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**The Feminine Divine: The Black Madonna in  
Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and  
Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code***

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of the Requirements for the Master Degree**

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## **Declaration**

we hereby declare that this dissertation entitled, “ **The Feminine Divine: The Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* and Mary Magdalene in Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code*”**, is our own work and that all the sources we have quoted from have been acknowledged by means of references.

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## **Dedication**

To my mother, my angel guard who gives sense to my life

To Mimi the joy of my life and the apple of my eyes

To my soul mate my sister Amina

To my dear brothers Hilal, Mohamed, and Chawki

To Mr. Akrib Abd Rahman for his help

To my dear cousins Hala, Naila, Aya, and Meriem

To my dearest friends: Rania, Meriem, Imen, Nadjet, Wahiba, and Ikram

***Khadidja***

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## Abstract

Today, the Feminine Divine returns into the scene in different domains such as arts, media, music, movies, and literature. The Feminine Divine or the Sacred Feminine becomes a new trend in contemporary literature. Different authors start to challenge the traditional representation of the divine and give a new radical representation of divinity. Sue Monk Kidd and Dan Brown are among those authors who give a new representation of the Divine in their works. This dissertation is intended to examine the how Kid and Brown have represented the Feminine Divine in their novels *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Da Vinci Code*. In addition, it also analyses the new role of women in the novels. In order to find answers to the research questions, the analytical approach and feminist theology are used. The result of this study shows that in both *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees* the divine was represented as feminine. For *The Da Vinci Code*, the divine is represented through Mary Magdalene a female character, while in *The Secret Life of Bees* the divine is represented through the Black Madonna a female and black character.

**Key words:** Feminine Divine, Feminist Theology, Black Madonna, Mary Magdalene.

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## Introduction

The Feminine Divine refers to the different female deities known as the "Mother Goddess" or the "Great Goddess". The Feminine Divine has other terms such as the Sacred Feminine, Goddess, Aphrodite, Inanna, Kali, Durga, Divine Sophia, Triple Goddess, Mother Earth, Persephone, and Lilith. The feminine image of the divine has existed since the earlier ages of history, and many different civilizations have worshiped female deities such as Ishtar the goddess of war and sexual love in the Sumerian Pantheon, and Isis who one of the most famous goddess of ancient Egypt .

At some point in history, the Feminine Divine has been suppressed and marginalized from the human heritage due to the intervention of the masculine religions that glorify a male god. The early Christian Catholic Church has worked consistently to exclude the Feminine Divine from the Christian tradition and to degrade the role of women in the different religious aspects as an attempt to promote male authority over women.

Lately, the debate over the Feminine Divine has been a present subject in many fields including mythology, theology, Jungian psychology, and literature. In the recent years, Contemporary literature has witnessed a noticeable growing interest towards feminist theology with shedding light on the portrait of a female image of god. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* are two popular literary masterpieces that have strongly revived the feminine image of the divine in contemporary culture.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Kidd has promoted a feminine portrait of the divine through the Black Madonna icon that used to be worshiped by African slaves. The Black Madonna has embraced a new image of the divine both as feminine and black. In the novel, the Black Madonna stands as a divine mother to the novel's female characters; it is a source of

empowerment in their lives and especially in the protagonist Lily Owens' life that helped her to find spiritual peace within her own self. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown has challenged the Christian doctrines by promoting Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife and the one who gave birth to his child. In addition, Brown claims that Jesus' message celebrated the Sacred Feminine as he wanted Mary Magdalene to lead the church after his death. However, Jesus' question was ignored by his male followers that instead, took power from Mary and seized control over Christianity.

For centuries, the patriarchal church worked to exclude and crush the concept of Feminine Divine from the Christian realm and its religious texts as an attempt to maintain the male dominance over Christian heritage and institutions. Alternatively, they worked to maintain a masculine image of god. This work attempts to explore the representation of the divine as feminine in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* by shading light on the image of the Black Madonna in *The Secret Life of Bess* and Mary Magdalene character in *The Da Vinci Code*. Hence, throughout our study we will try to answer the following questions:

- How did Kidd in *The Secret Life of Bees* and Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* represent the divine?
- Through what did they represent the divine in their novels?
- How does the representation of the divine as feminine contribute in promoting women's role?

The representation of the divine as feminine is a new trend in contemporary literature. The term *Divine Feminine* itself has come to the scene recently, and it has been the subject of interest from different writers and critics. The present study is hoped to give some advantages for future researchers who want to investigate about the new image of the divine as feminine,

it also tries to provide a contribution to literary study to those who are interested in studying Sue Monk Kidd and Dan Brown's works.

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* are both believed to be feminist novels *par excellence*. Thus, we will adopt a feminist critical approach to serve the methodology of the study. Many definitions are drawn from the concept of Feminism. But generally, Feminism is defined as a movement to promote women's status and their role in the different fields and it calls for equal rights for women with men. The Oxford learner's pocket defines Feminism as: "belief in the principle that women should have the same rights as men" (163).

Another definition states that feminism is a belief that women should have political, economic, and social equality with men (The World Book Encyclopedia). In her book, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, Bell Hooks, American feminist, and activist, defines feminism as: "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1). All feminists are concerned with women's oppression and discrimination due to their sex in a world that is believed to be a man-centered place. Different sub-movements have emerged from Feminism among them feminist theology which deals with feminism from theological perspectives.

The term theology is a Greek word composed of two parts "Theos" which means "God" and "logos" which means "treating of"<sup>1</sup>. So theology can be defined as: "The field of study and analysis that treats of God and of God's attributes and relations to the universe; the study of divine things or religious truth"<sup>2</sup>. According to the feminist theologians, traditional theology has a patriarchal nature, since it has been formulated by men in a culture that privilege men over women. In addition, traditional theology has ignored women as an essential part of the human life.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=theology>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/theologyqs>

*The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Da Vinci Code* provide a great scope for literary discussions from the point of view of literary theories and many researchers have conducted detailed studies about the issues that were raised in the novels. Many important ideas within the novels are worthy to be examined and among those is the representation of the divine as feminine that the present dissertation is willed to deal with.

In 2005, Jennie S. Knight worked on "*Religion and popular culture in America: Re-mythologizing the Feminine Divine in The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Life of Bees*". Throughout the study the writer attempts to explore the theme of the Feminine Divine in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* by shading the light on the Re-Mythologizing of the Divine Feminine through the use of Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code* and the Black Madonna in *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Amy R. Huseby, in her thesis entitled "*A Comparative Examination of Sacred Feminine Symbolism In The Poisonwood Bible and The Secret Life of Bees*" that was published in 2006, is interested in finding out how the floral symbols are contributing to reflect the sacred feminine in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. According to Huseby, Kidd has used floral names such as Lily and Rosalyn in order to show that the Feminine Divine can be found within the own self.

Siti Rodiyah in her thesis entitled "*The Feminine Symbols in Dan brown The Da Vinci Code*" published in 2007 analyzes the meanings associated with the feminine symbols in the novel such as "*The Last Supper*" which demonstrates to the viewers that Jesus and Mary Magdalene formed a couple or a pair. In addition, "*The Mona Lisa*" symbolizes the holy combination of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Another symbol is "*The Holy Grail*" which does not represent the holy cup of Jesus as it is known; rather it is really Mary Magdalene.

In her Extended Essay, “*The View of Women in The Da Vinci Code*”, Jonna Hoglin examines the image of women as described in the novel, presenting contradictory views held by Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* as well as the Christian religion. The writer wants to arrive at the point that women are marginalized and seen as sinful in the Christian doctrines and in the Bible. Meanwhile, women are given more importance and significant roles in the novel, considering its two female characters Sophie Neveu and Mary Magdalene.

The previously mentioned critical studies paved the way to the present study which entitled “*The Feminine Divine: The Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd’s The Secret Life of Bees and Mary Magdalene in Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code*”. It is a feminist study that attempts basically to examine the representation of the divine as feminine in *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Da Vinci Code*.

The present dissertation consists of three main chapters starting with a theoretical and sociohistorical background and ending with two practical ones. The first chapter deals with the definition of Feminism, as well as the explanation of feminist theology and feminist literary criticism. In addition, it includes a definition of the *Feminine Divine*, its historical background, and its re-emergence in literature. The second and the third chapters deal with the analysis of the aforementioned novels according to a feminist perspective emphasizing the representation of the *Feminine Devine* in each novel. As a result, we devote the second chapter to analyze Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* while we devote the last chapter to analyze Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Both chapters explore how Feminism is reflected in each novel. Thus, each chapter examines the new image of women and their role according to Brown then to Kidd. Finally, it is of paramount importance to shed the light on the main character that represents the *Feminine Devine* in each novel.

Research studies about *Feminine Devine* are needed to pave the way for other researchers to deal with this field in more details. This study lays the foundation for future

investigations about this topic as it concerns with the representation of the Feminine Devine according to different perspectives of writers.

## **Chapter One: A Theoretical and Sociohistorical Background for the Study**

Recently, the representation of the divine as feminine has become a popular topic not only in theology but also in literature. The representation of the divine as feminine is a central concern in both of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. Both novels have witnessed a world widespread and were turned into successful movies by Hollywood. The Sacred Goddess veneration took a very important status in the life of the ancient civilizations. Most of the ancient societies were matriarchal and they used to worship a female Goddess. However, the emergence of religions that promote a masculine image of god such as Christianity worked to marginalize the female Goddess veneration in order to overthrow it from the scene. Recently, the female Goddess veneration has witnessed a rebirth with the emergence of the feminist movement that attempted to bring the *Feminine Divine* back into the scene again.

This chapter aims to give the reader an understanding of the feminist theory and the Feminine Divine. The first part will deal with the feminist theory in addition to its sub-branch the feminist theology. Then, the second part will tackle the definition of the *Feminine Divine*, and a brief explanation of its historical development and its reemergence in literature.

### **1. The Feminist Theory**

Both of the chosen novels Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bee* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* involve the depiction of the Feminine Divine that the dissertation aims to tackle. Hence, since the study is aimed to raise issues concerned with women, the application of the Feminist theory is required.

Furthermore, relating Feminism with literary criticism as well as identifying the feminist theology would be beneficial and of an effective contribution to the study.

