

The Da Vinci Code: A Pseudo-Feminist Text

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Abstract

Dan Brown is able to compress extensive intellectual and religious arguments into quickly accessible sound bites, and his story takes place essentially in one twenty-four-hour period like James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Women are a large constituency of *The Da Vinci Code*, and the book responds in many ways to new thinking about women in western culture. In the novel's estimation, Mary Magdalene was a strong, independent figure, patron of Jesus, cofounder of his movement, his only believer in his greatest hour of need, author of her own Gospel, his romantic partner, and the mother of his child. Based on these descriptions of the novel, some scholars assert *The Da Vinci Code* is a feminist novel, which opens everyone's eyes to a startlingly different view of the powerful role of women in the birth of Christianity. Contrary to the dominating criticism of the novel, the thesis relies on feminist literary theory to scrutinize the patriarchal traces and hidden sexual discrimination in the phallogocentric text of Dan Brown. By inferring the allegory of the Holy Grail indicated in the novel, approaching the discourse inscribed with sexual discrimination, and revealing the distortion of female images in the phallogocentric text, the author concludes that *The Da Vinci Code* is a pseudo-feminist text, which embodies repression and manipulation of the self-consciousness of women. The feminist interpretation of the novel is not to reduce its literary value to political value but to be of great help to further studies on this novel.

Keywords

Feminism, Phallogocentric Text, Holy Grail Quest, Distortion of Female Image, Pseudo-Feminist Text

1. Introduction

The Da Vinci Code (2003), a story of the Holy Grail quest, has struck a huge avalanche of sales and been translated into 44 languages worldwide. The novel has become a global phenomenon having an impact not only in the literary do-

main and related fields of arts, but also in the political, social and religious spheres. Dan Brown's multi-layered fiction starts from deconstructing the traditional interpretation of Leonardo's artistic works, develops by self-reconstructing the symbolic system of the artistic and religious world, and terminates with an indefinite, thought-provoking ending. The novel purports to expose an ancient conspiracy of the Vatican and the Priory of Sion, which according to Dan Brown conceals the marriage and offspring of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Three major premises serve as the foundation for the construction of the novel:

- 1) The worship of sacred feminine precedes the monotheism of early Christianity.
- 2) The Vatican has conspired to conceal the marriage between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.
- 3) The Holy Grail symbolizes the seeded womb of Mary Magdalene, who carries the divine ancestral bloodline of Jesus Christ.

On account of the acclaimed theme of the story, some critics take it for granted that the novel is a feminist text that strives to rediscover the identity of the female. To erase the ambiguity concerning the story that purports to do justice to women, the thesis focuses on feminist literary criticism of the novel and presents the counterpoints on the interpretation of the main issues in the novel: on one hand, the author analyzes from feminist perspective the causes to some readers' misreading, who assert *The Da Vinci Code* is a feminist text which endeavors to revive the worship of sacred feminine and to promote the self-consciousness of woman; on the other hand, the author resorts to feminist literary theory to scrutinize the patriarchal traces and hidden sexual discrimination in the phallogocentric text of Dan Brown. By comparing and contrasting, the author concludes that *The Da Vinci Code* is a pseudo-feminist text written by a male author under the disguise of the quest of identity and the promotion of self-consciousness of women.

As is shown in **Figure 1**, literary narrative communication involves the interplay of at least three communicative levels. Each level of communication comes with its own set of addressers and addressees (senders and receivers). Since author and reader do not communicate in the literary text itself, their level of communication is an "extratextual" one.

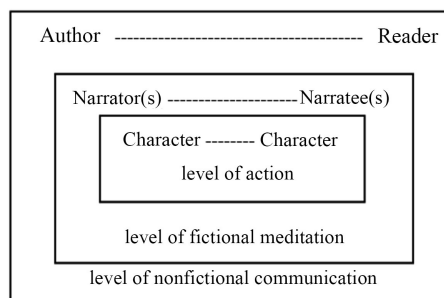


Figure 1. Communicative levels of a narrative (<http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N2.4>).

1.1. Synopsis of Feminist Literary Criticism

As a distinctive approach to literature, feminist literary criticism was inaugurated in the second wave of feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The two waves of feminist movement that struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements, and for women's social and political rights, serve as the social and historical background of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism originates from the penetration of political movements into culture and society, especially into the literary domain, so it has embodied profound political concerns from its very beginning. Since the early 1980s, feminist literary criticism has developed and diversified in many ways from the interaction with other academic disciplines. Owing to the influence of philosophy, sociology, psychology and other subjects, feminist literary criticism has produced, in its process of theoretical self-construction, a pluralistic pattern among which the Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructionist approaches are the most important. Annette Kolodny argues "what distinguishes feminist work from those similarly oriented 'social consciousness' critique, it is said, is its lack of systematic coherence" (Kolodny, 1989: p. 184). The tendency of the feminist literary criticism is therefore a fusion with postmodernism, and its own theories has been constantly deconstructed and reconstructed in its development. Adopting a critical pluralism does not mean feminists cease to disagree, the critical pluralism can free the feminists from the prejudice, the structures, and the blindness to women's social roles in the past, by which the feminists manage to threaten both the present coherence of and the inherited aesthetic criteria for the patriarchal canon. Feminist literary criticism moves with time from the criticism of writing by men and the exploration of writing by women to a questioning of what it means at all to engage with or in language. Feminist literary criticism is not a unitary theory or procedure in America, England, France and other countries because different feminist critics employ different vantage points and procedures. "The various feminisms, however, share certain assumptions and concepts that underlie the diverse ways that individual critics explore the factor of sexual difference and privilege in the production, the form and content, the reception, and the critical analysis and evaluation of works of literature" (Abrams, 2004: p. 89).

