

Arabs and the Da Vinci Code: Vision and Opinions

Ahmad H. AL Nuaimi¹ & Hanna Y. Abu-Jaber¹

¹ Department of Humanities, Faculty of Engineering Technology, Al-Balqa' Applied University, Amman, Jordan
Correspondence: Hanna Y. Abu-Jaber, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Engineering Technology, Al-Balqa' Applied University, P.O. Box: 15008, Amman 11134, Jordan. E-mail: hannaabujaber@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates, on one hand, the Arab readers' as well as the Arab elite's responses towards the American Dan Brown's Novel "*The Da Vinci Code*". This is performed through surveying the opinions of some Arab authors and religious Muslim and Christian clergy of the content of this novel, and its ban in some Arab countries. On the other hand, this study presents a perspective into the technical aspects used by Brown in composing his novel, especially those related to the novel genre, the significance of the place, and novel time movement. This study is based on the translated version from English into Arabic by Sema Abd Rabu (2004), and presents also a view on the translation itself.

Keywords: Arabs, Muslim and Christian clergy, The Da Vinci Code, fiction genre, place, time movement, politics taboo, fatwa

1. Introduction

Dan Brown's "*The Da Vinci Code*", ('Sheevrat Davinshi' in Arabic, published in 2004) found a great deal of interest by Arab readers immediately after translating it from English into Arabic when some Arab newspapers published some news and synopses about the novel. Although some Arab countries have banned the circulation of this novel, the ban has increased the Arab readers' interest in the novel, and the main question raised in the meetings of Arab writers has become: Have you read *Da Vinci Code*? If the answer is yes, another question then is asked: what do you think about it?

Someone can ask: why do some literary works cross over their language and country boundaries and become famous among other communities and languages? Are technical and artistic elements sufficient enough to make a literary work global? Why do some countries, especially in the Third World, ban some literary and intellectual works from entering their countries? Al- Huzaimi (2003) illustrates the ways in which books were destroyed in some Arab countries by burning, and by cutting or making holes in them. These ways of destroying books were carried out by the authorities and by scientists and scholars themselves.

But does the ban or burning books work in the era of satellite televisions, internet, and the open space?

The relationship between authors and societies are not always friendly, as it was not also friendly between authors and authorities. Many authors and intellectuals have been subjected to oppression, killing, torture, or rejection because of their opinions, which were considered offensive to religion or contradictory to the sacred topics in those societies. In his novel *Azazeel*, Zidan (2008) presents the biography of the Christian monk Hepa, who lived the turbulent period of the Christian Canon history in the early fifth century AD. The period was followed by the huge divisions between the major Churches on the backdrop of controversy over the nature of Christ.

In the Arab societies, for example, politics, religion, and sex are still taboos; not only the authorities that ban authors from writing on these taboos, but it is also the society itself which plays this role. Often the society is much stricter than the political authorities, especially when it comes to sex and religion. As for politics taboo, there are some indications that it has begun to weaken and dwindle in the Arab societies even before the Arab Spring broke out, but this should be further investigated.

Religion is still the most sensitive issue in the Arab countries. The reaction in this case would be very often great, but eventually, it would make the author who breaks this taboo famous even if he/she has a weak talent. Therefore, it is fair to say that authors are neither prophets nor always have good intentions; some writers, whose

literary or intellectual works did not receive any interest or were not popular, intentionally offended religion in order to be famous.

Dealing with sacred issues in culture always receives great attention especially by the recipients, to the extent that they often lose the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. Indeed, *Da Vinci Code* has employed this feature in a smart way to reformulate the novelistic information within a frame of suspense which does not leave any space for the recipient to think or to meditate, as if the novel borrows its structural type from the cinema, to the extent that *Da Vinci Code* can be considered an excellent cinematic novel (Jihad, 2009).