## 1.1 Defining Feminism

In the task of searching for an exclusive definition of what Feminism is; one can encounter multiple multifaceted definitions. Hence, one should keep in mind that no exact definition can be drawn for the concept. Bell Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* indicates that: “a central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to...arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is...” (17) and she quotes from Carmen Vasquez<sup>1</sup>'s essay entitled *Towards A Revolutionary Ethics* in which the latter refers to the inaccessibility to an exact definition of Feminism: “We can't even agree on what a "Feminist" is...There are as many definitions of Feminism as there are feminists” (17). Therefore, the subsequent lines will try to focus on the fundamental principles that the concept represents such as the quest for change to promote the status of women in the social, political, theological and cultural level:

Defining feminism can be challenging but it broadly includes women and men who act, speak and write about women's issues, rights and social injustice. Broadly, feminists are concerned with issues such as gender differences and equality for women. They all share one common goal: the liberation of all women from oppression and discrimination. (Botting and Houser 265 278)

For most, Feminism deals with studying women's position and situation in a patriarchal culture. Hook defines Feminism as “the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women any particular race or class of women” (26). Furthermore, Feminism is also concerned with the establishment of dynamic and effective policies and strategies that can make the world better place for the whole human life. As George Ritzer demonstrates in his book *Sociological Theory*:

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<sup>1</sup>An activist, writer, community intellectual and the current Coordinator of the LGBT Health & Human Services Unit for the NYS AIDS Institute

Feminism is a generalized, wide-ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a woman-centered perspective in two ways. First, the starting point of all its investigation is the situation and experiences of women in society. Second, it seeks to describe the social world from the distinctive vantage points of women...The third question for all feminists is: how can we change and improve the social world so as to make it a more just place for all people. (455)

Historians argue that the context has played a significant role in provoking the diversity of Feminism since different parts of the world led to the spread of diverse forms of Feminism determined by the motives and the qualifications of each version. According to Bruno:

When talking about feminist theories we are referring to a diverse and multifaceted corpus that resists simplifications or uniform labels. As a theoretical approach, feminism has been permanently engendering new versions of itself... Historically, also disparate regions of the world have led to the emergence of different versions of feminism, proving that contextual references do account for diversify in theoretical production. (3)

According to Humm, the word “Feminist” was used in France in 1871 to designate male patients having discontinuation in the growth of their sexual organs and the condition was diagnosed as “*Feminization*” in the medical terminology. Earlier, in 1837 Charles Fourier<sup>1</sup> originated the term “*feminisme*” when he wrote about the undeniable bond between women’s status and social progress. Later on, the term was imported to Britain during 1890s to refer to the different women’s movements for equal rights and to the US in the 1910s (1 2). Cristen Conger, writer and blogger for HowStuffWorks and a contributing writer for Discovery Newsclaims that: “It was during the 1890s that “feminism” in the sense of women-led activism for equality became a common term, migrating from France and entering the English language as early as October 1894 in a London newspaper article”<sup>2</sup>.

History has witnessed the emergence of multiple feminist movements at different periods in the form of waves and each one “describing and dealing with different aspects of the same feminist issues” (Krolokke and Sorensen 2). The first feminist wave emerged from

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<sup>1</sup> French philosopher and socialist thinker associated with utopian socialism

<sup>2</sup><http://science.howstuffworks.com/cristen-conger-author.htm>

the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, and it was concerned with political issues of women especially suffrage. The second feminist wave was not only concerned with women's political issues but also targeted to improve the status of women in the full civil life during the late of the 1960s and the 1970s. This latter witnessed the emergence of multiple types of Feminism, including liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and cultural feminism (Wood 77 79). She adds: "The third wave feminism is a reaction against second wave feminism and a response to its supposed failures. It is a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave" (91).

## **1.2. Feminist Literary Criticism**

Since the study aims to apply the feminist theory on a literary work, this section will try to facilitate putting the theory represented previously in the dissertation into practice. Hence, the subsequent lines will try to relate Feminism with literary criticism.

Feminist Literary Criticism can be regarded as the literary analysis that emerges from a feminist perspective. It stands against men's arrogance in claiming that literature must be a merely male-centered field. Dobie claims that from the old centuries, different Western cultures oppressed female writers due to the way women used to be regarded. Women were viewed as objects, "inferior creatures", and "lesser being" that have no potential or value (97). Therefore, Feminist Literary Criticism intends to value women's experiences and their contribution to literature. She further adds:

The premise that unites those who call themselves feminist critics is the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal; creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work. That social structure, they agree, is reflected in religion, philosophy, economics, education-all aspects of the culture, including literature. The feminist critic works to expose such ideology and, in the end, to change it so that the creativity of women can be fully realized and appreciated. (102)

The recent years have witnessed a noticeable influence of Feminism on literary criticism. It has changed the academic study of literary works and transformed the way literary texts are

published, reviewed and receipted (Plain and Sellers 1). Many “eloquent spokespersons” played significant role in literary and social development of women’s history that was divided by Elaine Showalter into three phases starting with the Feminine Phase (1840-1880) in which female writers adapted writing styles of famed male writers, and had to publish their works under male names to cover their gender identity moving to the Feminist Phase (1880-1920) in which women started to object the male domination and the unfair portray of them in male literature and call for equal rights with men, ending with the Female Phase (1920-present) which focused on including the experiences of women in literary fields.

Later, it gave female writers the opportunity to start writing about their lives and to remove the stereotype of women prompt from the tip of male authors away from the old restrictions and limitations, Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf are known most for their great contribution (Dobie 103 105).

The movement of the 1960s adopted Feminist Literary Criticism as a way to maintain women’s social and political rights through literature. According to Burry: “The feminist literary criticism is a direct product of the women's movement of the 1960 s...it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence” (122).

Therefore, Feminist Literary Criticism attempts to depict the unfair conduct toward women in male dominated societies, which was already discussed in older literary works. Burry states:“It[Feminist Literary Criticism] was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and proposed solutions” (121).

Influential literary works among these were introduced by British and French Feminists. For instance, Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the rights of Women” in 1792 sought to be as the prime work that paved the way for women to revise their situation and

position in society. Also, Woolf used “A Room of One's Own” that she wrote in 1928 to depict the discrimination of women and reestablish the ideal manliness. Simone De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949 in which she gave an exhaustive analysis of women's oppression in patriarchal cultures.

A major division within Feminist Literary Criticism has concerned disagreements about the amount and types of theories that should feature in it. The Feminism of the Anglo-Americans has attempted to be more doubtful about the traditional critical theory and very conservative when using it. It claims that this latter was a patriarchal production and focused on conventional critical concepts like theme, motif, and characterization. They regarded the traditions of realism in literature and dealt with it as a depiction of women's lives. On the other side, being influenced by post-structuralists; the French feminists have appreciated and used a big part of psychoanalytic criticism in their literary production and focused more on the language representation rather than the depiction of real life experience (Burry 125).

According to Kline:

While the former [Anglo-Americans feminists]group analyzed literary representations of women, the latter[French feminists] group focused on language and its role in producing knowledge... French feminists analysed the links between discourse and patriarchal ideology. They note that in order to speak and act publicly, women must adapt patriarchal discourse, a language that curtails women's expression because it does not reflect their experience or epistemology... Women are either forced to use a language that does not reflect their experience or be rendered unintelligible or silent in the public sphere. (206)

Feminist consciousness-raising drove women to revise their position and situation as they saw “the need to challenge patriarchal power or to analyze the complexities of gendered subjectivities” (Plain and Sellers 1 2). Rogers denotes that: “Instrumental to the spread of consciousness-raising across the USA and to the UK were the early writings that emerged from groups of women who wanted other women to know about the process that was changing their lives”. In *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*, Hook states the following:

Revolutionary feminist consciousness-raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized, perpetuated and maintained. The way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways we were victimized, exploited, and, in worse case scenarios, oppressed. Early on in contemporary feminist movement, consciousness-raising groups often became settings where women simply unleashed pent up hostility and rage about being victimized. (7)

One can observe that Feminist Literary Criticism's aim to appreciate and bring to light women's writing traditions and experiences starting with the protofeminist<sup>1</sup> writing has shaped the basis of modern feminist thought. Furthermore, involving in literature the depiction of women's oppression and position in male-centered cultures has contributed in raising the awareness of women and society as a whole to the oppression and marginalization of women.

### **1.3. Feminist Theology**

The word theology is derived from the Greek word *theologia* that combines two words; *theo* which means "God" and *logia* means "the study". Hence, theology means the study of God<sup>2</sup>. Since our topic is concerned with a feminist perspective towards the Christian doctrine, feminist theology in Christianity can be defined as a movement which attempts to redefine Christian theological matters from a feminist perspective. It works to promote and value women's contribution and position among the Christian authorities, reshape the God's image, and reconsider women's portrait in the Bible:

Feminist theology is rooted in the Christian women's movement that traced back into the 19th century. It wasn't until the ferment of the 1960's, however, and the increasingly hostile questioning directed at traditional institutions (e.g., the church) and patterns of thought (e.g., Christianity) that the question was posed with unavoidable directness: are Christianity and Christian theology irredeemably sexist, or can Christian symbols and patterns be re-imagined and re-stated in ways that properly value women? (Bouma 1)

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<sup>1</sup>Describes literature that anticipates the first wave of the feminist movement and examines the condition of women in society.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.dictionary.com/browse/theologyqs>

In her book entitled *Feminist theology*, Natalie Watson demonstrates that Enlightenment in the late of 1970 s and 1980s brought appreciation to people and their experiences and gave them the opportunity to challenge the Christian theology's traditions through claiming that it was dedicated only to maintain the dominance of the white man and his authority. By contrast, it did not operate to fit the multiple communities that were included in the big American community. Therefore, it needed reform to consider people's concerns and be devoted to do justice to them. Feminist theologians started to act and they focused on promoting women's lives and appreciating their existence. They opposed using the "Christian agenda" to marginalize women and elevate man over them because they regarded Christianity as a merely male-centered realm in which "women were forced to assume a male perspective if they wanted to be involved in the task of doing theology (1).

Watson also claims that feminist theology "involves an awareness of the ambivalence that many of the symbols and texts within the Christian tradition create for women...identifying dis-empowering readings of them and constructing and proposing new readings that advocate the full humanity of women" (2). She provides the following definition to feminist theology:

Feminist theology is the critical, contextual, and constructive, and creative re-reading and re-writing of Christian theology. It regards women and their bodies, perspectives, and experiences as relevant to the agenda of Christian theologians and advocates them as subjects of theological discourses and as full citizens of the church. Feminist theologians aim instead at the transformation of theological concepts, methods, language, and imagery into a more holistic theology as a means and an expression of the struggle for liberation. (2)

According to Isherwood, feminist theologians were conscious that achieving justice and equality for women was confined to detaching themselves from the Christian Church and traditions. They thought operating under male dominance will maintain authority oppression over women and that will prevent them from fulfilling their rights. This raised women's

awareness to revolt against the patriarchal Christianity which marked the beginning of post-Christian Feminism (5).

Most of the radical feminist theologians are considered as post-Christian feminists. They were feminists who were involved in the Christian Church and realized that the latter was a merely male-dominated realm by its origin, thus, contra women. Then, they recognized women's necessity to have their own goddess in order to overcome male authority over them. Therefore, they started to oppose the male Christian God that for them has contributed in authorizing women's inequity and the degradation of their status and turned to goddess veneration (Clifford 32 33).

