

Women and Religion in Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*

Mark Louie Tabunan
University of Northern Philippines

Rommel Tabunan
Madrid, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article examines Dan Brown's novel, the Da Vinci Code through the frameworks of post-structuralist theories, namely: deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, and cultural materialism. Following a descriptive design, it demonstrates that the novel offers various interrogations of truth, identity, and history through its representation of the suppressed sacred feminine. However, it might have advocated for feminist empowerment through its representation of Mary Magdalene, but it failed. Sophie's portrayal as a detective/cryptologist who was led to a damsel in distress and the novel's configuration to deconstruction and différance weaken its feminist agenda. Also, it might have deconstructed patriarchy and its repercussions, but the novel was soon bound in its uncertainty on the signifier Holy Grail, a symbol of marginalized women. The truth about the Holy Grail has never been revealed configures the novel to its language's and aim's uncertainty and fluidity. Insights from this study shed light on how popular literatures such as this participate in the perpetuation of the marginality of women. As such, it could also be extended to other popular literary and cultural forms in an attempt to interrogate discourses and practices that maintain gender inequality-towards improving the circumstances and future of women in contemporary society.

Keywords: *deconstruction, différance, feminism, post structuralism*

INTRODUCTION

Dan Brown's novel, the *Da Vinci Code*, has spawned great interest and controversy because of its revolutionary representation of women and religion. Known for its controversial stance on religion and history, the book since its publication has become one among bestseller list. Meanwhile, conservative Christians have received the novel with high eyebrows. For many, the novel's historical revisionism—not to mention the allegedly atrocious role of the Church in expunging the sacred feminine—is a big slur, if not total blasphemy.

Walton (2012) claims that cultural forms speak of the present age they have come from. Successful and controversial books are included among these. Along this light, the *Da Vinci Code* is worthy of examination because, although experts claim that it distorts history, it nevertheless has something to say about today's cultural

landscape. In this case, listening to marginalized voices through literary and cultural texts could serve as an attempt to empower them from the sites of their marginality. Hence, the significance of this study lies in the fact that the book, having earned admiration and contempt, provides a fertile space by which cultural critique may be enabled in order to question deeply entrenched “truths” towards the end of giving voice to marginalized groups, such as women. In so doing, critique such as this provides a critical conscience by which we could rethink how culture works (Buurma & Gold, 2018; Guillory, 2018).

This paper which is feminist in nature, looks at female empowerment through the character of Sophie Neveu and her supposed redeeming of the sacred feminine. It also attempts to examine how the novel has either succeeded or failed in its feminist agenda. From these objectives, the paper asks: What female and male representations are shown through the characters of Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon? How does the novel re-historicize religion and gender through the sacred feminine? To what extent has the novel succeeded in empowering women?

In achieving these objectives, the paper deploys contemporary literary theories that are post-structuralist in nature. Post-structuralism refers to a critical perspective that emerged during the 70's which has dethroned structuralism as the dominant trend in language and textual theory. Post-structuralist vision of language is that the signifier (the form of a sign/word) does not refer to a definite signified (the content of a sign/word), but produces other signifiers instead. The reason behind the use of these theories is that they are appropriate in shedding more light on the novel's subversive nature and dismantling of traditional modes of thought on religion and gender. The study, however, is only within the bounds of these analytical tools and their limited provenance. As such, other lenses could reveal other readings since theories position texts in certain ways, foregrounding certain elements while peripheralizing others.

Female subjugation and empowerment

Feminism concerns itself on the politics of gender because for countless ages, society's machinations of power have always privileged while putting women to the background. As what theorist Simone de Beauvoir aptly concluded, men are the “One” while women are the “other” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2012). This therefore explains the binary that men are seen as strong, rational, and powerful, while women are weak, irrational, and powerless (Parvini, 2018). This means that within the domain of binary oppositions, the presence of these qualities in men are seen as absence in women.

