

---

**RESEARCH**

## Peripheral Pedagogics: Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon A Time"

K. Narayana Chandran

The University of Hyderabad, IN  
chandran.english@aol.in

---

In this essay, I explore "peripheral pedagogics"—the wholly unforeseen ways of fantasizing others, and learning *from* them, when English situates young Indian readers of Nadine Gordimer's 1989 story, "Once Upon a Time." While students need little help in noticing the story's realist portrayal of post-Apartheid South Africa, only detailed analysis of crucial passages enables them to appreciate her ironic treatment of folktale clichés and time-worn conventions of children's stories. Reading Gordimer in a course called New Literatures in English, they see how colonial fantasy meets postcolonial forensics in such partnered narratives; how, further, the teller and her tale reflect mutually gothic fear and the monstrous, both indeed emanating from much the same consciousness. The interpretive light Gordimer casts on Homi Bhabha's (1988) "Other Question" and the colonial strategies of othering he discusses in *The Location of Culture* add to their discovery that clichés are to fiction what stereotypes are to social studies. Rather than asking what stereotypes are, the class here begins to ask what stereotypes are *for* (and why they return to wake us from deep slumber). The actual circumstances of Gordimer's story are inseparable from its telling. No learning is complete, however, unless the peripheral recognizes that *the telling is the story*—the one who tells and those to whom it is told share equal opportunity in this learning. Theoretical debates do not count for much if we do not believe that the values we teach are not always at odds with those inherent in such stories as Gordimer's.

---

**Keywords:** Peripheral pedagogics; Nadine Gordimer; Clichés and Stereotypes; Homi Bhabha's Other Question

---

### English in India and Peripheral Pedagogics

An Indian classroom of postgraduate students is a confluence of richly fascinating narrative streams. In a metropolitan city like Hyderabad, student groups find themselves in a Humanities school of telling differences, debating current politics and social change: the rising intolerance of oppositional views; social instabilities that plague the youth; hate crimes and violence against castes and tribes, women and children; moral policing and vigilante lynching, etc. rampant across the country. I have noticed how those of us who do English realize that working with what used to be a 'colonial' language is certainly advantageous in carrying on such debates. English heard in such public places neither dominates nor submits to the country's regime of polarizing narratives. As a matter of fact, it always does better than the twenty-odd official languages of India in helping young debaters look beyond their municipal and parochial pickets. That is to say, when they read and write English, the question for them is one not of knowing better but of knowing otherwise. They are inevitably drawn to another world, one where they begin to see laterally what might be happening elsewhere as well (in their immediate South Asian neighbourhood, or far away England, Europe, the Americas ...). When English sets the scene of instruction and largely determines the terms of their reading, Indian students see better for themselves how stories told, retold, and untold by others mesh with their own socio-economic realities of life and art. As for their English teachers, the wholly unforeseen ways in

which English allows young readers at once to learn others, and learn from them, comes as bonus. Without belabouring large scale pedagogic reflections on small scale happenings, the teachers see the brilliant logic of English in the World, the World in English.<sup>1</sup>

The transformative potential I find in such a postcolonial periphery is infinite. Drawn as they are from at least a dozen ethno-linguistic, minority/caste/tribal groups, my M. A. English classes at the University of Hyderabad (UoH) often have more women than men. While none of them might be 'weak' in English, the subject and medium of their choice, they are bi-/tri-lingual with varying degrees of competence. Their native languages are largely of the Indo-European and Dravidian families besides those of the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic. At least 6 of the North Eastern states from where half-dozen students join our English programmes every year count English to be their "official language" besides their respective local languages.

Migration among Indian students has been pretty large and steady since the government's Economic Liberalization of the early 1990s. The Migration certificates of such students often show interesting details of their multicultural neighbourhood and schooling, their aptitude for acclimatizing and adapting to inter-regional folkways and mores, their willingness to sample varieties of unusual cuisine, dress, film-and-tv fare, as well as music-dance-theatre ensemble of which every region in India is richly diverse and inviting. In short, migratory students (and most of their mentors) are always on some periphery or other across India. What specially makes for an 'English' experience at the UoH is our students realizing, first of all, that when they cross borders, they grow. Upon such peripheries they meet their selves as others who are not, as they blithely imagine, those unlike them but some displaced version or other of their own selves in transit. As one of our research students once put it, nothing serves them better than English in mitigating circumstances: Salem in the South and Silchar in the North East are reconfigured when they share common bo(a)rders in the university halls of residence. But the logic of such assertions is best ascertained by a peripheral heuristics when real discussion of texts enlivens classrooms.

### **New Literatures in English (NLE)**

The third semester MA course I teach nearly every alternate year is called "New Literatures in English" (NLE Core, 4 credits). It affords me the opportunity to illustrate the social-scientific dimension of stories. Students easily sense the unusualness of a familiar linguistic (Anglophone) world that nevertheless bespeaks quite non-Anglophone realities of exploitative colonial struggle, and the life-long misery of peoples unfamiliar with English and western culture. Besides asking the arguable question of narrative human rights (Who has the right to tell whose story?) they are more intrigued by the question of a White-outsider to a historically colonized group championing their subaltern cause, without ever falling into a trap of linguistic colonization. Indian students have always appreciated English playing the dual if dubious role of story and critique at once in the texts they read.

