# RACE, RELIGION, AND THE MORAL OF WHITENESS: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF NADINE GORDIMER'S *COUNTRY LOVERS*

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**Abstract**

This article examines Nadine Gordimer's *Country Lovers* through an integrated framework drawn from postcolonial criticism, critical race theory, and the genealogy of religion. It argues that Gordimer's short story offers a concentrated narrative archive of how race and religion function as co-constitutive systems of colonial power. Using a mimetic method of literary criticism, the study treats the narrative as a representational site where social, legal, and moral structures of apartheid South Africa are reproduced and contested. The analysis is grounded in the contemporary understanding of race as a sociohistorical construct whose apparent naturalness conceals political and institutional production. The study also draws on Talal Asad's formulation of religion as a historically contingent category shaped by European intellectual and colonial histories, as well as Malory Nye's and Theodore Vial's arguments that race and religion are inseparable "conjoined twins" of modernity. Within this theoretical constellation, *Country Lovers* emerges as a text that discloses how Christian-inflected moral orders and secular legal practices jointly uphold racial hierarchies. Close readings of key narrative scenes—Paulus and Thebedi's secret encounters, the description of the mixed-race infant, the court proceedings, and Thebedi's coerced silence—demonstrate the ways in which whiteness operates as moral purity while blackness is aligned with sin, transgression, and disposability. By analyzing these narrative elements as mimetic representations of structural power, the article argues that Gordimer's work illuminates the afterlives of colonial religio-racial discourse in modernity. Ultimately, the study contends that *Country Lovers* not only critiques apartheid but also exposes the deeper moral and epistemic architectures through which colonialism continues to shape postcolonial consciousness. The article contributes to broader scholarly conversations about decolonization by foregrounding literature as a site where racialized religious imaginaries are produced, contested, and potentially transformed.

**Keywords:** race, religion, colonialism, apartheid, Gordimer

## INTRODUCTION

The concepts of race and religion have long been central to the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies across human history. Both function not only as systems of belief or biological categorization but as deeply intertwined discourses of power that regulate human difference and legitimize social inequality. According to

Malory Nye (2020, p. 4), "race and religion are not separate entities but overlapping modes of classification that operate through and within each other to produce and sustain hierarchies of value". This interdependence is neither accidental nor purely theoretical; it has been historically produced and institutionalized through colonial domination and its aftermath. From the racialization of faith to the sanctification of race, the ideological linkage between race and religion has been a powerful mechanism for defining who counts as fully human and who does not. This essay explores the conceptual relationship between race and religion and situates their entanglement within colonial and postcolonial frameworks that have shaped both historical realities and literary representations of social inequality, especially in the works of writers like Nadine Gordimer.

The term *race* has been variously defined, shifting from biological essentialism to cultural constructivism. Historically, race emerged in early modern Europe as a taxonomical system that justified difference through pseudo-scientific reasoning. As Theodore Vial (2016, p. 7) explains in *Modern Religion, Modern Race*, "modern concepts of race and religion were co-constructed during the Enlightenment as part of the same project of modernity, designed to separate the rational and civilized from the irrational and primitive". This co-construction rendered both terms as epistemological tools that naturalized European superiority and colonial expansion. In religious studies, this view manifested in the Christian framing of civilization as inherently white, moral, and rational, while non-European religions were rendered as superstitious or backward. As such, religion became a civilizing mission that cloaked racial domination under divine sanction.

Religion, in its modern sociological sense, refers to "a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred, which unites into a single moral community all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). Yet in the colonial context, religion was rarely neutral or universal. It was deeply entangled with political and racial agendas. European colonial projects relied on Christianity not merely as a spiritual doctrine but as an ideological framework to legitimate conquest and control. Loomba (2015, p. 22) argues that "colonialism was not only about economic exploitation but also about the production of knowledge, identities, and hierarchies of difference". Religion was instrumental in that production, offering metaphysical justification for the subjugation of colonized peoples. The biblical notion of divine election, for instance, became the theological backbone for European racial supremacy.

In the colonial imagination, the Other was both racially inferior and religiously deficient. Vial (2016, p. 14) notes that "race and religion operate as two sides of the same coin—one defining the biological and the other the moral justification for inequality". This dual logic meant that colonized subjects were not only enslaved or dispossessed but also morally pathologized, their spiritual inferiority serving to validate their social marginalization. The construction of whiteness as a religious virtue and blackness as a moral stain extended beyond theology into the cultural consciousness of the empire. As Nye (2020, p. 11) observes, "Christianity was not merely a faith but a racialized form of power, a mode of world-making that privileged whiteness as divine order". Colonialism therefore transformed both race and religion into political technologies of domination. As Loomba (2015, p. 20) explains, "modern European colonialism was distinct from earlier forms of imperial contact because it restructured economies, cultures, and ideologies to sustain the capitalist world-system". Colonial rule relied on the symbolic force of religion to sustain racial hierarchies and on racial ideologies to justify religious conversion. This mutual

reinforcement allowed colonial powers to present themselves as moral agents rather than oppressors. The missionary project in Africa and Asia, for instance, functioned as a spiritual annexation of indigenous worlds, converting the colonized into passive subjects of a divine order that mirrored the colonial hierarchy.