Feminist literary studies often ask the questions: What sort of roles do female characters play? With what sorts of themes are they associated? Feminist

critics showed how literary representations often repeated familiar cultural stereotypes, which lead to a thorough examination of gender roles (Dobie, 2015).

Gender has to do not with how females (and males) really are, but with the way that a given culture sees them, how they are culturally constructed. Since men are accorded with privilege (strength, rationality, and power) which women do not have, this cultural construction goes along with the principle of differentiation. The presence of these elements in men leads to the absence of such in women, hence a binary opposition.

Feminism dismantles the foregoing idea. Through invoking Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, the best known version of post-structuralism, feminists claim that the culture constructed in women is not always true. In this sense, deconstruction claims that one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified (man as the privileged being while women are subjugated) is not always true. Deconstructionist-influenced feminism therefore empowers women through bringing them from the periphery to the center through, for instance, role reversal of the privileged and the underprivileged.

New historicism and cultural materialism

New historicism and cultural materialism are post-structuralist literary theories that speak a great deal about history and culture and their all-pervasive influence to people. Heavily influenced by philosopher Michel Foucault and Marxists Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, these theories lend themselves to extensive post-structuralist notions of the self, discourse, and power. Literature, according to Foucault, speaks of power that is pervasive and maintained through discourses (oral and written). In this sense, discourses emanate from those who hold power (Parvini, 2018).

Discourse for Foucault is much like Louis Althusser's ideology and Antonio Gramsci's hegemony. Through its supposed power/knowledge, discourse exerts influence and force on people. Althusser, for one, describes ideology as sets of beliefs that delude people from their real conditions of their existence. Set down by Ideological State Apparatuses (e.g. religion, law, government, etc.), ideology tells people what the right thing to do is, thus people follow it, not by coercion but by consent. This therefore induces people/subjects to false consciousness (Montag, 2018). Lastly, hegemony by Antonio Gramsci is the domination of a set of ruling beliefs and values through "consent" rather than "coercive power." Under hegemony, citizens/subjects have so effectively internalized what the rulers want them to believe that they genuinely think that they are voicing their own opinion every time they talk about their condition (Bertens, 2014).

These seminal ideas are taken by new historicist Stephen Greenblatt and cultural materialist Raymond Williams. Applied to new historicism and cultural materialism, power/knowledge, hegemony, and ideology occupy a great space in literary works. Since literature contains social relations, it also contains power relations. This refers to how certain individuals/groups who occupy power wield this power to others, who accept what the elite do and say. Power in literature works through discourses. Literature therefore is actively involved in the making of history through its participation in discursive practices (Buurma & Gold, 2018).

Unlike old historicism (which views history as composed of hard, solid facts), new historicism takes a different stance. It believes that history can always be rewritten through different perspectives because in the first place, history was written by those who hold power. In this sense, history is textual and can be fully realized only when various discursive manifestations are consulted and brought to light (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2012).

From these perspectives, history in literature concerns itself with a "mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds," and is thus a "critical practice that treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible." A new historicist critic therefore focuses on how power has worked to suppress or marginalize rival stories and discourses. The critic's interest is in the disempowered, the marginalized, those whose voices are hardly ever, or never, heard (Bertens, 2014).

Cultural materialism follows new historicism in speaking for the marginalized. The difference, however, is the room for exercise of agency (empowerment) that cultural materialism gives. Subjects cannot transcend their own time but live and work within the horizon of culture constructed by ideology, by discourses. Subjects' adherence to ideology is the reason why and how ideology is maintained (Montag, 2018).

Raymond Williams adopts Gramsci's view of hegemony. Along this vein, the dominant culture/hegemony is never more than one player in the cultural field, even if it is by far the most powerful. There is always residual and emergent strains within culture that offer alternative views and beliefs (Bertens, 2014). Therefore, although advocating dominant socio-cultural order, cultures are threatened from the inside, by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide. What is on the seemingly clean and clear surface is a crack which shows the dissident potential underneath.