Although Dan Brown is not an Arab, his famous novel *Da Vinci Code* received a great interest from the Arab readers. It also caused a great debate. Did this novel receive all this interest because of its beautiful style, or charming structure or unique technique used by Brown? Or is it because of its unorthodox treatment of history with its provocative way of dealing with religion? The obvious answer to the question: What do novels have to do with theology? according to J. Russell Perkin (2009 p. 4), is not very much. He believes that "of all the literals genres, the novel is the most of this – worldly". The novel, as Perkin (2009) puts it, "is emerging as a picaresque and satirical critique of the old order... it is customary to link the rise of the novel with the demise of a religious world view." Investigating these issues is the aim of this study.

2. Opinion on Arabic Translation

Arabic translation of Brown's novel comes in 494 pages. The translator, Sema Muhammad Abd Rabu, translated the novel into Arabic; the first translated edition was published by Dar Al Oloum for Publishing in Beirut in 2004.

If we know that the first English edition was published in 2003, the translation indicates that the decision to translate the novel was quick and serious and confirms that the translator has put double effort to publish the Arabic version as soon as possible.

It seems that the idea of one person translating this huge work in such short time brought up some mistakes. There are some spelling errors in addition to Arabic grammatical mistakes. Furthermore, it would have been better if the translator wrote phonetic transliteration for the names of the characters and the religious societies mentioned in the English version next to the Arabic names just once, in order for the reader to pronounce them correctly, and to save the researcher who needs to figure out the names in its original English form from any mistakes in writing the correct spelling.

3. A Perspective into Content

The plot of the novel starts in the Louvre museum in Paris, when a member of the strict Catholic Opus Dei, Silas, sneaks into the museum and kills the guardian, Jack Sonnier, after he fails to get the secret he is looking for. While Sonnier was dying, he was told by his killer that the other three who knew the secret were killed too because they refused to reveal it.

Jack Sonnier had an appointment that night with the religious iconology and symbology professor at Harvard, Robert Langdon. A French police officer goes to the hotel, where Langdon stays, to inform him about Sonnier's murder and to ask him for his help to catch the murderer.

Robert Langdon tries to unlock the murder mysteries. He discovers symbols related to a secret organization, and because this organization does not want Langdon to know the truth, it starts chasing him by a French police agent, who is an expert in decoding, named Sophie Neveu. The reader discovers that Sophie is the grandchild of Jack Sonnier and that she was living with him but she left home after a dispute between the two.

The novel claims that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and has a daughter from her, named Sara. It also claims that Jesus' blood is still inherited till today, and that the royal ancestry of Jesus ran away to France, contradictory to the assumption of the Catholic Church. The novel tries to make this topic interesting when the reader discovers that Sophie is related to Jesus by blood.

The novel makes the search for the Holy Grail an element of suspense. The Grail has a very symbolic meaning in the novel; it could be the Magdalene herself or her relic. It could symbolize the mother, or the land, or the hexagram Star of David which, in turn, symbolizes the unity between man and woman.

4. Points of View of Some Arab Writers and Religious People

It is acknowledged that *The Da Vinci Code* is one of the most controversial novels ever. Arab intellectuals, likewise their peers in the world, as well as Christian and Muslim clergymen had disagreements with regard to their acceptance or rejection of the content of the novel. Some of them believe that it is the writer's right to say whatever he /she wants without any restrictions, while the others believe that no one has the right to offend

religious beliefs or to show skepticism towards them.

During the preparation of this study, we talked to four Jordanian writers to know their opinions regarding the prohibition of the *The Da Vinci Code* in some Arab countries in particular, and the ban of certain books, in general. Their opinions were as follows: Mohammad Jameel Khader (personal interview, Sep. 23, 2011), Jordanian short story writer and journalist, believes that "the ban of any literary work in any Arab country will make readers eager to read the book, and look impatiently for it everywhere". He added that "Dan Brown was lucky because his book was banned; this made him more famous among Arab readers than any Arab novelist".