Within this historical matrix, literature becomes a crucial medium for representing and interrogating the intersection between race and religion. Postcolonial literature, in particular, exposes how colonial epistemologies shaped both identity and morality. As Edward Said (1978, p. 3) famously argues in *Orientalism*, "representation is an act of power, and in colonial discourse it becomes a means of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Other". Literary works thus not only reflect but also contest the ideologies that naturalized racial and religious hierarchies. Writers from formerly colonized societies often use fiction as a mode of resistance—an attempt to reclaim moral and spiritual agency from the oppressive frameworks of colonial discourse. The connection between race and religion has always been central to the formation of colonial identities. Loomba (201, p. 45) notes that "colonial encounters restructure ideologies of racial, cultural, class, and sexual difference, linking patriarchal oppression and colonial domination conceptually and historically". Religious doctrines were frequently racialized, and racial ideologies were sanctified through religious symbolism. For example, the Protestant work ethic was invoked to contrast the industrious, God-fearing white settler with the allegedly lazy and godless native. These moral binaries shaped the colonial subject's sense of worth and identity. The colonized were taught not only that their skin was dark but that their souls were stained—a metaphorical entanglement of pigmentation and sin.

Ania Loomba's (2015, p. 19) contribution is essential to understanding how postcolonial theory challenges these discursive structures. In her account, colonialism is both a material and an ideological formation that "locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history". These relationships are mediated through categories such as race, religion, and gender, which operate not merely as descriptors of difference but as instruments of control. Postcolonialism, by contrast, is a theoretical and political attempt to expose and undo the epistemic violence of colonialism. It interrogates how colonial discourse continues to shape modern conceptions of identity, nationhood, and spirituality. From a postcolonial perspective, race and religion function as overlapping codes of meaning that sustain global asymmetries even after the formal end of empire. Loomba (2015, p. 13) warns that "the contemporary global order remains haunted by the legacies of colonialism, in which religious and racial differences are reconfigured as cultural ones". This "cultural racism" operates under the guise of tolerance and multiculturalism but continues to pathologize non-Western ways of life. In the postcolonial world, religion often becomes the language through which race is rearticulated, as seen in the racialization of Islam in Western societies or the theological justification of caste in South Asia.

The entanglement between race, religion, and colonialism is not confined to the political sphere but extends into intimate and affective domains, including sexuality and love. In Nadine Gordimer's *Country Lovers* (1975), for instance, the forbidden relationship between a white farmer's son and a black servant girl dramatizes how racial and religious norms intersect to regulate desire and morality. The story unfolds within apartheid South Africa, where laws against miscegenation were enforced through both civil and religious codes. The narrative reveals how the Christian morality of purity and sin becomes entangled with racial purity, transforming love into

transgression. Gordimer's use of the term "forbidden" evokes not only social prohibition but also biblical sin, exposing how religious language reinforces racial boundaries. In literary terms, this fusion of race and religion can be analyzed through what Vial (2016) calls "the modern racial-religious formation"—a worldview in which "racial hierarchies are not merely biological but theological structures that organize the meaning of human difference" (p. 56). Colonial narratives, from missionary diaries to imperial fiction, perpetuated this worldview by depicting colonized peoples as spiritually and morally inferior. Conversely, postcolonial writers invert these tropes to expose their ideological foundations. By rewriting the moral map of colonialism, they challenge the theological justifications of racial oppression.

Colonialism also produced what Loomba (2015, p. 3) describes as "hybrid subjectivities"—identities fractured by the simultaneous internalization and resistance to colonial norms". The colonial subject is often caught between faith and race, between the imposed religion of the colonizer and the ancestral beliefs of the colonized. This hybridity, though often celebrated as a sign of cultural fluidity, is also a site of deep psychological conflict. In the case of South Africa, Christianity became both a tool of oppression and a language of liberation, as seen in the theology of figures like Desmond Tutu. Literature captures these contradictions, showing how religion can be both complicit in and resistant to racial domination. The Enlightenment, often celebrated as the age of reason, was also the age in which race and religion were redefined through each other. Secularism, far from liberating humanity from theological dogma, reconstituted religious categories within racial hierarchies. Vial (2016, p. 25) argues that "the Enlightenment's invention of the secular depended upon the racialization of the religious Other". This process was visible in Africa, where missionaries portrayed conversion not simply as salvation but as civilization—a racialized spiritual progress that conflated whiteness with enlightenment and blackness with darkness. The colonial mission thus embodied what David Chidester (1996, p. 27) calls "empire's comparative religion," a mode of knowledge that simultaneously studied, classified, and subjugated indigenous faiths. Conversion narratives from the Cape Colony to the Congo demonstrate how religion was a racial project: black converts were welcomed into faith but never into equality. As Loomba (2015, p. 28) observes, "colonial education and religion worked together to produce mimic men—subjects who internalized the colonizer's values but were never granted his power". This contradiction remains a central concern of postcolonial literature and theology alike.