Patriarchy: a term in anthropology, it refers to the clan organization that succeeds the matrilineal clan. It is a social system (or a cultural structure) in which father is the head of a family and descent is traced through the father's side of the family. Feminists adopt this term from anthropology and regard it as social precondition to the oppression and discrimination of women. They consider western civilization pervasively patriarchal (the omnipresence of patriarchy). The patriarchal society is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. In patriarchal society, the male is depicted as dominant, superior subject, but the

female is defined by negative reference to the male (the human norm), as obedient, inferior Object (or an Other). In men's works of literary canon, the female characters are likely to take a marginal, and subordinate position and tend to be depicted either as complementary to or in opposition to masculine desires and enterprises. "Women are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (conscious or unconscious presuppositions about male superiority) and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination" (ibid 89). In the androcentric dichotomy, women are always negatively defined as shown in **Figure 2**.

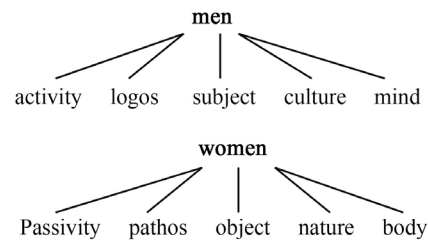


Figure 2. The androcentric dichotomy.

Gender: a key term in the second wave of western feminism to be distinguished from one's biological sex. Simone de Beauvoir is the first to use the term in feminist literary criticism, and she refuses the traditional idea that treats one's sex as identical to one's gender in *The Second Sex* (1949): "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other" (Simone, 1974: p. 301). One's gender is embodied by a collective of traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior. Contrary to one's sex that is determined by anatomy, Gender is not born with but constructed through psychological, cultural and social means. The so-called masculine and feminine traits are the products of the interaction among society, culture and psychology within the patriarchal society. Gender results from the indoctrination and manipulation of patriarchal culture, but it has been defined by the patriarchal culture as pre-determined by one's sex, which notion provides excuses for the patriarchal society to deprive women of their due rights.

Apart from certain assumptions and concepts, there are other concerns that make feminist literary criticism a distinctive approach to interpret literature.

What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism, then is neither dogma nor method, but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance; the consequences of that encoding for women—as characters, as readers, and as writers; and, with that, a shared analytic concern for the implications of that encoding not only for a

better understanding of the past, but also for an improved reordering of the present and future as well. (Kolodny, 1989: p. 186)

“The theoretical feminism is usually thought of two parts, the Anglo-American and the French” (Zhu, 2003: p. 229), though they are not mutually exclusive. Anglo-American feminist criticism emerged as an empirical approach, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was fronted by the “gynocriticism” of Elaine Showalter. According to Showalter, the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationship between women writers and their society, and “it goes through three major phases: Feminine, Feminist, and Female” (Showalter, 2004: p. 13). American and English critics have for the most part engaged in empirical and thematic studies of writings by and about women. “They tend to concentrate on the specificity of women’s writing, on recuperating a tradition of women authors, and on examining in detail women’s own culture” (Selden, 2004: p. 129). American feminist literary criticism undergoes three stages of development (not necessarily chronological): “women’s image criticism in the ‘androtex’, women-centered criticism or discovery of the ‘gynotex’ and identity criticism” (Sun, 2006: p. 370). The three stages of development in American feminist literary criticism are not discrete as they overlap and intersect repeatedly. The French feminist criticism derived from Simone de Beauvoir’s perception of woman as “the Other” to man. French feminists regard sexuality as a binary opposition between man and woman that designates the “sexual difference”. They consider that it is the social and cultural manipulation of the sexual differences that causes men to dominate or oppress women. French feminist literary criticism is deeply influenced by various poststructural theories such as “phallogocentrism” (Derrida’s term for the domination exercised by patriarchal discourse), and “Jacques Lacan’s reworkings of Freudian psychoanalysis in terms of Saussure’s linguistic theory” (Abrams, 2004: p. 92). French feminist theoreticians reveal “the linguistic and social arbitrariness of sexual differences in one of Lacan’s diagrams” (Selden, 2004: p. 139); therefore they regard language as a domain of male domination and strive to break down the conventional, male-constructed stereotypes of sexual difference encoded in language. Preoccupied with the role of gender in writing, French feminists focus on the inquiries of “woman’s language” and “feminine writing”, which prevent women writers from being automatically entrapped into the phallogocentric language. French feminist entered the critical arena mainly in 1970s, essentially the works of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous.

