

## “YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED”: SOUTH AFRICA'S GROWING RACISM IN THE EARLY APARTHEID ERA

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### Abstract

*The present study conducts a stylistic analysis of Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" from a racial perspective, focusing on racism to address both the past and present conditions of apartheid in South Africa. The research aims to remove the ambiguity surrounding race to offer solutions to ongoing social issues. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the text and its meanings from a racial perspective, which proves beneficial for students in developing critical insights into the phenomenon of apartheid. By drawing on concepts of racism, stylistic analysis was used to understand the social inequalities in South Africa by identifying similes, imagery, irony, and lexical items like nouns, adjectives, and verbs within the text. The findings suggest that the intersection of racial politics and the segregation of white privilege contributes to violence in South Africa. This analysis highlights how language constructs and reinforces power dynamics, offering insights into the enduring effects of racial oppression in South African society.*

**Keywords:** Racism, South Africa, violence, apartheid, stylistic choices.

### 1. Introduction

Racism is historically defined as the unfair and unfavorable treatment of individuals based on race or ethnicity (Behrning et al., 2023). In this context, racism operates as a bidirectional relationship where both offenders and victims coexist. Individuals can simultaneously be victims of racism as well as perpetrators (Yip, 2018). Racism functions as an economic system that perpetuates racial hierarchies, privileging some while oppressing others. Some individuals hold power, privilege, and superiority due to the racial and ethnic hierarchies in place (Fitzgerald, 2023). However, racism cannot solely be understood as interpersonal behavior; it is embedded in the structural dynamics of society, maintaining prejudice and discrimination, which function similarly to traffic signals guiding societal interactions (Cole, 2018). Recent studies also emphasize that racism is not just an interpersonal issue but is deeply ingrained in societal institutions and policies. For instance, racism can manifest in employment practices, healthcare, and education, further compounding the inequities experienced by marginalized communities (Williams & Mohammed, 2013).

Racial inequality in modern South Africa continues to be a key issue. Despite some progress, the legacy of apartheid still shapes the socioeconomic landscape. Studies indicate that while some Black South Africans have risen to positions of power and influence, deep-rooted structural racism and white privilege persist, making racial reconciliation an ongoing struggle (Mbembe, 2008; Manganyi, 2019). The growing Black middle class has not been able to dismantle the racial systems that continue to marginalize Black communities, particularly in poorer areas. Nawaz et al. (2021) analyzed the modality in the bear and viewed metaphor and its application in language learning and teaching. Ramzan et al. (2023) did comparative cultural analysis as style shift. Ramzan and Khan, (2024) analyzed pragmatic hedges and linguistic coherence as a cultural insight from stylistic views.

Even in present-day South Africa, racism remains persistently systemic and institutional in many forms beyond the prominent micro-aggressions that black people encounter daily. Due to this pervasive racism, Black South Africans unintentionally place more emphasis on white perspectives over their own sense of belonging (Andrews, 2018). As a result, white individuals voiced concerns that the large population of Black Africans in South Africa contributed to job shortages and various other challenges faced by African communities. This sparked anti-African sentiments that incited violence against African migrants (Naicker, 2016). Consequently, recognizing the discomfort stemming from the presence of Black individuals from other nations requires acknowledging the privileges associated with white people. Their narrative does not focus on this matter. They argue that the Black-led government places the needs of undocumented migrants above those of its residents and is deliberately fashioned around Black suffering and anguish to provoke feelings, fears, and anger (Langa & Kiguwa, 2016). Popular slogans such as "they are stealing your jobs," "they are the cause of South Africa's high crime rates," and "they are depleting state resources intended for the poor," along with similar phrases, are chanted to mobilize large crowds during acts of Afrophobic violence (Mbembe, 2019). Achieving social and racial justice, a fundamental human development objective (Killen et al., 2021), is an elusive goal.

Modern societal racism encompasses both historical and contemporary forms of white and Black separation. It provides compelling evidence that institutional and societal structures in the United States have long been permeated by systemic racism, which shapes public perceptions of these systems and fosters pervasive neglect. This phenomenon illustrates how Black Americans encounter challenges that White Americans do not, primarily due to enduring racial housing segregation, which restricts Black mobility and opportunity while perpetuating racial inequities (Massey, 2020). Residential hyper-segregation reinforces societal notions of Black inferiority and White superiority (Massey & Tannen, 2015). In the United States, White individuals are more likely to reside in racially segregated neighborhoods than any other racial group (Rugh & Massey, 2014). This residential segregation directly contributes to school segregation (Massey & Tannen, 2016; Owens, 2020), with local financing and segregation undermining the quality of education in predominantly Black schools. U.S. social institutions, policies, and practices are deeply entrenched in systemic racism; the subsequent sections will explore how these systems influence individual thought processes.

