

Popular Literature and Dan Brown: Decoding The Da Vinci Code

Praneeta Das

Lecturer in English, Sarala Mohavidyalaya, Rahama, Jagatsinghpur, Odisha

Abstract

Known to be the bestseller author of thrillers, Dan Brown has earned himself a comfortable place in the arena of Popular Fiction in contemporary times. The American author Dan Brown needs no introduction when it comes to his fame and his novels attaining wide readership all around the world. As the likes of Sidney Sheldon and others, Dan Brown's approach to the thriller genre and Popular Literature is unique in itself. This paper aims to decode the obsession of Dan Brown novels, especially through the close reading of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). This paper will also shed light on how thriller as a genre has given a boost to not only Popular Literature but also to the production of film adaptations and television series, highlighting different interpretations, perceptions and to top it all the commercial value.

Keywords: Dan Brown, Popular Literature, Popular Fiction, Thriller, *The Da Vinci Code*

Popular Literature and Popular Fiction

The technological innovation in printing and the demands for literacy and education have proved to be great facilitators for the increased production and consumption of popular literature. Simon in her book chapter titled *Popular Literature* (2000) has given her views on the usage of the term. She points out that "Since the term popular has generally been linked to the technical ability to reproduce cultural products mechanically, the phrase Popular Literature describes literature from the beginning of printing onward, but especially the dramatic increase in literary productions after 1765" (792). The industrial revolution is significant here. For instance, the works of literature that were previously produced for the consumption of the elites, became accessible to large sections of society. But one might still ask what exactly is Popular Literature? According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Popular Literature is any written work that is read or is intended to be read, by a mass audience" (Cunningham). Also, it can be said that, "The adjective "popular" thus not only delineates the common taste of a majority of people but also always connotes accessibility and "of the populace"—the people's choice" (Simon 792). In recent times, this term encompasses international best-sellers, popular fiction or genre fiction (including thrillers, romances, science fiction, fantasy, mystery, and war books), widely circulated periodicals, digital texts such as fan fiction, audio books and many non-fiction books too.

The concept of Popular Fiction is discussed in the book, *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (2012). According to Glover and McCracken, "popular fiction is frequently thought of as those books that everyone reads, usually imagined as a league table of bestsellers whose aggregate figures dramatically illustrate an impressive ability to reach across wide social and cultural divisions with remarkable commercial success" (1). The book also discusses how this straightforward phrase can turn ambiguous and misleading. The authors claim that the lack of clarity in the subject of study makes it difficult to come

up with a precise definition of popular fiction. Popular fiction, in this way, refers to a cultural creation that has evolved over time and differs depending on its location and cultural context (1). In her *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001), Makinen points out that:

Popular formulaic fiction is usually defined as the fiction that is read purely for pleasure, as a form of escapism. This is the sort of fiction that is read wholly for pleasure and is therefore part of one's leisure activity...the popular novel is there simply to entertain and to divert: if it fails to do this then it fails in its main. (11)

For a very long time, the bridge between high art and low art, culture of the elites and low culture, serious/literary fiction and popular fiction, has been maintained by scholars and thinkers. With the advent of cultural studies and postmodern theories, these dichotomies have been greatly dismantled. As per Simon "By contrast, the newer term popular literature promises to allow for a "plurality of methods" (Petzold and Späth) intent on discovering the specific interrelations between literature, mass production, distribution, and consumption" (792). Moreover, locating the importance of popular fiction, Mayerson has opined that:

"Popular fiction" as a general object of study has rarely been explored, in part because it is often subsumed under the umbrella of popular culture. This is a mistake: just as film and television have developed their own approaches that reflect the unique social, cultural, political, and industrial dimensions of each medium, so popular fiction should occupy its own critical space. (21)