Thrown on the periphery, no one quite sees things as they are. Everything objectified as 'other' is both known one way and made unknown another way. At borders people seem to tell us 'nowhere' stories— stories that transcend current locations or glorified times, stories of a new culture and experience that only borderlands afford them. When fiction does this, students recognize the fantasy; when critiqued for what it really is by marking stereotypes, they see how such a mindless creation of otherness from difference is a harmful if not downright malicious social practice. Thus the 'knowledge' literary clichés and social stereotypes give a class of young readers is neither natural nor sudden. In fact, I have found it very intriguing that literary commonplaces and socio-cultural stereotypes hardly seem to evidence the simple equations readers first find in them or the meanings that plain reading gives them. It takes a class week-long discussion to slowly discover that telling is the story: the one who tells, and those to whom it is told are equal partners in this peripheral heuristics.

### **Nadine Gordimer, for example ...**

Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" (1989) begins so unlike a story. That eases my students' approach to it, reading it more or less like an essay, a somewhat personal and authentic account of a South African writer's choices and predilections. They listen to this writer contemplating at bedtime why she should be asked to send something suitable for an anthology of children's stories. Fascinated by the voices that alternate between the story-teller and Nadine Gordimer, students now begin to watch this omniscient commen-

<sup>1</sup> I allude of course to Alastair Pennycook's title and argument of his essay published in 1995.

tator. She encourages her readers to be as dialectical as their reading allows. The anthologist who solicits a children's story from her seems to agree with some reputed novelist who believes that every writer "ought to write at least one story for children" (23). Gordimer resolves however not to write for children. She does not see why a writer "ought to write anything" (23) if she does not feel like writing for anyone at all. Presumably after a little sleep, she wakes up to some noise, still unclear what roused her. Was it an intruder, some assailant planning to attack a lonely woman? She stares at the door, lying still on her bed. Her thoughts now deflect toward the house in which she now lives. In apartheid South Africa, who could tell what might befall an unprotected white woman? She begins to think, as if prompted by a sudden historical awareness that her house is inhabited by 'stories' of colonial exploitation involving poor human labour and rich natural resources:

The house that surrounds me while I sleep is built on undermined ground; far beneath my bed, the floor, the house's foundations, the stopes and passages of gold mines have hollowed the rock, and when some face trembles, detaches and falls, three thousand feet below, the whole house shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance of brick, cement, wood and glass that hold it as a structure around me. [...]

I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body— release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story; a bedtime story. (24–25)

Gordimer's exquisitely framed metaphor begins here. Few students in my class miss this significant juncture. The story-teller is in her house but not quite safe as she might imagine because she must realize that hers is a House of Fiction that "shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance"(24) of materials with which she ought to build it anew every time she tells a story. Is this the strangely "complex fate" of all South African writers? Far from just being a question of managing memories in politically correct ways, a sensitive mind looks more within than without. In a passage eerily reminiscent of Gordimer's reflections here, J. M. Coetzee writes in *Youth* (2002) of his protagonist:

South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?

How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, "Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England"? (116)

*Youth* is an interesting experiment in autobiography. In order to maintain an ironic distance from both himself and the countries to which he is related in, let us say, politically awkward ways, Coetzee has his own story told by a character, a writer in exile, called John. Strange, again, that Gordimer and Coetzee do not feel that they are at liberty to tell their stories unless they seek alibis, by splitting themselves Borges-like into private persons and public authors. My class is quick to notice this to be a postcolonial gambit, recalling such writers of Indian origin like Naipaul and Rushdie. What is intriguing is not only John's recourse to *Once upon a time...*, admittedly a commonplace fairytale had hallmarked for ages, but what looks like his loaded allusion to Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time," a metaphor par excellence of a story. Gordimer's is indeed a horrendous story of wounds, self-inflicted and other, by the white people of South African apartheid.<sup>2</sup> That this is a continuing obsession, thematised along much the same lines of insecure white homes amidst black neighbourhoods, and that white people even in post-Apartheid homes are hoist with their own petard, is evident from Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998).

