

# Money Moves: Class-Based Scapegoats and the Decolonization of Literary Crime Fiction

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The crime fiction genre is one of many clichés, including isolated locations, technology struggles, law enforcement errors, red herrings, and more. These clichés interact with various class, gender, language, and religious identities that influence how investigations evolve and how the genre is received by its audience. Tana French's *The Secret Place* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) both interact with these genre conventions through isolated boarding schools and mansions on hilltops, law enforcement errors, investigative dynamic duos, and more, but the most significant of genre conventions is their consideration of the scapegoat and its functionality. In this essay, a scapegoat is a character knowingly forced to endure the blame and punishment for another's actions. While these pieces follow genre conventions in the presence of a scapegoat, each piece of literature juggles red herrings and the class-based scapegoats in new lights. These pieces transcend the genre

by forcefully calling out the class-based scapegoat, considering the perspective of the scapegoat, and vindicating the scapegoat. This essay will investigate the role of the scapegoat within *The Secret Place* and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* within the context of literary crime fiction genre conventions with Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as a framework to examine the significance of class, race, and violence in the decolonization of literary crime fiction. Tana French and Oyinkan Braithwaite transcend genre conventions established by wealthy, white English authors such as Agatha Christie by confronting contemporary issues through their consideration of the class-based scapegoat. This confrontational transcendence utilizes scapegoats to call out the marginalization and oppression of diverse populations by privileged individuals and subsequently replace the traditionally privileged individuals with the previously marginalized people.

## Introduction

The crime fiction genre has a rich background with notable authors like Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, both renowned, well-off British authors best known for *The Mousetrap* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* respectively (“About Agatha Christie;” “Biography”). Christie and Doyle are often credited for many of the genre’s popular conventions like isolated locations, technological struggles, red herrings, detective duos, and more. Within these conventions, one also finds considerations of class, gender, and language identities, all of which play large parts in those suspected, accused, and victimized within the chilling stories. Today, contemporary novels such as Tana French’s *The Secret Place* and Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer* transcend genre conventions established by wealthy, white English authors like Christie and Doyle by confronting the class-disadvantaged scapegoat. French does this by grappling with the obstacles of investigating a murder at a wealthy, all-girls boarding school, while Braithwaite explores what it means to be and assist a murderer.

Within this essay, the term “scapegoat” will be used to identify a character knowingly forced to endure the blame and punishment for another’s actions. This transcendence utilizes scapegoats to call out the marginalization of diverse populations by privileged individuals. After calling out the scapegoat, the authors subsequently replace the traditionally privileged individuals with the previously marginalized people. This replacement mirrors that prescribed by Frantz Fanon in his novel *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), which considers the actions necessary to decolonize a people through the class war. In accordance with the principles presented within *Wretched of the Earth*, contemporary crime fiction pieces, specifically Tana French’s *The Secret Place* and Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, challenge and decolonize genre conventions by calling out, considering the perspective of, and ultimately vindicating the class-based scapegoat.

### Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*

Within his text *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon considers violence, race, and the class war as he dissects the relationship between the colonist and the colonized. Most significant to this essay is Fanon’s idea that “decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” that occurs in an “unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless” manner (1). Regarding literary crime fiction and the class-based scapegoat, this substitution would occur when the conventionally

suspected marginalized scapegoat takes the place of the traditionally untouchable privileged victims. For this substitution to take place, Fanon declares that “the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists,” the privileged and the marginalized (3). Additionally, any “proof of success lies in a social fabric that has been changed inside out” (1), meaning not only must the economic structures change, but any supplemental power structure dictated by gender, race, or class must also be substituted. Decolonization is the absolute destruction of colonial structures and systems within a society. In addition to the substitution of species, this essay addresses the figures, such as police officers, that work to protect and maintain the colonial or classist regime and status quo, otherwise known as the “legitimate agent” of the regime (Fanon 3). In crime fiction, this violent confrontation against the regime and its agents takes place both in the literal crime committed, as well as in the accruing of land, money, and social influence.

## Calling Out the Scapegoat

Scapegoats are rife within literary crime fiction. These red herrings can be used to lead readers and detectives away from the truth, effectively making the conclusion more shocking and subsequently more entertaining. In the nineteenth century, crime fiction began with the understanding that “[i]f crime was the problem, then identification and removal of the perpetrator was the solution” (Lee 282). However, in contemporary novels such as *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *The Secret Place*, authors play with the many ways those falsely accused as the perpetrator are victims of a larger oppressive society. Today, the crime fiction genre has shifted to become a place of dissent, where previous conventions are transformed by radical decolonial politics (Roy 120). As contemporary authors begin the process of decolonizing the genre, they first call out the scapegoat, defining the many ways an oppressive regime is built and maintained.

Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite utilizes the scapegoat in a variety of ways. There’s the primary and most prevalent scapegoat, Korede, who becomes increasingly suspected and blamed as Ayoola, Korede’s sister, continues murdering her romantic partners. After Korede and her sister Ayoola have an interview with the police about Femi, Ayoola’s third victim, the police request to see Korede’s car (Braithwaite). The police’s possession of her car prompts Korede to question “why should [Ayoola’s] hands be clean, while [her’s] become more and more stained” (102). Regardless of who committed the violent murder, Korede is repeatedly suspected of the murders, making her hands, as she says, “more and more stained.” This passing of the blame to Korede is significant because of the sisters’ differing jobs and social standings. While Korede is a nurse who works at a local hospital, Ayoola “models the clothes she designs on social

media” as a social media influencer (Braithwaite 68). While both sisters hold service-based jobs, the audience perceives Korede as the harder-working, grittier individual relative to Ayoola due to established societal connotations of influencers. Braithwaite maintains these perceptions when Ayoola invites Korede to lunch and gets upset and frustrated when Korede cannot abandon her workload to go out. Through the class distinctions established by the sisters’ jobs, readers “are witness to the mobilization of a people, who now have to work themselves to exhaustion,” a people represented by Korede, “while a contemptuous and bloated Europe,” represented by Ayoola, “looks on” (Fanon 55).

Furthermore, Ayoola’s beauty and adherence to feminine body and behavior standards, as illustrated in her modeling/influencer career, signifies higher social standing within the patriarchal order due to implications of masculine desire, as described by David Buchbinder, a professor of Masculinities Studies (108-110). In contrast, Korede’s undesirable presentation relative to Ayoola’s decreases her social standing within the patriarchal order (Braithwaite 84-166; Buchbinder 108-110). Women’s beauty acts as a social currency that cultivates influence and power in the same way financial currencies garner power within the colonial order. Throughout the novel, Braithwaite utilizes Korede as an effective scapegoat, who is marginalized based on distinctions established between Korede and Ayoola’s jobs and the pair’s social standings within the patriarchal order.

In addition to Korede becoming a scapegoat for murder, Braithwaite also utilizes Mohammed, one of the janitorial staff members at the hospital where Korede works, as a scapegoat for thievery. After Tade, a doctor who works in the same hospital as Korede, finds his office a mess and his engagement ring for Ayoola broken, Yinka, a fellow nurse, decides that Mohammed likely trashed the office and broke the engagement ring because of drugs (Braithwaite 194). In response, Korede observes that “[i]t’s easy to point the finger at Mohammed. He is poor, uneducated. He is a cleaner” (194). Despite his tenure at the hospital and how “Mohammed denies the charges vehemently,” he is fired (194). Here, the class-based distinctions are clearer than those established with Korede, as there are direct references to Mohammed’s socioeconomic status as lower-class and “poor,” which is associated with being “uneducated” and his job as “a cleaner.” These class-based distinctions allow those around him at the hospital to easily prosecute and fire him. The scene that encompasses suspicions of Mohammed, his accusation, and the subsequent punishment takes up no more than one page. The more elite at the hospital, Korede’s fellow nurses and Tade, manage to utilize their social position and class to wrongfully punish Mohammed (194). Braithwaite reflects Fanon’s observation that “[c]onfronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed

guilty" (Fanon 16).

While all of Braithwaite's characters exist within a colonized context since Lagos was colonized by Britain, the story's "colonist" is the one with power and social influence. Fanon understands the colonist as one who "derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system" and the "colonized" (2). In this context, the nurses and Tade hold the social and financial power, effectively making them the colonists and Mohammed the colonized (Bishku 361). Mohammed is automatically presumed guilty and is punished at the will of the "colonizer." Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite emphasizes how class-based distinctions and discrimination are used to keep the fiscally and socially wealthy in power and unpunished through the unjustified prosecution of poorer characters.