As for Mohammad Sanajleh (telephone interview, Sep 14, 2011) Jordanian novelist and futurist, he said, "the prohibition of any literary work from being circulated among readers due to religious or political reasons would distract people from its artistic or intellectual merits, and encourages them to read it for several reasons, such as curiosity, pretension, or the desire to talk about it with others." He also added that "a forbidden fruit is sweet, but we should admit that there are some readers who care about knowledge, while there are others who love literature for pleasure. Regardless of the content of *The Da Vinci Code*, we must say that this novel contains a detective plot which attracts many readers".

Dr. Nawal Hifery, Algerian Contemporary Theater critic and academic researcher, believes that "the decisions of banning literary works and books that contain undesired topics about religion or politics can do little to keep them away from the readers, because today's world is full of open media such as the internet". She pointed out that "forbidding knowledge from having access to people is a process that can be portrayed as a child trying to touch the clouds". She also added that "Arab readers would not have had this great interest in the novel if it had not been for the much fuss made about it; it is evident from the fact that there were some earlier novels that Brown published before this novel, but they did not gain this interest from the Arab readers". Dr. Hifery (telephone interview, March 17, 2012) thinks that it is fair to mention that not only prohibition that attracts Arab readers; they have been interested in western authors for their beautiful styles, deep thoughts, exciting ideas, and human dimensions. She gave examples of those authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide, Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Paolo Coelho and others.

Iyad Nassar (personal interview, October 5, 2011) Jordanian short story writer and critic, believes that "the ban of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has most likely pushed the translator to take the decision to translate the novel immediately to fulfill the Arab readers' overwhelming appetite to read it since the ban has raised more questions about the essence of those sacred religious issues than it helped to subdue curiosity". He highlighted the negative consequences of any governmental or official decision of pen oppression due to long decades of mistrust between the authority and laymen. Nassar mentioned that, "Arab readers' great interest in banned books which break religious taboo is in fact a compensation for a hidden desire since the old days when the books of Averroes were burned by the religious authority. The great fame that Salman Rushdie has won is another example where breaking taboos can make writers famous even if their books are of little literary merit".

Having presented the opinions of some Arab writers, we would in this part present some opinions of other Arab Christian and Muslim clergymen about the content and the importance of this novel. With regard to the point of view of the Arab Christian people, we would like to refer to some sources on their reaction to the novel. I hereby note the stance of the Coptic father Khalil Takla who described the novel in a press statement as "children cartoon imagination" (Toghan, 2006), while pastor Matias Nasr, a scholar in Christian theology affairs said, "Although we are against the prohibition of artistic creativity, we do not allow to offend long-standing beliefs out of freedom of expression" (Toghan, 2006).

Father Rifa't Badr, who is one of the most oppositionist Christian clergy against the novel; said, "The person of Jesus Christ has been subject, since the early history of the church, to attempts of study and analysis, many of which are not based on the Bible or on any scientific basis" (Dilawany, 2011). Father Hanna Al- Keldany, of the Latin Archbishopric, has a different point of view; he believes that dealing with the person of Jesus in this novel does not imply that it is an unlawful work. He added that it is wrong to treat people as if they are underage and unable to take a decision about a book whether being good or bad (Dilawany, 2001).

Some Muslim religious scholars had clear as well as ambiguous opinions at the same time. For example, former Azhar representative, Sheikh Mahmoud Ashour, said, "The crisis of the *The Da Vinci Code* is staged; there is a great fuss about it here in Egypt though the book is available" (Toghan, 2011). However, he did not state clearly whether he was with or against the ban. Islamic scholar, Ibrahim Gharaibeh, believes that the novel of *The Da Vinci Code* is not more than an attempt to understand the effect of Christianity on other current religions. This effect was the reason for other sects, mixing between Christianity and other previous religions such as the case of the Knights Templar and Priory of Sion. Arab Christianity, in his opinion, believed for a long time in

monotheism and refusing the trinity which the current Christians believe in nowadays (Dilawany,2011).

An Arab Muslim inquired from the "Fatwa"² center more about the following issue: "I want to know what the stance of Islam is towards the notion that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene as mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*". The answer was, "there is no evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene or another woman, but if it was true, then there is nothing to be worried about, or to exaggerate it" (Islamweb.net).