Hilkert claims that for many feminists, the word "God" can only refer to a masculine "patriarchal God" in the human conception that is established in the male-dominated cultures. Moreover, they see that it is the Church to be blamed for repressing the goddess which represents the female image of God (341). Therefore, "Women moved from the archaic and misogynist views of woman and demand that the views of God should include female characteristics (Costner 4). Women's quest for improvement among social and religious structures, the feminist Goddess has been the substitute for them to object the patriarchal supremacy over Christianity. Daly states:

I have already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination... those which in one way or another objectify God as a being, thereby attempt in a self-contradictory way to envisage transcendent reality as finite. God then functions to legitimate the existing social, economic, and political status quo, in which women and other victimized groups are subordinate. (19)

One can note that the emergence of the female image of God has been an attempt for women to detach themselves from the patriarchal Christian tradition that promotes a male image of God and used to maintain male authority and oppression over women.

## **2. The Feminine Divine**

Based on archeological evidence, some scholars and archaeologists believe that the first human societies worshiped female Goddesses. Moreover, these societies were originally matriarchal societies where women controlled every aspect of life. With time and under some conditions these goddesses disappeared and became replaced with the male Gods. In our present days, the Feminine Divine is witnessing a growing interest more than any time. Due to its mystery nature, this topic becomes very controversial and debatable among theologians, psychologist, feminists, and writers.

### **2.1. Defining the Feminine Divine**

The *Feminine Divine* is a dynamic creative force that holds the powerful matrix of life. Only Women could produce new life, while men had no role in this reproductive process. Due to their ability to give life to another human being, women are more “sacred” than men. A woman can participate in the cycle of life by giving birth to a new soul. She is the principal source of every form of life on the Earth, and “Without the participation of the divine feminine nothing new can be born” (Vaughan Lee 4).

This *Feminine Divine* has an important role in the mysteries of nature; in the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. This feminine force is responsible for creating a new life for both female and male. She is the Motherhood of all the forms of life; her womb is the embodiment of the reproductive energies of nature birth, growth, death, and rebirth. She contains: “all opposites within herself, including male and female, creation and destruction. And she recognizes that life and death are of equal weight, held in balance to preserve the order of the universe” (qtd in Perot 12).

For Carl.c.jung, the Great Goddess represents an archetypal image inside the human psyche and its expression can be found in different aspects of life from ritual, to mythology,

art, and also in dreams. In his book *Four Archetypes Mother Rebirth Spirit Trickster*, he states that:

The concept of the Great Mother belongs to the field of comparative religion and embraces widely varying types of mother-goddess. The concept itself is of no immediate concern to psychology, because the image of a Great Mother in this form is rarely encountered in practice, and then only under very special conditions. The symbol is obviously a derivative of the *mother archetype*. (9)

The *Feminine Divine* is a principal that involves concepts of Goddess of the ancient civilizations and mythologies, the Holy Great Mother, and the doctrines of the Mother earth. In many ancient cultures, the Feminine Divine is considered as the feminine aspect or the other face of God, as Anne Baring explains: “the feminine face of God as it has been expressed in different cultures all over the world”<sup>1</sup>. According to Amy Peck<sup>2</sup>, the Sacred Feminine is a concept that believes that:

"God" Ultimately is neither anthropomorphically male nor female but a Divine Essence (Goddessence) Beyond form and duality—an essence that is a balance and unification of masculine and feminine principles—a dynamic, interdependent immanence that pervades all life. (1)

Throughout history, The Feminine Divine took many different names and titles. Among those titles, one can cite Divine Feminine, Sacred Feminine, Goddess, Goddess Archetype, Feminine Energy, Feminine Principle, Shakti, Mother Earth, Kali, Aphrodite, Persephone, Mary, Durga, Lilith, Triple Goddess, Sophia (Wisdom), and Black Madonna.

## **2.2. A Historical Background of the Feminine Divine**

In order to understand the importance of the re-emergence of the Feminine Divine in the present day, it is necessary to examine the historical development of the sacred goddess from the Paleolithic times to the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> [annebaring.com](http://annebaring.com)

<sup>2</sup> Amy Peck (Amalya) is an artist, dancer, writer, and producer of women's ceremonies and workshops in San Diego, California

### 2.2.1. The Paleolithic Age

The history of the *Feminine Divine* or the Great Goddess goes back to the earliest times of human existence. Diverse examples of the Goddess cult have been discovered throughout the world, and numerous ancient cultures and civilizations “were Goddess-worshipping, female-centered, in harmony with their environments” (Leonard and McClure 104). Scholars and archaeologists based on archaeological evidence have proved that the Goddess worship has a strong presence since the Paleolithic Age.

In her book *The Prehistoric Goddess*, Anne L. Barstow<sup>1</sup> explains that Goddess worship can be found in sacred settings as far back as 25,000 BCE from the Indus to Ireland, Siberia to southern Africa, and all over the New World. She says that the evidence of the existence of Goddess worship has been found "in caves, on the mountaintops, at home altars, and in the earliest shrines, the goddess appeared, carved from stone, modeled from clay, etched in plaster" (7). According to her, Goddess has existed before history started to be recorded thus calling it: “prehistoric Goddess”.

Over the past decades, small feminine pieces of sculptures and statues made of stones and bones and other materials have been discovered in different archeological sites and places such as France, Ireland, Siberia, southern Africa, India, and even in the New World. Those feminine statues date back to 25,000 BC and they are known as *Venus figures* (Dixson and Dixson 1). The most famous of figurines is the "Venus of Willendorf", a pregnant female figurine with a round shape depicting women’s bodies as the main source of life.

Archaeologists have discovered thousands of female figures, and any of these figurines are male. Due to their exaggerated form of buttocks, breasts, and bellies, these Paleolithic female figurines are believed to symbolize fertility, reproduction, and motherhood. These types of figurine are also called the Mother Goddess.

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<sup>1</sup>Anne L. Barstow is a professor of history, retired, at the State University of New York City at Old Westbury

### **2.2.2. The Neolithic Age**

During the Neolithic Age or the New Stone Age (10000 BC to 5500 BC), different female figurines have been found in different places throughout the world. At this period, the cult of the great Goddess became more organized as a religion:

Beginning over 20,000 years ago, and lasting tens of millennia the Goddess served as a central figure in spiritual and societal practices. A religion based on a Goddess-Mother Creator in the Neolithic period of c. 7,000 to 3,500 BCE was discovered and authenticated by the assemblage, Classification, and interpretation of some two thousand symbolic artifacts of this matristic order. (qtd in F.Minickiello 13)

Archeologists have found numerous female figurines in different Neolithic sites. One of the most important and largest Neolithic sites has been discovered is in Çatalhöyük (Turkey) by the British archeologist James Mellaart in 1957. In addition, the excavations of Marija Gimbutas<sup>1</sup> in sites such as Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and the Balkans helped to discover some extraordinary figurines of the Neolithic era. Most of these figurines were used to be worshiped as Mother Goddess in past times.

It was during this historical age that man became familiar with agriculture and learned how to cultivate crops and domesticate animals. With the development of agricultural communities, the great Goddess worship became more associated with the different agricultural seasons' cycles.

### **2.2.3. The Bronze Age**

During the Bronze Age (3500 to 1250 B.C.), the great Goddess worship began to be repressed and replaced by the male God. According to Baring and Cashford: "towards the middle of the Bronze Age the Mother Goddess recedes into the background as father gods begin to move to the [center] of the stage" (152).

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<sup>1</sup>Lithuanian-American archaeologist and cultural historian of Neolithic "Old Europe" and author of such treatises as *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982) (originally *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, 1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991).

This Age witnessed the invention of some different warfare tools, and as a result, the invasions by other people started to come to existence. The Indo-Europeans invasion was the most important invasions during this era and had a significant impact on the Great Goddess worship: “The invasion by the Indo-Europeans consisted of a series of migrations. This invasion began about 3400 BCE and lasted for roughly 3000 years, putting an end to the Goddess- Worshiping culture” (Orodenker 27).

The Indo-European invaders brought with them their own Gods who replaced the great Goddess. Some historians and scholars assign the decline of the great Goddess to these invasions. In Encyclopedia of Wicca and Witchcraft, Grimassi affirms that: “the Indo-European invasions put an end to the Great Goddess worship in central Europe by around 2500B.C” (111).

Joseph Campbell in his book *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* asserts that the elimination of the Feminine Divine began:

Towards the close of the Age of Bronze and, more strongly, with the dawn of the Iron Age (c. 1250 BC in the Levant), the old cosmology and mythologies of the goddess mother were radically transformed, reinterpreted, and in large measure even suppressed, by those suddenly intrusive patriarchal warrior tribesman whose traditions have come down to us chiefly in the Old and New Testaments and in the myths of Greece. (7)

With the decline of the great mother Goddess, the father Gods started to gain predominance among societies. This decline marked the end of the matriarchal societies and the rise of the patriarchal one.

#### **2.2.4. Christianity and the Decline of the *Feminine Divine***

Throughout history, women have been repressed and disempowered in many patriarchal cultures, societies, and religions, and their role and position have been downplayed and neglected. Overtime and with the rise of new religions the Goddess worshipping was no longer accepted or encouraged:

The repression of the divine feminine, the need to diminish her power, and the demonization of the Goddess have continued for centuries. In the period of the Great Inquisition, women who understood the secrets of the Goddess, those secrets of the rhythms of the earth, of cyclic life energy, and of the healing powers of the earth, were accused of being disciples of Satan and referred to as witches.(Orodenker 23)

The Feminine Divine or the great Goddess is believed to have an end with the beginning of the Hebrew religion with its God Yahweh<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the early Christian Church and especially the Roman Catholic Church worked to completely suppress and eliminate the great Goddess worship forever. Furthermore, the traditional story of Adam and Eve with the forbidden apple has stigmatized women with evil and sin, and subjugated the Feminine Divine for ever:

Most Judeo-Christian religious interpretations blame Eve for man's fall from grace and ultimately hold women accountable for men's expulsion from paradise, thus solidifying the denial of women's equality. Typically, when such interpretations portray Eve, with her sexual wiles, seducing Adam to eat the apple and take part in knowing the tree of knowledge, they infer that it was because of her intimate connection to evil (the serpent devil) that man now suffers from original sin. In short, as the Judeo-Christian culture spread, women's once prominent role and influence on society, home, religion and sexuality diminished. (Diana Costine 37)

According to Baring and Cashford, Eves' story with the apple is responsible in a great part of "the displacing of the mother goddess by the father god" (492).

