

Internalized Oppression or Rational Fear: Examining Internal Group Animosity in Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time"

Katy Keisling

Scripps College, Class of 2015

It is necessary to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, and wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized)...

bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

Nadine Gordimer's short story "Once Upon a Time" is a chilling depiction of the nearly five-decade long systematic segregation of races in South Africa, a period known as apartheid. In the story, which Gordimer presents as a "fairytale," the author paints a picture of a suburban, upper-class family and the wall they construct around their property to protect themselves from "people of another color."¹ The family obsessively updates the wall until, one day, their most recent security measure backfires: their little boy becomes trapped in the razor wire on top of the wall and bleeds to death. Gordimer focuses largely on the actions of the white family and their direct consequences. However, an examination of one character – the trusted housemaid, who is black – provides critical insight on the complex social and political issues of the time. While Gordimer's description of the housemaid is minimal, the way she navigates her position is revealing; the housemaid's relations with her own race are characterized by isolation, fear, and discrimination. In "Once Upon a Time," Nadine Gordimer's portrayal of the trusted housemaid reveals a subtle, but salient symptom of institutionalized racism: the harmful divisions that occur within groups. Ultimately, the housemaid's actions are not reflections of her own inherent racism, but the product of the larger social context of apartheid.

Gordimer's repetition of one simple adjective to describe the housemaid—"trusted"—is particularly effective for the reader's understanding of the social situation under apartheid. In a story that depicts the forced, physical separation of races, the housemaid is the exception to the rule. "People of another color...were not allowed into the suburb except as reliable housemaids and gardeners, so there was nothing to fear, the husband told the wife." Evidently, the adjective "reliable" is enough to distinguish the housemaid from the other members of the racial group to which she belongs. Gordimer's repetition of the phrase "trusted housemaid" throughout the story reassures both the reader and the family that the housemaid will not do any harm. If the housemaid were not described with this label, she would be just another threatening "person of another color"—those perpetrating the violence and riots on the other side of the wall. The

¹ Gordimer quotations throughout are from "Once Upon a Time."

housemaid's privileged social position (and the minimal justification for it) draws attention to the absurdity of racial stratification under apartheid.

Because of the high degree of responsibility she holds in the household, Gordimer's housemaid is acutely aware of the danger of intrusion by those on the other side of the wall. Her fear, which contributes greatly to the mounting sense of anxiety throughout the story, is evidently spurred by news of another housemaid's misfortune. "There were many burglaries in the suburb and somebody's trusted housemaid was shut up in a cupboard by thieves while she was in charge of her employers' house." In this simple sentence, Gordimer draws attention to three distinct and significant social issues. First, the event specifies the type of crime that was common during apartheid: burglary. Second, Gordimer illustrates the degree of social unrest existing between groups. In particular, the episode describes a direct clash between members of the same race outside the wall (represented by the thieves) and inside the walls (the trusted housemaid). Finally, Gordimer calls attention to the housemaid's immense responsibilities, as she is left "in charge of her employers' house." The implications of this responsibility are quite evident: if an intrusion occurs, it is the housemaid who will suffer the consequences.

These details are key to understanding the trusted housemaid's actions and role in the story. Unsurprisingly, the housemaid recognizes this "misfortune befalling a friend" as a possible threat to her own safety. Like the other housemaid, she is often left with the absurd and all-encompassing "responsibility for the possessions of the man and wife and the little boy"; thus, she fears a fate similar to that of her friend. As a result, "she implore[s] her employers to have burglar bars attached to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed." The fact that it is the housemaid who initiates the obsessive installation of home security marks her realization that she is just as much of a potential target for violence by blacks as her white oppressors are. Thus, by drawing attention to inter-group animosity, Gordimer presents the reader with a complex picture of the fear, oppression and discrimination of apartheid.

Gordimer develops this problem further by creating a situation in which the housemaid is unquestionably responsible for the suffering of her fellow oppressed people. When individuals "who [are] not trusted housemaids or gardeners" begin loitering about the suburb, begging for work or food, the wife takes pity on them. "She sent the trusted housemaid out with bread and tea, but the trusted housemaid said these were loafers and *tsotsis*, who would come and tie her and shut her in a cupboard." The housemaid is not just afraid of encountering the individuals on the other side of the wall—she insists on avoiding contact with them altogether. This reflects a profound fear of her own race, and is an open act of betrayal: she refuses to deliver her mistress' offering of food, thus contributing directly to their suffering. In this instance, the housemaid's betrayal of her race is accentuated by her use of South African slang word "*tsotsi*" (meaning "hooligan") to describe the beggars. While the housemaid's race is implied throughout the story, the appearance of this word marks the only *explicit* indication that she is indeed black. Gordimer's placement of it here is clever and troubling—the housemaid is discriminating against the people on the other side of the wall and, in the exact same moment, revealing her inextricable affiliation with them.

Gordimer also makes an effective choice with the wife's role in this scene. While the black housemaid's actions are portrayed as racist and discriminatory, her white mistress is depicted as amiable and sympathetic. The fact that "the wife could never see anyone go hungry" indicates that she maintains some level of concern for the well being of the oppressed group, despite the institutionalized racism that pervaded South Africa at the time. Ironically, the white characters in Gordimer's story make no directly racist actions; instead, the wife's meager attempt to give the beggars food shows her in a favorable light. It is the *housemaid's* action that shows discrimination, just as it is *her* fear that initially spurs the security measures. In both of these instances, the wife (and then the husband) are described as simply agreeing to the housemaid's demands: "She is right, let us take heed of her advice"/ "She's right. Take heed of her advice." By presenting the housemaid as the instigator of racial discrimination, Gordimer subtly requires readers to consider the relations that exist *within* a race under apartheid, not just those between races.