5. Fiction Genre

The Da Vinci Code belongs to two novel genres: detective and didactic. Usually, these two genres pose many challenges and difficulties to literary criticism; there is, as we see it, an implied agreement among serious critics that detective novels deserve little critical concern. They believe that these novels are typical in terms of themes and styles. The difference between a detective novel and another lies in the way the detectives discover the criminal or the villain. On the other hand, the didactic novel faces other challenges; it is often directed to children or youngsters, which means, from researchers' point of view, that it focuses on information rather than literary or esthetical aspects.

However, Dan Brown has managed to overcome many problems that face both genres in *The Da Vinci Code*. He combined both detective and didactic elements together without falling into the temptation of making the novel a mere detective. His goal was bigger than just writing a detective novel. His was a novel that creates a mix of theological, intellectual and mystery components that can impact the reader very clearly and deeply as if a didactic novel, yet it does not sacrifice the literary qualities of great literature. The short words of compliments, written on the back of the novel, by Nelson DeMille, Clive Cussler, and Robert Crais confirmed the "defectiveness" of this novel. At the same time, their words stressed the author's cleverness that goes beyond a detective novel.

Nevertheless, this novel stresses that artistic or literary creativity is still a powerful weapon in the hands of those who wage ideological, intellectual, and religious wars. It is obvious that Brown is a party in a religious war; he declares his intention in the acknowledgement at the beginning of his book where he writes thanks to his friend editor, Jason Kaufman, for his deep understanding of the aim of this book (Brown, 2004). The fact is that this matter entails deep risks; many young Arab intellectuals have always believed in what many western writers have expressed in that literary works are not war fields, but fields of aspiration for beauty and creativity. It seems as if Brown is trying to shift the role of literature. But the fact is that ideological, religious and intellectual wars should be waged somewhere else.

What is more strange is that Brown mentions some prominent western scientists and artists, namely Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, Botticelli and Leonardo Da Vinci, who belonged to the religious society of Priory of Sion and went through "wars" like his one, as he believes.

Despite of all what has been said, it does not undermine the importance of *The Da Vinci Code* which brings up major questions to the dialogue table such as the relation between truth and imagination, and freedom and creativity. It pointed out indirectly, through the huge sales figures, that the novel still attracts readers.

6. The Significance of the Place

Place has a great importance in the novel not only because it is where events occur, but also because it turns to be, in some narrative works, a space that gives characters the ability to express their points of view. Furthermore, it is what helps the development of the novel, what carries the protagonist's vision, and what expresses the author's perspective. In this case, the place according to Mhabak (2005) is not a piece of a painting cloth, it is the space of the painting. This is the case with *The Da Vinci Code*; the author has displayed a genius skill in delineating the place and portraying its elements as he has been able to mix art with truth. He indicates from the beginning that the description of artistic and architectural works, documents, and secret rituals in this novel is a real and meticulous description (Brown 2004). The conflict in this novel is a conflict over the place not over the notion; the novel seeks through its detective plot to reach the place of the Holy Grail, the great secret, or the relic of Mary Magdalene.

This great secret is known only by four people who are destined to be all killed. Thus, a strong race begins between the disputing parties to take over the Grail and the secret. Some of them want to know this secret and announce its place and its reality, while others want to hide it for ever. The novel ends when the code which leads to the place of the Holy Grail is found.

The Da Vinci Code begins with describing the place with such accuracy; the first sentence in the novel is: Louvre Museum, Paris (Brown 2004). In general, the events take place in France and Britain. In spite of the fact that the first impression before reading the novel gives us the feeling that the space is going to be open, the meticulous

reading will prove the opposite.

In general, a place in any novel can be divided into closed or open place. Open places are like streets, public squares, fields, deserts, ...etc, while closed places are cafés, bars, prisons, houses, temples, rooms ...etc.