### **2.3. The Feminine Divine in Literature**

Recently, with the feminist movement, the idea of the Feminine Divine and the great Sacred Goddess has re-emerged again and became a popular topic mostly by women. In her works about the revival of the Sacred Goddess, Elinor Gadon writes:

In the late twentieth century there is a growing awareness that we are doomed as a species and planet unless we have a radical change of consciousness. The re-emergence of the Goddess is becoming the symbol and metaphor for this transformation of culture. With the return of the Goddess, the new power of the feminine is being expressed in all areas of life. There is a re-evaluation of the female principle in religion, in psychology, in the arts, and in the quality and

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<sup>1</sup>Approximately, this was between 1800 – 1500 BC when the prophet Abraham lived in Canaan

relationship of humanity to the planet we live on. We are in the midst of a social evolution that will ultimately change how we see everything, as radically transformative as the smashing of the atom. (229 230)

Nowadays, the *Feminine Divine* is seen as an excellent symbol of women's empowerment and many people believe that it is time to embrace and honor the *Feminine Divine* and accept it as an equal aspect of the divine along with the masculine one (Peck 2). Moreover, the *Feminine Divine* becomes a very popular topic in, movies, art, music, and in literature. In her conference 'Sacred Practices in Everyday Life' conference at The University Edinburgh, Dr. Patricia Iolana<sup>1</sup> observed that the Feminine Divine begins to emerge in literature as a new trend:

I recognized, at that moment, that this was far more than a work of fiction; it was a springboard for a paradigmatic shift towards the Feminine Divine. As I read other contemporary novels that focused on the Feminine Divine and were obviously influenced by the work of Zimmer Bradley, I started to see a pattern: alongside the new theology – an archetype was emerging – the Great Mother.

As Dr. Iolana explained, there is a rise of interest in the Divine Feminine in literature and novels that deal with this topic became a new trend in literature. For instance, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* have been bestsellers and successful novels that brought the Feminine Divine to the scene:

La virgin is now a cultural icon whose popularity has exploded over the past decade... She's morphed into a transnational symbol that effortlessly navigates border crossing of race, gender, religion, and politics..... Her new popularity stems from the same trends that turned *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees* into major bestsellers: the divine feminine and the Black Madonna. (qtd in Creedon and Cramer 180)

Both novels were very popular and successful literary works and remained on the New York Times lists of the best sellers for over a year, and they were able to attract a large audience target:

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<sup>1</sup> Rev Dr 'Iolana holds a PhD in Literature, Theology and the Arts from the University of Glasgow where she examined the significance of Jungian and post-Jungian theory to the development of the Western Goddess Movement

The immense popularity of novels such as *The Secret Life of Bees*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Shake* of scholarly writing such as Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*, and of songs about the divine feminine by popular artists such as Shania Twain, and The Indigo Girls demonstrates that a large audience of women (and men) hungers to imagine the divine differently. (Knight4)

In fact, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* have done a major contribution to the return of the Feminine Divine in the Western culture and literature. Both novels made a huge debate within the Christian community because they deal with a religious theme which is the Feminine Divine. Both Kidd and Brown present to their readers a new image of divinity which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

From the previous analysis, one can understand feminism and the feminist theology as an important sub-branch of this theory. The chapter also provides the reader with a clear understanding of the Feminine Divine, its historical development, and its reemergence in literature.

## Chapter Two: The Feminine Divine in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret*

### *Life of Bees*

Sue Monk Kidd is a very famous author known by writing books about spiritual themes that promotes her unique feminist perspective toward the Divine in Christian theology. Kidd believes that the patriarchal image of God represented by the Christian Church has contributed in maintaining male dominance over women; hence, it has no credibility. Therefore, women need a female Goddess in order to get liberated from patriarchal authority. Kidd started a spiritual journey toward Goddess veneration that got her to the conviction of her own personal power as women. This was shown in her novel *The Secret Life of Bees* in which she demonstrates how escaping patriarchal authority and converting to the Sacred Feminine veneration empowers women and raises their awareness toward their self-sacredness.

Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* was published in 2002 and it knew a world widespread. The novel has sold over eight million copies throughout the world and it has been translated into thirty-six languages. In 2008, the novel which occupied bestseller list for almost three years was adapted into a movie. *The Secret Life of Bees* is a bildungsroman because it tells the protagonist Lily Owens's journey toward mental and spiritual growth after escaping her violent father. Lily's eagerness for maternal love and inspiration gets her to the Black Madonna veneration; a black skinned Mary, and to the recognition of her self-sacredness. Kidd's promoting the Feminine Divine in *the Secret Life of Bees* caused her huge critical acclaim due to the sense of divinity that it gives to women.

Therefore, this chapter attempts to examine the depiction of the Feminine Divine in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* through the Black Madonna and its contribution in empowering and representing a new positive image of women through the novel's female

characters. Furthermore, it aims to show the importance of getting liberated from the patriarchal attempts to restrict and define women, in granting them new vital role and status. Hence, the feminist theory that was discussed earlier in the previous chapter will be put into practice.

## **1. Feminism in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees***

According to what has been viewed previously, Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* can be considered as a typical feminist novel because it shows how patriarchal culture seeks to define women and restrict them by marginalizing their role and representing a passive image of them. Furthermore, Kidd tries to show how women; on the other side, choose to reject the gender role imposed on them and instead, they establish a feminist theological perspective based around Goddess worship in order to escape the patriarchal authority maintained by the Christian culture. Hence, feminist issues were raised in the novel dealing with how Goddess veneration empowers women and helps them to overcome patriarchal oppression as it is shown in the following passage<sup>1</sup>:

In Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, the theme of feminism often occurs. Throughout the novel, Kidd reveals the aspects and importance of feminine power and matriarchy versus the typical role of masculine leadership and authority. The teaching of Carl Jung, a philosopher who believes that society would be better by emphasizing the importance of feminine values versus the masculine, deeply influences Kidd's writings. These principles are greatly displayed in the plot and theme of *The Secret Life of Bees*. (4)

The following part will try to examine the representation of the new image and role of women in the novel. The first section will tackle the representation of the new image of women in the novel through its main female characters: Lily Owens, Rosaleen Daise, and August Boatwright. Later in the next part, the new role of women through the character of August Boatwright will be discussed.

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<sup>1</sup>“The Role of Feminism in *The Secret Life of Bees*”, University of Chicago. <https://studymoose.com/the-role-of-feminism-in-the-secret-life-of-bees-essay>

## **1.1. The New Image of Women in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees***

The patriarchal Christian culture has always tried to regard women as subordinate to men, passive, and irrational. This negative representation of women has been an attempt to retain women under male authority that would prevent them from recognizing their traits and potential.

Kidd, in her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, tends to contradict the stereotype of women in male-dominated Christian culture that marginalizes their role and contribution in the social and religious matters by representing a new positive image of women through the novel's main female characters. Furthermore, Kidd has succeeded to show how breaking off from the patriarchal Christian God and converting to female Goddess worship empowers women and promotes their position.

Therefore, in *The Secret Life of Bees*, Kidd has challenged the patriarchal Christian mindset by promoting a female image of God through the statue of Black Madonna and its contribution in empowering women. As well, Kidd maintains her conviction in the personal female power that the Feminine Divine gives to women.

### **1.1.1. August Boatwright: The New Image of Women**

August Boatwright is one of the major characters and she is given a vital role throughout the course of the novel. In contrast to the way women are regarded in patriarchal western culture, August is represented as an educated woman who chooses autonomy and independence over marriage. Despite the double burden that would make things worse for her as a woman and black living in the racist South, August runs her own business in beekeeping and successful honey manufacturing to provide sustenance for her and her sisters.

August; in addition to being taught and independent women, has a warm and sensitive personality which enables her to afford both material and mental support to those around her, especially to the other main character Lily Owens through whom Kidd could show to what

extent August is willed, responsible, and wise. August's intelligence is addressed in Lily's words, "Lying on the cot in the honey house, though all I could think was August is so intelligent, so cultured, and I was surprised by this. That's what let me know I had some prejudice buried inside me." (Kidd 81) and she describes her feeling as August embraces her by saying that: "it was like being swept under a bird's wing" (Ibid 253), a metaphor for the protection and safety that August could provide. The way August has been portrayed stands against the stereotype of women as submissive, irrational, and passive.

August's unusual willpower and determination were shown in many scenes throughout the narrative and the most prominent scene was when she decides to sustain Lily and her maid Rosaleen who came to her house after escaping the patriarchal oppression from Lily's father and the white community. Because Lily is the daughter of Deborah to whom August was a nanny one day, the latter feels responsible for her and chooses to shelter her and her friend. Soon, August becomes an alternative mother and close friend for Lily. Another scene depicting the wisdom of August is when she tries to comfort Lily as the latter knew her mother abandoned her when she was young: "every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily. Every last one. We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it" (Ibid 256). These words helped Lily to overcome her confusion and find peace again.

Moreover, August serves as an influential spiritual figure that could provide an alternative religion for her and the other southern black women. She made from her living room a "house church" where she teaches and practices a religious perspective based on Goddess veneration; a statue of Black Madonna inherited in her family. She functions as a priest that guides the black female community she named "the Daughters of Mary" into spiritual rituals of dancing, praying, and telling stories. The image of August as a priest

woman is very unusual for a woman because women were always prevented from playing an active role in the Christian heritage.

August plays a role model of a black woman who rejects dependency to the white male-centric Christianity. She could also inspire Lily and her friend Rosaleen to join “The Daughters of Mary”, the faith through which they could see life colorful again as Lily mentions: “The Daughters of Mary got to their feet and swayed together like colorful seaweed on the ocean floor” (Kidd 113) and help them to recognize their personal power within their selves, August says to Lily that she has “to find a mother inside yourself” (Ibid 288) and teaches her that “even if we already have a mother [the Black Madonna], we still have to find this part of ourselves inside ... not only the power inside you but the love ... to persist in love” (Ibid 288 289). One can note that without August; there would be no spiritual development in Lily as Herbert denotes: “Lily’s emotional and spiritual transformation largely to the black matriarch August and to the influence of the Black Madonna figure that looms large as an image in the novel” (3).

As seen previously, through the novel Kidd promotes the need for women to have their own Goddess, a female Goddess that “fits” them, and for the novel’s black female characters, the Black Madonna is just perfect as said by August: “it occurred to them [Daughters of Mary] for the first time in their lives that what's divine can come in dark skin. You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily” (Ibid205). August answers Lily’s question about why the statue of Mary is black by saying: “You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily” (Ibid 145). Worshiping Goddess was not the sole way for women to free themselves from Christian patriarchy but also through the recognition of their self-sacredness.

Furthermore, Kidd shows that feminine Divine can be found in every woman; it's a Divine within every female soul. This was addressed clearly through August's character that plays the role of mother for her sisters and for Lily. She is a source of maternal love and caring: "She looked like an African bride... Clouds of bees rose up and flew wreaths around her head. Twice she disappeared in the fogged billows, then gradually reemerged like a dream rising up from the bottom of the night" (Kidd 67), the same of the Great Goddess Mother that Black Madonna represents.

