive of the ”real” as a single world with a single set of rules of laws (Baker 1993). In the context of postcolonial writing magical realism points to and

[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia. ”Magic.” Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Vol. 11., 1982, 298-302.

addresses the inherent problems created when a bizarre and unreal European world view is imposed onto the local reality of the colonised (Baker).

Art Taylor states that in the wake of the Latin American Boom, works incorporating magical realism can be found around the world including the American South which "boasts works tinged with the element of magical realism" (444)[1]. He notes that many of the literary concerns that rose in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction such as the preoccupation with class hierarchy as a cornerstone of social order, the evolution of race relations, the insistence on the set roles of women coupled with anxiety if they veer from those roles and the idealisation of the land together with a certain amount of nostalgia explain the reliance on magical realism by certain southern writers. Taylor notes that for authors such as Lewis Nordan magical realism:

> provides a way—and perhaps the only way—for a white Southerner in his circumstances to confront the amazements of his own region and the injustice of his own people, to transform a past and even to rewrite history without denying the brutality of known facts, and to glean from a despair both personal and persistently historical some glimmer of hope ahead. (445)

However, the author need not be from the American South to use magical realism to grapple subjects such as race, class and gender. Although, the mode does provide unique ways of dealing with these issues. According to Taylor, magical realism not only offers a way for authors outside the privileged centre to enter the so-called "main body of Western literature", but also it provides a means for authors coming from the privileged centres to dissociate themselves from their own discourse of power and speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged (450). In relation to Hoffman, in my opinion she manages to address in her book how the privileged can also experience decentring, that there are differences within privileged communities as well. The Owens's may be a white middle-class family, but they are nevertheless ostracised in their original community for their disturbing and strange qualities.

[1] Taylor, Art. "Magical Realism and the Mississippi Delta." *Mississippi Quarterly* 57; 3 (2004), 441-454.

Christopher Warnes notes in his text the appeal of magical realism. He speculates whether it is due to its suggestion of spiritual truths beneath the surface of everyday life, a nostalgic solace it seems to offer to a rationalised, secular world which would explain the term's lasting presence in the popular imagination (2).

Molly Monet-Viera notes that some magical realist writers have been ignored because they have become “hot international commodities” (96)[1]. She raises the question whether some post-Boom (Boom referring to the Latin American authors of 1940s and 1950s) authors have been criticised because of their commercial success. As if being popular diminishes the potential

for subversiveness in the texts. Monet-Viera claims that because writers such as Isabel Allende, Paulo Coelho and Laura Esquivel have achieved a wide and global reading audience by continuing and transforming the mode making it even more popular, they have made the mode merit further study (96). The reason why these texts deserve further study is according to Monet-Viera:

> because they highlight several cultural trends in both the production and consumption of Latin American literature, namely the continued interest in magical or marvelous themes, the recent popularity of women's writing and the impact of these processes of globalization on literature. (96)

She calls this new literature ”spiritual fiction” and claims it draws on a medley of the world's (!) spiritual beliefs and practices, popularised and globalised by the New Age movement. Although some of Monet-Viera's notes on the subject are interesting, I do not believe that mixing the already muddied waters of magical realism with additional concepts is necessary at this point. Monet-Viera does, however, make the interesting point that the New Age rhetoric appeals to people that are part of a consumer culture; it promises an enchanting solution to deeply-experienced personal problems (112).

[1] Monet-Viera, Molly. “Post-Boom Magical Realism: Appropriations and Transformations of a Genre.” *Revista de Estudios Hispanicos* 38; 1 (2004), 95-117.

Many have noted the relationship magical realism has with postmodernism. Magical texts have been seen as a way of supplementing not only the failures of modernist text, but in addition the inadequacies of the so-called post-modern condition (Simpkins, 151)[1]. Scott Simpkins speculates that perhaps the ultimate goal of magical realism in our societies is to return our focus to the backdrop of textual reality, to its production and function, by defamiliarising it (151). Thus, magical realism can be seen to work towards "improving" the realistic text by revealing the inherent inability of language to describe our everyday experience. Simpkins states that "the textual project of magical realism is displayed through its linguistically bound attempt to increase the capabilities of realistic texts" (152). However, Simpkins does also note that the supplementation of texts with a magical element only adds a layer to the basic deception, which is that language and fiction could ever really describe or recreate reality (154). Both are artificial sign systems attempting to convey reality, but neither can ever achieve this. Magical realism may add an extra layer in the description of reality, but it is still doomed to come up short, just like any other type of literature since all literature is based on language and writing, two very artificial sign systems, neither capable of fully describing reality. However, magical realism perhaps manages to reveal the machinations of artificiality in constructing a text and makes the readership realise the fictitiousness and the structure behind a text that is trying to influence them.

Wendy B. Faris states that the category of magical realism can be extended to characterise: "a significant body of contemporary narrative in the West" (165). Which, according to Faris, suggests that the genre represents a strong current in post-modernism. As Theo L. D'haen puts it:

> It would seem, then, as if in international critical parlance a consensus is emerging in which a hierarchical relation is established between postmodernism and magic

[1] Simpkins, Scott. "Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 145-159.

> realism, whereby the latter comes to denote a particular strain of the contemporary movement covered by the former. (194)[1]

D'haen goes on to state that it is the notion of the ex-centric, speaking from the margins, from a place that is not a or the centre, that is an essential feature of the strain of postmodernism known as magical realism (194).

[1] D'haen, Theo L. "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 191-208.

3. Feminism and Magical Realist Features in *Practical Magic* and *Chocolat*

What I find interesting is that these two writers have decided to write their books in the magical realist mode, and not straightforward fantasy. It is not difficult to find magic and witchcraft related fantasy books, as a quick look at any online bookstore can verify. The authors of fantastic fiction often mix a variety of supernatural elements and beliefs into their narratives. Much like Vianne comments on her mother's beliefs in *Chocolat*:

> She was filled with this solemn children's lore, my mother, eyes lighting up with delight at the absurdity. All stories delighted her – Jesus and Eostre and Ali Baba working the homespun of folklore into the bright fabric of belief again and again. Crystal healing and astral travel, abductions by aliens and spontaneous combustions, my mother believed them all, or pretended to believe. (pp. 113-114)

Vianne does not share her mother's superstitions, even though she possesses some supernatural abilities. The disparity of belief systems between Vianne and her mother can be seen as a reflection on the relationship of fantasy and magical realism. In fantasy almost anything is possible, whereas in magical realism the proverbial other foot must always remain on the ground. Why, therefore, Hoffman and Harris have decided to keep their fictions grounded in reality is an interesting question, especially when looking at their texts from a feminist perspective.

Zamora and Faris state in their introduction that magical realism functions ideologically just as realist narratives do, but it is less hegemonic, because its program is not centralising, but eccentric (3)[1]. Magical realism creates space for interactions of diversity (Zamora & Faris, 3). They go on to state that:

> Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has

[1] Zamora, Lois Parkinson & Faris, Wendy B., Eds. "Introduction" in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995, 1-11.

> made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women. (6)

I have always considered that feminism (or feminisms as is now increasingly used) looks at the world from a different perspective than the norm. If the general outlook in a patriarchal society looks at things from the male perspective, feminism shifts this point of view to look at the world from the female perspective. Since magical realism also takes the hegemonic point of view of a culture's reality and shifts it askew, the two seem to be well-suited to exist together. Elaine Showalter brings forth that for clearly discernible historical reasons women have concerned themselves in matters peripheral to male concerns or at least slightly skewed from them (11)[1]. Zamora and Faris state that:

> The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds – in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. (6)

The development of the novel is not an account of a given reality, but a way of forming reality and a way of describing what a woman's life means under capitalism (Eagleton, 89)[2]. A woman writer must work within the dominant order, because to be outside it would be to be mad or dead (89). A similar notion can be seen in magical realism as a literary mode. As Angel Flores point out: "The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent 'literature' from getting in their way, as if to prevent myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms" (115-116). That is why magical realism finds itself especially at home in the novel, because it is a form that claims realist authority through its grounding in ordinary,

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[1] Showalter, Elaine. "British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing." *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986, 11-15.

[2] Eagleton, Mary. "Introduction: Women and the Novel." *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986, 88-92.

everyday life (Mikics, 372)[1]. Why then is realist fiction not enough? Gabriel García Márquez has stated that: "Realism . . . is a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality. However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page" (Simpkins, 148). Simpkins states that a so-called realistic text is not a satisfactory mode, nor an accurate presentation of reality, because disproportion is also part of our reality since our reality is indeed out of proportion (148). It goes to follow that a magical realist text may be paradoxically more realistic than a "realistic" text (Simpkins, 148).

I do not believe there is such a thing as feminine writing per se, but as individuals functioning in society one must often accept certain roles whether the person wishes it or not, or is even always aware of her or his position. And I do believe that 'the norm' even in our modern, supposedly post-feminist, society is a white heterosexual man, and it follows that even as a highly educated middle-class woman a person is categorised as the Other. Which I think is why magical realism is in principal well-suited to describe a woman's experience in society. Luis Leal points out that the writer of magical realist fiction does not create imaginary worlds in which we can hide from everyday reality, but rather: "the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts" (121). That is to say, the underlying structures behind our normal everyday perceptions, and it is important to discover and recognise these underlying structures especially when trying to deconstruct the patterns of a hegemonic patriarchal society.

Scott Simpkins notes that one of the things magical realist writers often do is present familiar things in unusual ways in order to stress their innately magical properties (150). By doing this, magical realists achieve a kind of defamiliarisation to emphasise common elements of reality, elements that are present in our everyday lives, but have become virtually

[1] Mikics, David. "Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History and the Caribbean Writer." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Faris, Wendy B., Zamora, Lois Parkinson. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, 371-404.

invisible because of their familiarity (150). Simpkins compares magical realists to Cubists who tried to show several perspectives of objects in order to capture their three-dimensional essences (151). For example, most healthy people take for granted that they are able to see properly, no matter what their emotional circumstances are, however, in PM when Sally's husband dies she stops: "believing in anything at all, and then the whole world went gray" (43). Little by little within a year she would be able to see colours again, but she would never again be able to see the colour orange, because that was too close to the colour of the faded stop sign the teenagers never saw on the day Michael was killed (PM, 44). The same kind of thing can be seen in *Chocolat* when Vianne talks about the very everyday action of cooking:

> There is a kind of sorcery in all cooking: in the choosing of ingredients, the process of mixing, grating, melting, infusing and flavouring, the recipes taken from ancient books, the traditional utensils – the pestle and mortar with which my mother made her incense turned to a more homely purpose, her spices and aromatics giving up their usual subtleties to a baser, more sensual magic. (CH, p. 62)

Vianne takes her mother's more exotic customs and turns them into something more ordinary, but yet she retains that both customs are magical in their own way.