This study presents a stylistic analysis of Nadine Gordimer's short story "Once Upon a Time" (1989), which often challenges students due to its thematic and linguistic complexities. By focusing on racism, this analysis seeks to make the text more accessible and highlight the socio-political issues embedded within the narrative. By shedding light on the state of apartheid in South Africa, including themes of racism, white supremacy, and systemic violence, the stylistic analysis allows a deeper understanding of the issues of racial bias, contributing to the broader discourse on social justice and equity.

### **1.1 Research Objectives**

- To explore the implied meanings of systemic racism revealed through stylistic devices.
- To analyze the lexical choices manifesting systemic racism in the selected text.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

1. How do stylistic devices reveal the underlying concept of systemic racism in the selected text?
2. How do lexical choices and their patterns highlight systemic racism in the text?

## **2. Methodology**

The study employs close textual analysis and interpretive methods to examine Gordimer's stylistic choices in the short story "Once Upon a Time" to reveal the apartheid prevalent in South Africa. Building on Short and Leech's (2013) framework for examining literary style, this research investigates the subtle ways language choices shape ideologies. Rather than focusing on quantitative data, the study examines how specific literary and linguistic devices - from lexical choice to metaphor - reveal themes of racial inequality. Short and Leech's method offers valuable tools for understanding the interplay of literary and linguistic devices in conveying intricate social commentary. Their framework aids in recognizing patterns in language that reveal the narrative's underlying issues.

### 3. Data Analysis

This section examines systemic racism in "Once Upon a Time" by analyzing stylistic choices, including figures of speech and lexical items. The figures of speech encompass simile, metaphor, personification, irony, allusion, and symbolism. The findings from the data analysis clarified the meanings of stylistic elements in relation to systemic racism.

#### Simile:-

A simile is a rhetorical device that establishes parallels between two distinct objects through comparison, using terms like, as, resemble, and similar (Syarwani, 2017). . Explicit comparisons can include equations and parables, which are also referred to as similes (Rika, 2021). In essence, similes encompass both direct and indirect comparisons of different entities, using words like as, like, resemble, and seem. The following excerpts illustrate the internalized racism portrayed through simile and personification:

**"But I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions, and my windowpanes are thin as rime; they could shatter like a wine glass."**

**"The misbeats of my heart tailed off like the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by the Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners who might have been down there, under me in the earth at that moment."**

The story begins with a sense of suspense and fear rooted in internalized prejudice. Yet, it is the writer's own inner turmoil that truly induces fear. Although she contemplates her current safety protocols, she indicates a lack of measures to protect herself should a burglar decide to break in. Fear of the unknown haunts her, reminding her of recent break-ins that resulted in tragic killings. Additionally, the researcher notes her discomfort stemming from the absence of nearby safety. The root of this unease lies in her overactive mind and subconscious fears. Through similes, the researcher highlights how the decline of colonialism laid the groundwork for apartheid and institutional racism. She observes that native Black South Africans, particularly the "Chopi and Tsonga" communities, are the ones toiling in the mines. The researcher points out that these "migrant miners" are either buried deep in the sand or resting in unmarked graves.

#### **Personification**

Personification assigns human qualities to non-human objects, as illustrated in the text. For instance, **"The arrhythmia of my heart was fleeing, knocking this way and that against its body-cage,"** compares a disordered heartbeat to a creature struggling to escape, highlighting the deep psychological impact of fear and racialized anxiety. The researcher argues that such personification of physical sensations—like the **"alarms calling to one another across the gardens in shrill and bleats and wails"**—reflects the heightened sense of danger within a racially segregated society. The alarms, anthropomorphized as communicating like **"psychotic animals,"** evoke the paranoia and fear associated with living in a racially charged environment. The use of

these figures underscores the deep-rooted anxieties fueled by systemic racism and the terror of intrusion, both literal and figurative.