The first part of "Once Upon a Time" is just about two pages, the background so called to a 'real' story that meets all the expectations of conventional listeners more adequately than they would ordinarily expect. In a suburban house live a white couple and their only child. The family has pets (one dog, one cat); a housemaid who is "absolutely trustworthy;" a gardener who visits on certain days, one who has earned their confidence. The man's mother ("that wise old witch") drops in occasionally to give her son timely advice and her grandson a toy Space Man and a book of fairy tales as Christmas gifts. What the family dreads most and talks about

<sup>2</sup> Neither my class nor I was aware that this story's depiction of the prolonged insecurities in South African cities might owe something to the troubled events following the brutal quelling of Soweto youth uprising of 1976. (I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this article who pointed out this crucial fact to me.) A student (whom we have nicknamed a "compulsive etymologist") once came up with the interesting observation that *vulnerability* is one's openness to harm, especially bodily harm (like a white writer/colonist's in a predominantly black South Africa): *vulnus*, she reminded us, is Latin for *injury* or *wound*.

from time to time is a possible attack on them by the unemployed crowd outside their gate— loafers and trouble-makers, intruders and burglars, even teams of armed robbers. Of course there are the riot-police and soldiers, the law-and-order-machinery in place, but they somehow feel terribly unsafe even within a house with its high wall, burglar bars, alarm system, and electronically-operated gates. Of course this white wealthy family could not have been any less foresighted than their peers in the vicinity, having enrolled in a medical benefit society, subscribed to the local Neighbourhood Watch, and taken out insurance for its members against possible damage caused by fire and floods, theft and burglary.

Nothing however seems to assuage the family's paranoia for they always hear only about reported burglaries, riots, cheating and robbery in their vicinity. The man's mother gives him money for buying extra bricks (another Christmas gift!) so that they can build a higher wall. The man and wife feel somewhat safer when they spot a coil of steel barricade fitted along the length of a wall. "Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so that there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way out," as they assure themselves, "only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper and sharper hooking and tearing of flesh" (29).

The story ends most tragically when, as one might expect, the family is hoist with its own petard. Inspired by a fairy tale, the little boy tries to clamber over their wall, imagining himself to be the Prince destined to brave tall trees and brambles in order to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty awake. There is blood all over the place when the horrendous razor wire drags the boy more and more into its coiled tunnel to leave his body hopelessly mangled. The "bleeding mass of the little boy," concludes this bizarre tale, "was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers..." (30) and taken into the house. Few stories portray "only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier" (29) in more lurid detail than this.

Students are quick to recall this phrase for its awful dramatic irony, a phrase the narrator uses earlier to describe the deadly steel barricade. They are shocked that the white couple could ever contemplate such an inhuman scenario for someone else without the slightest sense of waste or compassion. And of course how insensitively silly of them to feel ever so mortified by wholly unknown and non-existent predators they install an engine of destruction at their gate called "DRAGON'S TEETH" (29).

### A 'bedtime story' with a vengeance

"How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?" asks Coetzee's narrator in *Youth*: "How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, 'Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa'...?" (116) As long as, Gordimer seems to answer, we do not insistently flog this allegory of racial tension and violence, mostly self-inflicted and pointless. Would it not become a more instructive "bedtime story" if adults refrained from bringing up children only on fairy tales and did better than restrict their mental and physical movements within a small social circle beset by racist fear, suspicion, and hatred? As a writer, Gordimer feels it urgent to break the mould of the story to ask how stories come to mean much more than we concede to fiction ordinarily when they emanate from peripheral locations.

Gordimer's stories thus do not purportedly 'educate' or 'edify' those insulated against their racial "others." Not those, in other words, who are unwilling to even consider how other they themselves are from those others they dislike and cannot tolerate in their small worlds. Stories, however, can still enable us, as no social media can, to feel disenchanting about the way we experience the world, to see in them what we neglect to see in our racially segregated societies. Are we not, they ask, turning ourselves away from that mind-numbing otherness with which we are covertly complicit? How long are we ready to tarry at such crossroads in order to introspect and probe peripheral equations between the citizen and the State when the latter, as Giorgio Agamben (1995) fears, lapses into "[a] state of exception ... in the creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction" (174)?

Stories can enable us, in the words of Patrick O'Donnell (2002) who defines "cultural paranoia" as a method, to see "the multiple stratifications of reality... as interconnected or networked" (464). What this means is that there cannot be any complete escape or permanent safety for the simple-minded paranoiacs. They might, in sheer ignorance of the politics that manipulates all social beings, raise their wall of seclusion higher and higher, or install louder and louder alarms that sound false all the time. It is in the nature of contemporary stories however to make us realize that it is not too late to see ourselves as constituted by the paranoid fiction we make as readers/listeners. If "Once Upon a Time" teaches a lesson, it does so not by handing out a ready-to-use "object lesson" of textbooks and instruction manuals, but by asking us to take a hard if disenchanting look at tales of fantasy and romance, stories of domestic mishap, children, adults, and racially segregated societies where, as O'Donnell tells us:

[P]aranoia becomes the means by which connections are forged between disparate material realms: everything is known; everything is related; the anecdotal becomes the conspiratorial; accident becomes design. Further, paranoia, under these conditions, can be viewed as the binding force of the nation or the community: What brings people together, as it were, is the sense that they are the wary participants in an unfolding historical plot over which they have no control, but through which they gain visible identity as historically unified subjects. (465)

There is hardly any other way, as O'Donnell suggests, of telling or understanding the stories we make and live by in today's world that offers us a paranoid epistemology in order to cope with its complicated reality. My students could easily see Gordimer's method of simplifying this complicated scene when she enlists many of the familiar and easily spotted terms of our social and literary narratives in the service of her story. By this method she is not just giving us a story to interpret but is rather involving a group of young people in the circumstances that become the story, and letting them appreciate the metaphors for telling it. Of course, we must realize that no story, much less its teller, has an existence alone, or a meaning all by herself/itself.