Juliett Mitchell states that when a society changes its social structure, its economic base, artefacts are re-created within it (389)[1]. Literary forms are one way through which the changing subjects re-create themselves as subjects within a new social context (389). She states that the novel as a genre is a prime example of how women have begun to create themselves as social subjects under bourgeois capitalism, how they have created themselves as a category known as women (389). Mitchell states that the novel remains a bourgeois form, despite certain examples of working-class novels (389). Her description does apply to both *Practical Magic* and *Chocolat,* but what interests me is that both authors have chosen in their narratives to write about women who are somewhat ostracised; they are part of the

[1] Mitchell, Juliet. "Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, 2nd Edition*. Ed. David Lodge, Nigel Wood. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000, 388-392.

community, but at the same time slightly outside of it, outsiders. Theo L. D'haen states that writing from the margins the way magical realism does it produces a displacement of the dominant discourse:

> My argument is that magic realist writing achieves this end by first appropriating the techniques of the "centr"-al line and then using these, not as in the case of these central movements, "realistically," that is, to duplicate existing reality as perceived by the theoretical or philosophical tenets underlying said movements, but rather to create an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this "reality" depends upon. Magic realism thus reveals itself as a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s). (195)

What is problematic with this notion, however, is that if the wrongs are righted in magical realist writing, are the underlying problems of a society merely diffused and thus never produce any real action to change the existing conditions for the better.

T.A. Klimenkova discusses the relationship between feminism and postmodernism when she states:

> Postmodernism rejects any claim that texts correlate with any given reality. Texts are correlated only with other similar texts. Therefore, it becomes difficult to define the very concept of the representing of reality, since it is no longer clear what, if any, reality is objective. (278)[1]

It is clear from this quote that postmodernism, feminism and magical realism can be seen to be in many ways intertwined. Klimenkova comments on how the attempt to strive for 'the truth' is no longer valid, since the concept of the truth has been pluralised (278). She correlates this with the disappearance of a concept such as 'civilisation.' Klimenkova states that instead of one singular notion of civilisation, we now have different cultures (278). According to Klimenkova, postmodernism has responded to the situation by consciously embracing pluralism (278). Linda Hutcheon notes how the decentring of categories of thought

[1] Klimenkova, T.A. "Feminism and Postmodernism." *Philosophy East and West* 42; 2 (April 1992), 277-285.

always relies on the centres it tries to contest for its very definition (144)[1]. She states that the adjectives may vary: hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, anti-totalizing, uncertain, but the power of these new expressions is paradoxically always derived from that which they challenge (144). Hutcheon goes on to state that the centre may not hold, but it is still an attractive fiction of order and unity, something that post-modern art and theory may continue to exploit, while at the same time subverting it (145). She states that the objective of the post-modern enterprise is to question any bases of certainty and any standards of judgement (142). The important questions that need to be asked are who sets these standards, when, where and why (Hutcheon, 142). She argues that:

> The contradictory nature of post-modernism involves its offering of multiple, provisional, contextualized alternatives to traditional, fixed, ahistorical, unitary concepts, in full knowledge of (and even exploiting) the continuing appeal of those very concepts. (144)

Hutcheon points out that if the centre is seen as a construct, as fiction, and not a fixed and unchangeable reality the old binary structures begin to break down. Instead multiplicity and difference begin to open up new possibilities (147).

> The single and unitary concept of 'otherness' has associations of binary, hierarchy, and supplementary that post-modern theory and practice seem to want to reject in favor of a more plural and deprivileging concept of difference and the ex-centric. (Hutcheon, 149)

Post-modern art is always aware of a difference, difference within groups, difference defined by contextualisation or positioning in relation to others (Hutcheon, 151). The connection between post-modernism, feminism and magical realism can therefore easily be observed. Post-modernism advocates different points of view, points of view that are often of the margin, ex-centric. Feminism also offers an alternative point of view of that of the 'norm'. Magical realism presents its subjects also from an unusual perspective, something that

[1] Hutcheon, Linda. "The Post-modern Ex-centric: The Center That Will Not Hold." *Feminism & Institutions: Dialogues on Feminist Theory.* Ed. Linda Kauffman. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989, 141-165.

perhaps makes the audience consider these subjects anew. This is, in my opinion, the objective of all these three "isms", to represent subject matters and objects from an alternative point of view and therefore to make the reader think about things that they have previously not considered, often taken for granted as "normal", part of everyday reality. As I have already pointed out at the end of 2.2., magical realism seems to be aptly suited to fit with post-modernist thought. There have always been texts that combine fantasy with realist description, but as I have hopefully already made clear, magical realism is a specific type of union, one that suits the world as we see it now. It could be then said that with the rise of post-modernist thought magical realism has been accepted and in some instances embraced by the mainstream. The mode is no longer just part of the post-colonial, "third-world" parts of the world, but part of Western mainstream, as we are increasingly taught to look at our surroundings not only from the point of view of the privileged, but also with the eyes of other groups. Hutcheon's notion of difference within groups is explored further in the juxtaposition of witches and other well-to-do white women in the following section and later on in the analysis part of this study.

3.1 Why witches? Witchcraft and feminism

Willem de Blécourt considers the theoretical implications of the gendering of witchcraft from a historical perspective. He raises, among others, the question: what transforms a woman from a potential into an actual witch, into "the stereotypical opposite of the good wife?" (291)[1]. This opposition implies not merely bad wives, but according to de Blécourt also irredeemably anomalous women. He takes this thought process to its conclusion by raising the question:

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[1] de Blécourt, Willem. "The Making of the Female Witch: Reflections on Witchcraft and Gender in the Early Modern Period." *Gender & History* 12; 2 (2000), 287-309.

"When and how was a woman turned into her contrast, into a non-woman?" (291). Blécourt considers the concept of female space as one of the main settings of witchcraft accusations to be extremely important (303). Female space expresses a woman's place in the process of production and reproduction (Blécourt, 303). When conceptualised in this way, Blécourt states that it never was an autonomous female space, it was always defined by male authority. Blécourt suggest that a witchcraft accusation therefore implies a crossing of male-designated boundaries (303). Blécourt comments on what type of women were especially in risk of being accused of witchcraft: "In economic and social terms women who conducted an independent trade or owned their own land were more vulnerable and also those who moved to new communities" (304).

Rebecca Gordon takes a very structuralist approach in her article when she says that the dominant paradigm constructs our reality and our consciousness and is based on a system of binary oppositions (10)[1]. She goes on to state that feminist practice and some pagan practices, such as those of Feminist Wicca, seek to uncover and validate things that have been negated in the patriarchal paradigm. Gordon draws the conclusion that the practice of magic and feminism involves the changing of one's consciousness, with the realisation that reality is a construction, not a given, and thus it can be manipulated and recreated according to one's will (10). Gordon states that if women wish to become free from the psychic and institutional oppression of patriarchy, the boundaries of real must be transgressed and broken (10). It is not a large stretch of the imagination to link this idea with magical realism as magical realism also represents our 'known' reality from a different perspective.

Gordon states that the second wave of the feminist movement brought forth a "Goddess-centred", neo-pagan spirituality (9). In addition, she makes the curious statement that: "For the *first time* women could come together and identify their needs and desires and assert the

[1] Gordon, Rebecca. "Earthstar Magic: A feminist theoretical perspective on the way of the Witches and the path to the Goddess." *Social Alternatives* 14; 4 1995, 9-11.

bonds between them" (emphasis mine, 9). Gordon states that in the 1970s feminist witches realised the inextricable links between politics and spirituality, especially in relation to feminist politics. This led, according to Gordon, to the identification of a need for a particularly female spirituality which then found expression in Feminist Witchcraft (9). Gordon states that:

> Goddess worship is a celebration of female power and has attracted many women whom traditional western religion, with its patriarchal codes, has left disempowered, spiritually void, and in many cases, outraged and angry. (9)

This may very well be true in some cases, and it might explain to some degree why especially Harris, but also Hoffman, have decided to include witches in their narratives. Jan Berry shares Gordon's ideas to an extent:

> This raises important questions for women's ritualizing, which is normally not sanctioned by social or religious authority, and does not have the intention of supporting the status quo, but carries an implicit challenge to male-dominated structures. It is subversive and transgressive in its aims. (278)[1]

By the term 'ritualizing' Berry refers to the process by which women create and devise their own rituals (279). Ritualising emphasises the process of creation, it allows experimentation and change, it also adapts and invents material to fit particular situations and individuals instead of following rigid patterns and forms (Berry 279). Berry states that:

> . . . this activity is common to women in many cultures and times, it has a particular relevance for contemporary Western women, who find that significant elements in their life-experiences are omitted from religious (and secular) rituals; and where this experience is present, it is often named or defined in ways that are alien to them. The process of creating rituals that fit more appropriately becomes an act of liberation, by which women name their experiences, choose their own symbols and tell their own stories, so defining their own identity in and over against a patriarchal worldview. (279)

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[1] Berry, Jan. "Whose Threshold?: Women's Strategies of Ritualization." *Feminist Theology* 14; 3 (2006), 273-288.

As Berry states, ritualising is a strategy and it is a strategy for renegotiating power relations (282). As some women have begun to feel that often religious or secular rituals do not correspond to the major events in their lives, they have begun to invent their own rituals. There is a critique, however, that much of women's spirituality and ritual is little more than emotional escape and affects in domesticating and taming resistance to patriarchy (Berry 283). Berry does in the end come to the conclusion that ritualisation is not a force for social cohesion and control, but rather a strategy for women to adopt in order to challenge and resist patriarchal culture (287-288). As Berry states: "Rituals are potentially subversive, transgressive enactment of the stories women would like to tell about their lives" (288).

Gordon states that:

> Women who identify with the image of the witch know they are powerful, magical and divine. It is this emotive, political power of the image of the witch that further binds feminism with witchcraft. (10)

I find this statement interesting, since most representations of witches, especially in popular culture, may have been powerful and magical, but very rarely divine. Witches may have been described as strong and independent, but also in many cases evil and unattractive. The most persevering and perhaps most influencing images that come to mind from the audio-visual popular culture are the evil witches from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the Wicked Witch of the West from the film *The Wizard of Oz* (the film came out 1939, the original book in 1900). This image has begun to change in the 1990s, with new attractive and 'good' representations of witches replacing the images of old. As Andrew Stuttaford puts it:

> The old popular image of Oz's Wicked Witch is melting, melting away, replaced by the sirens of Eastwick, the girls on TV's *Charmed*, and Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock in *Practical Magic.* (34)[1]

[1] Stuttaford, Andrew. "Strange Brew: Eye of newt, toe of frog, and a pinch of PC." *National Review* July 12, 1999, 32-33.