Derrida's deconstruction and *différance*

Jacques Derrida's theory of the sign fits into the post-structuralist movement, which runs counter to Saussurean structuralism (the legacy of linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure). As such, Derrida challenged the long-established structuralist thought that the signifier (the form of a sign) refers directly to the signified (the content of a sign), one that relies on binary oppositions. He elaborated a theory of deconstruction (of discourse, and therefore of the world) that advances the notion that there is no structure or center, no univocal meaning. The direct relationship between signifier and signified is no longer tenable. Instead, we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signifier to another (Guillemette & Cossette, 2006).

The term *différance*, which represents a synthesis of Derrida's philosophical thinking, means that *différance* is the difference that shatters the cult of identity and the dominance of Self over Other; it means that there is no origin. It marks a divergence that is written, enabling *différer* [to defer] which means to displace, shift, or elude. This results to a future in progress (the fight against frozen meanings); it is the displacement of signifying signifiers to the fringe, since there is no organizing, original, transcendental signified.

METHODOLOGY

Following a descriptive design, close reading was employed as data gathering procedure of the study. Data gathered were analyzed through the frameworks of feminism, cultural materialism, new historicism, and Derridean deconstruction and *différance*.

Question no. 1 was answered through collating and analyzing passages that are representations of the character of cryptologist Sophie Neveu. Through feminist lens, Neveu's portrayal as an empowered woman is examined (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2012; Galvan, 2018).

Question no. 2 focused on the role of the Roman Catholic Church in expunging the sacred feminine. Through the frameworks of new historicism and cultural materialism, the paper shows that the Church was successful in such aim because they hold power and are thus producers and authority of power/knowledge (Parvini, 2018; Bertens, 2014).

Question no. 3 sought to describe the degree of success the novel had in advancing its feminist agenda. The researchers' assumption on this matter is that the book is not that successful because of relegating Neveu to the background and just ending being contented on the dormancy of the sacred feminine. Such failure of the novel's feminist agenda was examined through Derrida's *différance*. The reason behind this is the seemingly non-closure of the text and its downplaying of the sacred feminine. The researchers argue that such downplaying, such turnaround of the sacred feminine as not-so-sacred in the end, is a product of *différance*, of the absence of transcendental signified.

Although this study did not involve human subjects, the researchers' ethical considerations lie in the fact that the analyses and extrapolations were filtered through the lens used and not their own interpretations alone. In so doing, the reading of the text assumes objectivity to a large extent and veers away from what the New Critics called "affective fallacy," which is a type of reading that relies solely on critics' interpretations, even biases (Cain, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Female and male representations

Protagonist Langdon discusses androgyny and ying and yang which advocate balance of power between male and female. But does the novel uphold this balance? To answer this question, events of the narrative which center on the predicaments Langdon and Neveu encountered are here interrogated.

Event 1. The novel began with the murder of Jacques Saunière, curator at Louvre Museum. At the crime scene, he was splayed like Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of the Vitruvian man, and drawn on his upper extremities is the pentacle, allegedly a feminine symbol. He also wrote on the floor several esoteric symbols, last of which is "P.S. Find Robert Langdon".

Having seen such note, the police, led by Captain Bezu Fache, summoned Robert Langdon to the scene. The police hoped that while talking to them, Langdon could say something that would be a sufficient ground for his arrest. Several minutes later, Sophie Neveu entered the scene. She was a cryptologist working with the police in their intelligence operations, thus occupying a job typical for men. Such choice of occupation empowers her and is a way of veering away from the cultural construct that women are weak, irrational, and powerless (Bertens, 2014).

Captain Bezu Fache, the police team leader, however, was not pleased with Neveu's presence. Neveu nonetheless entered the crime scene, which had traditionally been dominated by male investigators in crime fiction. Such action, which seems to disregard the male head, Fache, adds force to Neveu's empowerment as a woman.