### Socio-cultural Stereotypes and Literary Clichés

A story, like the person who tells it, lives among a collective, a community of tellers and listeners, its meaning very much part of its telling. The tried and tested terms of narrative endearment and empathy are therefore no longer tenable; they are rather seriously limiting and unhelpful for readers who must, from now on, look beyond socio-cultural stereotypes and literary clichés. When we realize that the parables of instruction and edification have often embodied a pedagogical myth that divides the world into the knowing few and the unknowing multitude, we begin to see how peripheral pedagogics works. On the periphery, we are all alike. There we learn together.

I have not seen a class I have taught before re-read any text with as much attention and a turn-round focus as the readers of Gordimer when I begin to suggest to them that our clichés are perhaps made of the same stuff as the social scientists' stereotypes. Our reading, from then on, urged us to look way beyond those socio-cultural stereotypes and literary clichés that work on the osmotic principle of thicker and thinner fluids where it is assumed that a powerful imperial English will always cast non-English peripheral selves as slow, corrupt and corrupting, that the edifying fiction of the empire will help slow people on the periphery catch up with the civilized centres of learning in good time. It is not for nothing then, I argue, that Gordimer plays off social stereotypes against narrative clichés in telling us this bizarre "bedtime story." The debate in class takes a new turn from this argument.

That we are conducted through a metaphoric rather than a routinely fictional terrain becomes clear when students notice that the story rubs in all the text-book claptrap of fairy tales and story-books. The class is then wakeful and watchful, not losing themselves too much in a fairy-tale world to be completely unmindful of the hard socio-political everyday, the apartheid world of mounting paranoia and potential trouble. While they are free to entertain an illusion of fiction, students certainly do not seem entertained by it; they do not feel, for example, that the conclusion of this story was inevitable and utterly just so. In the "double reading" Gordimer so affords such readers, they sense the knowing wink and tongue-in-cheek allusions she periodically makes to the familiar motifs of the fairytale such as the "wise old witch;" gates and barricaded entrances; the warning of impending trouble/danger, etc. The nearly predictable pattern of children's stories is a bonus, if they recall that as well— Gordimer's story plays on the well-known topos of a child leaving the boring 'safety' of home to court some 'dangerous adventure' only to 'return home' chastened and grown wiser!

The more motifs and topoi one recalls, the heavier swells the new story's irony. First of all, we note this story's conformity to the norms of an Aristotelian plot: single and continuous action in a three-beat sequence with a clearly marked exposition, climax/catastrophe, and a tragic denouement. In Gordimer's telling, the deferred impact of suspense deepens the story's dramatic irony. The "happily ever after" refrain attempts to prepare readers somewhat portentously for the story's extremely unhappy and ironic end.

At this point, a student recalls that the unnamed white middleclass couple, always cautious and fixated on the security of their home and their only son, strikes a reminiscent bell. In "The Monkey's Paw," a much-anthologized tale in most schoolbooks, W. W. Jacobs (1902) exploits the three-wish formula of fairy tales with aplomb, but Gordimer's most strikingly stereotypical pointer to this intertext, argues the student, is perhaps *the Whites*, the name Jacobs gives the English family in "The Monkey's Paw." Their only son's death in a freakish accident involving a deadly factory-machine eerily anticipates the macabre end to Gordimer's story.

When this student alerts the class to such a plausible intertext, we agree that all this has the air of a task executed with vengeance. Gordimer, it would seem, is keen to suggest that lives and stories return in order to hark us back to 'white' traditions of revenge tales such as Jacobs's. Acts of brutality match their remorseless telling in other lives, other times. The story builds itself systematically upon such blocks of literary/folktale conventions and clichés on the one hand, and a familiar set of apartheid stereotypes on the other. The class now charts a list for easy reference:

### Clichés

Children's/Bedtime story

Happy ending: "living happily ever after"

Happy family: Father, Mother, Son

(Cat, dog, toys, storybooks, servants...)

"The Wise Old Witch" of fairy tales

Holidays, swimming pool

"Cat looking before it leaps" (proverbial cliché)

Mother reading a storybook to son at bed-time

The Storybook as Xmas present by Grandmother

The boy-prince and daredevilry (the allusion to Sleeping Beauty)

### Stereotypes

The white family's hatred and fear of the natives in South Africa

(burglar bars, alarms, gun under pillow, dogs, electronically-controlled gates)

Prejudice against casual labourers as criminals

("Anyone off the street")

The Neighbourhood Watch, Gated Community of the whites

The racial profiling of intruders: YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED sign

(the ambiguity of its profile...)