Douglas Ezzy comments on how the cinematic representations of 'good' witches typically involve women who do not threaten the patriarchal status quo. The so-called good witches may fight demons or the like, but they do not use their powers after the battle is over, but only return to the subservient roles that do not threaten the hegemonic order (22)[1]. Is it then, that the old stereotypical images of evil and wicked witches may have been more subversive than the new and "improved" images of the 'witch'. This may well be in the audio-visual culture, but is it also true in the literary world? I will go further into this later on in my study. Willem de Blécourt considers the contrast between actual witches and stereotypical women as artificial (290). He states that the power of stereotypes, including witch stereotypes lies chiefly in their application.

Neopaganism is an important concept to mention when talking about modern-day alternative belief systems. "Neopaganism refers to the revival of pre-Christian pagan gods, goddesses and spirits, their worship and ritual manipulation" (Jencson, 2)[2]. The term 'Wicca' refers to one type of Neopaganism. Wiccans can be either male or female and they call themselves witches (Jencson, 2). Neither *Practical Magic* nor *Chocolat* really deal with the subject of actual modern day witchcraft, the word 'Wicca' is never mentioned in either book, whereas the term 'witch' is used, by others, to describe the women in the books. This distinction is a relief since the books do describe the women in possession of extraordinary, supernatural powers, something that most modern-day Wicca's would not perhaps claim as having. Jencson comments on how the worship of a supreme female deity appeals to feminists and that there is a definite feminist thrust in the movement (3). Most of the practitioners are indeed female, as women search for powerful feminine symbols and empowering

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[1] Ezzy, Douglas. "White Witches and Black Magic: Ethics and Consumerism in Contemporary Witchcraft." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21; 1 (2006), 15-31.

[2] Jencson, Linda. "Neopaganism adn the Great Mother Goddess: Anthropology as Midwife to a New Religion." *Anthropology Today* 5; 2 (April 1989), 2-4.

psychological images (Jencson, 3). The primary deity of modern Wicca is the Goddess. She first entered the English literate world in the late 19th century (Jencson, 3). It is nevertheless interesting that neither *Practical Magic* nor *Chocolat* address the idea of this neopagan religious movement directly. To do so would mean a more direct correlation to modern society with, perhaps, more profound consequences. Neither book refers to any kind of worship of a female Goddess, and indeed in both books the main characters try to deny or hide their abilities and true selves as well as being unaware and uninformed of their capabilities, as happens in *Practical Magic*.

If the books were to talk of Wicca's they would have a more direct relation to the political side of witchcraft in modern society. For example, Andrew Stuttaford mentions that Wicca is recognised as a legitimate religion by the United States army (33). He also mentions a woman by the name of Crystal Seifferly who won a legal battle in the US to be allowed to wear a pentacle, a Wiccan symbol, to high school in Michigan (34). In addition, US congressman Bob Barr had come into the public eye to suggest that witchcraft was somehow un-American. Stuttaford disputes this and states that: "if ever a religion was tailor-made for a contemporary America in full flight from the Enlightenment and the Founding Fathers, it is Wicca" (34). Willem de Blécourt brings forth the idea that the overall male hegemony and subsequently the subordination of women in European and North American societies was in the past and in some cases still is articulated through witchcraft discourse (289). He does comment on how equating witch hunting with women hunting ultimately negates witchcraft; it originates from the disbelief in witchcraft (290).

Linda J. Holland-Toll has compared the cultural treatment of witches to that of the bluestockings:

> Bluestocking as a label functions in much the same manner as witch. Both these terms control educated women, clarifying that they have transgressed the acceptable boundaries of their defined gender group. (Holland-Toll, 33)[1]

Holland-Toll claims to see a dual process in which witches are being simultaneously erased and re-inscribed (36). The belief in witches has been discarded or cast in the realm of fiction, whereas the idea of a witch as a transgressive, disruptive force has been shifted to the bluestockings. Holland-Toll states that:

> The mid-nineteenth century no longer believed in witches, yet disruptive women were not only present but increasing in both numbers and influence, as women realized that they could take a part in shaping the society in which they lived. (36-37)

Holland-Toll has studied several stories that have been written in the nineteenth century and set around the time of the Salem Witchcraft Trials and she makes the conclusion that these stories function as reconfiguring the role of the witch from ignorant old woman to include bluestockings (36). It is interesting that Holland-Toll states in her paper, that: "Witchcraft tends to ally itself with unwritten oral traditions, folk traditions, and wise-woman traditions as opposed to accepted written discourse" (44). She discusses Clara F. Guernsey's "The Last Witch", written in 1873, and comments on how: "The 'ignorant' or less book learned women are the ones who know what must be done" (46). Holland-Toll brings forth how Guernsey seems to be aware of an attitude toward educated women: do these people have any knowledge useful in the real world?

I think her study goes in part to show a tradition in North-American literature of representing independent and educated women as witches. Witches are not just part of the European superstitions or the imaginations of post-colonial regions, but there is a tradition including them in North-American literature as well. What I find additionally interesting is that most of the authors in Holland-Toll's study are women themselves, as is the case with

[1] Holland-Toll, Linda J. "Bluestockings Beware: Cultural Backlash and the Reconfiguration of the Witch in Popular Nineteenth-Century Literature." *Femspec* VI; 2 (2005), 32-53.

Hoffman and Harris. I think the idea of the ‘witch’ (not the ‘Wicca’) connotes a link with something more primordial than we are used to in our everyday lives in the Western world. It is therefore not difficult to see why Hoffman and Harris have chosen to introduce witches in their narratives, especially when writing in the magical realist mode.

The link with religion and witches is an important aspect for this study. As Holland-Toll points out, it is not surprising that the majority of people accused of witchcraft were women:

> Women were, after all, directly responsible for mankind’s hasty and untimely exit from Paradise; they were considered deceitful, sinful, lustful, and natural allies of Satan Himself. (33)

Holland-Toll states that especially an educated and outspoken woman ran a risk of being treated as a witch (34). She comments on that this conflation between witch and educated woman did not only occur in medieval Europe, but was established early in Puritan America, as well. Holland-Toll argues that:

> Puritans argued that any woman who used disruptive knowledge to challenge the theocracy was a witch; the accusation demarcated and demonized the woman, who were then accused and often executed. (34)

Holland-Toll notes on the “strategies of exclusion”, the process of ‘othering’ that sacrifices others in order to maintain the dominant community. She states that: “In colonial America, Salem in particular, the others happened to be disruptive women who did not play by the rules, women who challenged patriarchal assumptions” (34). However true that may or may not be, Holland-Toll makes the apt statement that witches are almost always described as deviants, as disorderly women who failed or refused to abide by the behavioural norms of their society (34). She points out that even calling a person a ‘witch’ functioned as a weapon: the label was used to control or punish people (33). This is something that happens very clearly in both Hoffman’s and Harris’s books. As Holland-Toll writes:

> To inscribe a woman as a witch is to set her apart from the body politic, and thus negate any commentary she may make. As most authors make abundantly clear,

> accusations of witchcraft were functions of social ordering. If one removes the disruptive influence, the community remains unruffled by new and threatening ways of thinking and can safely hold to its common beliefs. Women who are ejected from the community cannot effect changes. (48)

de Blécourt states that religion helped to justify witchcraft discourse and to keep it operative (303). According to Michael D. Bailey, the authorities often deployed the idea of witchcraft as a tool for dealing with basic ontological and epistemological problems of their time (386)[1].

What I have attempted to bring forth in this section is the historical and cultural background of witches in Western society. I do not claim to be an expert on either subject, but I think it is clear that witches occupy a special space in Western society. The link between witches and women is also an important one. I think after going through this background in general observations of Western culture, it is clear why Hoffman and Harris have included witches in their narratives. It is through the concept of the witch that a person belonging to the Western cultural sphere can see why an educated well-off white woman can still be outside the boundaries of 'the norm'. On the other hand, witches can be considered as a kind of throwback to some ancient primordial times, having abilities no longer available to the rest of us. Therefore, it is perhaps easier for the Western audience to associate supernatural with everyday life if it is presented through the image of the witch. Since magical realism has sometimes been described as the literary mode of the more 'primitive' areas of the world (a.k.a the so-called Third-world), it is conceivable to see a link between witches, primordial women, and magical realism.

[1] Bailey, Michael D. "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature." *American Historical Review* April 2006, 383-404.

3.2 Religion: Witches, New Age, Christianity and Magical Realism

The juxtaposition of women and Judo-Christian religion is something that must be addressed when talking about witches in western society. This is something that especially *Chocolat* addresses directly. I think women's relation to religion is a major issue to be considered when talking about "the feminine condition", as it were, in modern society. The historical, political and cultural impact of religious teachings and dogma are still present in today's society, some more clearly and some less obviously. These underlying effects are perhaps the more important reason to address the various impacts of religion in the open.

Tony Walter and Grace Davie bring forth the interesting fact that on virtually every measure, women can be considered to be more religious than men in Western Christian societies (640)[1]. One interesting fact in their study is that whereas in every other category women could be seen as more spiritual and having more beliefs, the only exception among the English was the belief in ghosts where there was no gender difference (643). This is interesting when considering the subject from a magical realist point of view since ghosts are one of the supernatural elements that often occur in magical realist fiction. If women are statistically proven to be more religious than men, except for this one supernatural category, does it mean that this is one area where men and women are more equal? Putting the old dogmatic, approved version of reality, that of Christian dogma, aside and replacing it with something even older, but reworked to suit our modern society. Loren Wilkinson states that many people today are willing and even proud to be calling themselves pagans and witches (55)[2]. This is certainly a change that has happened only in the last couple of decades. Walter and Davie note on how the people who are most vulnerable to social, economic and political oppression often seek emotional and practical solace through religion (643). Interestingly

[1] Walter, Tony & Davie, Grace. "The religiosity of women in the modern West." *The British Journal of Sociology* 49; 4 (December 1998), 640-660.

[2] Wilkinson, Loren. "The Bewitching Charms of Neopaganism." *Christianity Today* November 15, 1999, 55-63.

enough, Walter and Davie also state that the lack of status within the church is one of the reasons for women leaving religious groups, sometimes to join more egalitarian movements. They mention as an example of this trend contemporary goddess religions which especially affirm women's status, power, bodies and mutual bonds (645). According to Jencson, many Wiccans also practice their religion alone, instead of in groups (3). "Hence religion (controlled by church authority) may be replaced by spirituality (which the individual discovers for him or herself)" (Walter & Davie, 655-656). This shift characterises the New Age movement:

> in which the seeker tries any and every spiritual teaching and practice in order to find out what works for them, authoritative religious dogma alone being ruled out of court. (Walter & Davie, 656)

New Age thinking is in general characterised by a pattern of implicit or explicit cultural criticism according to Hanegraaff (291). He claims that within the context of New Age one may encounter a variety of ideas and convictions, but underneath it all is a general dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Western thought (291)[1]. He suggests that this is a dissatisfaction with existing daily realities and a feeling that mainstream culture leaves no room for some important dimensions of personal human experience (291). An important aspect that Hanegraaff points out is that:

> What sets New Age apart is that its primary sources of inspiration for formulating holistic alternatives are derived from certain so-called "western esoteric" traditions which have long existed in our culture but have seldom been dominant. (292)

Like the more dominant currents of Christianity, Western esoteric currents have taken on considerably different new forms under the impact of the processes of secularisation since the Enlightenment (Hanegraaff, 293). He claims that "magical" or "occult" superstitions have been present in all periods and cultures (294). Indeed Occultism, which Hanegraaff defines as

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[1] Hanegraaff, Wouter J. "New Age Religion and Secularization." *Numen* 47; 3 (2000), 288-312.

secularised esotericism, is a 19th century phenomenon which forms the historical foundation of New Age. He makes the statement that many academics have been concerned with the opposition of Christianity and non-religious views of life (312). He considers this to be an outdated point of view. The emergence of New Age religion shows how secularisation creates an entirely new type of religion, which may superficially resemble older traditions, but is nevertheless based upon brand-new foundations (Hanegraaff, 312). Whether this new "religion" as Hanegraaff puts it, is indeed something new and more egalitarian remains to be seen.