To prove the novel is a pseudo-feminist text, the thesis starts with the analysis of Mary Magdalene: angel or monster, since she is the central figure discussed by the characters; then moves to the interpretation of Sophie: resisting or assenting, for she seems to be the protagonist but actually marginalized in the narration; finally the thesis focuses on the Holy Grail quest because it is the most recurrent image in the *The Da Vinci Code*, and is believed the most sought-after treasure in human history.

1.2. Mary Magdalene: Angel or Monster

Mary Magdalene is, in many ways the central figure discussed by the characters in *The Da Vinci Code*, and it is fitting that she should be the starting point for this thesis' odyssey into exploring the feminist and patriarchal indications of the novel. For the scholars who hold opposing ideas concerning the interpretation of the novel the analysis of the images of Mary Magdalene serves as an appropriate point of departure, because the symbolic interpretation of the characters and the symbolic self-construction of the author both center on the studies on identity, religious role and symbolic indication of this historic figure in Christianity.

1.2.1. The Angel Image

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene is mentioned 62 times by the characters. She emerges in the middle of Sophie and Langdon's Holy Grail quest. To help explain the painting of Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper, the crippled, jovial, fabulously wealthy historian Sir Leigh Teabing points out a figure in the famous painting in his study:

“Who is she?” Sophie asked.

“That, my dear,” Teabing replied, “is Mary Magdalene.”

Sophie turned. “The prostitute?”

Teabing drew a short breath, as if the word had injured him personally.

“Magdalene was no such thing. That unfortunate misconception is the legacy of a smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail.” (263-264)

Teabing claims Mary Magdalene is the woman who singlehandedly could crumble the church for her marriage with Jesus Christ manifests the earthly aspects of Jesus' life, but the early Church needed to convince the world that the mortal prophet Jesus was a divine being. Teabing argues the “V” shape at the focal point of The Last Supper symbolizes the Holy Grail—Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ, while the hidden “M” in the painting symbolizes Mary Magdalene—wife of Jesus and the Divine Mother of his offspring. Leonardo indicates in his painting the vestiges of the influences of pagan goddess cults and the “sacred feminine” in early Christianity to celebrate Mary's apocalyptic spirituality. To justify the secret marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, Teabing cited some Gnostic gospels such as Gospel of Mary Magdalene, The Gospel of Philip, and so forth.

“The Gospel of Philip is always a good place to start.” Sophie read the passage: And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” (266)

Teabing asserts with Langdon's agreement: "as any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse" (266), and this is considered the initial step Teabing takes to retrieve the reputation of Mary Magdalene or to rediscover the "feminine worship". In order to seek evidence of Mary's important role in Jesus' ministry, Teabing quotes the Gospel of Mary Magdalene:

Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words. She read the text: And Peter said, "Did the Saviour really speak with a woman without our knowledge? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

And Levi answered, "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like an adversary. If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." (268)

The woman mentioned in this gospel according to Teabing is Mary Magdalene, whom Peter is jealous of and Jesus prefers. Teabing takes a step further to argue that the relationship between Mary and Jesus is more than mere affection and "Jesus gives Mary instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone" (268). Teabing claims that Peter is a sexist for he bears hatred toward Mary regarding her superior position in Jesus ministry. Teabing concludes his symbolic and religious inference by declaring Jesus was the original feminist in that He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene rather than to the disposal of men disciples. So far, Teabing has finished his mission to retrieve the reputation of Mary Magdalene from a demonic prostitute to an innocent, devoted disciple, and he has succeeded in rediscovering the "Goddess Worship" from the Gnostic gospels in the early Christianity.

Based on the analysis of the previous paragraph, some readers are deceived into misreading of *The Da Vinci Code*. These readers as introduced in the literature review of this thesis, are indoctrinated by Teabing in the same way like Sophie. They are convinced of the result of Teabing's argumentation, but never consider his intention and the context of the whole narrative. It makes sense for some scholar to say that

Goddess worship was linked to "female" values that promoted peace, harmony with nature, equality, and love for all. In opposition, "masculine" values, enshrined in the male supreme deity of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, promoted male domination, aggressive violence, subjugation of women, and exploitation of the earth. The reclaiming of Goddess worship took on the vision of redemption of humanity and the earth from the nadir of violence and destruction that had been unleashed by patriarchal religion and rule. (Ruether, 2005: p. 274)

If readers employ this theory to interpret Teabing's effort to retrieve the long-lost "feminine worship", they will inevitably come to such conclusion that

the narrating character, Leigh Teabing represents the author, Dan Brown's feminist tendency to revive the "Goddess worship" from the rift of the Christian ideology, for which *The Da Vinci Code* ranks high as a feminist text.