Such empowerment, however, is full of contradictions. Although Neveu finished her cryptography schooling in England at Royal Holloway, Fache blatantly thought she weakens the police force because of her lack of physicality for the work. In addition, she being "in an office of middle-aged men . . . drew eyes away from the work at hand." These notions are anti-feminist. Despite such objectification and sexism, Neveu could prove Fache wrong. Seeing that Langdon being the suspect could easily fall prey to Fache's custody and interrogation, she helped him "escape", so to speak, from Fache's watch through putting on a soap the tracking device

planted in his jacket, and eventually flinging it outside onto a moving truck. Langdon could indeed say that Sophie is a "lot smarter than he was."

Through these actions, therefore, Sophie had become an empowered woman. By helping Langdon, she had shown that women could also do what men can do. There seemed to be a deconstructionist role reversal in order to empower her character as a woman.

Events 2 and 3. While the police were out looking for Langdon, whom they believed fled, Langdon and Neveu returned to the crime scene and looked at the codes Saunière had drawn. Neveu immediately decoded the numbers through only rearranging them to the Fibonacci sequence 1-1-2-3-5-8-13-21. According to Sophie, the reason behind the writing of this in the crime scene was for Saunière to attract her attention. It was later learned that the assassinated man was her grandfather.

Next, Professor Langdon was the one who decoded the second and third line: "O Draconian devil/ Oh lame Saint!" as "Leonardo da Vinci! The Mona Lisa!" A seeming imbalance of power seemed to have resulted from the Langdon's being able to decode the anagram, for Sophie thought she should be the one who had figured out the anagram. In the first place, that was her specialty; while Langdon's was on the arts. This part of the novel, therefore, seemed to have favored Langdon.

Event 4. The stripping of power mentioned in event 3 was redeemed by Sophie in event 4. Before the painting Madonna of the Rocks, a museum guard accosted Langdon and tried to arrest him. Sophie held the painting Madonna of the Rocks like a hostage to ensure Langdon did not get arrested. While holding the painting, she found a key at the back of it, embellished with a fleur-de-lis and the initials P.S. With such hostage, Sophie was able to disarm the guards. She and Langdon were successful therefore in fleeing from the museum. Not only was she able to figure out the third anagram (So dark the con of man = Madonna of the Rocks) but her skills and instinct on getting the painting as hostage idealizes her potential as a woman. In an androcentric or male-centered environment, she showed she had the capability to uncover her grandfather's secrets initiated by the fleur-de-lis key and to protect the wrongly-accused Professor Langdon.

From these events, post-structuralism's loud articulations are obvious. Whereas traditional structuralism and cultural anthropology posited women as domesticated, subjugated, or lacking power, Sophie's character undermined such construct. The sign "woman" here is not anymore kept within the bounds of patriarchy, for she was able to slyly and confidently defeat the male guards. The sign "woman" now had displaced significations - empowered and can do anything for a goal at hand and for the aim of protecting Professor Langdon, a male. She was playing as a detective at first, then became a victim because the assassinated person is her grandfather, and at the last part, she became a suspect because of her

unlawful actions of having the painting as hostage. Such displacements of identity are post-structuralist in nature and form huge gaps from the traditional construct of female figure.

Event 5. A balance of power resulted in the events at the Swiss bank where the fleur-de-lis key led Robert and Sophie. They were in a teamwork as they figured out what the number of Saunière's vault is.

Event 6. Bank manager Vernet helped Sophie and Robert get away from the police who were in front of the bank through getting them on board an armored truck. On the road, however, he transformed into a sinister force - again invoking post-structuralist indeterminacy and unpredictability of identity.

He then turned out as a pseudo-protector of the vault which Saunière left to Sophie. He brandished his gun, threatening the two. Langdon, however, was able to trick Vernet by slamming the truck's door to him. They then maneuvered to escape aboard the armored truck. Vernet was left alone, angry on the road.