New Age spirituality is also no longer a phenomenon that is limited to a fairly marginal subculture, but it has developed into a broad folk religion that appeals to many people at all levels of society (Hanegraaff, 289). He has analysed the reception of New Age literature and he states that there is a feeling of recognition, of being understood among the readership (290). New Age literature entails elements that seem to resonate with the reader's own experience, and according to Hanegraaff, one of the main elements is a dissatisfaction with certain aspects of contemporary culture and society (290). He claims that New Age thinking has taken root in contemporary Western society to a much greater extent than most observers would like to think (290). What interests me is, could the success of magical realism and Hoffman's and Harris's books in particular be seen as an adoption of New Age beliefs in Western society. Dissatisfaction with aspects of contemporary culture produce a feeling of malaise that the church for example cannot answer. New alternatives must therefore be presented, which include alternate views on reality that the current dominant belief system consider to be "wrong". This might explain why texts written in the magical realist mode appeal to so many readers. The success of New Age spirituality and its presence in modern society imply that readers in science orientated, rational Western societies would nevertheless be aware of and understand a rhetoric that diverges from what is seen as the normative views

on reality. Whether the understanding of New Age type of rhetoric means that the readers know to dismiss any alternate points of view as “just a bit of silliness” or whether presenting these views could have a deeper impact, especially from a feminist perspective, I do not know.

Michael D. Bailey states that disenchantment is a hallmark feature in modern Western society, which has come into full vigour with the Protestant Reformation (383). He notes that disenchantment is a basic notion and remains very influential in trying to understand the modern world, especially from an academic perspective (383). Bailey states that magic and cultural perceptions of the magical occupy a critical place in conceptions of modernity, and the juxtaposition of “the supernatural” as opposed to “scientific rationalism” frame discussions especially when Western modernity confronts traditional beliefs and practices in other world cultures (383). Many would argue that religion has displaced magic from European society, Bailey, however, brings forth the notion that certain magical beliefs and systems of thought not only survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but were in fact essential elements of European modernity (384). Bailey reminds in his text that the categories of “religion” and “magic” are almost entirely creations of the post-Reformation era (384). Bailey comments on the long-standing Christian conception of the potentially demonic nature of practically all magic (385).

> Witches were constructed as surrendering themselves entirely to demons, entering into pacts with them as members of diabolical sects that gathered secretly to devour babies, desecrate sacraments, partake in sexual orgies, and perform terrible rites. (Bailey, 386)

In establishing witchcraft as something clearly diabolical in nature, authorities were particularly concerned about stripping any appeal people may have felt for and any solace they may have gained from the simple ritual acts that witches employed (Bailey, 386). Questions about the effectiveness and the appropriateness of, and indeed the difference

between, spells and charms as well as church ceremonies and sacraments continued for a considerable length of time, several centuries (Bailey, 387). Matters became complex when authorities tried to validate certain rites which closely resembled magic spells and charms and yet claim that they were dramatically opposed to more pagan variants (393).

4. Feminist Analysis of *Chocolat* and *Practical Magic*

4.1. Women Outsiders

Rebecca Gordon states that: "The image of the witch is one that holds great historical and cultural significance for women. Historically, witches existed on the margins of society" (9). Maryanne O'Hara states that: "Real life is hard life in Hoffman's books, which tend to feature outsiders—strong women, single women, struggling women, children facing danger" (197)[1]. The outsider status of the Owens women is very clear in *Practical Magic*. The Owens family has been ostracised in their community for generations: "for more than two hundred years, the Owens women have been blamed for everything that has gone wrong in town" (PM, 3). The Owenses are feared for being different, which casts them outside the normal community:

> . . . the other children in town avoided them. No one would dare to play with the sisters, and most girls and boys crossed their fingers when Sally and Gillian drew near, as if that sort of thing was any protection (PM, 7).

Therefore, even though the Owens women did not come from an otherwise disadvantaged background, they nevertheless experienced discrimination from early on in their lives. Symptomatically of their childhood, later on in their lives, Gillian has taken on living a kind of nomadic existence and she: "had confessed when she even thought of the name of their town, she broke out in hives" (37). For Sally she tries to gain acceptance into the community and eventually succeeds through a man, her husband Michael. As an example of this, he invites people to celebrate the birth of Antonia, their first child, and the people of the community come instead of boycotting the event. Sally's reaction to this was: "*We seem so normal. . . I think you might faint if you could see us. I really and truly do.*" (italics in the

[1] O'Hara, Maryanne. "About Alice Hoffman." *Ploughshares.* 29; 2/3 (2003), 194-198.

original text, PM, 36). The operative word in that section being ‘seem’. They may seem normal, but they are not, nor is either Sally or Gillian embracing their true identities, but both rather hiding or running away from them. As Terri Brown-Davidson states: “the sickness inherent in human society which mandates (self) deceit” (no pagination) is a frequent motif in Hoffman’s works[1]. When Sally’s husband dies and she mourns for him, the family reverts back to their old outsider position. When the positive or neutralising male influence is gone, the women are unable to retain their more respectable positions within the community. This has partly to do with the influence of the two old aunts, who do not need the acceptance of others, in fact they scorn it, and encourage outrageous behaviour in their young relatives: “Goodness, in their opinion, was not a virtue but merely spinelessness and fear disguised as humility” (PM, 26). Being ostracised by the community does make the Owens women pull together. Neither Sally and Gillian nor Kylie and Antonia would have bonded so tightly in another environment, the sisters were so different from each other: “It was only at the aunts’ house that the girls became allies, perhaps even friends” (PM, 52). The aunts are the oldest pair of sisters and they have become virtually indistinguishable from each other, they are not even referred to by their names, but almost as a single entity. This is perhaps the other extreme result of pulling together and relying on each other rather too tightly.

In *Chocolat* the outsider aspect of Vianne and Anouk is also very pronounced. Even at the very beginning of the book when Vianne starts to narrate the story, the comments that she makes are clearly that of an observer, an outsider watching a scene that she is not a part of. “No-one looks at us. We might as well be invisible; our clothing marks us as strangers, transients” (CH, 13). This tradition of wandering has started generations ago, Vianne’s grandmother is said to be of South American origin, of a people who do not make permanent

[1] Brown-Davidson, Terri. ”To build is to dwell: the beautiful, strange architectures of Alice Hoffman's novels.” *Hollins Critic* 33; 5 (1996).

settlements. Vianne's mother spent her life travelling from place to place with her daughter, a tradition that Vianne has upheld, at least until now.

In both *Practical Magic* and *Chocolat* these outsider women are called witches and are feared for being different. In *Chocolat* Vianne meets a local woman, Armande, for the first time and immediately she asks of Vianne: "'Does he know you're a witch?'" Vianne's response to this is: "Witch, witch. It's the wrong word, but I knew what she meant" (CH, 41). The word witch is often used as a general derivative phrase for any woman who upsets the status quo in Western society. The difference is that in both texts the women do indeed have some unusual abilities that differ from what we normally would believe people are capable of. When Vianne opens her chocolate boutique and they wait for their first customers Anouk tries to use her gifts to coax the people to come in, it is Vianne who stops her:

> 'Please, don't do that.' [. . .] 'We can't, we shouldn't.' I try to explain to her. It sets us apart. It makes us different. If we are to stay we must be as like them as possible. (CH, 49)

In *Practical Magic*, the powers that Sally and Gillian, and later on particularly Kylie, have are more innate than conscious. The aunts perform their love spells with deliberate use of their powers, but the younger generations are mostly clueless about their own abilities, things just happen to them without conscious effort. They do not control what happens to them or their own powers. It is as if they have a genetic ability that they do not know how to embrace or to harness. For example, when picked on by the local children, the only damage they manage to cause Sally and Gillian, is psychological:

> These boys liked to pitch winter apples or stones at the girls, but even the best athletes, the ones who were the stars of their Little League teams, could never get a hit when they took aim at the Owens girls. Every stone, each apple, always landed at the sisters' feet. (PM, 7)

This could very well be interpreted as a hint that most of us have hidden strengths that we are unable to utilise, but that are nevertheless there. Curiously enough, the film version of the

book has a blurb on its cover that says: “There’s a little witch in every woman.” It seems the film makers have certainly embraced the idea that there is some untapped potential in women in general. Hoffman seems to encourage in her story women in particular to tap into a forgotten layer of themselves: “She disguised her own nature so well that after a while she grew uncertain of her own abilities” (PM, 8). To be forced into a mould that society has constructed for them has caused some damage to the Owenses and yet they wish to fit into that mould rather desperately. In a Foucaultian way (e.g. see *Discipline and Punish: the birth of a prison*, 1975), they have internalised the way they ought to be in society, under its pressure, so that they have begun to sensor themselves. Like Vianne says to her daughter: “If we are to stay we must be as like them as possible” (CH, 49). To be able to function in society, they must disguise and deny who they really are, on the outside at first, until it is so ingrained that even they begin to forget who they truly are underneath the surface.

In both texts the protagonists are aware of their outsider status, they struggle against it and try to fit themselves into the surrounding community and society. In *Chocolat* Vianne knows the consequences of being an outsider and has passed on this knowledge to her daughter as well: “ I taught her all of this long ago; the hypocrisy of the Church, the witch-hunts, the persecution of travellers and people of other faiths” (CH, 59). In *Chocolat*, the homogenising effect of society is strongly represented in the power of the Church. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Vianne ends up in an unofficial power struggle with the local representative of the Church, Francis Reynaud. What I think is a positive aspect in both texts, is the representation of strong female communities: “Owens women ignored convention, they were headstrong and willful, and meant to be that way. Those cousins who married had always insisted on keeping their own name, and their daughters were Owenses as well” (PM, 26-27). In *Chocolat* the female community in the village is afraid and scattered and it takes the efforts of Vianne, a strong

woman and an outsider to change things. Both texts feature mothers and daughters in their centre and it is the basis from which Vianne begins to build a female community in *Chocolat*.