1.2.2. The Monster Image

But if the narrative is analyzed from the opposite perspective, the counterpoint is subversive to the conclusion of those readers. Leigh Teabing is the most controversial and ambiguous character in the novel: on one hand he serves as the Teacher of the bloody murder committed by Vatican's section, Opus Dei; on the other hand he is the helper of Sophie and Langdon's Holy Grail quest. The identity of Teabing dodges between good and evil; therefore this narrating character is by no means credible, concerning the ambiguity of his motivation to save Mary Magdalene's reputation. What is the real motivation of Teabing's saint behavior? This question can be answered with the lines of characters' own statement in *The Da Vinci Code*. Robert Langdon says that "In my experience, there are only two reasons people seek the Grail. Either they are naive and believe they are searching for the long-lost Cup of Christ [...], or they know the truth and are threatened by it" (232). But Teabing belongs to none of the two groups of Grail seeker. Sir Leigh Teabing is a former British Royal historian, and a lifelong Grail researcher and an expert in the Priory of Sion and the Holy Grail. Teabing's life passion is the Grail and he moved to France to search churches in hopes of finding it. So it is the ambition to possess power of the Holy Grail that attracts him to help Sophie and Langdon to reveal the hidden message. Langdon says in the novel: "Teabing would probably trip over himself to help them as much as possible. [...], but Teabing was a Grail researcher, and Sophie claimed her grandfather was the actual Grand Master of the Priory of Sion. If Teabing heard that, he would salivate at the thought of helping them figure this out" (236). As a Priory academician he anticipates the brotherhood's release of the truth of the Holy Grail at the end of the millennium, only to be disappointed. On the basis of the previous analysis, readers will see through the real intention and motivation of Teabing—greedy, fervent ambition to possess the truth and the power of the Holy Grail.

When the narrative of Teabing and Langdon is considered as a whole, readers are to reveal the contradictory images of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code*. To illustrate the Vatican's conspiracy to eradicate the truth of the Holy Grail, Teabing presents the readers with the reasons and process of the demonizing of Mary Magdalene, who is considered overwhelming destructive forces to Christianity. Langdon agrees with Teabing on the historical demonizing of Mary Magdalene for the religious and political reasons. In the novel Langdon says: "The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever" (133). Langdon asserts that the "original sin" is fabricated by man to usurp the sacred role of life-giver of wom-

en. It is said that “the moment (at the end of 6th century) Pope Gregory the Great Grafted Gospel of Luke’s unnamed sinner onto Mary Magdalene’s identity, was the moment as which Mary Magdalene was transformed into a prostitute, largely because women’s sins were inevitably construed as sexual sins” (Jansen, 2004: p. 49). For the demonizing of Mary and the erasing of “Goddess Worship”, Teabing adds: “Genesis tells us that Eve was created from Adam’s rib. Woman became an offshoot of man. And a sinful one at that. Genesis was the beginning of the end for the goddess” (259).

Throughout the whole narrative of *The Da Vinci Code*, two images of Mary Magdalene emerge on the horizon: the innocent “apostle of apostles” and the wanton outcast prostitute. By apply the feminist literary theory of Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, readers will see the images of “angel” and “monster” have been so ubiquitous throughout *The Da Vinci Code*. In feminist literary criticism, the women’s image criticism is to reveal the distorted depiction of women’s images and to explore the devaluation of women characters portrayed by male authors in terms of their own fears and fantasies. Gilbert and Gubar’s multi-volume history of women in literature began in 1980 with the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which was followed by *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, the Tradition in English* in 1985. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they argue: “the images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitively ‘killed’ either figure” (Rivkin, 2004: p. 812). They analyze two stereotypes of female image generated by male authors and reveal the distortion and discrimination women have suffered in the patriarchal society. The female characters with virtues of beauty, purity and tenderness, try to avoid their inner voices, needs and wishes, whose only significance in living is devotion to others. Those pure, innocent virgin are glorified as the “Angel in the House” by male novelist and poet. The other distorted image of women is called “monster”, and this type embodies male writers’ disgust and fear towards those “selfish” women who are not obedient to men. “These images tend to fall into two antithetic patterns for the angel image symbolizes the idealized projections of men’s desires (the Madonna, Dante’s Beatrice), but the monster image symbolizes demonic projections of men’s sexual resentments and terrors (Eve, Pandora)” (Abrams, 2004: p. 90). Both of stereotyped images reflect the discrimination and depreciation against women in the deep-rooted patriarchal literary tradition.

“Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), drew attention to the pervasiveness of patriarchy and to the ways in which it was reinforced through family and culture, notably in the distortion of the female character in the patriarchal literature” (Zhu, 2005: p. 346). The two images of Mary Magdalene portrayed by Dan Brown turn out to be traditional distortion and discrimination that women have suffered in the patriarchal society. The monster image, the prostitute Mary Magdalene symbolizes the Vatican Church’s resentments and terrors consider-

ing Mary Magdalene—the wife and apostle of Jesus Christ and the real Holy Grail, whose marriage with Jesus Christ manifests the earthly aspects of Jesus’ life, which is contrary to the Church’s doctrine—Jesus, a divine being. The angel image of Mary Magdalene symbolizes the idealized projection of men’s desires. In terms of the angel image of Mary, there rises a question: why Teabing endeavors to save the reputation of Mary Magdalene? (Why the author attempts to portray her as an angel?)