Thriller as a Genre

Thriller is one of the genres of Popular Fiction. Read by the masses and packaged for its commercial value, it is the true epitome of what Popular Literature stands for. Not only novelists, but filmmakers and television creators also make use of thriller as a genre. Thriller as a genre of fiction overlaps with other sub-genres such as suspense, crime, and detective fiction. Thriller novels are driven by dark, captivating, and intriguing plots. One can hardly find comic elements in a thriller novel. The thriller novelists have laser focused expertise in delivering heightened feelings of excitement, suspense, anticipation, anxiety and exhilaration through their works. A thriller generally keeps its audience on the "edge of their seats" as the plot builds towards a climax. The readers become actively curious as they turn pages

vigorously. The 'what next formula' and nail-biting action is the key to thriller novels. Many literary devices such as plot twists, unreliable narrators, cliff-hangers and red herrings are often use. In his introduction to the book titled *Thriller* (2006), Patterson explains that:

...Thrillers provide such a rich literary feast. There are all kinds. The legal thriller, spy thriller, action-adventure thriller, medical thriller, police thriller, romantic thriller, historical thriller, political thriller, religious thriller, high-tech thriller, military thriller. The list goes on and on, with new variations constantly being invented. In fact, this openness to expansion is one of the genre's most enduring characteristics. But what gives the variety of thrillers a common ground is the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness, all designed to generate that all-important thrill. By definition, if a thriller doesn't thrill, it's not doing its job. (Patterson 2006)

Dan Brown and Characteristic elements of his works

The American author, Dan Brown needs no introduction given his prominence and the massive global readership of his novels. His approach to the thriller genre and popular literature is distinctive in itself, much like that of Sidney Sheldon and others. He is not a newcomer to this genre. Intricate plots, use of

history, religious symbols, interesting conspiracy theories, and suspenseful action are all featured in each of his books. In Brown's novels, a variety of codes, puzzles, anagrams, ambigrams, and messages concealed in scientific findings and pieces of art are introduced as fresh, exciting devices. One of his greatest achievements as a writer is his remarkable capacity to muddle the distinction between fact and fiction, leaving his readers uncertain of the validity of what they have read. Helfers sees that “the author turns reality on its head so plausibly and so challengingly that it becomes impossible to finish a Dan Brown novel and not start a quest to find the truth behind the fiction” (21).

The Da Vinci Code

The Da Vinci Code (2003) belongs to Dan Brown's Robert Langdon thriller series. The other novels in this series are *Angels & Demons* (2000), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013) and *Origin* (2017). With millions of copies sold and translated into several languages, the Robert Langdon series has also been adapted into films and television series. The secret behind Brown's mania requires critical attention. The close reading of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) will help in decoding how he has tapped into the genre of thriller and contributed to the space of Popular Fiction. As the Robert Langdon series is known for their engagement with religious versus science, secret societies and historical facts, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) is no exception to this. This novel combines all these elements into an exceptional thrilling and nail-biting experience that catapulted Dan Brown to a celebrity status overnight. He got the inspiration for this novel while studying about the hidden meanings in Da Vinci's artwork for example *The Last Supper*. Before beginning to write *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Dan Brown spent a year learning as much as he could about Da Vinci and symbology. Additionally, he researched and spoke with members of Opus Dei, a contentious group within the Catholic Church. Also, the personal upbringing of Dan Brown in a Christian family with parents as academicians, influenced him to bring forth the discussions on the conflict between science and religion through his works.

The Da Vinci Code (2003), achieves Dan Brown's aim to provoke curiosity among readers about the history of Christianity such as the lineage of Jesus Christ, speculation concerning the Holy Grail legend, the significance of Mary Magdalene and the non-canonical gospels. Though the novel is sometimes critiqued for historical and religious inaccuracies, it is the unusual blend of bit of history and a lot more fiction that lures the reader's attention to popular beliefs and doubts. In this novel, Dan Brown has conjured a thought-provoking story. The story begins with a cold murder of Louvre curator and Priory of Sion grandmaster,

Jacques Sauniere. The protagonist, Robert Langdon, receives an urgent request to assist with the investigation of a murder that serves as a cryptic, symbol-based evidence to be used as a lead. From this starting point, the readers get thrown into an incredible story that expands into a manipulated battle between the Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion (both are religious organisations). The theme of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) can be understood through the following lines:

As someone who had spent his life exploring the hidden interconnectivity of disparate emblems and ideologies, Langdon viewed the world as a web of profoundly intertwined histories and events. The connections may be invisible, he often preached to his symbology classes at Harvard, but they are always there, buried just beneath the surface. (22)