I have already noted the outsider status of the female protagonists in *Practical Magic* and *Chocolat*. They are not accepted in their respective communities. Both Sally and Gillian end up leaving the family home that has housed the Owens women for centuries, only to discover that certain things they carry along with themselves wherever they go. Eventually they decide to make a stand in the community they have moved to. Similarly, Vianne decides to give up trying to hide away and run by making a stand in her new community: “This is where the journey stops. This is where we stay to face whatever the wind brings us” (CH, 87). In both novels the women are free to run and move around wherever they like, but it turns out this is not the kind of liberty they really need. The true goal would be to accept themselves as they are and perhaps make the surrounding community do the same. I think this is an important aspect in both texts. It is not enough to wander around the outskirts of society or to isolate oneself within it in order to produce change in attitudes. One must work within a community and society, to make others see things from a different light, therein lies the potential for subversive action. At the end of *Practical Magic* Sally has to invite the old aunts, that she has left behind, to her new home in order to fix the supernatural problem Jimmy’s ghost has produced in the household: “For Sally to see the aunts in her own driveway, however, is like seeing two worlds collide” (PM, 252). In the end, the women manage to unite the rift between the past and the present, and manage to do it with the help of the past instead of disowning it. In *Chocolat* the situation is similar in the sense that the past has been consistent wandering for Vianne and for Anouk, and taking a stand at the end Vianne hopes they will finally be able to make roots in the community. Taking a stand, Vianne no longer fears The Black Man, though his haunting presence has chased her mother and her for years: “At last we have faced down

the Black Man, Anouk and I, seen him at last for what he is: a fool to himself, a carnival mask" (CH, 319).

Wendy B. Faris notes as one of the main descriptions of magical realist text that: "These fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity" (173). Janice Kulyk Keefer notes that home is childhood's originary site: "the place where a sense of identity and belonging first forms" (17)[1]. It is not necessarily a building and may not have anything to do with where we feel the safest or the most comfortable (Keefer, 17). Keefer states that the "borderland of home" is as much a site of confrontation and conflict as it is of desire and belonging (17). The theme of female communities is very pronounced in both *Practical Magic* and in *Chocolat*. Claire Buck states that:

> The figure of the mother has long been a central locus of most theoretical accounts of femininity regardless of ideological persuasion. The maternal role defines the nature of femininity for all women. . . (129)[2]

In *Chocolat* Vianne is haunted by her mother's presence, sometimes more literally than others, but it is clear that she needs to resolve issues of her past and childhood before she can make any permanent actions about her future. As Buck says: "the child uses the question of where I came from to answer the question of who I am" (131). Or as Vianne states talking of her mother: "From her I learned what shaped me" (CH, 44). In *Practical Magic* Sally and Gillian lose both their parents at an early age, the aunts help raise them, but more often than not they turn to each other. Sally has always been the responsible one and when she becomes a mother she finds a role that suits her. Gillian, on the other hand, reacts to their childhood in another way:

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[1] Keefer, Janice Kulyk. "Home Comings/Border Crossings. Travels through Imagined and Actual Worlds." *Dangerous Crossing: Papers on Transgression in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Monica Loeb, Gerald Porter. Umeå: Umeå University, 1999, 15-30.

[2] Buck, Claire. "'O Careless, Unspeakable Mother': Irigaray, H.D. and Maternal Origin." *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan Sellers. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 129-142.

> Because of her family history, she has real abandonment anxiety, which is why she's always the first to leave. She knows this, she's spent enough time in therapy and paid enough bucks to discuss it in depth, but that doesn't mean anything has changed. (PM, 80)

Interestingly enough, Sally's main love interest in the book, Gary Hallet, was not raised by his parents either, but by his grandfather:

> Until Sonny died, Gary had always shared a house with his grandfather, except for his brief marriage and the first eight years with his parents, which he doesn't remember out of sheer willpower. But he remembers everything about his grandfather. (PM, 205)

This could establish a common ground between the two characters, both being raised by older relatives and not by their parents. Gary has therefore never had a strong female role model in his life growing up. Sally has had the example of her aunts, but it is questionable how close that relationship has been since the two sisters lean so much on each other for support. She does, however, remember the nurturing the aunts had done in her childhood:

> When she was a girl, the aunts had been the ones to sit up with her all night whenever she'd had an ear infection or the flu; they'd told her stories and fixed her broth and hot tea. (PM, 49)

Regardless of this, Sally feels the need to escape her past and the aunts' presence by moving to another city, just as Gillian has done. As a powerful image of a protective mother, when Sally recovers from mourning her husband, Michael, Sally happens on her children in the park about to be picked on by other children of the community:

> The swans took flight slowly as the boy ran to Antonia, grabbed the ball, then pushed her down. Her black coat flared out behind her; her black shoes flew right off her feet. "Stop it!" Sally called out. Her first words in a year. (PM, 47)

The decision to leave the aunts and the community came from her own desires to be normal and accepted as well as her protective instinct to save her children from the same ridicule and torment she and her sister had endured as children.

Vianne tries to fight the hard lessons her mother has taught her and begins to think about settling down, something that her mother would have disapproved of.

> My mother would have despised all this. And yet perhaps she would have envied me too. *Forget yourself if you can,* she would have told me. *Forget who you are. For as long as you can bear it. But one day, my girl, one day it will catch you. I know.* (CH, 46)

Vianne's mother had died in New York, but she had continued her wandering existence with her own daughter until now:

> I find myself looking at the sun and wondering what it would be like to see it rise above the same horizon for five – maybe ten, maybe twenty – years. The thought fills me with a strange dizziness, a feeling of fear and longing. (CH, 46)

Vianne too wants to change her life, not only for her, but also for her daughter. She too does not want her child to live through the same kind of childhood she once had. That is why she and Anouk have stayed in the same country for the past five years, to ease the disruption of their moving and perhaps to prepare for a more permanent settling down.

Further on in *Practical Magic* the narrative focuses also on Sally's daughters, Antonia and Kylie. They have grown into teenagers which has introduced a whole new set of problems. Antonia is a cruel, but beautiful girl who teases her sister mercilessly. She also lacks the more magical qualities that her sister has. Kylie is the more awkward one of the sisters, but she also has more innate magical qualities. Hoffman seems to equate magical abilities to a person based on their social status, their popularity. Antonia is less magical and therefore is able to be a "popular" girl and more overtly successful in her social circle. Kylie is gangly and awkward, an outsider with one good friend, but she also has more magical qualities than her sister. Hoffman seems to suggest that there is power in being an outsider, some quality that others lack. Kylie is described to have possessed these qualities since birth, but during the course of the narrative she turns thirteen, a critical point in turning from a child into a woman. As Hoffman states: "thirteen is a dangerous age" (PM, 110). There is no going back once that

threshold has been crossed: “Kylie has always been able to read people, even those who close themselves up tight. But now that she’s turned thirteen, her meager talent has intensified” (PM, 111-112). Hoffman uses the magical realist motifs of supernatural abilities to emphasise the process of growing from a child into a woman. The closer to womanhood Kylie gets, the more powerful she becomes. And being born female, she has had these abilities since birth, although not completely aware of their existence, still not being able to utilise and harness them fully to her advantage. Clearly, again, this could be a reflection on how women in general have powers they are not aware of and left untapped. In addition, the outsiders of society, the ones that do not fit the standard of the norm, are ones that possess abilities that others lack. Therefore, the women who do not fit into the normal roles that are prescribed to them by society, have unexpected strengths and qualities.

4.2. The male and female relationships and juxtapositions

Interestingly enough, Paul Nathanson argues that good and evil are gendered in Harris’s book:

> Vianne is more than a character – she is an archetype. She represents some primordial female essence, one that Harris identifies with pagan, worldly, and life-affirming sensuality. Her male counterpart is also an archetype. Reynaud, whose name means “fox”, is the local priest. He represents some male essence, one that Harris identifies with the patriarchal, otherwordly, and life-denying mentality of Christianity (10)[1].

Nathanson is partly right in his criticism: Reynauld is a man, “The Black Man”, and Vianne’s opposite and enemy. In addition to Reynauld, the narrative introduces the character of Monsieur Muscat, a local cafe owner and an abusive husband to his wife, Joséphine. What Nathanson does not comment on, however, is that there are also “good” male characters in *Chocolat*, for instance the characters of Roux and Guillaume. Roux represents mostly the

[1] Nathanson, Paul. *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001.

main love interest in the story. He is not a strong influence in the narrative, but does in some ways represent Vianne's "ideal man," which is perhaps exactly the reason why he remains in the periphery since she does not wish for a strong, tied-down relationship with a man.

You could see the gendered evil in Hoffman's book as well. As Sanford Pinsker notes: "Her female protagonists are usually drawn, almost unconsciously, to dangerous men" (257)[1]. In *Practical Magic* the dangerous man is mainly represented by Jimmy, Gillian's abusive boyfriend who dies and ends up haunting and causing trouble for the Owens women. In addition to Jimmy, an example of dangerous men happens in the book when Sally's teenage daughter Kylie manages to run away from two strange men who are planning to rape her. But, again, there are also representations of extremely good men in *Practical Magic*. Ben Frye falls in love with Gillian and Gary Hallet falls for Sally even before they have met, through a letter that she wrote. If good and evil are to an extent gendered in both books, does this encourage any kind of change, a disruption in the norm, or is it part of the norm, the centuries old idea of women as the angels in the house. Instead of representing a feminist style setting of patriarchy against strong independent women does it carry on the idea that women are somehow innately "better" than men?

The choice to name the protagonist's enemy in *Chocolat* "the Black Man" does resonate on a number of levels. It would be very easy to make racial connections from the phrase: white woman against a black man, but I think this would be an oversimplification and a misleading interpretation. The image does invoke the binary juxtapositions of light and dark, black and white. Black being the colour of evil and white representing goodness. Except in *Chocolat* Vianne is described as representing colour whereas the Black Man in actuality is devoid of any, like a black hole.

[1] Pinsker, Sanford. "The Grip of Family in the Novels of Alice Hoffman and David Small." *Critique* 38; 4 (1997), 251-261.

Hoffman has endowed the male love interests with some unusual characteristics: Ben performs magic tricks to sick children at the local hospital and Gary has the ability to cry unashamedly often and in front of other people. Perhaps these abilities single them out from the rest of the men for the female protagonist and again it is the slight difference from the norm that is represented as ideal. If both the women and the men deviate slightly from what is considered the norm in society, do they not then make an ideal pairing where they then compliment each other in sense of two wrongs making a right. This would certainly invoke the old Platonic idea of two half-souls searching for their other completing halves. Especially *Practical Magic* has a very heteronormative ending; all the main female protagonists end up with ideal male counterparts. *Chocolat* differs in that it leaves its ending open, and Vianne does not end up with Roux, but instead pregnant with his daughter and thus strengthens the line of mothers and daughters separate from the male characters: "Another child – not fatherless this time, but a good man's child, even if he never knows it" (CH, 319). I think this ending may produce a more beneficial reading from a feminist perspective, because she remains a strong independent woman with an even stronger female community since in the end she realises she is pregnant with another daughter and has built connections in the village community. On the other hand, finding an ideal romantic interest is not necessarily an antithesis to being a strong independent woman, although since at the end of *Practical Magic* all four women of the younger generations are in contented heterosexual relationships, that might be taking it a bit too far. Perhaps it is a slightly ironic way of the author to round up these relationships, but somehow I do not think so.