These events stripped Sophie of her empowerment as a woman. Like with the anagram case previously, she was expected to defeat Vernet because she was trained in the police force. It was Langdon, a middle-aged professor not trained in armed battle, who did it. As they got away from Vernet, Langdon drove capably the armored truck, which entailed that Sophie was in the passenger's seat, lacking power. Imbalance of power therefore resulted from this, and was corroborated by the lines: "Her grandfather's rationale for including him was now clear. Sophie was not equipped to understand her grandfather's intentions, and so he had assigned Robert Langdon as her guide. A tutor to oversee her education." These lines blatantly say that Sophie is unequipped, while Robert is equipped.

Event 7. Sophie and Robert's journey away from Vernet led them to Chateau Vilette, residence of historian Sir Leigh Teabing. Langdon and Teabing were the ones who educated Neveu about the sacred feminine, the secret protected by the secret society in which Jacques Saunière is the present grandmaster. In their discussion, the sacred feminine was the power of women through the ages that had been raped and taken away by men.

Meanwhile, the Holy Grail which was not the cup on which Jesus drank was connected to the sacred feminine because according to Langdon and Teabing, the early Christian church was supposedly in the protection of Mary Magdalene. She was after all the wife of Jesus who bore him a child. After Jesus' death, she went to France and had their lineage protected by the Priory of Sion.

These exchanges of information between Langdon and Teabing put Sophie at the periphery. Totally naive of these matters, she just listened and got educated

by the two men, thus disempowering her. Langdon indeed was "her tutor to oversee her education." Tasked to guard and guide one of Jesus' granddaughters, Langdon was the one who received power on these parts.

Event 8. Silas, the murderer of Jacques Saunière and also in hot pursuit of the Holy Grail, arrived at Chateau Vilette and threatened the three. Sophie and Leigh were held at gunpoint, while Langdon was knocked unconscious. In fact, the text reads: "Sophie Neveu, despite working in law enforcement, had never found herself at gunpoint until tonight." From here, major changes resulted in the novel's depiction of Sophie. Formerly an empowered woman, she was now helpless. At this point, Sophie had only the handicapped Teabing to help her.

Solving the problem was Teabing who mauled Silas while Sophie kicked him in the face. Langdon, on the other hand, had done nothing. Although Sophie played a crucial part here, it was noteworthy that Silas's defeat was mainly because of Teabing. It could be said therefore that Sophie was not fully empowered in this case.

Event 9. Now in England to continue their Grail quest, Langdon and Neveu were puzzled on who was the knight whom a pope interred. Langdon was able to figure this out, while Sophie continued to be silent and just remained a sidekick.

Event 10. It is in this part set in Westminster Abbey in which Sophie's empowerment continued to be undermined. Formerly the kind erudite who openly welcomed Langdon and Neveu, Teabing was revealed as the actual archenemy, the Teacher, who told Silas to kill Saunière and who seemed to have great concern for the Holy Grail - but using wrong ways. Teabing who claimed to be the Teacher therefore displaced the meaning of the title Teacher. Known to be Jesus' title, it was used by a person who has evil plans. The sign "Teacher" therefore was deconstructed.

Sophie eventually was held at gunpoint, while Teabing preached to her that she was the reason why the secret of the Holy Grail had been kept. Its truth could have been released and freed women who have been under the cruel clutches of patriarchy. With this situation, Sophie eventually became the conventional damsel in distress. Langdon, on the other hand, realized that he should bring Sophie from this predicament - alive. Furthering the degradation of Sophie's empowerment, Teabing said he could not imagine that Saunière bequeathed the keystone to an unqualified, estranged granddaughter who required a symbologist baby-sitter. Also asked if she knew the password, Sophie now distraught said no. Kneeling (a symbol of her submission), she did not know what to do anymore.

These events totally diminished from Sophie her last specks of empowerment. Now under the mercy of a handicapped man, she although in law enforcement had not done any good for self-defense. Thanks to Bezu Fache and his

men who arrived in time and apprehended Teabing after he learned that all events, including Saunière's death, have been done under the machinations of the historian Teabing.