### **1.1.2. Lily Owens: The New Image of Women**

Lily Owens is the novel's protagonist. She is a fourteen years old white girl, whose spirit and will is beaten down by her abusive father, T. Ray. Lily lives with the frustrating memory of killing her mother Deborah that disturbs and sours her life. The feel of guilt makes Lily feels unworthy and depressed. During the course of the novel, Lily starts a journey toward mental and spiritual development that turns her into a mature woman.

At the beginning of the novel, Lily is represented as passive and submissive young woman who cannot figure out the world around her. Lily's father has always tried to humiliate her and destroy her self-esteem by preventing her from performing any useful activities and wearing nice clothes, as she says:

He [T. Ray] didn't believe in slumber parties or sock hops, he refused to drive me to town for football games, pep rallies, or Beta Club car washes... He did not care that I wore clothes I made for myself in home economics class, cotton print shirtwaists with crooked zippers and skirts hanging below my knees, outfits only the Pentecostal girls wore. I might as well have worn a sign on my back: I AM NOT POPULAR AND NEVER WILL BE. (Ibid17)

Hence, one can note that through the character of Lily' father, Kidd attempts to show how patriarchy works to marginalize women and degrade them. Lily's impassive father has always attempted to leave her unmotivated by convincing her that she is "unable to be

educated” and her reading books is useless, as she says: “Whenever I opened one [book], T. Ray said, "Who do you think you are, Julius Shakespeare” (Kidd29). However, Lily’s intelligence provides her with logical analysis of her father’s actions which she refers to the mindset that patriarchal Christian culture adopts toward women:

T. Ray refused to let me bring books and read, and if I smuggled one out, say, *Lost Horizon*, stuck under my shirt, somebody, like Mrs. Watson from the next farm, would see him at church and say, "Saw your girl in the peach stand reading up a storm. You must be proud." And he would half kill me. What kind of person is against reading? I think he believed it would stir up ideas of college, which he thought a waste of money for girls. (Ibid 27)

Moreover, Kidd shows us further in the book the hidden will and bravery in Lily’s character. This was depicted strongly in the scene when Lily’s nanny Rosaleen gets beaten and sent to jail by racist police and as she knows that she would be killed by racist white men as soon as she gets out of jail, Lily risks her life and decides to break Rosaleen out of jail and escape her father’s oppression. Lily is not afraid to take action and do something that is not accepted for a woman. Lily says: “in a matter of seconds I knew exactly what I had to do—leave. I had to get away from T. Ray, who was probably on his way back this minute to do Lord-knows what to me. Not to mention I had to get Rosaleen out of jail” (Ibid 64).

Lily’s determination to escape the patriarchal oppression of her father and her longing for a maternal love that would cover the warmth shortage she feels; forces her to run away and start a journey that leads her to discover the hidden power and capacities that were marginalized by her father as she learns beekeeping and how to be an active member in The Boatwrights’ community.

### **1.1.3. Rosaleen Daise: The New Image of Women**

Rosaleen Daise is a black woman who works as a house keeper in The Owens. Although she is a maid to Lily and T. Ray, Rosaleen doesn't consider herself inferior to white people. Instead, she provides her young white mistress with love and care. As Lily says: "I was the only one who knew that despite her sharp ways, her heart was tenderer than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason" (Kidd 21). Rosaleen is confident woman and always considers her dignity as a priority in her life. This was shown when Rosaleen has preferred divorce rather than to live with a disloyal husband whom she considers "stupid" and chooses to live independent.

Although Rosaleen is a black maid, she could show unfamiliar determination and proud soul that doesn't hesitate to defend herself. For example, when Rosaleen gets harassed by three white racist men in her way to vote after the Civil Rights Act was passed giving black people the right to vote, her reaction is defensive as she "lifted her snuff jug, which was filled with black spit, and calmly poured it across the tops of the men's shoes" (Ibid 32) and when they ask her to apology, she refuses even after getting beaten terribly by them, and "they didn't get no apology, though" (Ibid 46).

Hence, Kidd could represent a new strong image to black women that stands against the portrait of double burden women as submissive and passive through Rosaleen's character that is not afraid to take brave action in the face of racism and oppression.

### **1.2. The New Role of Women in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees***

Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* has succeeded in removing the stereotype of women that has always perceived them in the Christian male-dominated culture. The novel has known great acceptance by the audience and especially among women because it tends to promote

their contribution and position in both Christian heritage and society through its female characters, mainly August who is given the most vital role.

In contrast to the way women are regarded in male-dominated Christian culture, August is given a vital role through which she contributes in providing both of spiritual and mental guidance. She functions as a priest in the black female community “The Daughters of Mary” that she has established. August’s position as a leader in this religious community is an unfamiliar position for a woman to serve. According to Sarah Peters in her thesis entitled “*Ambivalent Devotion: Religious Imagination in Contemporary Southern Women’s Fiction*”:

The novel has challenged masculine religious language and developed new vocabularies to articulate feminine spirituality... As August creates a woman-centered religion centered on a Mother-God [that] represents women’s spiritual experiences outside of the constraints of male-centered theology... [and] a recognition of the sacred feminine that would allow her to retain her sense of connection to ultimate reality but also heal her wound and affirm the value of her womanhood, restoring her self-worth. (160 164)

Moreover, in addition to being the main spiritual influential figure, August is a successful businesswoman who sustains her family. Kidd makes of August the prime responsible for Lily’s coming of age due to her wisdom and determination: “August, the eldest and wisest of these calendar sisters, and a host of other spectacular black women help create an atmosphere that promotes Lily’s psychological development” (Herbert 11). Lily, during her residence in August’s house, describes how rested she was: “the first week at August’s was a consolation. The world will give you that once in a while, a brief time out; the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life” (Kidd 122).

## **2. The Black Madonna: the Mother Goddess and the Feminine Divine**

The representation of the Black Madonna figure in *The Secret Life of Bees* is attempted by Kidd to promote her perspective toward the divine as feminine. In general, the Black Madonna is “the image of the Virgin Mary whose devotees commonly refer to her as

“black”” (Boss 77). The Black Madonna is portrayed alone or with the infant Christ<sup>1</sup>. This religious figure exists in different sites in the world as Ean Beg writes in his book *The Cult of the Black Virgin Mary*. According to him, there are about 450 images of the Black Madonna throughout the world (3). In her thesis entitled *Jung, Black Madonnas, and the Priority of the Maternal*, Rosemary Murray gives the suggestions that were raised behind the dark skin of the Black Madonna:

The most common reason given for the blackness of the black madonnas is that the images have become black over time due to dirt, soot, and candle smoke...common argument is that the images reflect the artist's conception of a dark-skinned Palestinian Mary... Finally it has been suggested that the original figures were carved in ebony or other black material, but such material was not available in Europe and almost all European black Madonna statues are carved in indigenous wood such as oak, apple, cedar, and olive. (26)

The Black Madonna icon was given a significant role and a central attention throughout the course of the novel. She stands as a guide and source of empowerment for the novel's female characters. In addition, this religious figure is used by Kidd to promote her feminist perspective toward the divine as feminine that challenges the traditional image of God as masculine.

In the novel, Kidd explains to the reader the emergence story of the Black Madonna veneration as a popular religious icon among the black community in America. August tells Lily: “back in the time of slaves, when the people were beaten down and kept like property, they prayed every day and every night for deliverance”(Kidd 158), she continues: “On the islands near Charleston, they would go to the praise house and sing and pray, and every single time someone would ask the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom” (Ibid). Then, she says that a slave named Obadiah was near to the Ashley River when he saw: “something washed up on the bank. Coming closer, he saw it was the

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<sup>1</sup> See figure 1 in the list of figures

wooden figure of a woman. Her body was growing out of a block of wood, a black woman with her arm lifted out and her fist balled up” (Kidd 159).

For Obadiah and the other slaves, this black woman statue was a response from God to their prayers, and she was sent to rescue them as they could feel her saying: “It's all right. I'm here. I'll be taking care of you now” (Ibid 159). Furthermore, they took her to the praise house and start to worship her as Mary; “the mother of Jesus” (Ibid 160) that guides their lives. This is also denoted in Lily's description of the Black Madonna:

She was black as could be; twisted like driftwood from being out in the weather, her face a map of all the storms and journeys she'd been through. Her right arm was raised as if she was pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist. It gave her a serious look, like she could straighten you out if necessary. (Ibid 106)

Throughout the novel, the Black Madonna has played an undeniable role in the empowerment of the black female community members; “The Daughters of Mary” and the novel's protagonist. In fact, the Black Madonna is what inspires Lily to start her journey toward “Tiburón in South Carolina, the town [that she found] written on the back of the black Mary [picture]” (Ibid 66) and where she would witness spiritual and mental growth, Lily says: “I hated to imagine where I might have ended up if I hadn't seen the Black Madonna's picture that day in the Frogmore Stew General Store and Restaurant” (Ibid 201). According to Murray, the Black Madonna gives her female devotees strength to face patriarchy:

The Black Madonna serves to subvert patriarchal monotheism, to compensate conscious attitudes of Christianity, to signal the reemergence of the feminine, and to complete the symbolic portrayal of the Godhead by bringing to it both the feminine principle in its fullness and the principles of matter and darkness. Black madonnas will be seen as powerful symbols and metaphors which serve to complete the image of both the feminine and the divine and... as a spontaneous manifestation of the Great Mother archetype. (2)

In the novel, August Boatwright derives her power from the Black Madonna and uses this power to influence the other female characters. Furthermore, the novel depicts how Lily's

journey as she longs for maternal love and inspiration ends up with venerating Black Madonna that helps her to fill the emotional and the spiritual deficiency that she feels and guides her to the recognition of the personal divine within herself. As shown by Amy R. Huseby:

Motherhood, in keeping with the concept of the Great Goddess Mother, is a primary issue in both novels, and arguably the central theme of Kidd's work. Lily's entire journey is a search for a maternal figure, for information about her deceased mother. As noted previously, however, she learns... The Black Madonna Marian revitalization movement demonstrated by the Daughters of Mary assists Lily in her realization of self-sacredness, in addition to emphasizing Kidd's commentary about racial injustices. (15)

The Black Madonna serves as "the mother of thousands" (Kidd 234) for the novel's female characters that "filled their hearts with [power and] fearlessness" (Ibid 161). However, Kidd insists that each woman has to find her own personal feminine power in herself. This is clear when August tells Lily: "You have to find a mother inside yourself... even if we already have a mother [Black Madonna], we still have to find this part of ourselves inside" (Kidd 205)

In a quiet scene at the beginning of the novel, August explains to Lily why the Daughters of Mary worship the Black Madonna: "I wish you could have seen the Daughters of Mary the first time they laid eyes on [the Black Madonna]," says August also: "You know why? Because when they looked at her, it occurred to them for the first time in their lives that what's divine can come in dark skin. You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily". Therefore, August along with the other black southern women have chosen to glorify the Black Madonna because she fits them as black women and stands as an alternative to the white male Christian God. According to Christopher Pramuk, in her article entitled "*Girlness Made Powerful: The Divine in Female Form*"<sup>1</sup>, the Black Madonnaplays a significant role for the Daughters of Mary. She explains that:

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.hopesingssobeautiful.org/index.php/2017/02/23/girlness-made-powerful-the-divine-in-female-form/>

What the Black Madonna does for the Daughters of Mary is what no white male image of God could do, reflecting their own inherent dignity, strength, and beauty, and thus redeeming their suffering from within. She does not stereotype, she *sees*, and in seeing her *see you*, you become visible to yourself. In the patriarchal and racially explosive culture of the deep South, this is no small gift. For the women in the story the Black Madonna is a healing and empowering Presence, because she safeguards that image of the divine who hides in every person, yet is so much obscured and denied by dehumanizing forces in the culture.