One of the most interesting motifs in Hoffman's book is that of desire. And in the context of the book, desire that is mostly focused on the male-female relationships. As the narrative says, the aunts' speciality is love, and though they are ostracised in the community, it is this speciality, and desire, that make the women in the town seek them out. It is interesting that

Hoffman focuses on this subject as well on the female community. It is the women of the town that go looking for the aunts' help, not the men. Does Hoffman imply that love, or messing around with love is a female concern? Or that magic and love, perhaps even separately, but definitely when put together, are a female concern.

> The aunts were not invited to potluck suppers or library fund-raisers, but when a woman in town quarreled with her lover, when she found herself pregnant by someone who wasn't her husband, or discovered that the man she'd married was unfaithful as a hound, then there she'd be, at the Owens' back door, just after twilight, the hour when the shadows could hide your features so that no one would recognize you as you stood beneath the wisteria, a tangled vine that had grown above the door for longer than anyone in town had been alive (PM, 12)

The reason why these women go to the Owens house, even though they are scared, is desire: "Desire had a way of making a person oddly courageous" (PM, 13). These women would give up a lot for their desire, forgetting convention and good manners in the process.

As an example of the aunts' powers, the case of the drugstore girl is presented. She is a young woman who is in love with a married man and she wants this man to fall in love with her. She goes to see the aunts and is given the means to make this happen. Sally and Gillian as children watch this event and decide to observe the girl in order to prove that the aunts have no powers and therefore they are like everyone else: "All Sally could hope for was that perhaps her life was not quite as abnormal as it appeared" (PM, 17). They watch the drugstore girl and it seemed that she got what she wanted: "'Coincidence,' Sally insisted. 'I don't know about that.' Gillian shrugged.[. . .] 'She got what she wanted. However it happened.'" (PM, 18-19). The drugstore girl is, however, not satisfied with just having the man in love with her, she wants marriage, and him to leave his wife. The girl goes to see the aunts again, and again gets what she asks for. In the end this turns out to be something she did not want, and she goes to see the aunts once again. She threatens Sally and Gillian, which causes the aunts to punish her by making her silent, permanently.

> For the rest of her life she'd be followed around by a man who loved her too much, and she wouldn't even be able to tell him to go away. Sally knew the aunts would never open the door for this client of theirs, not if she came back a thousand times. This girl had no right to demand anything more. What had she thought, that love was a toy, something easy and sweet, just to play with? Real love was dangerous. . .(PM, 23-24)

Hoffman makes the point that love and desire are dangerous things, not light-hearted, easy things to be messed around with. And yet people go seek it out, even if they know better. Having this story written in the magical realist mode I think reveals some aspects of the human condition better than could be done with a more traditionally realistic mode. And yet the heteronormative relationship is still the ideal in the book as well. Sally learns a hard lesson from the drugstore girl, but in the end she ends up being lonely and subsequently falls in love with Michael. Michael is an example of a positive male character in the book, but his time is short-lived. He is slightly overwhelmed by the number of females in the household, but he takes this good-naturedly. In addition, he seems to bring a balancing force to the family, one that helps the Owenses to be accepted in the community, as I have previously argued. In *Chocolat* the main male-female relationship is between Vianne and her "enemy", so there is not the same kind of heteronormative relationship presented as an ideal. The main female and male characters are juxtaposed in a more aggressive way as I will go further into in the next chapter 4.3.

In *Practical Magic* the male characters are clearly divided between the good guys and the bad guys. The main "bad guy" is Jimmy, who, however, is actually dead during the events of the book, although we are told what he was like while living, which does not make for a pretty picture: "Dead or alive, he is who he is: somebody you don't want to mess with." (PM, 79). Going along with the theme of dangerous desire, Gillian wanted him despite his less than ideal character.

> I was really in love with this one. Deep down in my heart. It's so sad, really. It's pathetic. I wanted him all the time, like I was crazy or something. Like I was one of those women. (PM, 81)

And Jimmy's ghost, his essence if you will, will not let them be, but continues to haunt them even though he is gone. On a symbolic level that may happen to any character, but in Hoffman's magical realist narrative she is able to explore this on a more concrete level.

> She, who had vowed never to let passion control her, had been hooked but good. She'd been trying to muster the courage and the nerve to walk out the door for so long, almost this whole year. She had written Jimmy's name on a piece of paper and burned it on the first Friday of every month when there was a quarter moon, to try to rid herself of her desire for him. (PM, 88)

Gillian is presented as a victim of unwanted desire, of the desire she feels for Jimmy. And even her supernatural attempts to get rid of this feeling do not succeed. This would suggest that these kinds of strong passionate emotions outweigh any magical manipulations a person might try to attempt or that most of these superstitious actions are indeed useless. If the latter interpretation is true, it would mean that Hoffman undermines her magical realist narrative by introducing the supernatural level as something less than credible, but I do not think this is her intention. Gillian talks to Sally about Jimmy and her relationship to him and she ends up admitting that perhaps she got what she wanted: "I got what I thought I deserved" (PM, 138). So it is not the failure of the methods of getting rid of Jimmy, since she did not deep down want to rid herself of him. But now that Jimmy is dead, Gillian meets her ideal man in Ben, who is Jimmy's opposite: "Ben was about as different from Jimmy as anyone could be" (PM, 151). This new relationship has its hiccups, mostly due to the emotional baggage Gillian has collected from her past:

> Gillian felt like crying, and why shouldn't she? She could never live up to Ben's version of her; she had a whole secret, horrible past to hide. She used to fuck men in parked cars just to prove she didn't give a damn; she used to count her conquests and laugh. (PM, 153)

But Ben is persistent, stated to be completely in love with Gillian and acts in a way that the ideal man would. Perhaps not the most realistic sequence, but then again this is not realistic

fiction. The good people get what they deserve, even the outsiders get their happy ending. And yet, Gillian is afraid of her feelings for Ben, because: “When you want someone you’re in his power” (PM, 158). She has never really felt the same way about Jimmy, and so she is afraid of the power that love has over a person.

The theme of power and control in male and female relations is brought up in *Chocolat*. A good example of this is when Reynaud is tending his garden:

> I would like orderly rows of shrubs and flowers, perhaps with a box hedge around the whole. This profusion seems somehow wrong, irreverent, a savage burst of life, one plant choking another in a vain attempt at dominance. (CH, 235)

The old juxtaposition between nature and man, savagery and civilisation describes well the mindset of Reynaud, his attitudes. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that in this categorisation Reynaud (as a man) represents order and Vianne disorder. Reynaud is in some ways fighting a losing battle, as nature tends to take over his efforts, but that does not change his goal: “Lovely, but not invasive. . . Nature tamed by man” (CH, 236). Harris has pitted the main female and the main male characters strongly against each other, that their relationship has not got room for much else than a fight for control and the upper hand. She does not allow for any compromise, and in the end it is the woman, and nature that takes over.

4.3. Religion versus alternatives

As I have mentioned before, religion is clearly confronted head on in *Chocolat* whereas in *Practical Magic* the subject is not raised to the forefront. Reynaud represents “the Black Man”, the figure that has in the past haunted Vianne’s mother and now her. Vianne states in the narrative that the Black Man actually represents death, and running away from the figure of him also means a futile attempt on her mother’s part of trying to avoid her own mortality. That is not the only thing that the figure of the Black Man represents. The Black Man, it is

said in the narrative, is a more universal figure, but in this context he is mainly represented by the character of Francis Reynaud, the village priest. For Vianne's mother, it was also at first a priest that she began escaping from, until the Black Man turned into something more, to represent death. Vianne's mother had tried to confess to a priest, when he had started to persuade her to leave her daughter behind to be raised at a convent. The priest had urged her, that if she loved her child and wanted to be saved, she should leave her to be raised by people more appropriate than her. Vianne's mother did not leave her daughter behind, but the effects of that encounter remained for a long time:

> I understood he had almost convinced her to leave me behind. After that she often asked me if I missed having friends, a home … But however often I told her yes, no, no, however often I kissed her and said I regretted nothing, *nothing*, a little of the poison remained. For years we ran from the priest, the Black Man, and when his face returned time and again in the cards, it would be time to run once more, time to hide from the darkness he had opened in her heart. (CH, 53)

Therefore Vianne has been living with the character of the Black Man most of her life, and is able to recognise him time and time again. "And here he is again, just as I thought we had found our place at last, Anouk and I. Standing at the door like the angel at the gate" (CH, 53). A curious simile, since in the same instance Vianne calls him her enemy, and she his. One would not normally feel the need to fight against the angels. Perhaps it is as Nathanson argued, on some level their fight is a fight against Christianity itself.

In *Chocolat* every now and then there is a chapter that is narrated from Reynaud's perspective, so the readers know what he is thinking and how he experiences things; his attitudes towards the villagers, religion and Vianne. He tells how he finds the brightness of her shop unsettling. Reynaud opposes her laughing and gesturing, he comments on how they are "accustomed to a greater reserve" (CH, 25). He states that he is not a kind man, and yet at the end of the chapter he notes how a complete loss of contact to other people is a kind of hell. He states that he wishes to learn how to communicate, and perhaps more importantly, how to

hope. Yet in the next chapter Reynaud narrates he has started to see Vianne as an enemy. She has opened a chocolate shop just at the beginning of Lent and through the confessional has to listen to his parishioners tell of their broken vows of fasting. He begins to see the appeal of stricter times, of stricter rules: “The harsh, clean world of the Old Testament calls to me. We knew then where we stood. [. . .]. We loved God, but we feared Him more” (CH, 34). At the end of that chapter his stance has started to take on a vindictive streak: “Tomorrow I’ll make them pay. Tomorrow, Sunday, when the shops are closed” (CH, 35).