Synthesis. Events 1 to 10 in the foregoing discussion show that Sophie Neveu's empowerment was not stable, subject to oscillation. At first, she seemed to own the power because of her job, along with her intellect, physical prowess, and tactics. Robert Langdon, caught in a predicament of being the prime suspect, seemed powerless in the beginning but was helped by Sophie. There seemed to be a balance - a yin and yang - of the two at the beginning. As it turned out, however, Sophie's stint in the police force was questioned by the sexist Fache. Also, power seemed to have been transferred from her to Langdon because it was he who solved majority of the codes left by Jacques Saunière. He grabbed the limelight because of his expertise in symbology that was needed in the challenges they encountered.

Meanwhile, Sophie seemed to have been relegated to a sidekick role towards the middle of the novel. Her being in the law enforcement proved useless as she was not able to protect herself and Langdon. She further spiralled downward to being a damsel in distress, a stereotypical role in literature that belittles women who are in need of men to save them. Therefore, it could be said that the feminist agenda of the novel might have been successful at first through Sophie Neveu, but it soon spiraled downward to defeat. The novel began with Sophie Neveu taking the limelight, then balance between her and Langdon, then Langdon leading the way towards the end.

Re-historicized religion and gender. German philosopher Frederic Nietzsche once said that people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim: "Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself imported into them" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2012). In writing about the sacred feminine, Dan Brown blatantly pointed this out. Allegedly, those who occupy positions of power - religious leaders specifically- have erased the sacred feminine from the record of the world and replaced it with masculine discourse. With the aim of redeeming it, the *Da Vinci Code* in claiming that power underlies what people believe as true aims to revise the history of gender and religion. Further, with the goal of regaining sacred feminine's lost glory, it undermines 'truth' through exposing that writing of 'facts' is always steeped in power relations. This section of the paper thus explores the ways in which the novel presents the silencing of the sacred feminine, namely: a) the sacred feminine and the Church and b) Mary Magdalene and the Church.

Sacred feminine and the church. The book claims that the Catholic Church, through its discourses that eventually materialized to wicked actions, played a crucial role in doing away with the sacred feminine. In its aim to rule a world within the bounds of patriarchy, it "conned" the world, thus bringing to mind its "deceitful

and violent history." Its missions - the crusades specifically - aimed to "re-educate the pagan and feminine-worshipping religions" in order to bring them out of such forms of worship, which the church labelled "evil" and masculine religion as "good," thereby forming a binary opposition.

Historian/philosopher Michel Foucault claimed that those who hold power maintain their position through discourses, thus forming power/knowledge that oppresses the underprivileged and the disempowered. This idea is quite obvious in the novel. Since the church had the power to decree or set what is right and what is wrong, the novel claimed the Church allegedly used such power/knowledge to oppress women. With the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches' Hammer) as their primary power/knowledge instrument, they thus silenced freethinking women - that is to say, empowered women who might turn out to be their enemies. These women were believed as being the threat of toppling down the patriarchal, religious hegemony they had set as instrument of social control. The novel also mentioned Eve, thus claiming that her downfall had always been exploited as root for mankind's fall from grace.

Therefore, with these subversive ideas that the novel preaches, it thus puts the blame to the church as the primary culprit behind women's oppression for such a long time. In fact, because of such female displacement, the world suffered drastically, for the supposed male-female equilibrium already spiralled out of control. The novel claims that the church because of its hegemonic masculinity is therefore to blame in the world's testosterone-fueled wars, misogynistic societies, and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth.

Within the context of Foucault's power/knowledge, the religious discourses in those times thus subjected people to false consciousness through constructing a binary between men and women. Through patriarchal hegemony, religion's minions have proclaimed a domination of beliefs and values that are anti-women. It is as though the novel says that those who carried out the church's discourse through the crusades have done so through consent. Because of such power/knowledge, they policed "free-thinking women," thus totally oppressing and displacing them (Galvan, 2018; Montag, 2018).