Riots incited by people of colour

Burglars as food-starved and craving for expensive single malt whisky

The portrait of the unemployed black, job-seekers (27)

The housemaid's fantasy about loafers and tsotsis

Reports always of *black* threat and intrusion into white territory

A string of clichés: architectural styles of well-protected houses (29)

People for Total Security, DRAGON'S TEETH, business ads.

It is easier now for us to see this as the narrator's shrewdness in killing two birds with one stone— by aligning narrative clichés with racist/apartheid stereotypes. As she interweaves clichés with stereotypes, we are able to see very well how they both betray, and are betrayed by, those who practise racial and elite-class discriminations. The point is that neither literature nor society will make any headway if it is still stuck in old ways, if it mindlessly repeats the same old story of unfounded prejudice and mutual fear. If my class was able to read "Once Upon a Time" with as much ironic awareness as Gordimer guessed her readers would, I was sure that the class would be able to appreciate the larger and subtler irony of all 'knowledge' that we claim to acquire of any society. We cannot know others unless we invoke differences and contrasts; unless, that is, we are able to see ourselves as different from others in significant ways. Pre-eminently here, the narrator begins to see and feel like the other(s) within her, as 'divided' and as 'distressed' as the characters, both black and white, she creates— a necessary gambit that allows her to move her narrative pieces smoothly through. I could not help reminding the class at this point of Barbara Johnson's (1987) most cogent formulation of *difference* as "a mis-reading of sameness, [that which] must be represented in order to be erased. The resistance to finding out that the other is the same," Johnson adds, "springs out of the reluctance to admit that the same is the other" (178).

### **Stereotypes as Reframed Clichés**

There is no other way we can learn about ourselves, about others, about the societies we live in than by minding the stereotypes we live by. Stereotypes, then, are essentially pedagogical tools whose usefulness and ad hoc applications we must begin to appreciate in the various stages of our evolutionary learning.

Robert Cantwell's (1990) "On Stereotype" argues that cultures understand and express themselves solely through stereotypes. This insightful essay tells us how cultures know themselves, but here is one crucial observation that characterizes the stereotype as a 'story' that a culture chooses to tell itself and others:

How ... can culture express its knowledge of what is not itself, and how can that knowledge... have any authority save that which it has from its own historical and cultural situation? What can we know about social reality especially, when the discourse in which we know is itself social? Insofar as human communities of whatever kind, on whatever scale, express, preserve, and transmit their experience in culture, and insofar as culture is the medium of knowing, one community can know another only negatively... (56).

And further, explaining the rationale of distortion that facilitates a deeper and reflexive understanding of culture, Cantwell observes:

Stereotype is a science of distortions— but a vernacular science, one which reasons from a primary cause, which is the distortion itself, supposing that all difference can be explained *as* difference. It does not ask what are the traits of the outsider, for it already knows them, as effects of causes it has adduced from the laws of its own world; reasoning only unknown effects from known causes, denying to the outsider causes peculiar to his own history, circumstances, and occasions, particularly those hidden causes which lie in the cross-cultural encounter itself, stereotype denies the outsider, in effect, his life. (57)

So do our arts and letters, as they stay in business by assuming shared cultural misunderstanding. We cannot always recognize stories for what they are, and having known this, open them up for increasingly nuanced critical debate, unless we learn first to recognize the Aristotelian patterns and paradigms in them and the repeated uses to which most western practitioners put them. Clichés, the literary equivalents of cultural stereotypes, are better recognized as such so that we know the distortions to which they subject fiction itself, the 'make-believe' story that mistakenly points toward only one direction and intuits a singular meaning affirming partial truths in a dangerous politics that demeans lives and letters. By reframing stereotypes as discursive clichés, both become terms that suggest the uniquely fraught and elusive relationship that race bears to socio-literary representation and history.

And Gordimer has every reason to be most worried about the harm clichéd writing and stereotypical thought will do in South Africa because she has repeatedly wondered to herself what 'truth' and what 'reconciliation' would suffice when racist regimes cannot see beyond the white and black. "Polymorphous fear cramps the hand," she wrote as early as 1973, speaking about the intimidation of black writers in South Africa.

Would-be writers are so affected that they have ignored gigantic contemporary issues that have set their own lives awash. Such stories as they are ... repulp the clichés of the apartheid situation... that have been so thoroughly blunted by overuse in literature good and bad that they can be trusted to stir the censors and the police as little as they can be trusted to fire the people's imagination (133).