What explains the housemaid's seemingly cruel discrimination? Gordimer poses a difficult question and offers no direct insight toward the answer. The author's simplistic writing style and minimal character description necessitates looking beyond the literary text. Drawing upon psychological theory and historical context reveals several possible explanations for the housemaid's actions. The housemaid's actions towards the members of her own race are indicative of *internalized oppression*, a concept discussed in both psychology and sociology. Though it manifests in many different ways, internalized oppression is a phenomenon in which members of a subjugated group begin to use their oppressors' views against themselves (Pyke 544). One symptom of internalized oppression is isolation, or the manner in which individuals physically separate themselves from other blacks out of fear and distrust (Lipsky). "The isolation that results from internalized oppression can become so severe that a black person may feel safer with and more trustful of white people than blacks" (Lipsky). We can see these behaviors clearly reflected in Gordimer's trusted housemaid: she isolates herself from the rest of her race, develops an acute fear of them, and garners the protection and security of her white employers. Another common component of internalized oppression is "defensive othering," in which individuals in the subordinated group attempt to distance themselves from their peers. "By attributing the negative stereotypes...that the dominant society associates with the racial/ethnic group... the subordinated can distance themselves from the negative stereotype" (Pyke 557). In this context, the housemaid's use of the word *tsotsi* to characterize the black beggars is demystified—by using this negative stereotype, she mentally isolates herself from her race, and asserts her superiority at the same time.

Although the housemaid's actions can be interpreted as the result of internalized oppression, examining the historical context of the story offers another explanation. When "Once Upon a Time" was published in 1989, political unrest in South Africa had reached a new height. In 1984, a new constitution was implemented which granted limited parliamentary representation to Asians and "colored" people (those of mixed race), but not to blacks (Ikejiaku 452). This marked the beginning of a period of intensified resistance, as well as a dramatic

upswing in crime rates. In the ten-year period between 1980 and 1990, serious offenses rose by 22%, and burglaries rose by 31% (Ikejiaku 452). In light of these statistics, the actions and choices of Gordimer's trusted housemaid seem quite sensible. Her repeated demands for increased security, which on their own seem somewhat like paranoia, are perhaps better characterized as the products of *rational fear*. When the story is read without the historical context in mind, the housemaid's rationalization of her refusal to interact with the beggars seems a bit far-fetched: "They were loafers and *tsotsis*, who would come and tie her and shut her in a cupboard." However, considering the social unrest, the crime rates, and the recent seizure of a friend, her claim is not so absurd. Thus, when she refuses to interact with the blacks on the other side of the gate, it is not necessarily an act; her position as a housemaid in a white, upper-class suburban home puts her in the direct line of fire for real, probable crime.

Whether committed out of internalized oppression or simply rational fear, the housemaid's actions are symptoms of the larger social context of institutionalized racism. They cannot, and should not, be viewed as reflections of genuine racist sentiments of the housemaid herself. The housemaid's internalized oppression would not exist without the initial external oppressors. Similarly, the social and political unrest that contributes to the housemaid's acute fear would not exist if apartheid had not been implemented in the first place. Gordimer's characterization of the housemaid highlights these complexities, and the omission of a direct explanation for the housemaid's actions suggests that there *is* no simple explanation. The housemaid's position between racial worlds makes her acutely aware of the complex and vicious social situation of her country. This awareness feeds into her actions—they are not aimed at effectively straddling the racial rift, but staying as far away from it as possible. In this way, she tragically, unwittingly contributes to the further division of her race.

Gordimer presents a contrast to the housemaid's social standstill with the role of the little boy. Throughout the story, the little boy repeatedly approaches the barriers his family has built to protect him. When his parents install electronic gates and an intercom system, "the little boy [is] fascinated by the device and use[s] it as a walkie-talkie in cops and robbers play with his small friends." The little boy's mockery of this barrier reveals his ignorance of the social situation—making him the perfect candidate to transcend it. In the story's final scene, the little boy attempts to climb over the wall while pretending to be the brave prince of a fairy tale. This stunt can be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to overcome the rift between racial groups. But what is important about this act is that it is not an act at all—it is simply the result of the boy's naiveté. He would never dream of approaching this barrier if he were mature, rational, and aware of the social situation (like his literary counterpart, the trusted housemaid). Gordimer subtly presents the distressing idea that the only way to approach the convoluted social situation is from a place of ignorance. But the way she thwarts her own idea is even more disturbing: in the end, the boy bleeds to death in the tangles of the barbed wire.

In "Once Upon a Time," Nadine Gordimer paints a troubling picture of race relations under apartheid in South Africa. In the story, the discriminatory actions of the black housemaid against members of her own race reveal a harsh world of institutionalized racism. Whether the

housemaid's actions are a reflection of internalized oppression or racial fears cannot be determined by the text—but this is also not particularly relevant to the weight of the story. What matters is that the housemaid's seemingly racist acts are merely symptoms of the larger social disease of apartheid. Today, nearly 20 years after the official end apartheid in South Africa, the country still grapples with the aftereffects of half a century of institutionalized racism. As racial animosity persists even after the formal institution of equality, it is tempting to shift the blame onto minority groups. However, placing the blame onto the oppressed is not only unfair, but it is inaccurate. Now, more than ever, it is critical to remember that the complex and vicious consequences of apartheid originate from the oppressor, and not the oppressed. Indeed, although "Once Upon a Time" does not present any possibilities for subverting the apartheid system and the social tensions it creates, it does come with a warning (in the form of Gordimer's little boy): approaching the situation from a place of naiveté and ignorance has potentially grave consequences.

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