To solve this problem, the spirituality and the culture in the West must be analyzed. “The structure of spirituality in male monotheism was homoerotic, for males to love God means that a human male must love a divine male. Yet the heterosexist culture and ethic in the West forbid an explicit elaboration of male-male eros, such as that in classic Greece” (Ruether, 2005: p. 304). In the patriarchal society, “male believers of Jesus Christ have to veil the homoerotic structure of their spirituality by seek an alternative to this, and reinventing the female spiritual love object just serves their need” (ibid 304). Mary Magdalene as God’s bride may also become the love object of the male devotee. “And another option for Christian males is to rediscover the female, or Wisdom, side of God and envision the soul as bride-groom and lover, ever seeking the gracious response of his celestial lady love” (ibid 304). This theory can be applied to explain the Hieros Gamos practiced by members of Priory of Sion and the cult of “Baphomet” by the Knight Templar. Based on the feminist analysis of the images of Mary Magdalene, it can be affirmed that the image of Mary Magdalene is distorted and manipulated for the need of male chauvinism in the West. Dan Brown’s portrayal of Mary Magdalene reflects the discrimination and deprecation against women in *The Da Vinci Code* and these stereotyped images of women are deeply rooted in the patriarchal literary tradition.

1.3. Sophie: Resisting or Assenting

Dan Brown is celebrated for his mastery of intrigue and suspense: for intrigue the author suggests the conspiracies in the novel; and the suspense in *The Da Vinci Code* includes the bloody murder of Jacques Sauniere, the decoding of the anagrams, the estrangement between Sophie and Sauniere, and the revealing of the Truth of the Holy Grail. Among the suspense of the novel, the causes for the estrangement between the granddaughter and grandfather serve as incentive for readers to continue the reading. The alienated relationship is recollected in Sophie’s flashback and is addressed both by Langdon and Teabing.

1.3.1. Resisting the Patriarchal Family

To explore the reasons for the estrangement between Sophie and Sauniere, one has to examine the early life of Sophie living with her grandfather. From childhood, Sauniere has raised Sophie in a strict and strange way with regard to the age of the girl. Sophie is required to practice French at school and practice English at home as a little girl. Sauniere brings her to many places which are not considered appropriate for a child, such as Denon Wing in Louvre Museum,

Notre Dame to see the gargoyles, Rosslyn Chapel, etc. Sophie's childhood is different from others' for she is taught some mysterious tricks and strange knowledge by her grandfather. Sauniere has acquainted her with the traditional knowledge that a grand master of the Priory of Sion values, for instance, using Fibonacci numbers, playing Tarot cards for fun, the Divine Proportion, PHI, cryptex, P.S. etc. From the narrative of *The Da Vinci Code*, one can discover that Sophie is not raised in the normal way that other parents follow generally. From early childhood, Sophie is educated by Sauniere to be the heiress of his role of Grand Master of the Priory of Sion. Therefore, Sophie's life and ideology are greatly manipulated and influenced by her grandfather. At an early age, Sophie is exposed to sensitive issues her grandfather poses:

Sophie said, "You think Jesus Christ had a girlfriend?"

"No, dear, I said the Church should not be allowed to tell us what notions we can and can't entertain."

"Did Jesus have a girlfriend?"

Her grandfather was silent for several moments. "Would it be so bad if He did?"

Sophie considered it and then shrugged. "I wouldn't mind." (267)

Many a time, Sauniere indicates to Sophie the "Goddess Worship" and the "Sacred Feminine". When they live together her grandfather never ceases to indoctrinate Sophie to accept his ideologies and values. Sauniere is involved into the conspiracy of the Priory of Sion to guard the truth of the Holy Grail, so it is his style to hide and disclose secret in special and mysterious ways without being sensed by others. Sophie is trained to live in such a way like Sauniere as is depicted by the author of *The Da Vinci Code*—Sophie has to solve a series of riddles and codes in order to get Christmas present from her grandfather. The patriarchal domination in Sophie's life is pervasive, and this domination sometimes makes her life bitter which is demonstrated in Sauniere's complaint that Sophie is wanting in respecting his privacy. The pain of growth suffered by Sophie living with Sauniere accumulates, and inevitably, it is likely to cause revolt from the oppressed Sophie. The revolt culminates when Sophie witnesses the scene of Hieros Gamos in the basement of her grandfather's vacation chateau in Normandy, returning from graduate school in Britain for spring break a few days early. Sophie's confrontation with the ritual of "sacred marriage" is the direct cause for the separation and estrangement of the two.

That night, with her life shattered by disillusionment and betrayal, she packed her belongings and left her home. On the dining room table, she left a note.

I WAS THERE. DON'T TRY TO FIND ME.

Beside the note, she laid the old spare key from the chateau's woodshed. (153-154)

They have separated from each other until the death of Jacques Sauniere. At

this point, readers differ with each other in terms of the literary indication of the separation. Some critics regard Sophie's leaving home as her explicit revolt against her grandfather's domination, and it symbolizes her active resistance to the patriarchal family. Therefore, *The Da Vinci Code* once again is considered a feminist text by some critics. With the death of Jacques Sauniere, these critics argue that the Sauniere's indoctrination fails and Sophie succeeds in resisting the patriarchal domination.

1.3.2. Assenting to the Patriarchal Ideology

Does the patriarchal indoctrination really end with the death of Sauniere? The answer to this question is negative because the indoctrinatory role of Sauniere is succeeded by the other two narrating characters in the novel, Langdon and Teabing. The circumstance is presented in the second chapter for the discussion of sequential communal voice constituted by Langdon and Teabing. Their birds-and-the-bees lecture goes from the interpretation of *Mona Lisa*—the “sacred feminine”, to the interpretation of *The Last Supper*—Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail. In their Holy Grail quest Langdon collaborates with Teabing to convince Sophie of the patriarchal ideology and their united forces transform Sophie from a resisting character to an obedient character. The collaboration between Langdon and Teabing not only can be inferred with narrative poetics but also marked obviously in the discourse of the novel:

“Nonetheless, establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base. By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable [...].”