In the broader context of postcolonial theory, the study of race and religion intersects with the critique of modernity itself. As Vial (2016, p. 23) asserts, "modernity's claim to secular universality is itself a theological project that privileges European whiteness as the normative form of humanity". The secular state, far from being neutral, inherited the racial and religious hierarchies of colonial Christendom. This is why Nye (2020, p. 7) emphasizes that "to understand race, we must understand religion—not as faith, but as the grammar of power that organizes belief and belonging". Both scholars highlight how secular modernity disguises its Christian and racial roots under the rhetoric of reason and civilization. Loomba (2015, p. 15) similarly cautions that "the end of colonial rule does not mean the end of colonial power". Instead, colonial epistemologies persist in global structures of inequality, where religion and race continue to inform moral and political hierarchies. Postcolonial theory thus demands a decolonization not only of political institutions but also of knowledge itself—the categories through which we understand difference.

Literature, as a site of imagination and critique, plays a vital role in this epistemic decolonization. By narrating the lives of those silenced by history, writers challenge the moral authority of empire and expose the violence concealed within its religious and racial discourses.

In this light, the intersection of race and religion becomes a crucial lens for analyzing postcolonial literature. Texts like Gordimer's *Country Lovers* do not merely depict racial injustice; they reveal how religious morality and racial purity converge to sustain systems of oppression. The story's tragic conclusion, in which the black woman is punished for a relationship that transgresses racial and moral boundaries, mirrors the historical logic of colonialism: the sanctification of violence through moral rhetoric. As Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 169) argued, "colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip; it turns to the past of the oppressed people, distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it". Religion often becomes the instrument of that distortion, sanctifying domination as divine will. In sum, the relationship between race and religion is not an incidental feature of human society but a foundational axis of modernity, colonialism, and postcolonial identity. Both categories have been used to define the boundaries of humanity and morality, often to the detriment of those deemed racially or religiously other. As Loomba (2015, p. 16) reminds us, postcolonialism "can only remain a healthy and vital field if it continues to expose how the legacies of colonial rule shape our present inequalities". To study literature from this perspective is therefore to participate in an ongoing struggle for epistemic and moral justice—a struggle to imagine new forms of coexistence beyond the inherited binaries of race and religion.

The conceptual scaffolding developed above — definitions of race and religion, an account of their co-constitution in colonial modernity (Vial, 2016; Nye, 2020), and the intervention of postcolonial critique (Loomba, 2015; Said, 1978) — prepares the way for a focused textual analysis. What follows will apply these theoretical resources to a close reading of Nadine Gordimer's short story *Country Lovers* (1975), with special attention to the narrative's deployment of domestic rituals, medico-legal procedures, burial practices, and testimonies as secularized religious acts that racialize bodies and reify whiteness. The close reading aims to make specific the general claims made above: rather than treating race and religion as separate background conditions, it will show how the story's micro-events — an infant's death, an exhumation, a courtroom exchange, gestures of secrecy — instantiate the larger processes that Nye and Vial diagnose as the religionization of racial meaning in colonial modernity. The study therefore moves from conceptual exposition to literary practice: the theoretical lens will be brought to bear on textual details (quoted and analyzed), and the resulting argument will demonstrate how literature both reveals and participates in the moral economies that naturalize unequal life chances.

The intersection of race and religion has increasingly attracted attention across postcolonial literary and religious studies, particularly as scholars recognize that colonial modernity produced both categories as mutually constitutive systems of difference. Yet, despite this theoretical convergence, detailed literary analyses that track the micro-operations of this entanglement within narrative form remain relatively rare. The following review surveys several major and accessible contributions that engage the religion–race nexus in literature and culture—Malory Nye (2020), David Levey (1999), Anya Topolski (2022), Anindyo Dhar (2022), and Magdalena Pycińska (2021)—before locating the present study's analysis of Gordimer's *Country Lovers* within that conversation.

Malory Nye's (2020, p. 5) article "Race and Religion: Postcolonial Formations of Power and Whiteness," published in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, represents the most explicit theoretical effort to fuse critical race theory with critical religion studies. Nye argues that "race and religion are co-constitutive formations, each making the other possible and meaningful through modern colonial epistemologies". Deploying a Foucauldian genealogy, he reconstructs how European colonial governance racialized both bodies and beliefs: the colonizer's Christianity became the invisible norm of "religion," while the colonized's spiritual practices were cast as superstition, magic, or fetish. Importantly, Nye (2020) insists that religion itself, as a scholarly and institutional category, is a racialized construct—a claim that destabilizes any neat disciplinary separation between theology, culture, and ethnicity. While Nye's theoretical synthesis provides an essential conceptual foundation, his discussion remains largely abstract, anchored in discursive history rather than literary representation. He identifies the structural co-formation of religion and race but seldom examines how specific texts encode or resist this process at the level of narrative voice, figuration, or affect. The present study extends Nye's argument into the domain of close reading by asking how Gordimer's prose *performs* the processes Nye describes. In *Country Lovers*, for instance, the language of confession, purity, and punishment—themes central to Christian moral discourse—coincides with juridical and racial hierarchies of apartheid South Africa. By tracing these motifs within character speech and courtroom narration, the essay demonstrates how the "grammar of whiteness" (Nye, 2020, p. 7) manifests in literary microstructures rather than merely in ideological macro-discourses.