From the foregoing analysis, one can say that through the representation of the Black Madonna as Sacred Divine in *The Secret Life of Bees*, Kidd tends to challenge the white male image of God and to show to what extent worshipping a Divine that is feminine contributes in empowering women, sustaining their self-worthiness, and promoting their status and role in both social and religious realm.

Furthermore, Kidd demonstrates that women cannot be vital and prosper unless they separate themselves from patriarchy. This has been depicted through the novel's main female characters August who has chosen independency over marriage restrictions, Lily who escaped her abusive father to discover her traits and potential, and Rosaleen who preferred divorce than living with a disloyal husband. These women are not able to advance until they are free from patriarchal authority.

Celebrating the Feminine Divine within the self is an attempt for Kidd to promote the personal female power in women through the icon of the Black Madonna and to challenge the male divine of the Christian tradition that has contributed in maintaining men authority and oppression over women.

### **Chapter Three: The Feminine Divine in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code***

In 2003, Dan Brown published his famous and controversial novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Since its publication, the novel has known a huge success and acceptance and has markedly led to a lot of questions and debates across the Christian world because it dealt with the truth about the image and the role of women in the Catholic Church. *The Da Vinci Code* remained at the top of the bestseller lists for more than one year and it turned into a movie in 2008. The novel attracted the readers because it dealt with a new and mysterious topic which is the Feminine Divine and Christianity.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Feminine Divine is the basis of the whole story line. According to Brown, Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and her womb was the real Holy Grail, and she was supposed to head the Church after Jesus' death. Moreover, he claims that the early Catholic Church worked to hide this truth and subjugate the Feminine Divine. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown gives a new radical view of divinity as feminine through the image of Mary Magdalene; she is the Holy Grail, the Sacred Feminine, or the Feminine Divine. This new image of divinity argues for the equality and power of women.

This chapter aims to shed light on Brown's new representation of the divine as feminine in *The Da Vinci Code* as embodied by Mary Magdalene, and how this representation gives a positive portrayal of women. The application of the feminist theory on basis of what has been discussed in the previous chapter sounds effective in examining Brown's new representation of the *Feminine Divine*.

## 1. Feminism in Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

As seen in the previous chapter, Feminism is a fight against any kind of women's oppression, repression, or classification. At its center, Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is a feminist novel that deals with the suppression of Mary Magdalene (women) and the marginalization of her role by the early Catholic Church. Actually, there is an intense interest to know the truth about Mary Magdalene and her position in Christianity. According to Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre in their article entitled "*There's Something About Mary Magdalene*"<sup>1</sup>, this intense: "interest in her [Mary Magdalene]" and her life is part of: "the women's movement itself, especially with the development of women's studies and increased activism in religious and sociopolitical arenas".

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown claims that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and he was the father of her child, and their descendants still exist to the present day in France. According to him, this truth has been concealed up by the patriarchal Catholic Church in order to suppress women and maintain men's authority over Christianity. The fact that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife and the mother of his only child will definitely change women's image and position in Christianity forever. Moreover, Brown challenges and attacks the Catholic Church views of women, and tries to restore the ancient sacred image of women and their role in the positive representation of his main female character Sophie Neveu.

An examination of women's image and their role in the novel will be discussed in this chapter. The first part will discuss the new image of women in the novel through the main female character in the novel Sophie Neveu. Then, the next part is going to deal with her role in the novel.

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<sup>1</sup>[www.ms magazine.com/spring2006/mary.asp](http://www.ms magazine.com/spring2006/mary.asp)

## **1.1. The New Image of Women in Brown's *The Da Vinci Code***

Throughout the Christian history, women have been oppressed, neglected, and often treated as inferior to men. For instance, the Inquisition within the Catholic Church warned of the “dangers of freethinking women killed an estimated five million women” (Brown 106). This has greatly left women out of respect and dispraised their position in Christian mind.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown claims that women had represented a very sacred image in ancient religions and civilizations. In general, women had played an important role in all the different aspects of life: “The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred” (Ibid 202), but this role of women had challenged the patriarchal system and caused a threat to male's domination over the Christian Church: “the sacred feminine was demonized and called unclean” (Ibid).

Furthermore, he asserts that the early Christian Church under men's control worked to deform women's image and to prevent any pretending role of them in the religious life: “It was *man*, not God, who created the concept of 'original sin', whereby Eve tasted of the apple and caused the downfall of the human race. Woman, once the sacred giver of life, was now the enemy” (Ibid).

### **1.1.1. Sophie Neveu: The New Image of Women**

The image of women and their role are the centers of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* storyline. Brown believes that all the negative concepts around women are based on a misinterpretation of the Christian understandings, and he aims to re-concept women's image and position in the Christian history and to celebrate the Feminine Divine throughout his novel. Brown tries to play on the traditional and conventional characterization or stereotype of women that is engraved in western theology and popular culture.

In the novel, Sophie Neveu is a very specific woman with remarkable skills; she is a national French police cryptographer and works with the Direction Central de la Police Judiciaire in Paris which is a very difficult and unfamiliar profession for Women to do. As a

character, Sophie is represented as a strong, brilliant, and very brave woman with: “an unembellished beauty and genuineness that radiated a striking personal confidence” (Brown 43). In fact, all these qualities contradict the traditional stereotype of women.

In the course of the narration, Sophie goes alongside with Professor Robert Langdon - a Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard University- on a journey to solve the murder of Jacques Sounière who is the Louvre curator and Sophie’s grandfather, and together they discover a series of mysteries and codes. In this journey, Sophie proves that she is useful and equal to Professor Langdon. Furthermore, she intelligently deals with many serious situations and saves Langdon on many different occasions. For examples, when inspector Fache came to arrest Langdon at the Louvre Museum, Sophie quickly manages to make his escape from the police arrestment.

Another example that shows Sophie’s unusual female character is the scene of the taxi after Sophie and Langdon’s escape from the Louver Museum, where she is sitting with Langdon and she discovers that the taxi driver is taking them to the police: “before Langdon knew what had happened, she had yanked out the pistol, swung it around, and was pressing it to the back of the driver’s head. The driver instantly dropped his radio, raising his one free hand overhead” (Brown 139). This act shows Sophie Neveu’s physical ability to deal with any hard situation.

It is so important to note that Brown’s choice of naming Sophie with this name is not a coincidence. Professor Langdon explains to Sophie the significance of her name, he says: “Yes! Sophia literally means wisdom in Greek. The root of your name, Sophie, is literally a 'word of wisdom' ” (Ibid 272). As professor Langdon explains, Sophie’s name is derived from the Greek word Sofia which means "Wisdom", and she is equated by the Gnostics to the female Goddess of wisdom<sup>1</sup>. In addition, Sophie last name Neveu is a French word that stands

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<sup>1</sup>[www.davincilegacy.com/Infringement/private/PerdueBrown-The-heroines-are-the-Goddess.html](http://www.davincilegacy.com/Infringement/private/PerdueBrown-The-heroines-are-the-Goddess.html)

for the word “neuve” which contains two parts new and eve and together they refer to the word “New Eve”.

Therefore, the name of Sophie Neveu has a great significance in the novel, and it serves as a symbol of the rebirth of the Sacred Feminine or the Feminine Divine:

Those attuned to contemporary Christian culture wars may have already noted that Sophia’s name is itself a clue: “Sophie Neveu” is an anagram for “Wisdom New Eve”. In the Greek version of the Old Testament book of proverbs, the word we translate as “wisdom” was the word Sophia, suggesting a female quality to the wisdom of God. Recently, there has been a growing trend to “re-image” God in female form. Sophia serves as kind of a god created for women, by women. (Boa and Turner 11)

At the end of Sophie and Langdon’s journey, they discover a dangerous secret that has been covered for centuries by the Catholic Church leaders; Sophie is Jesus and Mary Magdalene bloodline descendant. According to Brown, this secret was protected by an ancient secret organization called “The Priory of Sion” for generations. The fact that Sophie is Jesus and Mary Magdalene descendant shows that early Christianity was a religion that believed and celebrated the Feminine Divine. In addition, Sophie is the representation of the Feminine Divine in the modern life.

## **1.2. The New Role of Women in Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code***

After its publication, *The Da Vinci Code* knew a huge success, especially among women. The New York Times bestseller described the novel as a pro-feminist novel. Furthermore, the novel gives new understandings about women’s demands for equality, as explained by Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre: “For feminist scholars and activists, research on Mary Magdalene has created new understandings of Christian history that inform the ongoing struggle for equality in church and society”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>[www.msomagazine.com/spring2006/mary.asp](http://www.msomagazine.com/spring2006/mary.asp)

In his book entitled *The Da Vinci Code in the Academy*, Bradley Bowers explains how Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* makes women feel better about their position in Christianity:

In my conversations with many *Da Vinci Code* fans, particularly women, I hear great enthusiasm for the elevation of women and the feminine connection with the Christian tradition that is overburdened by patriarchy and masculine symbols. From the smart and ultra-competent Sophie Neveu to the resurrecting of the power of Mary Magdalene that has allegedly been covered up, readers of Brown's thriller are seemingly given an alternative version of female strength, both past and present. Women who read this feel empowered. Especially my catholic students report me that *The Da Vinci Code* asks and answers many pressing questions about the seism of the Church that they have secretly entertained themselves. (22)

Throughout the whole story line, Brown points out that the early Christian Church has consistently sought to minimize the role of women and dismiss their power from the Christian mind and heritage forever. Women in the Bible are not given an important role to do, and they are permanently portrayed as impure and passive individuals and they are believed to inherit their mother Eve "original sin" (Brown 101). Moreover, the church believes that the pain that women feel during childbearing is the punishment of God for all women because of Eve.