Sophie glanced at Langdon, and he gave her a soft nod of concurrence.

“It was all about power,” Teabing continued. (253)

One will find the verb—“nod” appear at least ten times in the novel, to link the cooperation between Langdon and Teabing. The process of the Holy Grail quest is a process of indoctrination for Sophie, who seldom suspects the credibility of the male narrators' point of view. Sophie is portrayed like a “speech-absent”, passive figure in the novel, and she is even left out by the author of the novel before the truth of the Holy Grail is to be revealed. So the viewpoint of those critics that the Holy Grail quest symbolizes the quest of identity and self-consciousness of women cannot hold water based on the previous analysis.

What relegates Sophie to such a subordinate and marginal status? To deal with this issue, one must resort to Judith Fetterley's feminist theory of “resisting reader” to apply a feminist approach to examine the novel by male writers. Most of critics agree that Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) inaugurates the practice of feminist literary criticism with the radical idea that literature is political rather than remote from everyday life. But it is Judith Fetterley who establishes this link

between the personal and the political by her “revisionary rereading” in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978) of some fictions by male American authors (Irving, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, James). According to Fetterley, the canon of American literature is filled with primarily male authors and the majority of these texts also display some sort of male biases. American literature fails the woman reader by regarding male experience as universal and the American identity is constantly defined in opposition to the female, as she says, “the experience of being American is equated with the experience of being male” (Fetterley, 1978: p. xii). Fetterley calls for readers to reconstitute the way in reading in order to do justice to female point of view, concerns and values. She argues “feminist literary criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read” (Culler, 2004: p. 52). The feminist critics and women readers should alter the way in reading literature of the past and serve not as an acquiescent (assenting) but a resisting reader, who can resist the author’s intention and design in order to reveal and to counter the covert sexual biases inscribed into literary works. Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* reinvigorates the critical debates surrounding canonical male authors, and encourages the reader of American literature to resist critical commonplaces rather than simply assent.

In dealing with the narrative produced by Langdon and Teabing, Sophie should not serve as an acquiescent (assenting) narratee but a resisting reader in order to reveal and to counter the covert sexual biases inscribed into the literary text. Unfortunately Sophie fails to suspect the incredibility of the narrative, and she is deceived into accepting the narrator’s indoctrination. As a reader of *The Da Vinci Code*, one should play the role of resisting reader to examine the intention of the author and to resist the patriarchal ideology and sexual discrimination encoded in the narrative discourse. As an assenting narratee, Sophie is lost in the Holy Grail quest and is discriminated by the male narrators. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Sophie takes a marginal and subordinate position, and is depicted as complementary to masculine heroes’ Holy Grail quest. She is brainwashed to internalize their patriarchal ideology (conscious or unconscious presuppositions about male superiority) and so are conditioned to derogate her own sex and to cooperate in her own subordination.

The sexual bias of the author against Sophie can be located in the novel through the statement of the narrating characters. The following paragraph is structured to the detriment of Sophie and to the benefit of male characters:

“Saunier’s fault,” Teabing said. “He and his senechaux lied to Silas. Otherwise, I would have obtained the keystone without complication. How was I to imagine the Grand Master would go to such ends to deceive me and bequeath the keystone to an estranged granddaughter?” Teabing looked at Sophie with disdain. “Someone so unqualified to hold this knowledge that she required a symbologist baby-sitter.” Teabing glanced back at Langdon.

“Fortunately, Robert, your involvement turned out to be my saving grace. Rather than the keystone remaining locked in the depository bank forever, you extracted it and walked into my home.” (442)

1.4. The Holy Grail Quest

The Holy Grail is the most recurrent image in literature, religion, art of western and Mideastern culture. It is considered the most sought-after treasure in human history, and a pagan symbol adopted in Christianity. “In the Grail legend, the ancient tales of cauldrons of bounty and horns of plenty were transmuted in the Middle Ages to Christian cups and platters without end in their giving of food and drink” (Sinclair, 1998: p. 14). The Grail is, in one of its aspect, a mystery, a historical and literary puzzle, and there is an insatiable appetite for solutions to such mysteries and puzzles.

1.4.1. The Allegory of the Holy Grail

The Holy Grail legend has inspired many enthusiasts to be desperate to eliminate the mysteries of the past, and to remove the doubts that may surround them. Some writers write to reassure people that scientific investigation is capable of solving such enigmas and that simple answers can be found to the most complex questions, which bring people back to the conspiracy theory of history. *The Da Vinci Code* is such a book that purports to offer concrete solutions instead of the shifting kaleidoscope of knowledge about the Holy Grail. In the novel, the interpretation of the true nature of the Holy Grail is initiated by Robert Langdon and completed by Leigh Teabing. Langdon explains to Sophie that the Sangreal is a collection of documents that reveals some dark secret. Rather than being the cup of Jesus used in The Last Supper, the Holy Grail is an ingeniously conceived allegory. Langdon sets out to interpret the allegory of the Holy Grail from a symbolic perspective, and he indicates to Sophie the feminine nature of it. The Priory of Sion according to Langdon is the keeper of the Holy Grail and worshiper of Mary Magdalene as the Goddess, the Holy Grail, the Rose, and the sacred feminine.