In *The Secret Place*, French, too, utilizes the class-based scapegoat to call out how society discriminates and punishes those of lower classes. After detectives Stephen Moran and Antoinette Conway return to St. Kilda's, an all-girls boarding school in Dublin, Conway recalls how "[o]ne of the groundskeepers came up on the system: prior for supply" and they "figured it was [their] lucky day: two solves for the price of one. Chris snuck out to buy drugs off the groundskeeper, some fight over money, bang" (French 39). However, the "groundskeeper alibied out... We got him for possession with intent, but the murder... I should have known it wasn't gonna be that simple" (39). Within this scene, there are a few instances of class-based discrimination. To find the "simple" answer, Conway and the previous detective on the case chose to go after the groundskeeper who would have stuck out at a rich, all-girls boarding school. As a blue-collar worker with "priors," the groundskeeper would make an easy target. Within this quick, off-hand comment, French establishes how the regime uses class-based scapegoats as an easy way to get answers and solve crime with a bow, regardless of whether their answers are genuine and truthful. In this moment, "[t]he agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination" (Fanon 4), but rather there is a proud display of the many ways society utilizes class-based oppression to more easily display control over the public. French's utilization of the class-based scapegoat, like that of Braithwaite's, works to "exacerbate inequalities" and reveal crime and its punishment as key elements of societal struggles for power (Roy 123).

After establishing the scapegoats within their stories, the contemporary authors face the challenge of "seiz[ing] th[e] violence as it realigns itself" (Fanon 21). By calling out scapegoats, these contemporary authors start the process of seeking justice, prompting the need to "seize their efforts" (Lee 289). This search for justice realizes itself in the many ways authors consider the scapegoat identity along with the different gender and racial identities that influence it. French and Braithwaite are two women residing within postcolonial contexts in Ireland and Nigeria respectively. Both



Ireland and Nigeria have been colonized by European powers and while those colonial powers have left, their structures have stayed. French and Braithwaite's understanding of this dichotomy allows them to utilize Korede, Mohammed, and the groundskeeper to establish class-contexts and subsequent identity politics necessary to prompt a confrontation against the status quo with regard to crime fiction genre conventions.

### Considering the Scapegoat

While traditionally French considers the police officer to be "the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression" (122), Shampa Roy, an Associate English Professor at the University of Delhi, considers how detectives provide greater opportunities for marginalized peoples in crime fiction. Within Braithwaite and French's novels, scapegoats are marginalized by societal values and standards, implanted by colonial interests within several contexts. Braithwaite highlights Korede's identity as undesirable relative to patriarchal beauty and behavioral standards, one which Korede is "marginalized" and subsequently "demonized" for, as seen through her continuous persecution throughout the novel. However, Braithwaite deepens her consideration of the scapegoat by understanding the position of being colonized as fluid with many degrees of severity. In these moments, Braithwaite acknowledges Fanon's idea of the traitorous common person "who apparently gets along very well with the occupier and strives to succeed in the context of the colonial system" (67). While Korede and Mohammed are in a continuous state as colonized, Korede also often acts as a "spokesperson for the colonizer" or traitor to the fellow colonized by regularly chastising and disciplining Mohammed (Braithwaite). While Korede is "disenfranchised within colonial contexts," she also finds her voice within the same context as a powerful figure. In her consideration of the scapegoat, Braithwaite acknowledges the nuance of the colonial context concerning the various powers, including economic and patriarchal powers.

In addition to Braithwaite, French works to consider the scapegoat by consistently evaluating why the detectives, as well as the employees and students of St. Mary's, presumed and believed the scapegoat's guilt. For three-quarters of the novel, students, detectives, and other school faculty admit to believing "Groundskeeper Willy" was guilty of killing young Chris Harper (French 358). When first reviewing the murder, detectives only had the murder weapon, a hoe, that only had the groundskeepers' prints and access. However, this lack of information was not limited to just the detectives. Much of the general student body recollected that they were not even sure of the accused's name, claiming that "that's just what everyone else called him" (89). Moreover, the girls of St. Kilda's even admitted that "[they] don't know

if he was a pervert or just a drug dealer, but either way, ew” (89). The school readily associated the groundskeeper with being a “pervert,” going as far as actively referring to him as “Willy” in reference to the colloquial term used for the male sexual organ.

Relying solely on rumors and weak police evidence, the entire school and police force fortified the colonizer-colonized system that relies on identity-based discrimination. While the audience never hears the groundskeeper’s perspective, French provides insight into the weak and seemingly baseless assumptions that support the public’s quick assumption of guilt concerning the groundskeeper. A blue-collar job and previous drug charges were enough for students, staff, and detectives to quickly think the worst—that a man was capable of murdering a child. French further considers the scapegoat, determining that detectives are “not going to suspect [someone like] Selena,” a rich, white girl (404). Rather, they would suspect a groundskeeper. As illustrated by French, there are certain identities people more frequently associate with crime, specifically ones associated with socioeconomic status, gender, and race.

By highlighting the different biases involved in determining a scapegoat, French and Braithwaite participate in what Buchbinder determines to be “mark[ing]’ in the sense of being singled out for retribution” (99). The contemporary authors’ acknowledgment of discrimination creates a vehicle for the retribution of the scapegoat. By considering the scapegoat within each novel, French and Braithwaite examine, poke, and spotlight the many biases and structural errors that influence the creation and perpetuation of the scapegoat determined by class distinctions.