What most distresses Gordimer as a story-teller is not so much the destiny others seem to fashion for her as a writer as the destiny she begins on her own to discover to be *hers* one to which she seems condemned. It is about this dehumanized world she writes in "Once Upon a Time," a world that makes stories of clichés that match stereotypes and vice versa. What distinguishes this exemplary narrative of Gordimer's "complex fate" above all is her candid reflection on the metaphors storytelling affords when colonial fantasy meets postcolonial forensics, when gothic fear and desire are recognized as such, and when stereotypes are identified as shadows of their clichéd substance. But tell we must, this and other stories, no matter how pointless the exercise, how frustrating the results for now. It is not for nothing that the conscience of the teller is awakened, "the echo-chamber of the subconscious" (23) stirred, by voices, even if those voices may be far from "afar" or "ancestral" and they may not yet be "prophesying war" (Coleridge 305).

### **One *Other* Question: Homi Bhabha**

"The worst readers are those," declares Nietzsche (1876) in his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, "who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole." (137) As a teacher, I daresay this fate has befallen Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question:

Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” an essay (first, a paper at an Essex University conference, 1982; later, published in *Screen* in 1983) that has had a chequered interpretive history in post-colonial scholarship for about three decades. My students have always found this essay rather too densely argued and complicated to argue a coherent set of positions on issues related to the colonial strategies of ‘othering.’ To them I propose a re-reading of “Once Upon a Time” as some immediate help, provided they are able to situate both Bhabha and Gordimer on the periphery. Undoubtedly, the Gordimer story casts ample light on the paradoxical nature of stereotyping in Bhabha. I am not sure that Gordimer herself was familiar with Bhabha’s essay while writing her reflections and the story in 1989, but the two writers never the less seem to envision a common ground upon which ideas of racial alterity and ambivalence meet discursively in order to explore the complex relationships they notice between knowledge and narratives involving colonial stereotypes.

Assuming, as Bhabha does in his essay, that the stereotype is a form of knowledge, we further understand “that the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation” (100). He gives the reason for this at the outset when he cautions us not to mistake it for a settled and fixed episteme, but take it only as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... to be proved” (94–95). In sum, he sees both repetition and ambivalence to be central to stereotypes that grow and vitiate relationships in a society that divides itself by enforcing stereotypes to define and regulate relationships. This is precisely the viciousness of the circle Gordimer’s story shows to be true. When stereotypes proliferate, clichés arise to meet them discursively. “The Other Question,” when told as a story will read like “Once Upon a Time.”

Gordimer’s story is certainly evidence of “a theoretical and political response that challenges deterministic or functionalistic modes of conceiving the relationship between discourse and politics” so that its writer is able “[t]o recognize the stereotype as an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power” (Bhabha 95). The story of the white couple here engages “the relationship between discourse and politics” in ways fiction can when it sheds its putative ‘make believe’ and is made to reflect on its dharma that makes a story-teller of every citizen. Clearly, Gordimer is most determined not to be guilty of the literary theorist’s projection of the sin that constructs the colonial subject in discourse that largely ignores “forms of difference— racial and sexual”(96). This granted, we shall now see Gordimer’s story as reading “The Other Question” more shrewdly than most critical commentaries on it.

The reason for this is simple. Gordimer, unlike Bhabha, does not see the ambivalence of colonial discourse affecting only the colonized but here (ironically) affecting herself as well— a ‘colonizer’ if you like, because she is white but one who is obliged to see herself as part of the politics of apartheid rather unfairly, in which special sense one who is as much colonized as the Colonized Other of the stereotype’s binary. If such stereotypes have stuck, and if they cannot be undone, one might at least deal with them ironically in art because history has not closed the book for ever on such peculiar politics and people.

Building up a colonial fantasy in the opening section of her story, Gordimer is determined to address what Bhabha calls “an ‘impossible’ subject” (116) somewhat differently. How? If anyone seriously questions the suitability of the title “Once Upon a Time” for an account of the happenings that is better read as *This, in Our Time*, we have some clue as to how “an ‘impossible’ subject” might be represented in fiction that is not quite that, but probably a metaphor for fiction. Famously, *pace* W. H. Auden, fiction makes nothing happen; the pun on *nothing* works both ways. If nothing happens “once” as fiction, her fiction makes even nothing happen “now.” We are unlikely then not to miss the irony with which she loads her “bedtime story,” embedded punningly: as a story that was conceived of at bedtime and delivered of herself while lying awake in bed. If the colonial subject is hopelessly split and hybridized, she is as much split and hybridized as a writer, one knowable and yet different like Bhabha’s colonial subject. The woman who suffers and the writer who assumes omniscience here are not one. The one even resents the demand for a story in its first part; the other tells it despite herself in its second.

If clichés have their uses in the arts and letters (basically, how to approach or appreciate a work) stereotypes are indispensable to all socio-political constructions. There is always some vague threat of the barbarians at the gate mandating borders and barricades, fences and walls. The commentary Bhabha uncannily seems to make on the Gordimer story is particularly interesting for students. (That was at least a bonus for my class that seemed otherwise to have drawn a blank on Bhabha’s essay.)