Brown believes that women's suppression still exists in the present day, and women are still treated as inferior to men. In the novel, when Sophie first meets inspector Fache Bezue at the Louver Museum he disregards her position and presence. Fache ignores Sophie's capacities and he believes that this work is not for women: "women not only lacked the physicality necessary for police work, but their mere presence posed a dangerous distraction to the men in the field"( Ibid 40).

Unlike this traditional view of women, Brown gives his female character Sophie Neveu a significant role to do in his book. In the course of the narration, Sir Leigh Teabing a British royal historian who is interested in the Holy Grail, explains to Sophie and Langdon how the role of women has been deformed in Christianity, he says:

This concept of woman as life-bringer was the foundation of ancient religion. Childbirth was mystical and powerful. Sadly, Christian philosophy decided to embezzle the female's creative power by ignoring biological truth and making *man* the Creator. 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. (Brown 197)

In the novel, there are two main characters Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu and throughout the novel Sophie the female character has played an important role just like the male character Langdon. Sophie, as revealed at the end, is not an ordinary person; she is Jesus and Mary Magdalene holy blood descendant, and she is very important to The Priory of Sion which as Brown states a real secret society founded in 1099.

This secret society has been founded to keep Jesus and Mary Magdalene's secret hidden from the public and to protect and guard their descendants. According to Brown, famous figures were members in this society including: "Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo Da Vinci" (Ibid 378). In addition to men, the Priory of Sion also accepts women for membership and four of its Grand Masters have been women: "the *sénéchaux* were traditionally men- the Guardians- and yet women held far more honored status within the priory and could ascend to the highest post from virtually any rank"( Ibid 367).

As a legitimate heir of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Sophie is trusted by the Priory of Sion to hold the secret of the Holy Grail: "the Priory has put its trust in you Miss Neveu" (Ibid 242). In fact, holding the secret of the Holy Grail is not something easy to do, because Sophie has to choose whether to keep hiding this secret or to announce it to the world. Sir Teabing explains the situation for Sophie, he says: "I apologize if I am pressing, Miss Neveu. Clearly I have always believed these documents should be made public, but in the end the decision belongs to you" (Ibid).

## 2. Mary Magdalene: the Female Goddess and the Feminine Divine

Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has been regarded as a disappointment for most Christian believers because it has attacked some fundamental elements in the Christian faith and principles. For many of them, the book was considered as a fierce and violent attack on Christianity and the Christian Catholic Church. Moreover, some Christian leaders and theologians believe that Brown's novel is a theory of conspiracy against Christianity and its principles. For instance, theologian Dr. Erwin Lutzer<sup>1</sup> describes the book as: "the most serious assault against Christianity that I have ever witnessed".

After its publication, *The Da Vinci Code* was surrounded by an atmosphere of mania and obsession. However, the book gained a huge success and became one of the popular works in the whole world. Some scholars and critics describe Brown's book as: "a cultural phenomenon" (Hixson 42).

Moreover, the book has had a great impact and influence on the general public and succeeded in casting a lot of questions and doubts among some of its readers:

Like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Da Vinci Code* was more than a book; it was a cultural earthquake. We now live in a post-*Da Vinci Code* age, a time when the mania for the book has finally died, but a time in which most of the assertions of the book are accepted by the general public as holy writ. (Hodapp and Von Kannon 262)

Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has created all this confusion and became a phenomenon around the world because it questions historical and religious issues that have relation with Jesus Christ life and the new representation of Mary Magdalene. What made *The Da Vinci Code* a very debatable and controversial literary work is the fact that Brown has supported his narration with a series of real names, historical events, and places. At the introductory page of

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer is an evangelical Christian pastor, teacher and author. He was the senior pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago

the book<sup>1</sup>, Brown states the following remark: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate”.

This passage means that the novel is not only a fictional book, but it is also based on accurate historical facts as Darrell L. Bock states in the introduction of his book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*: “This remark surfaces as a kind of pop-up ad at the start just to grab our attention. But it also tells us that the story we are about to hear is set in a nonfictitious, historically accurate world” (I).

*The Da Vinci Code* becomes so controversial literary work because it puts forth a new theory that will change the representation of Mary Magdalene and her role in Christianity. Brown’s theory states that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, and the Holy Grail is not a cup but in fact, it is Mary Magdalene. This truth was covered up by the Catholic Church for nearly two thousand years. This new representation of Mary Magdalene does not match with her traditional representation in the Biblical history. For centuries, Mary Magdalene image was represented by the Catholic Church in a negative way.

Brown’s theory also suggests that the Church had worked to spread horrible rumors and wrong facts about Mary Magdalene and removed texts from the Bible that portrayed her in a positive way. Mary Magdalene’s character and life were always surrounded by mystery and confusion. For instance, in the Western Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene has been regarded as a sinful woman and a penitent prostitute who washed and anointed Jesus’ feet before his crucifixion. In the New Testament, Mary Magdalene is mentioned as one of the women who witnessed Jesus’ resurrection:

"Then the women remembered his words, returned from the tomb, and told all these things to the eleven disciples and all the rest. The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and

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<sup>1</sup> Entitled as FACT

Mary the mother of James; they and the other women with them told these things to the apostles" (Luke 24:1-35)<sup>1</sup>.

She is also mentioned in the King James Version of the Holy Bible as: "a woman possessed by seven demons" (Luke 8:2.)<sup>2</sup>.

Basically, Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* discusses the truth about Mary Magdalene and her close relationship with Jesus Christ. Brown asserts that the image of Mary Magdalene and her role have been repeatedly misrepresented in the Christian history for centuries and he transforms her image from a former prostitute to Jesus' wife and the mother of his child. Brown affirms that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a very close relationship, and he claims that Mary Magdalene was more than his favorite disciple, but she was actually his wife. Brown supported this claim by passages from the Gospel of Philip, which is an early Christian text that has been found buried at Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt in 1945<sup>3</sup>. He quotes from the Gospel of Phillip the following passage:

And the companion of the Saviour 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 (Brown 208).

Then, Teabing adds to Sophie that Jesus was preparing Mary Magdalene to lead the Church after his death. He says to her: "At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone" (Ibid 203). He adds that Peter was "something of sexist" and he felt that if Mary Magdalene will be on the head of the church, he and the other disciples will lose their power over the church (Ibid).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bible.com/fr/bible/296/LUK.24.1-35.gnb>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bible.com/fr/bible/296/LUK.8.2>

<sup>3</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/marymagdalene.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/marymagdalene.shtml)

Brown goes far and maintains that at the time of Jesus death Mary Magdalene was carrying in her womb his own child. And because of her fear of the Church prosecution, Mary Magdalene has supposedly escaped to France in order to protect herself and her child. In France, Mary Magdalene found a safe refuge and gave birth to a daughter “Her name was Sarah” (Brown 210). Then, Sarah married one of the French royal bloodlines and the result of this marriage was the Merovingian kings of France.

Brown goes far when he claims in the novel that Leonardo Da Vinci was one of those who knew about Jesus and Mary Magdalene sacred marriage and his famous painting *The Last Supper* conveys an important code or a message about their marriage. This is clear when Sir. Teabing says to Sophie the following: “You will be shocked to learn what anomalies Da Vinci included here that most scholars either do not see or simply choose to ignore. This fresco, in fact, is the entire key to the Holy Grail mystery. Da Vinci lays it all out in the open in *The Last Supper*” (Ibid 195).

More than this, Sir Teabing persuasively asserts that in *The Last Supper* painting, the person who is sitting on the right side of Jesus Christ is not the Saint John as it is believed, but it is a woman. He shows to Sophie Leonardo Da Vinci *The Last Supper* painting and asks her to take a close look on it: “Uncertain, Sophie made her way closer to the painting, scanning the thirteen figures—Jesus Christ in the middle, six disciples on His left, and six on His right. “They’re all men,” she confirmed” (Brown 199). Then he says to her: “How about the one seated in the place of honor, at the right hand of the Lord” (Ibid).

Sophie starts to reexamine the person and it turns out to her that this person has female features: “As she studied the person's face and body, a wave of astonishment rose within her. The individual had flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without a doubt... female. “That’s a woman!” Sophie exclaimed” (Ibid 199-200). When Sophie

asked Teabing about the identity of this woman, he replays to her that the woman in the painting is: “Mary Magdalene” (Brown 200).

In addition to the previous claims, Teabing has another one concerning the nature of the Holy Grail, he says that: “The Holy Grail is not a thing. It is, in fact... a *person*” (Ibid). Here Langdon confirms to Sophie Teabing’s claim by asserting that the Holy Grail is not the cup or the chalice that Jesus has used to drink from in the last supper as it is recorded in the official history of the Catholic Church. He explains to Sophie that: “legend tells us the Holy Grail is a chalice—a cup. But the Grail's description as a *chalice* is actually an allegory to protect the true nature of the Holy Grail” (Ibid 202), he continues that this true nature of the Holy Grail is symbol for the Feminine Divine: “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” (Ibid).

Brown in the character of Teabing claims that: “Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth” (Ibid 204). Teabing also claims that: “The Priory of Sion, to this day, still worships Mary Magdalene as the Goddess, the Holy Grail, the Rose, and the Divine Mother”(Ibid 209). However, the truth that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married was so threatening to the Church male leaders. In order to protect its position, the Church started to suppress Mary Magdalene’s role from Christianity: “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” (Ibid 200), and to distort her image: “Magdalene was recast as a whore” (Ibid 204).

The reason behind the disfigurement of Mary Magdalene image and portraying her as a prostitute was to weaken her position and to avoid any claims about Mary Magdalene’s right

in leading the Church and to undermine the position and power of women in the Christian traditions. For the church, Mary Magdalene is: “A woman who carried with her a secret so powerful that, if revealed, it threatened to devastate the very foundation of Christianity” (Brown 197).