Moreover, within new historicist lens, the church wrote its history of domination through constructing discourses that maintained its seat of power through marginalizing women. Without a doubt, the novel implies that since the church still maintains its power today, it still wields such power. Also, the perpetuation of hegemonic patriarchy and subjugation of women are due to the church's dark actions in the past.

Mary Magdalene and the church. The book claims that the church's power to marginalize women is most pronounced in its treatment of Mary Magdalene, the

allegedly wife of Jesus and most famous manifestation of the sacred feminine. This is according to Gnostic gospels (body of writings about Jesus that were not included in the biblical canon). Langdon claims that Mary Magdalene has been treated as a prostitute in the biblical canon because of the church's aim of hiding the truth about her, thus a convoluted Biblical canon. The novel even claims that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child, and their lineage could be a potent force to destabilize the patriarchal church. It was later revealed that the Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene's lineage and later interpreted as her bones which are evidence of the sacred feminine.

Within the context of new historicism, these claims by Langdon and Teabing about Mary Magdalene undermine gender and the history of religion as people know them. History as a unified entity composed of indisputable facts is totally put into question, especially so Langdon and Teabing are portrayed as experts in history, hence their credibility. New historicism asserts that history is textual. These texts are steeped in power relations between those who wrote them (who ultimately possess power) and those under their influence.

Along this view, biblical history is put into question as the novel asserts that what have been included in the Bible are only those writings capable of supporting the power of the church. While contradictory histories exist between and among writings about Jesus, those that are potent to support the church's power are included, while those "rival stories and discourses" (namely the Gospels of Phillip and Mary Magdalene) are suppressed or marginalized (Bertens, 2014).

From the point of view of cultural materialism, these discourses on Mary Magdalene are thus disturbance to the seemingly stable, clean, and clear hegemony of patriarchal Catholicism. The "histories" about Mary Magdalene in this novel expose that in patriarchal hegemony, there are oppressed women who thereby make up the crack in this hegemony's clean surface. Mary Magdalene and the disempowered and marginalized women she stands for – whose voices people hardly ever heard – form the dissident potential in society's (in general) and the novel's (in particular) patriarchy (Galvan, 2018).

Empowerment

Determining the extent in which the novel succeeded in empowering women seems a dubious idea at this point of the paper. The previous section declares a positive answer to this question because the alleged writings on Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail are empowering to women. Discussion in the first section, however, are problematic along this view. The modern-day manifestation of sacred feminine, Sophie Neveu, had been portrayed as not so empowered because Langdon took the limelight in dealing with the challenges they encountered, while she seemed to have sat back for she had done nothing to protect

herself when threatened by the handicapped Teabing. These answers therefore showed that the novel's feminist cause seemed ambivalent in its stance.

The end of the novel further complicates this. At Scotland, having now found her grandmother and brother, Sophie chose to stay there, thus somehow domesticated like the traditional woman in society and in literature. Langdon, on the other hand, continued his powerful career as a professor. In addition, he was the one who figured out where the Holy Grail (Mary Magdalene's bones). The end, therefore, somehow shows that the novel's feminist agenda is questioned.

On one hand, such ending puts the novel's feminist agenda in hanging. As mentioned earlier, the novel through cultural materialist perspective features the feminist agenda as a dissident potential in society's seemingly clean surface of patriarchy. This dissident potential is a crack that threatens the stability of society's phallogocentric culture, thus an exercise of agency/resistance on women's part. Nevertheless, this is just a dissident potential; it cannot totally subvert patriarchal hegemony which is all-pervasive. Only a total overhauling of culture could do so.