Citing Fanon’s famous example of recognition/disavowal of white/black subjectivity, Bhabha remarks: “Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjections, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity...” (117). Reading this, the class will ideally be reminded of at least some specific details of the Gordimer story, but the tragic end to the imagined fears of



the white couple illustrates Bhabha's later cryptic remark that "the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow" (117). What remains after the stereotypes are undone determines the success of the story. Despite the "ambivalence," the stereotypes do not seem to vacate white consciousness entirely. Gordimer herself cannot be sure that it is just her subconscious (mentioned in the prefatory section of her story) that triggers the ambivalence. The unfamiliar and the disquieting howl, the threatening and censorious voices that seem to emanate from her echo chamber, mysteriously lodge her within the precincts of a reality only fiction will negotiate so that she might feel less anxious and guilty about the difference that her race, economic and social class, and western education combine to make her a stereotype.

The question further is: What is this ambivalence ambivalent *towards*— the stereotypes, or the knowledge of them to be nothing but stereotypes? If there is one last lesson "Once Upon a Time" teaches the students of English and their teachers in India, it is this. Despite the best efforts, mere knowledge of the stereotypes is no guarantee that we can effectively, ever, get rid of them.<sup>3</sup> Much like the white couple and the man's mother (at least two generations) it is impossible not to be affected by stereotypes. Even to the most professionally guarded minds, stereotypes hardly seem to be such when they manage sneakily to lodge themselves within educated minds and hearts.<sup>4</sup> Much as we cannot be naïvely unsuspecting and boldly welcoming trouble, with the best intentions of the best politics available to us, sometimes we find ourselves invoking stereotypes only to feel ashamed and regretful later that we have done so. For the trouble with stereotypes (as with the shop-worn concepts that best go with them) is that they not only work for beginners (social beings, students...) but they overwork every time they begin all over again. Nothing in this world is proof against life-threatening danger, a lesson once learnt we are apt to forget, a lesson every generation must learn all afresh, and hopefully not too late like the wealthy white family in Gordimer's story.

### Peripheral Pedagogics at Work

Moving far beyond the insidious discourses upon which Bhabha still casts his censorious light, Gordimer seems more concerned about the "responsibilities" others now impute to white writers in erstwhile colonies. Let us recall that questions of ethical responsibility were raised and debated nearly around the same time by theorists elsewhere when crucial texts and events of political import seemed enmeshed. "It is that all action is undertaken," declares Gayatri Spivak (1994), "in response to a call (or something that seems to us to resemble a call) that cannot be grasped as such. Response here involves not only 'respond to,' as in 'give an answer to,' but also the related situations of 'answering to,' as in being responsible... for/to ourselves and for/to others..." (22). The Levinasian burden of this thought informs the layered narratives of "Once Upon a Time" that begins by explaining why the story-teller must not simply capitulate to certain empty gestures of solidarity by contributing to an anthology of children's stories. For someone who feels so strongly about what she owes to society as a writer, the suggestion of "a certain novelist [that] every writer ought to write at least one story for children" (23) is resented. Gordimer's views on this subject are at least as forthright as they are apposite to those who read Bhabha's "Other Question." The following passage sums up, albeit cryptically, her credo as a writer, something readers of fiction today might like to remember when they reconsider the Other Question:

What right has society to impose responsibility upon writers and what right has the writer to resist? I want to examine not what is forbidden us by censorship — I know that story too well —but to what we are bidden. I want to consider what is expected of us by the dynamic of collective conscience and the will to liberty in various circumstances and places; whether we should respond, and if so, how we do (Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture," 6).

Furthermore, peripheral negotiations such as Gordimer's betray the vanity of dogmatizing home-grown securities and stabilities, a realization with respect "Once Upon a Time" gestures to young minds in quite exemplary ways. While demonstrating how a writer's discovery of being human often happens across wide

<sup>3</sup> For most Indian students of NLE this is pretty axiomatic. They are familiar with the major writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Terry Eagleton, and Stuart Hall— all of them keen on addressing the circumambience of racial and other forms of prejudicial profiling generated and vitiated by clichés and stereotypes implicit in all imperial scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> Gordimer once admitted to her "strange ethnic loyalties" towards Jewish activists in "South Africa's liberation movements and progressive circles." When her interviewer asked her about her Jewish descent, she said: "I can't help being pleased [...] to think that [...] there have been a really disproportionate number of Jews [in such progressive movements here], given the smallness of the Jewish population. I'm rather proud of this" (Gordimer to Karen Lazar, 164). One is not quite far therefore from racially-affiliated thought and feelings such as these but it takes enormous courage and commitment as a writer-activist, as Gordimer suggests, to fight deleterious stereotypes and discriminatory action based on them.

gulfs of suspicious dread and hopeless incomprehension, Gordimer reflects on such experiences in her melange of self-reflexive parable, memoirist essay, and allegory of journeys— all well begun and half done. She guides herself and her readers through peripheral passages, both physical and speculative, in order to unveil the complexities of reading cultures that are locked in age-old prejudices and centrist fancies. Peripheral pedagogics for her is not simply a matter of crossing physical borders and closing mental gaps but rather of discovering that imperial history indeed mandates that every writer negotiate, perhaps more literally than the poet ever guessed, “many cunning passages and contrived corridors.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps such passages are very much within and across all of us. They help not only the communities that imagine our selves but our alterities into being.