The novel's plot holds the reader's interest from the very beginning and allows one to ponder upon alternating ways of looking at history. It also makes the readers question if the story's beliefs are rationally valid. The major conflict in the novel includes Robert Langdon's attempt to decode the message left behind

by Jacques Saunier and find the hidden secret of the Priory of Sion. The character Robert Langdon acts as a detective, actively looking for clues and decoding the mysterious, symbolic codes in the paintings of Leonardo and in the anagrams of Saunier. The climax of the novel is served with the revelation that Leigh Teabing or the Teacher is the man behind the murders. The action in the book comes to a close with incidents like Robert Langdon's visit to Rosslyn Chapel, the identification of Sophie Neveu's family (a cryptologist and Saunier's great-granddaughter), and Langdon's trip to the Louvre, which he believes to be the last resting location for the Holy Grail.

Although this novel, like other thrillers, opens with a murder and the overgrowing suspense. The reader is then engrossed by the story's twists, turns, escapes from almost being captured, and revelations. The traditional interpretation of Leonardo Da Vinci's artwork is dissected at the outset of Dan Brown's multi-layered novel, which then progresses by self-reconstructing the symbolic framework of the artistic and religious worlds and concludes with an open-ended, thought-provoking conclusion.

Dan Brown's mania is not only evident because of the action and story he presents through his thriller novels but also due to his characterisation. In *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), we find many characters working in pairs. The Harvard professor of symbology Robert Langdon, pairs up with Sophie Neveu, the cryptologist to solve the mystery behind the murder. Fache and Collet, Bishop Aringarosa and Silas, and Teabing and Remy also work in pairs. The characters are well-developed, and the author sheds sufficient light on each of them for their actions to be justified throughout the novel.

The style of writing adopted by Dan Brown also makes him a favourite among the readers all across the world. As the action in *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) is fast-paced, the language is simple and easy to follow. The use of point of view is remarkable. Third person point of view is used in most parts of the novel. The suspense in this way is kept intact and the readers keep on guessing about what the character is going to do next. At several points in the novel, the readers find themselves sitting on the edge of their seats, wondering what the next twist would be and waiting for the next piece of the puzzle to be revealed. By referencing real historical individuals like Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Constantine the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, and others, as well as real places like the Louvre and Rosslyn Chapel, and incorporating them into his compelling fictional plot, Dan Brown utilises fact in fiction.

Beyond just telling an interesting and entertaining story, Dan Brown has the unique ability to draw the reader into the universe he has created. Because of his depiction of the human condition and predicament in an easier manner, the novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) feels accessible to readers. He gives the readers the impression that they are too part of his story. When he describes their settings, people who have been to those places in person may visualise the characters acting out their parts there in real time. Novels like *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) causes the reader to reevaluate a variety of topics, such as the world in which we live and any hidden meanings that symbols might hold. Therefore, it is without an engaging and thought-provoking piece of Popular Literature.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the understanding of Popular Literature and Popular Fiction. It has depicted thriller as a genre of Popular Fiction and its characteristics. This paper has also shed light on how thriller as a genre has given a boost to not only Popular Literature but also to the production of film adaptations and television series, highlighting different interpretations, perceptions and to top it all the commercial value. By delving into Dan Brown's approach to the thriller genre and Popular Literature, this paper has

successfully decoded the obsession of Dan Brown novels, especially through the close reading of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

References

1. Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. Random House, 2003.
2. Cunningham, John M. "Popular Literature". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/art/popular-literature>. Accessed 20 September 2023.
3. Glover, David, and Scott McCracken, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
4. Helfers, John. *The Unauthorized Dan Brown Companion*. Citadel Press, 2006.
5. Makinen, M. *Feminist Popular Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
6. Patterson, James. *Thriller: Stories to keep you up all night*. Harlequin, 2006. Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. "Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, pp. 21–35. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416317>. Accessed 20 Sept. 2023.
7. Simon, Sunka. "Popular Literature." *Encyclopedia Of German Literature*, 1st ed., vol. 1, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp. 792–794.