David Levey's (1999) "Religion and Writing in South Africa," published in *Literature & Theology*, offers one of the earliest attempts to situate religion within South African literary criticism. Levey surveys writers such as Alan Paton, André Brink, and Nadine Gordimer, arguing that "religious themes of guilt, redemption, and prophetic witness have been central to South African letters". He frames religion primarily as a moral or spiritual vocabulary through which writers articulate resistance or reconciliation during and after apartheid. Although Levey identifies Gordimer's engagement with moral conscience, he interprets this engagement in broadly ethical rather than structural terms. Religion appears in his analysis as an internalized moral sensibility, not as an historically racialized system of classification. The gap between Levey's thematic reading and Nye's genealogical critique is instructive. Where Levey treats religious language as an expressive moral idiom, Nye treats it as a disciplinary regime. The present research bridges that divide by reading *Country Lovers* both as moral narrative and as historical symptom. Gordimer's text is not simply "about" sin and innocence; rather, it reveals how Christianized moral vocabularies sustain racial purity laws and social taboos. By re-embedding Levey's thematic concerns within Nye's structural frame, the analysis turns moral symbolism into evidence of institutional power, demonstrating how religion functions as what Vial (2016) calls "a technology of racial differentiation".

Anya Topolski's (2022) open-access paper "Exploring the Entanglement of Race and Religion in Africa" broadens this conversation by situating Africa as a primary site for the historical co-production of the two categories. Topolski surveys interdisciplinary research on missionary education, colonial legal systems, and postcolonial identity politics, contending that "religion and race in Africa cannot be separated; both emerged through European strategies of rule that conflated spiritual salvation with civilizational hierarchy". Her analysis underscores the institutional scale

of this entanglement—schools, churches, censuses—but pays less attention to aesthetic mediation or to the emotional and linguistic textures through which those institutions inscribe belief. The forthcoming reading of Gordimer's *Country Lovers* addresses precisely that lacuna. The story's depiction of domestic service, clandestine intimacy, and the courtroom dramatizes the interface between institutional and intimate dimensions of colonial power. Gordimer's black female protagonist is subject to the state's racial law and to the settler's religiously inflected morality simultaneously; her body becomes the text upon which both legal and theological judgments are written. By analyzing this intersection at the scale of imagery and dialogue, the essay complements Topolski's macro-level synthesis with a micro-textual case study of how colonial institutions permeate affective life and narrative form.

Anindyo Dhar's (2022) "The Invention of Race and the Postcolonial Renaissance," published in the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, provides a further link between theoretical and literary approaches. Dhar argues that postcolonial literature continually revisits the historical invention of race, dramatizing both the violence of classification and the possibilities of its undoing. Through readings of Caribbean and South Asian texts, he shows that the novel often serves as an archive of racial epistemology—a space where race is narrated, challenged, and re-imagined. Dhar's intervention is significant for repositioning literary form as a historical actor in the making of race. However, Dhar (2022) concentrates on the racial rather than the religious dimension of colonial difference. Although he occasionally gestures toward Christian missionary discourse, religion remains peripheral to his analysis. The present study takes up this unexamined strand by extending Dhar's literary methodology to the theological and moral vocabularies that underwrite racial categorization. In *Country Lovers*, the very terms through which sexual transgression is condemned—"sin," "shame," "purity"—are theological residues that stabilize racial boundaries. Where Dhar exposes the narrative invention of race, the present reading exposes the narrative *religionization* of race—the moral metaphors through which racial difference acquires affective and juridical force.

Magdalena Pycińska's (2021) article "Postcolonial Racialisation of Gender & Religious Experience," also in *Literature & Theology*, provides a more intersectional perspective by focusing on the convergence of gender, religion, and race in postcolonial texts. Pycińska argues that "postcolonial female subjectivity is constituted through the double mediation of religious discourse and racial hierarchy" (p. 416). Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theory, she shows how religious symbolism both empowers and constrains women in postcolonial contexts, producing what she terms "gendered religio-racial subjectivities". Pycińska's analysis is especially relevant to Gordimer's story, whose central figure, Thebedi, embodies this layered subjectivity: a black woman whose sexuality and motherhood are moralized through a Christianized colonial gaze. Yet Pycińska's comparative approach—ranging across several authors and contexts—limits the depth of textual analysis. The present study therefore narrows the scope to a single, densely symbolic text in order to expose the precise narrative operations through which gendered religio-racial subjectivity is produced and punished. It demonstrates that Thebedi's voice is doubly silenced—first by the racial hierarchy that denies her humanity, and second by the religiousized moral order that renders her desire sinful and her motherhood criminal. In this sense, the essay concretizes Pycińska's theoretical insights through a close examination of narrative detail, syntax, and focalization.