The reader of this novel can notice that most of the events occurred in a closed place which is the Louvre Museum. Then the novel directly moves us from the crime scene to another closed place which is the hotel where Robert Langdon is staying; and when a French police officer tells him about the murder of Jack Sonnier.

From these two closed places the novel moves to a third closed place which is the house of Silas. Then, the novel moves us to another narrower place, Silas' room, where he calls the Master and tells him that he accomplished his mission.

Afterwards, most of the events proceed within closed places. Even open places such as streets are reached through closed spaces such as planes, cars, and trucks during chase, escape or surveillance. It can also be noticed that the descriptions presented by the novel are for closed places like the description of the global headquarters of the Opus Dei in New York.

Notwithstanding, the interest of *The Da Vinci Code* in closed places has many reasons. The events of the novel begin with a murder. Later, the novel tells the reader about other crimes, where the crime scenes are often closed places. It also tells about many conspiracies for murders and machinations, and most often the planning for such acts as well as the investigations thereof happen in closed places. It also includes descriptions of secret rituals which usually take place in closed places. This could have psychiatric significance related to the author himself.

If it is true that Place is not only a naturalistic physical world that surrounds us; it frames us, realizes our selves and ideas, adopt our cultures, and its settings is found in our subconscious and values (Jum'a 2011). It is probably that Dan Brown, by selecting so many closed places in his novel, has started as a basis for his work from a special theology-related culture, or probably from a culture that is related to some closed secret rituals.

7. Time Movement

One of the stylistic themes that could be contemplated in this novel is related to time. Time is very important to the interior world of the novel; movement of characters, events and its structure. Time takes many forms in the novel such as, psychological time, chronological time, flash back "prolepsis" and flash forward "analepsis".

While chronological time indicates the consequence of events as occurred in terms of general time or that of a time machine, the psychological time as Al-Nu'aيمي (2004) maintains, cannot be measured; it is the character's special sense of its own time. It is natural that each one has his/her own sense. An hour for an injured person, waiting for someone to help or rescue him, is, for sure, different from the same hour that the same person would spend while drinking coffee with his girlfriend on the beach.

The novel begins by setting the chronological time of the murder as follows: 10:46 pm. The killer is keen to leave his victim suffering from physical and psychological pain for the longest time possible. He realizes that the bullet has not rested in the right place and that Sonnier will suffer for some time before he dies. Therefore, he refuses to shot him again and tells him before he leaves that pain is such a good thing. As for Sonnier himself, an old warrior in the Algerian war, he previously witnessed such horrifying slow death and this increases his psychological pain (Brown 2004).

As for flash back "prolepsis" and flash forward "analepsis" techniques, we can simply explain each one of them with examples from the novel. Kana'an (1995) believes that prolepsis is a reference from the author to future events in the novel like the famous saying of Anton Chekhov about the need to connect the appearance of Venice on the stage and future killing or suicide. An example on prolepsis in *The Da Vinci Code* is when Jack Sonnier tells his granddaughter, in the last phone call between them before he was killed, that he wants to tell her the truth about her family (Brown, 2004). This prolepsis is used to tell the reader that the novel will present serious and exciting information in the next chapters because what is said by Sonnier contradicts with what is known about the death of the granddaughter's family in a car accident long years ago. We discover in the last chapters of the novel that this granddaughter has a brother who was not with the parents when they died. This brother was hidden for his own safety and in order for the family clan to survive. We can say that such prolepsis offers exciting events to the reader that is not expected to be such important.

As for Brown (2004) analepsis is to recall and retell past events. This technique has weakened the novel and turned some of its chapters into lectures or scattered speeches. Most likely, this sign of weakness emerges from Brown's insistence to make *The Da Vinci Code* a didactic novel in the first place.