Above all, for teachers who are mindful of the ethical imperatives of oppositional pedagogy, there could not be a more appropriate lesson than this Gordimer story. Few students who read it will need additional lessons in critical pedagogy that help them cross borders on their own “in order to understand Otherness in its own terms” (Giroux 24). Fewer still might want another lesson to comprehend Foucault’s remark that critique helps them “begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought” (457). Among the “things” my Indian students began to think afresh certainly included caste/racial stereotypes and literary clichés. The one other passage they found apposite to the inordinate ways clichés and stereotypes enhance artistic success was Umberto Eco’s (1985) concluding remarks on *Casablanca*:

“Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking *among themselves*, and celebrating a reunion. [...]he height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime. [...] If nothing else, it is a phenomenon worthy of awe” (38, Eco’s italics).

All told, “Once Upon a Time” proves to me time and again that it is that unusual blend of the literary social science, one that most helpfully erases those distinctions of the ‘human’ and ‘social’ that the academic ‘sciences’ seem insistent on segregating as disciplines housed under separate roofs. All dimensions of the literal, metaphorical, social, communal, and the cultural are subsumed in a pedagogical imperative on the periphery. In the uncertain, non-constitutive space of that periphery, nearly everything that we affirm as central and integral to our culture is, or ought to be, called into question. For that insight alone, my class and I were indebted to this Gordimer story. While it underscores divisiveness as anathema, it recognizes discriminating differentiation as salutary while living in a community or reading texts differently in a classroom. Peripheral thinking grants such an unusual discovery, no matter where we live, or what we live for.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Contribution

**K. Narayana Chandran** is Professor of English in School of Humanities, the University of Hyderabad, India. He has published widely on topics in Anglo-American literatures, English in India, comparative studies involving languages and literatures in English, English Education and Language Teaching, and Translation. He has been teaching and mentoring graduate students for over 40 years.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Bhabha, Homi. “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism.” *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Cantwell, Robert. “On Stereotypes.” *New England Review*, No. 13, issue 2, 1990, pp. 53–78.
- Coetzee, *Youth*. Random House, 2002.
- Coleridge, S. T. “Kubla Khan.” *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969, pp. 304–305.
- Eco, Umberto. “*Casablanca*, or the Clichés Are Having a Ball.” *On Signs*. Ed. Marshall Blonsky. Basil Blackwell, 1985, pp. 35–38.

<sup>5</sup> This is a phrase from T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion,” line 36.

- Eliot, T. S. "Gerontion." *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Selected with an Introduction by Helen Vendler. Signet/Penguin, 1998, pp. 20–23.
- Foucault, Michel. "So Is It Important to Think?" *Essential Works of Foucault: 1954–1984*. Vol. 3: *Power*. Ed. James D. Faubion. New Press, 2001, pp. 454–458.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Post-Colonial Ruptures and Democratic Possibilities: Multiculturalism as Anti-Racist Pedagogy." *Cultural Critique*, No. 21, 1992, pp. 5–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354115>
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1989. "Once Upon a Time." *Jump and Other Stories*. Penguin, 1991, pp. 23–30.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility." Tanner Lecture in Human Values. The U Michigan, 1984, pp. 3–19. [www.tannerlectures.utah.edu](http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu) [Accessed 16 January 2014].
- Jacobs, W. W. "The Monkey's Paw." [www.lonestar.edu/departments/english/Jacob\\_Monkey.pdf](http://www.lonestar.edu/departments/english/Jacob_Monkey.pdf) [Accessed 17 February 2020].
- Johnson, Barbara. *A World of Difference*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.
- Lazar, Karen. "A Feeling of Realistic Optimism." *An Interview with Nadine Gordimer Salmagundi*, No. 113, Winter 1997, pp. 149–65.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Part I. Miscellaneous Maxims and Opinions." *Human All-Too-Human*. [www.gutenberg.org/files/37841/37841-pdf](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/37841/37841-pdf). [Accessed 19 October 2018].
- O'Donnell, Patrick. "Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative." *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*. Ed. Bran Nicol. Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp. 463–78.
- Pennycook, Alastair. "English in the World/the World in English." *Power and Inequality in Language Education*. Ed. Tollefson, J. Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 34–58.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "Responsibility." *boundary 2*, No. 21, issue 3, 1994, pp. 19–64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/303600>

**How to cite this article:** Chandran, K. Narayana. "Peripheral Pedagogics: Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon A Time"". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 18, issue 1, art. 3, 2020, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.13>

**Submitted:** 10 November 2019

**Accepted:** 22 May 2020

**Published:** 18 June 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Anglo Saxonica* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

**OPEN ACCESS**