Across these five studies, a pattern of conceptual progression becomes visible. Nye (2020) provides a genealogical theory of race–religion entanglement; Levey (1999) and Topolski (2022) survey regional and institutional manifestations; Dhar (2022) and Pycińska (2021) reintroduce literary and gendered dimensions. Yet, despite their collective richness, several research gaps persist. First, most of these works privilege macro-historical or theoretical explanation over micro-textual demonstration; few show how the intertwining of race and religion operates at the level of literary technique. Second, scholarship on South African literature has tended to separate religious and racial analysis—studying apartheid morality as ethical allegory or racial segregation as political structure—without fully exploring their shared theological underpinnings. Third, little attention has been paid to how everyday rituals and legal procedures within fiction reproduce religious categories as racial technologies. The forthcoming analysis of *Country Lovers* addresses these omissions through a method that may be termed "textual micro-genealogy." It applies the historical insights of Nye (2020) and Vial (2016) to specific narrative events—the concealment of a child, the exhumation scene, the courtroom testimony—to show how colonial power operates through a fusion of sacred and secular languages. In doing so, it also extends Levey's early intuition about the moral centrality of religion in South African writing by reinterpreting morality itself as an instrument of racial control. The study thereby situates Gordimer's story within the larger field of postcolonial religion and literature, yet moves beyond general thematic commentary to a precise analysis of narrative mechanics.

Moreover, by reading Gordimer alongside theoretical accounts from Loomba (2015) and Fanon (1967), the analysis demonstrates that religious discourse is not only a colonial residue but a living structure within modern racial orders. The result is a hybrid methodology that unites critical religion, critical race theory, and narratology. It approaches literature as both archive and experiment: an archive preserving colonial grammars of purity and contamination, and an experiment in imagining ethical relations beyond those grammars. Through this synthesis, the essay contributes to an emergent subfield sometimes called "critical religion and literature," which insists that aesthetic form and religious epistemology are co-implicated in the production of racial modernity.

In summary, the existing scholarship establishes that race and religion are historically entangled and that postcolonial literature frequently negotiates this entanglement. Yet it seldom specifies *how* literary form enacts, reproduces, or subverts that dynamic at the level of plot, character, and metaphor. The present study fills that gap by performing a sustained close reading of *Country Lovers* under the theoretical lights of Nye, Vial, and Loomba. It demonstrates that the story's tragic structure is not simply sociological testimony but a theological allegory of racial sin and redemption, one that reveals how colonial Christianity's moral binaries continue to animate postcolonial gender and race relations. In doing so, the essay offers both a methodological contribution—an integration of genealogical theory and narrative analysis—and a substantive insight: that the racialized theology of purity remains embedded in modern moral consciousness, legible not only in institutions but also in the sentences and silences of fiction.

The methodological orientation of the study is explicitly mimetic: it treats Nadine Gordimer's *Country Lovers* as a representational artefact whose narrative content can be read as an imitation or reflection of social life—particularly the intertwined formations of race and religion under colonial modernity. As Abrams and Harpham

explain, "Mimetic criticism views the literary work as an imitation, or reflection, or representation of the world and human life," and therefore interprets the text by comparing its depictions with social, moral, and historical realities (Abrams & Harpham, 2015, p. 166). This theoretical grounding justifies reading the story's scenes (the riverbank meetings, the infant's body, the exhumation, the courtroom exchanges) as indexical of wider institutional and ideological practices; the narrative is treated not as autonomous ornament but as a discursive trace of material practices—law, medicine, household regimes, and religious discourse—that together produce racialized moral order. The mimetic frame thus provides a hermeneutic warrant for treating specific sentences and images in *Country Lovers* as data-bearing: that is, as empirical evidence about cultural meanings and power relations rather than merely aesthetic effects.

The data-collection procedures follow from that epistemic stance. The primary data set consists of the story's narratives and performative speech acts: all passages referring to interaction across racial boundaries, descriptions of the child's body, scenes of secrecy, legal testimony, and ritual gestures were systematically extracted from the text and entered into a working corpus. Close, iterative reading—line-by-line transcription of salient paragraphs, repeated reading for variations in focalization and tonality, and the preservation of original lexical choices—ensures fidelity to Gordimer's language while enabling comparative interrogation with historical documents and theoretical sources. This mimetic research practice resonates with classical and contemporary definitions of mimesis as representation: as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes, mimesis encompasses the "relation between the words of a literary work and the actions and events they recount," a relation that legitimizes reading fiction as a source for understanding social acts and dispositions (Pappas, 2008). In short, the "data" are the textual events themselves, harvested with attention to context, voice, and narratorial mediation so they can be read against secondary sources that supply sociohistorical corroboration.