Another perspective this paper offers is an explanation through Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and *différance*. Derrida negates the common notion that language could give people a transparent access to reality and pure worldview (Walton, 2012). He adds that language is full of contradictions and that there is no such thing as transcendental signified (Dobie, 2015). A sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, but a certain signifier (a word) could have different signifieds (a concept/entity the signifier refers to). Because of deconstruction, language and reality could be played with, hence language's inability to capture truth and establish permanence (Bertens, 2014). Applied to a literary text, deconstruction plays the concepts in a certain literary piece, hence displaces the concepts' unitary meaning. *Différance* results from this. Identity is shattered and concepts are put into Derridean play.

Along this vein, the researchers argue that the signs "sacred feminine" and "Holy Grail" (which are representative of the novel's feminist agenda) are also caught up in Derridean *différance*. At first the sacred feminine's meaning is not certain. Then it was explained as the glory women had lost which must be regained. Similarly, the Holy Grail has been explained by Robert as "Holy Blood", "Royal Blood", "Mary Magdalene", "Mary Magdalene and Jesus' lineage", and "Mary Magdalene's bones." Such shifts and displacements of meanings thus follow Derridean *différance*. As a result, the identity of these two concepts has become blurred because of Derridean play with language. Just like the veracity of the church's authority is put into question by the novel's feminist agenda, such feminist agenda could also be subjected to deconstruction and *différance*.

The end of the novel proclaims such *différance*: “It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself. The beauty of the Grail lies in her ethereal nature . . . And for most, I suspect, the Holy Grail is simply a grand idea . . . a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today's world of chaos, inspires us.”

The supposed-to-be instrument of feminist empowerment has been seemingly downplayed to “simply a grand idea, a glorious unattainable treasure” that it seemed it is immaterial already, as hinted by this passage. Such shift of the Holy Grail's meaning seems like it oscillated from materiality/tangibility to immateriality/intangibility. *Différance* on the Holy Grail shattered its cult of identity. In addition, while readers might expect that it gets revealed in the end, it had not been, for it was said that “The Priory has always maintained that the Grail should never be revealed.” With *différance* in view, the expected ending was therefore displaced, shifted, or eluded. Hence, the Holy Grail (an embodiment of feminist potential) as a “signifying signifier has been displaced to the fringe, since there is no organizing, original, transcendental signified” that could withstand language's instability and fluidity (Guillemette & Cossette, 2006). It proclaimed itself to be the truth, but just like the way it deconstructed patriarchy, it itself got deconstructed. In the end, its feminist agenda is no transcendental signified, just like Truth, Identity, and History which religion established and the novel deconstructed (Dobie, 2015). In short, the novel has not succeeded in advancing its feminist agenda because it is caught up in its post-structuralist *différance*.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined Dan Brown's controversial novel, the *Da Vinci Code*. Through the frameworks of post-structuralist theories, namely: deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, and cultural materialism, this research has demonstrated that the novel, through Mary Magdalene and protagonist Sophie Neveu, is a powerful affront to the hegemonic masculinity and the history which religion has told people to believe for countless ages. In so doing, it is a powerful expose of the underlying power relations in the writing of truth, identity, and history that have stabilized organized institutions for long. It also is a dissident potential against patriarchy, hence an exercise of agency/empowerment for women. Therefore, the novel offers various interrogations of truth, identity, and history. However, Sophie's portrayal as a detective/cryptologist who was led to a damsel in distress also weakens its feminist agenda. Further, its post-structuralist configuration to deconstruction and *différance* is also another reason. It might have deconstructed patriarchy and its detrimental repercussions in contemporary society, but the novel was soon bound in its uncertainty on the signifier Holy Grail, a representation of marginalized women. The fact that the truth about the Holy Grail has never been revealed configures the novel to its language's and aims uncertainty and fluidity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend that this study, specifically the framework used, could also be extended to other popular literary and cultural forms in an attempt to interrogate discourses and practices that maintain gender inequality—towards improving the circumstances and future of women in contemporary society. The novel could also be re-examined using other lenses such as through postmodernism by Jean Francois Lyotard or ethics, aesthetics, and politics by Emmanuel Levinas and Giorgio Agamben.

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