Teabing’s interpretation of the true nature starts with his subversion of the traditional interpretation of The Last Supper by demonstrating that no cup exists in the scene. His subversive argument goes like this: “‘What I mean,’ Teabing countered, ‘is that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false. As are the stories about the Holy Grail’” (255). He says that the Grail is literally the ancient symbol for womanhood, and the Holy Grail represents the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church. His statement suggests the Holy Grail symbolizes the celebration of the female fertility, for the power of woman and her ability to produce life was once very sacred. For the fertility indication, Teabing holds that Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail, the female womb that carries Jesus blood. Furthermore he convinces Sophie of royal nature of the blood, which created a lineage known as the Merovingian bloodline when it intermarried with French

royal blood. For Teabing the Holy Grail quest has always been a quest for the Magdalene and the secret documents in early Christianity that serve as proof of her family's rightful claim to power. Deriving from Langdon and Teabing's interpretation, it is clear that the allegory implied in the novel is "female principle"—the sacred feminine, female fertility, the chalice carrying the royal bloodline. Therefore the Holy Grail quest of the characters in *The Da Vinci Code* symbolizes the quest to retrieve the time-honored "Feminine Worship" and to promote the self-consciousness of the women. This interpretation by some readers is again the misreading if the overall quest is examined and the identity of the male characters is scrutinized.

1.4.2. The Secret Remaining Hidden

The history of the Legend of the Holy Grail is, thus, the history of the gradual transformation of old Celtic folk-tale into a poem charged with Christian symbolism and mysticism. This transformation, at first the inevitable outcome of its pre-Christian development, was hastened later by the perception that it was a fitting vehicle for certain moral and spiritual ideas. (Nutt, 1888: p. 227)

The allegory of the Holy Grail is hardly definite for in the eyes of the Celts and the Nordic folk, the Grail is the cauldron and the spear; in classic times, the cosmic bowl and the horn of plenty; for the Jews, the Ark and the Tabernacle; for Christians, the chalice and the dish; for Muslims, the Ka'aba with its black stone; for the dissenters, the fire, the serpent and the dove. Yet the Grail is not all things to all men, but only one—a symbol of each person's direct approach to the divine light. Thus the Holy Grail quest is a personal spiritual quest. It is not a treasure hunt, but an exploration of self. "There are millions of paths to the Grail. If we ever reach the end of the road, we will see it in the shape of our experiences on the way [...]. The quest for the Grail is the parable of all of our lonely looking for the divine" (Sinclair, 1998: p. vii). Among the characters in *The Da Vinci Code*, only Langdon fulfills his mission of the Holy Grail quest. The epiphany leads him to the true nature of the Holy Grail, which the novel purports to disclose. Some critics consider the novel a feminist for the rediscovery of the "sacred feminine", the "Goddess Cult", but other readers are apt to raise such question as: Why did not Robert Langdon reveal the truth of the Holy Grail to the public?

To answer this question, the analysis of Langdon's trait is necessitated for so far in the thesis, the author leaves one trace of information about Langdon untouched. The description of Langdon's morbid trait foreshadows the author's helpless treatment of the ending of *The Da Vinci Code*.

Langdon exhaled, turning a longing glance back up the open-air escalator. Nothing's wrong at all, he lied to himself, trudging back toward the elevator. As a boy, Langdon had fallen down an abandoned well shaft and almost died treading water in the narrow space for hours before being rescued.

Since then, he'd suffered a haunting phobia of enclosed spaces—elevators, subways, squash courts. The elevator is a perfectly safe machine, Langdon continually told himself, never believing it. It's a tiny metal box hanging in an enclosed shaft! Holding his breath, he stepped into the lift, feeling the familiar tingle of adrenaline as the doors slid shut. (26)

This portrayal of Langdon emerges at the beginning of *The Da Vinci Code*, and Dan Brown apparently wants to send a message to the readers and to foreshadow the decision made by Langdon in the face of the truth of the Holy Grail. The well shaft is an archetypal image that symbolizes the enclosed space—the womb. The childhood accident—being trapped in the narrow space almost claims his life. After the accident Langdon has suffered a haunting phobia of enclosed spaces, the claustrophobia—an abnormal fear of being in narrow or enclosed spaces. Langdon's claustrophobia symbolizes his abnormal fear of women. It is this continual fear that hinders him from revealing the truth of the Holy Grail when it is up to him to make the decision. Furthermore as a symbologist, his interest in the Holy Grail is primarily symbolic, so he tends to ignore the plethora of lore regarding how to actually find it or whether to disclose it or not. The previous analysis has undermined some critics' assertion that *The Da Vinci Code* is a feminist text because the Holy Grail quest of the characters in the novel symbolizes the quest to retrieve the time-honored "Feminine Worship" and to promote the self-consciousness of the women. Contrary to this, the secret of the Holy Grail remains hidden because Robert Langdon fails to fulfill his task at the end of the novel.