Analysis proceeds through a structured set of interpretive moves designed to respect both the literary particularity of the text and the broader genealogical claims that inform the study. First, close reading (mimetic close description) isolates formal features—metaphor, narrative gaps, reported speech, irony—that instantiate racial–religious meaning. Second, thematic coding groups these formal indices into analytic categories (purity/contamination, secrecy/confession, testimony/silencing, ritual/forensics), enabling pattern-recognition across scenes. Third, theoretical triangulation situates those patterns within the genealogical frameworks of Nye's "religionization" thesis and Vial's account of modern religion–race co-formation, and within Loomba's critique of colonial knowledge production; this step moves the reading from description to explanation. Finally, validity is addressed through reflexivity and intertextual corroboration: interpretive claims are checked against archival and scholarly sources (historical accounts of apartheid law, missionary literature, and critical scholarship) and by noting alternative readings where the text admits ambiguity. This combined methodology—rooted in Abrams's account of mimetic criticism but extended through contemporary genealogical theory—permits a rigorous analysis that treats literary narrative as both aesthetic form and evidentiary medium for the study of race and religion.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

When Malory Nye poses the question, "when we speak of religion are we in fact talking about race?" (Nye, 2020, p. 4), he opens a critical pathway into postcolonial literary analysis. Nadine Gordimer's short story *Country Lovers* (1975) can be read precisely through this provocative intersection, where the discourses of race and religion converge to produce and legitimize systems of domination. The story's rural setting, its racialized intimacy, and its juridical resolution expose how colonial South Africa's social order is upheld by moral and quasi-religious norms masquerading as natural law. Reading Gordimer alongside Nye's theory of "religionization" and Theodore Vial's genealogy of *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (2016) clarifies how the two categories—religion and race—are not merely related but co-constitutive. Through this lens, *Country Lovers* emerges not simply as a story of interracial tragedy but as a parable of how colonial modernity moralizes racial difference through theological, moral, and legal codes.

Nye (2020, p. 7) insists that "the categories of race and religion are conjoined and co-constructed through histories of colonialism and power". He argues that the very idea of "religion" functions as a racialized discourse: it defines and polices which bodies, cultures, and practices count as civilized or human. Vial (2016, p. 3) reinforces this point, writing that "race and religion are conjoined twins. They are offspring of the modern world". Together, these frameworks demand that we read *Country Lovers* not as a mere moral tale of love and crime but as a narrative in which colonial religious and racial epistemologies shape the contours of intimacy, law, and death. Gordimer's South African farm functions as a microcosm of colonial modernity. The boundaries between the farmhouse and the kraal, the white family and the black laborers, are sustained by what seems a moral order—coded as propriety, decency, or law—but is in effect a theology of segregation. The young white boy Paulus and the black girl Thebedi grow up as playmates, yet the narrator's tone foreshadows the inevitable rupture between innocence and social taboo: "When the children grew up they were not allowed to play together anymore" (Gordimer, 1975). This transition marks the intrusion of a racially moralized social order that divides bodies according to a hierarchy presented as natural law. It is a social catechism disguised as culture, whose prohibitions mirror the disciplinary forms of religion itself.

Malory Nye's concept of "religionization"—the process by which social and political hierarchies become moralized through religious language—applies vividly to the moral structures governing the farm. The domestic sphere of the white family operates like a temple of purity, where racial boundaries are sacralized. When Paulus, now a young man, returns from school and secretly visits Thebedi by the river, their meetings occur "where the willows grew green and trailing" (Gordimer, 1975, p. 2). The natural imagery here suggests a pastoral innocence that contrasts with the moral rigidity of the farmhouse world. Their love is profane precisely because it crosses the sacred geography of whiteness. The narrative's subtle religious undertones emerge when the story's transgression becomes public knowledge. The "pathological tests" performed on Thebedi's infant and the police's exhumation of the grave (Gordimer, 1975) echo ritual acts of purification. The state—through law, medicine, and police—performs a secularized form of religious judgment. Talal Asad (1993, p. 28) explains this historical transformation: modern secular institutions inherit the disciplinary and moral functions of the church, continuing to enforce norms of purity, propriety, and truth. "The secular is not the absence of religion," Asad writes, "but its historical reformation within new regimes of power". In Gordimer's world, colonial law assumes

the role of priesthood, preserving the sanctity of white order through ritualized investigation and judicial absolution.

The story's courtroom scenes dramatize the alliance between law and whiteness as moral authority. When Thebedi testifies that she saw Paulus pour poison into the baby's mouth, the narrator records: "She cried hysterically in the witness box, saying yes, yes, she saw the accused pouring liquid into the baby's mouth" (Gordimer, 1975). Yet when the case is retried, her testimony is dismissed as perjury; the judge tells Paulus there is "strong suspicion" but "not enough proof". The contrast between visible emotional testimony and invisible evidentiary standard reveals how modern law privileges a theological whiteness—a presumed rationality, objectivity, and purity associated with the white subject. Richard Dyer's (1997, p. 28) analysis of whiteness as the invisible norm helps decode this dynamic. Whiteness, Dyer argues, "secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular". Paulus's whiteness renders him neutral, while Thebedi's blackness renders her embodied, emotional, and thus unreliable. Similarly, Toni Morrison (1992, p. 14) notes that whiteness in colonial and modern narratives is "mute, veiled, curtained," precisely because its power depends on invisibility. The judge's unwillingness to convict Paulus performs the secular ritual of absolution that keeps whiteness untarnished. The white body becomes untouchable—holy—while the black body is the site of excess emotion and contamination.