An example on analepsis is when Robert Langdon, a religious iconology and symbology professor at Harvard,

and a great scientist, lectures to a group of criminals at Essex County prison and has a discussion with them about issues that need experienced or educated people to understand. What is strange is that those prisoners have a good knowledge about Leonardo Da Vinci and understand his art works. They are also able to lead a discussion with the best expert in this field. They also know a lot about Isis and the ancient Egyptian Gods & Goddesses. What is stranger is that one of those prisoners inquires from Langdon if what he says is just Harvard nonsense to say simply that the Mona Lisa is only an ugly girl (Brown, 2004). When Langdon asks the prisoners: Have any one of you ever heard about an Egyptian God called Amon? One of the prisoners answers: Of course, he is the God of male fertility! (Brown, 2004).

Thus, the didactic objective is harmful to *The Da Vinci Code* and weakens the author's ability to deal with time in the novel. Brown created this weak Chapter 26 to present us with the following idea: Mona Lisa's face is not only what looks bisexual, but also her name which indicates a holy combination of a male and a female, and this is the secret of Da Vinci and the reason behind the Mona Lisa's vague smile (Brown, 2004).

One of the technical mistakes suffered by this novel is the long conversation between Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon while the Bank manager is smuggling them in a truck. Such a long conversation that looks like a lecture needs two relaxed persons, not two persons that are being chased.

Such examples of Brown's insistence to be a tutor more than being a novelist are clear. He is keen to look like the one who has the information and owns the ability to present it and analyze it at the same time, even if he is obliged to control the time in the novel using an inappropriate method.

Before moving to the conclusion, I would like to say that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* leaves us with the following impression: if you want to make an ordinary literary work a great one, just play around with established religious beliefs in a creative work that would find critics as well as readers to defend out of freedom of speech and the right of literature and art to criticize the taboos, and at the same time would find other strong believers who are ready to ban it or wage campaigns against it.

8. Conclusion

This study has come up with the following conclusions:

I. *The Da Vinci Code* received a great interest by Arab readers after it was translated directly into Arabic and has been controversial in Arab religious and cultural circles.

II. No Arab writer or a religious figure was enthusiastic about the novel content; or at least no one showed such enthusiasm in public. Despite that, Arab authors stood against its ban, whereas religious people had different opinions; some supported the prohibition, while some others disagreed out of freedom of expression.

III. The Arab writers, whose opinions were surveyed by this study, have agreed on the fact that banning this novel from the Arab market had a reversal effect. This contributed to spreading it among Arab readers and made them interested in its themes regardless of its literary and stylistic issues.

IV. *The Da Vinci Code* combines didactic and detective novel genres.

V. Most of the novel events occur within closed places, which have much significance.

VI. The novel employs narrative time techniques such as: prolepsis, analepsis, chronological time, and psychological time.

VII. The author is keen to look like the one who has the information and the ability to present and analyze it at the same time. Thus, he makes technical mistakes.

VIII. Although there are some technical mistakes, the novel still maintains elements of suspense, and is able to make the reader follow its events till the end.

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Notes

Note 1. An American novelist, born on June, 22, 1964 in New Hampshire. He wrote: Digital Fortress(1998), Angels and Demons(2000), Deceptio Point (2001), The Lost Symbol (2009) , and The Da Vinci code (2003) which was one of the bestsellers and was translated into 52 languages and was very controversial in many countries. See, *Dan Brown's website*, <http://www.danbrown.com/#/home> (accessed August 7, 2011). And See, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Brown (accessed August 7, 2011).

Note 2. A **fatwā** (Arabic: فتوى; plural **fatāwā** Arabic: فتاوى) in the Islamic faith is a juristic ruling concerning Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar. In Sunni Islam any **fatwā** is non-binding, whereas in Shia Islam it could be considered by an individual as binding, depending on his or her relation to the scholar. The person who issues a fatwā is called, in that respect, a Mufti, i.e. an issuer of fatwā, from the verb أَفْتَى 'aftā = "he gave a formal legal opinion on". This is not necessarily a formal position since most Muslims argue that anyone trained in Islamic law may give an opinion (fatwā) on its teachings. If a fatwā does not break new ground, then it is simply called a ruling. See, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatw%C4%81> (accessed October 11, 2011).