## Vindicating the Scapegoat

Within Braithwaite and French’s works, vindicating the scapegoat takes many forms, most particularly given that only certain scapegoats are vindicated. In her article entitled “Crime Fiction and Theories of Justice,” Susanna Lee remarks that “[t]heories of punishment include such traditional justifications as retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation and restoration” (284). Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *The Secret Place*, scapegoats are vindicated primarily through means of retribution and restoration. These punishments are enacted against the people, powers, and institutions that actively work to marginalize and demonize the scapegoats. The punishments support those working against the marginalizing system and the marginalized themselves—victims are “not just the actual individual victim of the crime at hand, but also society at large, the city, moral fiber and even the individual detective” (Lee 284).

In Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, while Mohammed is not saved, the

novel does end with an acknowledgment of the system's failures. While at work, after dealing with Muhtar and Ayoola, Korede calls for Mohammed only to be told, "Mohammed is gone, ma" (Braithwaite 221). In this moment, Korede must hold herself accountable for her part in supporting the status quo and forcing Mohammed to be a scapegoat. In addition to this reflection, which serves as Mohammed's vindication, Korede ends the novel with an understanding of retribution against several powerful identities, including men and the patriarchal order, that act as a colonizing power within Korede's space. There's also retribution on the class front since many of Ayoola's victims are rich men. Towards the end of the novel, when asked who stabbed her, Ayoola quickly blames Tade, determining that "he proposed to [her] and [she] said [she] wasn't interested and he lost it" (206-207). When Korede pushes back on her sister's statement, Ayoola remarks that "it's him or me," telling Korede that "[she] can't sit on the fence forever" (207). In this scene, Ayoola forces Korede to make the decision to either support her sister and fight against the larger patriarchal order, or fight against her sister. Both represent a colonial power in Korede's context. At the end of the novel, Korede, Ayoola, and any other person impacted by the masculine construct are vindicated when Korede happens upon Ayoola's new boyfriend: "They are in the living room—my mum, Ayoola and the man... The man smiles. I smile back" (223). At this point, Korede is not vindicated from her sister, but rather no longer letting her life be ruled by rich men. Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite vindicates the scapegoat by recognizing the intersectional nature of the colonized and the subsequent power dynamics within colonized populations.

In *The Secret Place*, there's retribution against patriarchal powers with a recognition of class influences. At the end of French's novel, detectives figure out that Becca, a boarding student at St. Kilda's, murdered Chris. The girl recounts that "all those stupid slimebags, James Gillen and Marcus Wiley, it could never have been them. They're nothing; they're totally worthless. You can't have a sacrifice that's worth less. It has to be something good" (French 424). Rather than killing one of the boys who fit the patriarchal order, the boys who had a history of teasing girls like Becca, Becca killed Chris, someone she described as "kind" (109). To protect her and the girls' sacred friendship, Becca follows through with Fanon's final violent confrontation. Rather than letting a wealthy, white boy that represented, in Becca's mind, the best of the patriarchal order rule over or destroy the girls' bond, she kills him. This murder substitutes the standing power of the wealthy man with a new power, the feminine. There's vindication in this moment because the girls get their vengeance—they maintain their friendship, as seen when, "in the center of the clearing, Holly dropped to her knees in the grass" and her friends "opened like a puzzle, arms unfurling, reached out to draw her in and closed around her" (427). Despite Becca's criminal behavior,



the standing societal order does not reclaim its power, rather there's a complete acceptance of the girls' power for a moment. French vindicates the scapegoat by disconnecting the groundskeeper from Chris's murder and by allowing the girls' sacred friendship to persevere contrary to the patriarchal order.

## Conclusion

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and Tana French's *The Secret Place* both deal with the scapegoat with considerations of class and subsequent identity influences, most especially gender. These deliberations, in alignment with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, illustrate how "[t]he crime fiction of the colonized or previously colonized writers is often a resistant force" (Roy 127). Braithwaite and French spotlight, consider, and vindicate scapegoats in such a manner that creates a confrontation between two forces created by the colonial context (Fanon 2). This confrontation is illustrative of the authors' efforts to "move away from 'classic' detective fiction and its formal conventions in order to engage critically with the compelling sociopolitical issues" and decolonize the genre (Roy 127). At the end of *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite encompasses contemporary crime fiction authors' efforts by acknowledging that in their deconstruction of the genre, any investigation is a game of " [their] word against *ours*" (213).

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