Gordimer's narrative captures the tragic effects of what Vial (2016, p. 19) calls "modern racial religion"—the way Western modernity sacralized race itself as a moral category. Vial explains that since the Enlightenment, "religion and race have been used to define humanity and subhumanity, belief and disbelief". In *Country Lovers*, these definitions manifest in the moral codes that structure sexuality and legitimacy. Paulus's attraction to Thebedi is treated as a temporary lapse—a private sin—whereas Thebedi's motherhood becomes a public scandal. The asymmetry mirrors what Vial identifies as the modern coupling of race and religion: white transgression is individualized and redeemable, black existence is collective and condemnable. In this sense, the story's tragedy is not simply interracial love but the system of moral classification that interprets love through racial theology. The white community, including Paulus's family, need not invoke explicit religion; their social order already functions as a secular church that sacralizes whiteness. The household, the court, and the farm constitute what Nye (2020, p. 11) calls "the ongoing religionization of race," where racial hierarchies are "not merely cultural but moralized, spiritualized". The colonial system's moral economy operates through what Stuart Hall (1980, p. 341) calls "the articulation of race with other social forces." Hall argues that race is "the modality in which class is lived". In Gordimer's story, race is the medium through which class and morality are experienced. The farm's hierarchies—who serves, who owns, who loves—are expressed in the idiom of propriety rather than explicit theology, yet their structure mirrors religious order: the master and servant relationship replicates priest and parishioner, purity and pollution. David Chidester (1996, p. 22), in *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, observes that colonial comparative religion functioned as an imperial technology of control: "Religion was a means to domesticate the savage and to sanctify the colonizer". *Country Lovers* embodies this dynamic. Paulus's family, by enforcing the unspoken code that forbids interracial intimacy, performs a secular sacrament of purity, reaffirming colonial sanctity. Thebedi's pregnancy becomes a form of blasphemy against that order, requiring sacrificial resolution—the death of the child.

The infant's death in *Country Lovers* is not accidental but structural. It is the system's demand for purification. "The baby was not fed during the night … it was dead" (Gordimer, 1975). The understated narration mirrors bureaucratic detachment, yet it carries theological weight: the death expiates the interracial transgression. The later exhumation of the body is both forensic and ritual—an act of disinterment and moral cleansing. The "wooden cross" marking the grave (p. 4) signals the continuity between Christian symbol and colonial authority: the cross has shifted from salvation to sanction. Frantz Fanon (1952, p. 109) helps decode the psychological violence embedded in such scenes. Under colonial regimes, he writes, the black subject is "sealed into his body, an object among objects". Thebedi's child, doubly racialized and objectified by the medical gaze, becomes precisely such an object. Its body is treated not as human but as evidence—of transgression, of contamination, of threat to the social body. The narrative's moral economy thus fuses race and religion into a single grammar of purity, where death restores order.

The story's final courtroom absolution completes the ritual cycle. The judge's pronouncement—"The Court could not accept the girl's evidence" (Gordimer, 1975)—echoes the priestly formula of dismissal. The institutional voice substitutes divine judgment with juridical authority, yet the moral structure remains the same: sin is redefined as suspicion, and whiteness is redeemed. Nye (2020, p. 15) observes that modern Western secularism "continues to perform the theological function of differentiating the pure and impure, the saved and the damned". In this respect, South African apartheid law operates as a liturgy of modernity—its rituals bureaucratic, its theology racial. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015, p. 110) provide a political counterpart to this analysis in *Racial Formation in the United States*. They describe race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies". In Gordimer's story, the child's mixed body becomes the battlefield of those conflicts: it embodies the failure of boundaries the social order must repair. The law's acquittal of Paulus and the erasure of the infant's life reveal what Vial (2016, p. 27) calls "modernity's racial religion of innocence"—a creed that allows white subjects to remain morally unmarked while black subjects bear the sign of guilt.

Gordimer's narrative style enacts the double consciousness of postcolonial witnessing. The omniscient narrator observes events with clinical precision, yet the emotional undercurrents—Thebedi's silence, Njabulo's resignation—expose the fractures of subjectivity under racial surveillance. Paul Gilroy (1993, p. 37) describes such double vision as "the diasporic counterculture of modernity," where black life navigates the contradictions of belonging and exclusion. Thebedi's eventual silence in court—her calm denial after earlier hysteria—embodies this negotiation. She performs what Fanon (1952) would call "strategic compliance," a survival mechanism within a structure that allows no genuine speech. Edward Said's (1978, p. 2) theory of *Orientalism* further clarifies how knowledge systems produce and sustain racial hierarchies. "Orientalism," Said writes, "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction". In *Country Lovers*, the farm embodies such a local Orientalism: white domestic space is ontologically superior, black labor space epistemologically suspect. The "epistemological distinction" is enforced not by scripture but by social custom—an inherited religious form translated into racialized modernity.