According to Brown, the sacred feminine represented in Mary Magdalene was an essential part of Christianity. But after Jesus Christ’s death, the sacred feminine was ruthlessly suppressed to maintain men’s domination. For instance, the first council of Nicaea was held by the leaders of Christianity to decide to keep about Jesus life and what to hide from the public. In this council, Emperor Constantine has changed Christianity and created the myth that Jesus is God. He threw out most of the gospels, and kept only the sections that served his interests:

powerful men in the early Christian church ‘conned’ the world by propagating lies that devalued the female and tipped the scales in favor of the masculine.....Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from a matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever. (Ibid101)

Thus, Mary Magdalene was the victim of a conspiracy by The Church and Constantine who determined to represent her as a prostitute in order to hide her secret and suppress her leadership role from Christianity forever. However, Brown believes that the Feminine Divine is returning back again. The protagonist Langdon tells Sophie that she is everywhere: “you see her everywhere. Paintings.Music.Books. Even in cartoons, theme parks, and popular movies” (Ibid 215). For instance, the Feminine Divine has been a hidden message that existed in most of the cartoon works of Walt Disney. These works contain hidden codes which tell the story of Mary Magdalene and her sacred secret. Langdon clearly asserts this saying to Sophie Neveu the following:

Most of Disney's hidden messages dealt with religion, pagan myth, and stories of the subjugated goddess. It was no mistake that Disney retold tales like *Cinderella*,

*Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White*—all of which dealt with the incarceration of the sacred feminine. Nor did one need a background in symbolism to understand that *Snow White*—a princess who fell from grace after partaking of a poisoned apple—was a clear allusion to the downfall of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Or that *Sleeping Beauty's* Princess Aurora—code-named "Rose" and hidden deep in the forest to protect her from the clutches of the evil witch—was the Grail story for children. (Brown 215)

According to Brown, in all these works, Walt Disney wants to tell the coming generations about May Magdalene and her Feminine Divine:

Walt Disney had made it his quiet life's work to pass on the Grail story to future generations. Throughout his entire life, Disney had been hailed as "the Modern-Day Leonardo Da Vinci." Both men were generations ahead of their times, uniquely gifted artists, members of secret societies, and, most notably, avid pranksters. Like Leonardo, Walt Disney loved infusing hidden messages and symbolism in his art. For the trained symbologist, watching an early Disney movie was like being barraged by an avalanche of allusion and metaphor. (Ibid)

From the foregoing analysis, one can say one can say that Mary Magdalene is likely the most debatable woman in the popular culture and the Christian history. For some people, she is a reformed prostitute who believed in Jesus Christ and witnessed his resurrection. While for others like Dan Brown she was Jesus' wife, the mother of his daughter, and the embodiment of "the feminine divine" and the lost goddess.

Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* aims to celebrate women and to bring the Feminine Divine back again to the scene. He believes that the Feminine Divine was the essence of the life in the past times and that women have been seen as sacred creatures. But with the coming of Christianity, women started to lose their sacred image and position. To achieve his point, he portrays Mary Magdalene in a new positive way; he asserts that Mary was one of the favorite disciples of Jesus Christ. More than this, he asserts that Mary Magdalene and Jesus had a sacred marriage and they had a child.

As it is shown in the novel, Sophie Neveu is the holy descendant of Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Thus, she is having that divine spirit within her. One can understand that Sophie is the new embodiment of the feminine Divine.

## Conclusion

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* are two popular literary works that gained a huge success not only in America but also in the whole world. After their publication, the two novels have raised a lot of controversy and debate due to the topic they dealt with which is the Feminine Divine. Both writers Brown and Kidd have given a new image or representation to the divine in their novels.

The present dissertation has been an attempt to investigate the representation of the Feminine Divine in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. The analysis that has been conducted within this study demonstrates that this representation was the central basis of the two novels.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, the representation of the Black Madonna figure aims to portray the Feminine Divine of the Goddess Mother that guides the novel's female characters to the recognition of their personal power as women. Furthermore, the inherited divine within the self is another way for Kidd to promote the Sacred Divine as feminine that helps to empower women and contributes to maintain their position in both social and religious realm. Hence, one can note that the portrait of Lily is an attempt for Kidd to show how seeking maternal love and inspiration can be fulfilled through the veneration of the Sacred Feminine and the conviction of the inherited sacred female power. This gives the Divine Feminine a powerful stand that has always been marginalized by the dominating patriarchal God.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown represents Mary Magdalene as the lost Sacred Feminine that has been erased by the patriarchal Christian Catholic Church as an attempt to hide this secret in order to suppress her legitimate right to lead the Church and neglect her role as a woman in Christianity. This truth has been discovered by the two protagonists of the novel Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu who came to discover serious secrets about Mary Magdalene's divinity. For instance, Mary Magdalene is Jesus' wife and they had a daughter.

Moreover, they revealed that the sacred Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene who was chosen by Jesus to lead the Christian Church and bring the Feminine Divine back again into the scene.

After analyzing the two novels, one can establish the fact that both authors have offered a new radical representation of the divine as feminine. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the divine was represented through the image of Mary Magdalene; a female divine, while in *The Secret Life of Bees* the divine was not only represented as feminine but also through a black figure. Kidd and Brown have given the Feminine Divine which is a pre-Christian belief a Christian touch by using popular figures in the Christian history that are Mary Magdalene and the Black Madonna.

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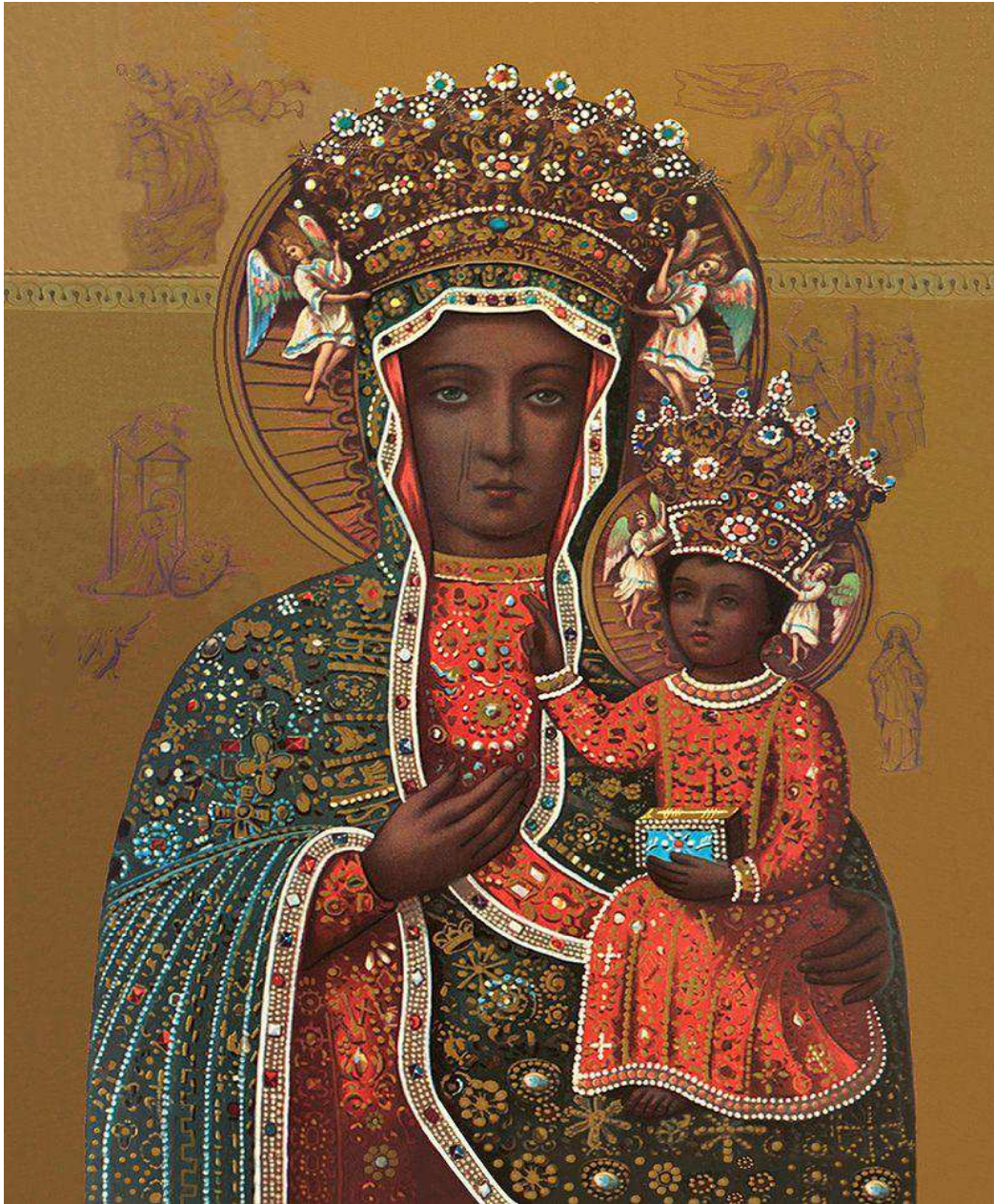
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## ملخص:

تدرس هذه الرسالة المعنونة بـ "الانثى المقدسة: مادونا السوداء في رواية الحياة السرية للنحل للروائية سو مون كيد وماري ماجدولين في رواية شيفرة دافينشي للروائي دان بروان". حيث تمت دراسة كيفية اعادة تمثيل الانثى المقدسة في الروايتين و دورها في اعطاء صورة ايجابية للنساء. ما فعلته الروايتان قام بتحدي الصورة التقليدية للاله كذكر في التقليد المسيحي الذي لطالما عمل على تهميش صورة الاله كأنثى كسعي لرفع سلطة الرجال وتهميش دور النساء في المسيحية. اعطت الكاتبة كيد من خلال ايقونة مادونا السوداء صورة جديدة للاله كأنثى حيث جعلتها محور عبادة من طرف شخصيات القصة وأظهرت دورها في تقوية هذه الشخصيات ومنحهم مكانة جديدة خاصة لبطله القصة ليلي اونز والتي تدور احداث القصة حول سعيها للتخلص من سيطر وظلم والدها وايجاد مصدر يعوضها الحنان الذي فقدته مع موت والدتها. تجد ليلي في نهاية رحلتها كلما ما كانت تبحث عنه من قوة عاطفية وروحانية في مادونا السوداء مما ساعدها في تقوية شخصيتها وتدعيمها. قدم الكاتب بروان في روايته "شيفرة دافنشي" صورة الاله من خلال شخصية معروفة في التاريخ المسيحي وهي شخصية ماري المجدلية. بروان يعتقد ان ماري المجدلية لم تكن مجرد امرأة عادية بل انها زوجة المسيح وأم ابنته الوحيدة سارة كما يذهب الكاتب الى أبعد من هذا من خلال ادعائه ان الكأس المقدسة في المسيحية ما هي الا ماري المجدلية لان رحمها كان وعاءا لحمل سلالة المسيح المقدسة. للاجابة على أسئلة الدراسة, تم استخدام المنهج التحليلي وعلم اللاهوت النسوي. النتيجة التي يمكن استخلاصها من خلال تحليل كلتا الروايتين ان كلا الكاتبين قام باعطاء صورة جديدة للاله كأنثى , في رواية دافنشي صورة الاله كانت من خلال ماري المجدلية بينما في رواية الحياة السرية للنحل تم تمثيل الاله كأنثى سوادء من خلال صورة مادونا السوداء

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**Figure 1:** The Black Madonna<sup>1</sup>.



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<sup>1</sup> From Wikipedia