Vianne, in her turn, sees the larger significance of a character like Francis Reynauld:

> In a place like Lansquenet it sometimes happens that one person – schoolteacher, café proprietor, or priest – forms the lynchpin of the community. That this single individual is the essential core of the machinery which turns lives, like the central pin of a clock mechanism, sending wheels to turn wheels, hammers to strike, needles to point the hour. If the pin slips or is damaged, the clock stops. Lansquenet is like that clock, needles perpetually frozen at a minute to midnight, wheels and cogs turning uselessly behind the bland blank face. (CH, 43)

Vianne recognises the place and the role that Reynaud occupies. It is not clear whether she plans to be next ‘lynchpin’ of the community, at this point at least, but it can be sensed that the purpose on many of her travels has been to find these stagnated communities and get the so-called clock moving again. Whether this implies that she is in fact the one working for the powers of good, whereas the church, in this case in the character of Francis Reynauld, is in actuality not working for the benefit of the population, but for its detriment, is entirely possible. In fact, Vianne states that: “Set a church clock wrong to fool the devil, my mother always told me. But in this case I suspect the devil is not fooled. Not for a minute” (CH, 43). If Reynaud is currently the lynchpin of the community which causes the village clock to run, it is not his actions then that keep the devil at bay.

Vianne’s descriptions of Francis Reynaud do not inspire confidence either: “He is like a cat himself, I notice; cold, light eyes which never hold the gaze, a restless watchfulness, studied, aloof” (CH, 21). Or, at a later point: “I have no idea of this man’s tastes. He is a

complete blank to me, a man-shaped darkness cut into the air. I feel no point of contact with him, and my smile broke on him like a wave on a rock" (CH, 50). After Vianne and Reynaud have almost unspokenly declared themselves each other's enemies, Reynaud begins to leave Vianne's shop when she sees a change in him:

> Something in his eyes, some light where there was none before, alerts me. Amazingly, he is *enjoying* this, this closing of two enemies for battle; nowhere in his armoured certainty is there room for the thought that he might not win. He turns to go, very correct, with just the right inclination of the head. Just so. Polite contempt. The barbed and poisonous weapon of the righteous. (CH, 53)

He may have tried the age old church tradition of ignoring people to gain power over them (as was done with the interdict), but before their encounter is over Vianne manages to hand Reynaud the final barb. She gives him chocolates that are shaped like tightly closed oysters saying that they remind her so much of him. But it is clear that this encounter is the first of many and that the true battles are yet to come.

In the narrative, it is implied that Reynaud has some kind of secret that he needs to hide. Vianne senses this and thinks to herself: "Is this the Black Man's secret? I need to know his secret if we are to stay here. And I do need to stay. Whatever it takes." (CH, 65). It is clear that she already equates Reynaud with the character of the Black Man, the figure she has been running away from all her life. It is also clear that in the power struggle between Vianne and Reynaud, her liberal ways and his constricting ones, it is Reynaud's secret and its revelation that will tip the balance one way or another. The conflict does not, however, grow to imply an opposition between Christianity and the pagan ways in which the pagan ways are seen as more appealing and in the end more winning. In one of Reynaud's conversations with the old père of the parish he confesses that he does not feel the presence of God in his church: "My sin is that of pettiness, *mon père*. For this reason God is silent in His house. I know it, but I do not know how to cure the ill." (CH, 89). Even Reynaud realises that his actions may not be what they perhaps ought to be according to some Christian traditions. He is a negative

representative of the church. If God is therefore absent in his works, could Harris therefore imply that it is the outsider influence of Vianne that could in fact be guided to this village by some benevolent force of good. Reynaud is not doing the work of a benevolent God, but could it be that a woman, not a representative of any Church could still be working for the forces of good.

Vianne has not had a traditionally Christian upbringing. In fact, as it was a priest that tried to take her away from her mother, she has learned to treat the representatives of organised religion with suspicion. Her religious upbringing has consisted of a mesh of various stories and beliefs. This is consistent with the New Age notion of picking whatever beliefs suit you from different sources and putting them together into a combination that suits that particular individual. Vianne's mother has certainly advocated this notion:

> And I her daughter, listening wide-eyed to her charming apocrypha, with tales of Mithras and Baldur the Beautiful and Osiris and Quetzalcoatl all interwoven with stories of flying chocolates and flying carpets and the Triple Goddess and Aladdin's crystal cave of wonders and the cave from which Jesus rose after three days, amen, abracadabra, amen. (CH, 114)

In this belief system Christianity or its myths are reduced from their hegemonic status to one of many different systems of belief or mythologies. It is interesting though that Vianne seems to regard these myths with a certain kind of cynicism, that of a person who no longer believes in these things, but she does believe in her own abilities to do magic, and that magical things still exist. Harris, it would seem, therefore makes a distinction between out-and-out lore and other mystical qualities in her reality. Interestingly enough, Vianne talks about these myths and her beliefs as not being true, but she does not completely disbelieve them either:

> Buddha, Frodo's journey into Mordor. The transubstantiation of the sacrament. Dorothy and Toto. The Easter Bunny. Space aliens. The Thing in the closet. The Resurrection and the Life at the turn of a card . . . I've believed them all at one time or another. Or pretended to. Or pretended not to. (CH, 184)

Some of the things listed above are reserved for children to believe in, and others are taken quite seriously by adults as well. Vianne does not state which things are the things she no longer believes in, or whether it is all of them. Or, which ones are the things she pretends not to believe in any more. Perhaps Harris tries to make a point in this that all beliefs in things we cannot and have not seen are equal. Either equally childish or just require the same childish faith that cynicism can obliterate.

Vianne decides to have a chocolate festival at Easter, which provokes a comment from Reynaud about old pagan ways and how he and the old père had tried to eradicate such habits. Even chocolate itself can bring the association to pagan rites. As Martha Few points out, chocolate was sacred food in ancient Maya culture (675)[1]. In Mayan culture, especially members of the elite consumed chocolate on important ritual occasions. "During menopause and childbirth, women drank chocolate to fortify themselves, as did men and women suffering from magical sickness" (675). Vianne herself sees a connection between her chocolate shop and Reynaud's disapproval:

> 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. (CH, 64)

Harris uses irony to point out that central Christian myths are just that, myths, that could be equated with other ancient stories. Using chocolate as the tangible material that Vianne works with, Harris takes an everyday substance, which, however, at the same time reminds the reader of pagan traditions and history that predate any Christian myths. Vianne comments on the everyday magical qualities of chocolate by stating: "There is a kind of alchemy in the transformation of base chocolate into this wise fool's gold, layman's magic. . . (CH, 64). Yet, she herself also uses it with her supernatural powers to divine the future: "Scrying with

[1] Few, Martha. "Chocolate, Sex, and Disorderly Women in Late-Seventeenth- and Early-Eighteenth-Century Guatemala." *Ethnohistory* 52; 4, fall 2005, 673-687.

chocolate is a difficult business. The visions are unclear, troubled by rising perfumes which cloud the mind (CH, 65).

As Sally in *Practical Magic* denies believing in things she cannot see, Vianne also states that she does not believe in some of the supernatural things at least the way her mother did.

> I don't believe in divination. Not in the way she did, as a way of mapping out the random patterns of our trajectory. Not as an excuse for inaction, a crutch when things turn from bad to worse, a rationalization of the chaos within. (CH, 87)

Vianne's mother has treated her beliefs as many people use religion. Vianne on the other hand has witnessed that this did not work for her, perhaps only made their lives worse, so she does not share her mother's conviction. Interestingly enough, she turns to psychology and literature as a balance opposed to her mothers beliefs:

> As an antidote I read Jung and Herman Hesse, and learned about the collective unconscious. Divination is a means of telling ourselves what we already know. What we fear. There are no demons but a collection of archetypes every civilization has in common .(CH, 87)

Both Hoffman and Harris bring forth their main characters hesitation towards believing in the supernatural. And they show the characters' capability of rational thinking, not alienating them from readers who hold more traditional metaphysical beliefs.

The villagers themselves do not hold great affection towards Reynaud, but he commands some respect due to his station as a representative of the Church. With centuries of tradition behind him, he holds a power that is hard to sway, but Vianne seems to manage it just the same. One of the villagers, Guillaume says when talking about another man in the village:

> 'I sometimes wonder,' he said reflectively, 'whether Narcisse isn't a better Christian, in the purest sense, than me or Georges Clairmont – or even Curé Reynaud.' [. . .] 'I mean, at least Narcisse *helps*,' he said seriously. (CH, 183)

Vianne does not necessarily introduce new thoughts about how things are to the villager, more like she shows how things could be. She answers Guillaume's thoughts by stating: "'I don't think there is such a thing as a good or bad Christian,' I told him. 'Only good or bad people.'

(CH, 183). Guillaume nods and admits with the comment “Maybe” that her view just might be true. He does, however, retain a certain amount of scepticism towards Vianne’s beliefs as well:

> In that case, the things I’ve believed all my life – about sin and redemption and the mortification of the body – you’d say none of those things mean anything, wouldn’t you? (CH, 184)

Vianne smiles and again in a very New Age way answers the question by saying everyone is entitled to their beliefs as long as they make them happy. When yet when Guillaume asks her what she believes in, she has to pause until she opts for simply happiness: “I believe that being happy is the only important thing” (CH, 184).

Vianne tries to battle her mother’s memory and make a new life for herself and her child, but it is a struggle, not only in the sense that she has to gain the villagers’ acceptance and battle Reynaud for her right to be there, but also within herself. She speaks to herself logically and rationally: “The Black Man is a fiction, I tell myself firmly. An embodiment of fears underneath a carnival head. A tale for dark nights. Shadows in a strange room” (CH, 247). She tries to use reason, but in the end she has to admit she is not entirely successful:

> I try to apply my studies in psychology. It is an image of the Black Man as Death, an archetype which reflects my fear of the unknown. The thought is unconvincing. The part of me that still belongs to my mother speaks with more eloquence. (CH, 247)

This could be seen as a larger metaphor for Western civilisation. No matter how much rationality rules and Christian dogma is in a hegemonic position, there is an element of superstition that is more primal and cannot be glossed away. As Vianne noted earlier, there are things that people pretend to believe in, or perhaps more poignantly pretend not to believe in. Reynaud knows or senses this as well. Around Easter, which is the culmination of the power struggle between Vianne and Reynaud he thinks to himself.

> But this year, will they be thinking of the Passion, of the solemnity of the Eucharist, or will their mouths be watering in anticipation? Her stories – flying bells and

> feasting – are pervasive, seductive. I try to infuse the sermon with our own seductions, but the dark glories of the Church cannot compare with her magic carpet rides. (CH, 290)

If magic is a way to take control of the chaos of life, then so is religion. Vianne represents to Reynaud old pagan ways that were without control, at least what he would consider as sufficient control. Vianne's presence and actions threaten his carefully constructed world of control and order: "It is the sense of disorder which she brings, père, that so unnerves me. That wildness" (CH, 159). Reynaud also admits that he envies Vianne's influence over the villagers, and in a sense her growing power over them.