If one employs the feminist literary criticism to analyze the contradiction between the purported theme and the conservative ending of the novel, one is to discover the author Dan Brown's incompetence to produce a real feminist text.

It is a tendency in feminist criticism that feminists aspire to regress to the matrilineal society before the emergence of human civilization when they discover there exist to a large degree the inequalities between men and women in the present and past society. Although this kind of tendency is not necessarily directed to the means of production, it is a nostalgic aspiration to the vanishing past. (Zhang, 1998: p. 228)

This feminist tendency echoes with the Kristeva's feminist psychoanalysis. It is universally acknowledged that Julia Kristeva is the first woman critic to establish a feminist theory of psychoanalysis to the study of women's literature. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), she puts forward "a 'chora', (from Plato for enclosed space, womb) or prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal, and unsystematized signifying process, centered on the mother, that she labels 'semiotic'" (Song, 2004: p. 146). "The 'semiotic' highlighting multiplicity, fluidity and impulse, is inevitably associated with the female body, while the 'symbolic' characterized by coherence, rationality and order, is linked with the law of the father which censors and represses in order that discourse may be produced" (Rivkin, 2004: p. 768).

Kristeva's feminist psychoanalysis marks the shift in attention, and deconstructs a central theoretical premise of patriarchal culture that fathers determine sexual identity, whose intervention between mother and son initiates the separation that preserves civilization. She suggests that women should reject the symbolic order with its social code and paternal function, and find a discourse close to women's body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract within their semiotic system.

Dan Brown gets his technique right when he designs the ideal theme of the novel to revive the "Goddess worship" and feminine ideology from the rift of the Christian tradition. But the protagonist—the male symbologist stands as the major obstacle to the fulfillment of the purported theme. Langdon's claustrophobia—his unconscious fear of women prevents him from identifying with the feminine ideology, and as a symbologist he can hardly accept the pre-Oedipal "semiotic", which in the novel is represented by the "Goddess worship" having existed long before the Christian monotheism. The male author purports to undermine the traditional Christian doctrine in the western culture only to be trapped in his own symbolic self-construction. His incompetence to produce a feminist text results from the influence of the traditional patriarchal ideology and the deep-rooted sexual discrimination of men against women in western society.

2. Conclusion

In summary, the narrative discourse—the written or oral words in the novel, is characterized as textually marked sexual discrimination and male chauvinism. The male characters are the discourse producer and the female are only the consumer of the fabricated discourse; to make it worse Sophie is not a resisting reader but an acquiescent character depicted by Dan Brown. The male characters take the turn to preach their "rational" and "logic" interpretation on western art, history, culture and Christianity. They are depicted self-referential, sophisticated and superior to Sophie, the "weak sex". Many a time, the male heroes ridicule Sophie for her incompetence to reveal the secret by herself that her Grandfather left to her, and for her deficiency, ignorance of the knowledge about the Holy Grail. The male heroes Saunier, Langdon and Teabing pretend to be the martyr and teacher who come to Sophie's rescue to help to promote her self-consciousness. Contrary to this, Sophie accounts for only a tiny spot in the narrative discourse and she is led by the teacher into internalizing the patriarchal ideology. They even kick her out as dropping a burden at the dawn of the revelation of the true nature of the Holy Grail, and Sophie together with her identity is led to be lost in the androcentric discourse.

The level of narrating involves the relations between author and reader. The narrating level in *The Da Vinci Code* is examined on the theoretic basis of feminist literary criticism. The author's feminist tendency, which is likely to deceive the reader into misreading, is analyzed on the narrating level. Dan Brown is

regarded as the savior who redeems the reputation of Mary Magdalene, but he cannot avoid characterizing the female figure with the stereotyped antithetic images: angel and monster. The two extreme images generated by male authors in western literary canon are all distorted images that the male author depicts to serve his own needs. By distorting the image of Mary, the novel is considered not so much a feminist text than a phallogocentric discourse preventing women from promoting their self-consciousness. The Holy Grail is the most recurrent image in literature, religion, the art of western and Mideastern culture. It is considered the most sought-after treasure in human history, and its allegory varies to readers of diverse backgrounds. The Holy Grail is a mystery, a historical and literary puzzle, but the author of *The Da Vinci Code* endeavors to remove the doubt and to explore the truth of the Holy Grail. According to the characters' interpretation in the novel, the Holy Grail symbolizes the "female principle"—the sacred feminine, female fertility, the chalice carrying the royal bloodline. Thus the Holy Grail quest in *The Da Vinci Code* symbolizes the quest to retrieve the time-honored "Feminine Worship" and to promote the self-consciousness of the women. But this is by no means the theme of *The Da Vinci Code*, if readers take into consideration Sophie's absence from the last scene of revelation of the true nature of the Holy Grail. Because of the patriarchal ideological influence, it is virtually impossible for a male character to disclose the truth of the Holy Grail. The patriarchal domination represented by the religious organization, the police and powerful men historical and present, makes it inconceivable for a male author to fulfill the prescribed theme of the novel. Based on the interpretation of distorted female image, patriarchal domination and readers' misreading, the author concludes that *The Da Vinci Code* is a pseudo-feminist text.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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