Gordimer's narrative underscores secrecy as both moral necessity and religious taboo. Paulus's visits to Thebedi are hidden, performed at dawn or dusk, and later

denied. “He did not go to the kraal again for a long time” (Gordimer, 1975). The secrecy mirrors the confessional logic of sin: the forbidden act demands concealment, confession, and absolution. Yet confession here is inverted. Thebedi confesses before the law, not to be absolved but to be discredited. The confessional structure itself is racialized—only white subjects possess redeemable interiority. Asad (1993, p. 63) argues that “the modern notion of confession presupposes a subject who is free and self-knowing”; Thebedi’s coerced testimony exposes how black women are denied such subjecthood. Intersectionality deepens the analysis. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) foundational work on intersectionality emphasizes that systems of power interlock, producing unique oppressions at the nexus of race and gender. Thebedi’s experience exemplifies this intersection. Her blackness marks her as subhuman; her womanhood subjects her to both sexual exploitation and disbelief. The religious and moral codes that define sexual purity are applied asymmetrically. As Nyasha Mboti (2013, p. 91) notes in postcolonial gender studies, “the black woman in South African fiction is doubly colonized—by race and by patriarchy”. Gordimer’s story captures that double colonization within the domestic-religious matrix of apartheid culture.

The lingering of Christian and colonial moral frameworks in secular South Africa suggests what Nye (2020, p. 18) calls the “afterlife of race as religion”. Thebedi’s world is governed not by overt Christianity but by its secular derivatives: purity, property, family, and law. The logic of predestination—who is destined for innocence or guilt—continues to structure postcolonial relations. In this sense, Gordimer’s story anticipates what Aníbal Quijano (2000) names “the coloniality of power,” the enduring patterns of control that outlive colonial administration. The religious morality of racial purity becomes the invisible architecture of everyday life. If, as Vial (2016, p. 5) claims, “modern religion and modern race were born together”, then the task of critique is to unlearn the habits of thought that sanctify hierarchy. *Country Lovers* offers literature as one mode of such unlearning. By narrating how love is criminalized and how justice is inverted, Gordimer exposes the falsity of a moral order that calls itself civilized. The narrative’s refusal to moralize explicitly is itself an ethical act: it demands that readers confront the coexistence of empathy and complicity within colonial modernity.

As a literary theologian of the secular, Gordimer dismantles the false binaries between sin and law, belief and custom, religion and race. The tragedy of Thebedi’s child becomes a modern Passion narrative: innocence destroyed to preserve social sanctity. The court’s verdict, like Pilate’s washing of hands, proclaims purity through denial of responsibility. This echo is not accidental; it is the structure of colonial morality itself. Nye’s (2020, p. 21) insight that “race and religion remain mutually constitutive in modern discourses of purity and danger” reminds us that postcolonial critique must continue to expose these genealogies. Gordimer’s *Country Lovers* dramatizes the intimate machinery of racial theology in colonial modernity. Through the forbidden relationship between Paulus and Thebedi, Gordimer reveals how race and religion intertwine to police bodies, dictate morality, and construct hierarchies of innocence and guilt. The story’s quiet diction, its forensic realism, and its unresolved justice expose the continuity between colonial law and religious ritual: both serve to sanctify whiteness and condemn blackness.

By reading the narrative through Malory Nye’s (2020) framework of religionization, Theodore Vial’s (2016) genealogy of racial religion, and the broader theoretical constellation of Asad, Fanon, Said, Hall, and Morrison, we see that the moral order in *Country Lovers* is neither secular nor sacred but a hybrid theology of race. The court’s verdict, the farm’s hierarchy, and the villagers’ whispers all perform the liturgy

of modernity's racial faith. The child's grave, marked by a simple cross, stands as the story's final sermon: a symbol of purity regained through sacrificial violence. In this way, Gordimer's story anticipates the critical project Nye and Vial describe—the deconstruction of the "conjoined twins" of race and religion. The challenge that remains, for readers and scholars alike, is to disentangle moral imagination from the theologies of domination that continue to shape our world.

## CONCLUSION

Nadine Gordimer's *Country Lovers* dramatizes the intimate machinery of racial theology in colonial modernity. Through the forbidden relationship between Paulus and Thebedi, Gordimer reveals how race and religion intertwine to police bodies, dictate morality, and construct hierarchies of innocence and guilt. The story's quiet diction, its forensic realism, and its unresolved justice expose the continuity between colonial law and religious ritual: both serve to sanctify whiteness and condemn blackness. By reading the narrative through Malory Nye's (2020) framework of religionization, Theodore Vial's (2016) genealogy of racial religion, and the broader theoretical constellation of Asad, Fanon, Said, Hall, and Morrison, we see that the moral order in *Country Lovers* is neither secular nor sacred but a hybrid theology of race. The court's verdict, the farm's hierarchy, and the villagers' whispers all perform the liturgy of modernity's racial faith. The child's grave, marked by a simple cross, stands as the story's final sermon: a symbol of purity regained through sacrificial violence. In this way, Gordimer's story anticipates the critical project Nye and Vial describe—the deconstruction of the "conjoined twins" of race and religion. The challenge that remains, for readers and scholars alike, is to disentangle moral imagination from the theologies of domination that continue to shape our world.

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