> Earning for herself a kind of affection, of loyalty which – God help me! – I am weak enough to covet. Preaching a travesty of goodwill, of tolerance, of pity for the poor homeless outcasts on the river while all the time the corruption grows deeper entrenched. The devil works not through evil but through weakness, père. (CH, 162)

A group of travellers have settled for a while near the village, and are met with prejudice by many of the villagers. Vianne, however, is talking about tolerance and getting along harmoniously with all kinds of people. In fact, she is talking about the very things that should belong to a good Christian. At least according to some interpretations. Reynaud interprets things differently: "And yet the Bible tells us quite clearly what we must do. Weeds and wheat cannot grow peacefully together. Any gardener could tell you the same thing" (CH, 163). Both interpretations could be seen as Christian, from different points of view, therefore what is truly good and what evil, right or wrong must come from somewhere else. Harris seems to advocate a more personal interpretation of what a person ought to do, which is also in accordance with New Age thinking. The individual must look to themselves and their conscious to find a path through moral and spiritual impasses since institutions (the church) and their representatives (priests) cannot always be trusted to lead in the right direction. Reynaud ends up the villain of the story and he promotes an intolerant atmosphere:

> How secure are we? How soon will it be before the disease spreads even to the Church itself? We have seen how quickly the rot has spread. Soon they will be

> campaigning for *non-denominational services to include alternative belief systems,* abolishing the confessional as *unnecessarily punitive,* celebrating the *inner self,* and before they know it all their seemingly forward-thinking harmless liberal attitudes will have set their feet securely and irrevocably on the well-intentioned road to hell. (CH, 162)

Reynaud nevertheless seems to have the best interest of the people in mind, but his views are strict and conservative. Perhaps Paul Nathanson has a point in that Vianne represents positive attributes with her New Age and pagan beliefs whereas Reynaud is made to be the bad guy with his severe and stagnated rules, despite his good intentions. Are these belief systems then somehow gendered? There is a baggage of historical elements that suggest so, as I have noted in chapters 3.1. and 3.2. The Catholic Church has historically excluded women from its workings, and even persecuted those who have not abided by its strict rules. As a priest Reynaud's character is necessarily a man, although considering that Harris writes in the magical realist mode, she could have made the priest also into a woman. I think Harris has made the juxtaposition of male and female, Church and alternatives deliberately, so in this sense she advocates a confrontation and correlation of the two.

In the end, Vianne wins the struggle for power and control between her and Reynaud and it is he who has to run away from the village. Almost the moment the battle is over, she feels a shift in the atmosphere of the village and her perceptions of it: "Something in me feels the inevitability of change [. . .] Lansquenet, with all its associations, seems less real to me somehow, already receding in memory" (CH, 318). She has had hopes and dreams of staying in Lansquenet, that now seem to be in jeopardy:

> Perhaps it is what I suspected from the first, that Reynaud and I are linked, that one balances the other and that without him I have no purpose here. Whatever it is, the *neediness* of the town is gone; I can feel satisfaction in its place, a full-bellied satiety with no more room for me. (CH, 318)

She and Reynaud are both outsiders in their positions in the village. It could also be seen that they are each other's opposites that nevertheless depend on each other. This would imply that

not only Reynaud, but also Vianne is an archetype. And if Reynaud represents death, Vianne as his opposite must therefore represent life with all its complexities. One could make the link between death and maleness and life and femaleness, but in the end of the book Roux represents a man who also helps create life and Vianne, she claims, ends up pregnant with another daughter to her family.

On a more general level, I think that Harris has brought the juxtaposition of the ways of the Christian Church and other, New Age type of beliefs, to the forefront which is relevant in current Western society. Increasing secularisation has affected people who nevertheless crave for some form of spirituality. The Christian dogma in its rigidity has often come up short in answering people's needs in changing circumstances, so they turn to other things. In addition, the hegemonic position of cold scientific explanations have left people wanting for a level of something else in their realities. The general term 'magic' has begun to signify anything mystical, inexplicable, but with a positive ring to it. Magic no longer holds that image of control over the elements, rather it connotes the unpredictability of the life, the universe and everything. Perhaps this is because in the Western world we do not believe in magic the same way we use to, due to the influence of Christian authorities and the significance put to scientific explanations. Magic as a concept has lost its power to frighten us, because we do not believe in it the same way we used to. I would argue that magical realist writing is an international phenomena, not just limited to South America or the post-colonial regions of the world, but as something is adapted and then produced by a culture, it takes on its baggage and unique qualities. In Western society that means that most people (and I am speaking in generalities) do not consider that magic can truly affect the natural world and bend it to their wills. Magic is therefore safer, has moved from a real thing to the realm of fantasy. However, even though magic does not hold the same power it used to, magical realism works in ways that are different. The mode, almost insipidly, introduces the idea of magic into the hum-drum

everyday reality, allowing the reader to glimpse a world-view perhaps different from their own. That is what good magical realist books do, and while introducing alternative world-views, they also introduce alternative ways of being, which I think is key to any subversive views on the hegemonic parts of society.

4. Conclusion

What I have attempted to bring forth in this study is first the history, background and definitions of the literary mode called magical realism. Secondly, I have attempted to take a look at two texts, Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* and Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*, through a feminist perspective. I have tried to study whether these two texts, written by white middle-class women, continue in the tradition of subversion established by earlier magical realist writers, or do they manage in a sense to "corrupt" the mode, make it part of the mainstream while losing its subversive qualities. Both books have gained a lot of popularity and have even been made into popular motion pictures. This popularity is one of the reasons why I think it is pertinent to study these texts from an analytical perspective. If these texts have gained such a large audience I consider it poignant to examine whether they manage to sneak in any subversive notions to the generally patriarchal and heteronormative popular culture. There has not been a lot of academic research done on either of the authors I have chosen for this study, but I have attempted to bring forth that both of these authors deserve to be examined as their works provide interesting objects of study on several levels and a multiply of subjects.

I do believe that the reason Hoffman and Harris have decided to write in the magical realist mode is that they wish to examine everyday life from a slightly different perspective. They are both highly educated women with university degrees and are doubtless aware of the mode, its history and conventions. However, I also believe that the popularity of anything 'magical' that has lasted for several years may have had an impact in the author's choice of mode. I would argue that writing in the magical realist mode enables these authors to examine women's everyday reality from a new and interesting perspective. Whether this actually has a

subversive impact is, however, not so clear. I would argue that while magical realism provides the tools for analysing reality from unique and perhaps occasionally enlightening perspectives, it does not guarantee a subversive text.

One of the main things I decided to focus on in the texts was the fact that both portray witches, or women that have been labelled as such. The image of the witch in these books is not the same negative image the Church officials maintained for centuries. Different types of fiction that represent witches as appealing and good have begun to exist all over popular culture. As a sign of changing times, even the Catholic Church apologised in 2000 for its involvement in the witch-hunts performed by the Inquisition. The books, written in 1999 and 1995, came out in the thick of this change. The writers were part of this phenomena and benefiting from it, intentionally or not. Why this change occurred, is perhaps the basis for another more extensive study, focusing on the Western culture as a whole and from a more theological perspective. In this study, I have introduced the newly born Wiccan movement in addition to the New Age movement and linked them with the now popular image of witches. I speculated that increased secularisation and the inability of organised religion to meet the needs of the population is the reason other alternatives are being sought and becoming more popular. These two works of literature reflect that. I would claim that although entertaining, the books also reflect a more positive attitude towards alternate forms of spirituality and their success would indicate that the general audience is accepting these notions as well. How much of this acceptance is located in the realm of fiction and how much of it is translated into reality, is another matter and perhaps the subject for other studies.

The image of the witch is nevertheless a powerful one in Western culture and produces numerous connotations for the audience. I have argued that by using witches in their narratives Hoffman and Harris have introduced an image that might be considered supernatural, but due to the way witches have permeated our culture, is an acceptable example

of the paranormal. Another supernatural element that is present in both books is ghosts. As I noted in my study, 50 percent of Britons believe that ghosts exist, so it is not even clear whether this would be deemed as something outlandish and out of the ordinary. There are other details, however, that push the world-views of the books more towards the extraordinary, something that I would argue is necessary for the narratives to produce any shifting of the reader's perspective. This shift in perspective has the potential of making a person look at everyday reality from a different angle, and perhaps open their minds wider to accept alternate views of the world.

It is through the image of the witch that the books address one of the most important motifs of the texts. Both books bring forward the prejudice and discrimination that women who differ slightly from the norm, at least in society's eyes, have to endure. Women who are strong and independent are ostracised, feared and even hated. Calling these women witches invokes the notion of the witch hunts, which lasted for centuries, and by association brings forward the idea that anyone who is too different in Western society must be hunted down or isolated from the group. The fact that these women do have some extraordinary abilities in these books might be seen as mooting the point. However, since the women do not use their abilities for negative ends, it can be seen as revoking the old idea of evil witches and embracing anew the pagan traditions of old.

The second thing I chose to bring to the forefront was the New Age versus Religion aspects of the texts, which in the case of particularly *Chocolat* provided a fruitful object of study. Religion is not directly addressed in *Practical Magic* so it did not provide much on this topic. All in all, I would argue that *Chocolat* provided a more useful object of study since it juxtapositions so clearly the old patriarchal and constrictive religion against the positive influence of a female practitioner of a non-traditional religious background. *Practical Magic* is a beautifully written book with powerful details of description. From a feminist perspective,

it also provides strong examples of female communities and male characters of both positive and negative variety. However, from the perspectives of this study, it is *Chocolat* that has provided deeper levels of analysis.

On the subject of male and female relationships and juxtapositions I have noted that both books bring forth negative portrayals of men, but the representations are not left one-sided in the sense that also positive male characters are introduced. There are, however, not equally negative female characters which I do not necessarily consider to be a positive thing from a feminist perspective. If the female characters are presented in an comparatively more positive light, it reduces the credibility of the text and also does not help in representing women in a more realistic and comprehensive way that is normally available in a patriarchal society. *Practical Magic* is, in particular, very heteronormative in its treatment of the main characters since all the women end up with their ideal male counterparts. *Chocolat* is slightly more different since the main character does not end up with a man, but remains a single mother who becomes pregnant with another daughter. The reason I brought up the subject of male and female representations in the texts is that when looking at the books from a feminist perspective I noticed, especially in the case of *Practical Magic*, how much they conform to hegemonic notions of ideal male and female relationships. This is good example of the fact that although writing in the magical realist mode opens up more variety in depicting reality, it does not necessarily mean that those opportunities are taken advantage of.

In Hoffman's book the Owens women have some unusual abilities, the younger generations are unaware of their full potential of what they possibly could do, and the overriding desire of being normal affects strongly Sally's and through her, her children's lives. She therefore lives a suppressed life, and only at the end, by necessity, reconciles some parts of her inheritance and her newer, socially acceptable, life. In Harris's *Chocolat*, Vianne is more aware of her supernatural abilities, perhaps since she and her mother have lived

outside normal society all their lives. But she too chooses to suppress her abilities and not use her full potential. Being clueless about their potential, suppressing their true selves and trying to fit society's norms are clear themes in the book, and very important from a feminist perspective. I also do think that magical realism is a way of bringing these motifs to the forefront in a compelling and interesting way.

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