### **Imagery**

In the following excerpt, interpersonal racism focuses on imagery and symbols: The presentation of sensory experience through language is known as imagery. Interpersonal racism highlights the imagery that the housing system transformed into a disaster. The luxurious items become electronic gates, coiled robotic intercoms, and serrated wires. This image suggests desperate, fearful, and fruitless attempts to keep threats out of the house—ultimately failing. The family also lived like prisoners, setting them apart from others. They are not safe, even though they believe they are. Complex circumstances sometimes did not prevent them from living freely. They built an electronic gate and a high wall instead of the traditional white picket fence. This reaction arose from concerns about the riots, crime, and violence that frequently plagued South African communities during the Apartheid era. Black people could only enter areas inhabited by white people if they proved, through a pass, that they were working there. By protecting themselves and their possessions to the highest degree, the family set off a chain of events that would culminate in their son's death.

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ceased because of concerns about the riots, criminality, and violence that frequently occurred in Apartheid-era South African communities. Black people could only enter areas inhabited by white people provided they could show, through the use of a pass that they were working there. The family had started the series of events that would culminate in their son's death by protecting themselves and their belongings to the highest level.

### **Symbol:-**

Symbolism denotes the representation of ideas or qualities through various objects, whether animate or inanimate, that signify something beyond their literal meaning (Cuddons, 1999). A wall symbolizes isolation, either shutting oneself off or being shut out from another individual. It alludes to the concept of imprisonment, exemplified by an indistinct barrier. The husband and wife have established a physical division around their residence to deter intruders, a poignant emblem of their unwillingness to engage with one another in any capacity. This severance reflects the family's complete adoption of racist and classist ideologies as frameworks through which they perceive their existence in the world; consequently, the wall separating them from those beyond is solidly barricaded. The coils of barbed wire symbolize both a prison and a concentration camp, with their sharp edges conveying violence and functionality, indicative of a desire to restrict movements both inside and outside. These elements underline a fundamental division among humanity and signify a profound detachment from recognizing the humanity of others. Initially, the family implements appropriate safeguarding measures, including installing a standard gate,

hiring individuals with credible references, obtaining necessary licenses, fencing the pool, ensuring their property, and becoming members of the neighborhood watch.

**Allusion:**

A literary device or figure of speech called an allusion refers to a previous work, story, or event. Consider the structural and institutional racism depicted in the following excerpt:

**"Once Upon a Time".**

**"People of another colour were quartered".**

**"The misbeats of my heart tailed off like the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by the Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners who might have been down there, under me in the earth at that moment".**

**"next day he pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life to life he dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his little body to creep in and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle".**

Structural and institutional racism involves references to parallel apartheid. The phrase "People of another color were quartered" suggests that white families permit individuals of different colors or races from outside the city to work in the suburbs. The people of different colors protest, and security measures, including coiled razor wire, highlight the division. These outsiders face high unemployment rates and are subjected to military and police suppression. Additional references include "Once Upon a Time," the opening line of a classic fairytale, "Chopi and Tsonga," which are two African groups from Mozambique, and "Prince and Sleeping Beauty," which serves as a negative allusion. Their fear of "people of another color" intensifies from that point. There is no protection against riot damage, as they are provided merely with an electronic gate featuring an intercom system. In response to break-in reports, they board up windows and doors and install an alarm system. They raise the wall due to the unemployed individuals wandering in the streets and add coiled razor wire in response to further crime reports. The author addresses the white population's insecurity, particularly as the story approaches the conclusion of the apartheid era. The chilling short tale "Once Upon a Time" illustrates the apartheid conditions that persisted for almost fifty years, involving the deliberate segregation of races in South Africa. The wall they construct around their suburb serves to protect them from "people of another color." The description of the mine beneath her home represents the most explicit allusion to colonialism. The researcher emphasizes the mining work performed by native black South Africans, specifically the "Tsonga and Chopi" peoples. Furthermore, the implication is that these individuals may be migrant miners buried deep within the earth. The researcher highlights the structural racism present in South African society by referencing the dangerous work of indigenous miners. Black laborers undertake hazardous jobs for lower wages to enrich the white individuals who own the profitable businesses in the country.

**Metaphor**

Cuddon (1999) defines a metaphor as a figure of speech that compares two unlike things. The text features several instances of metaphors, some of which are given below:

**"Yet she was afraid that someday such people might come up the street and tear off the plaque YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED and open the gates and stream in..."**

The researcher highlights the institutional racism in African society by illustrating the perilous labor of indigenous miners. Black workers engage in unsafe jobs for meager wages to enrich those who operate the most profitable businesses in the nation. In this way, the researcher suggests that the exploitation of Black labor is foundational to white prosperity in South Africa. Metaphorically and ironically, an image of a masked invader is presented: "You have been warned." The fence and sign are directed at Black people. This shows the white couple's obliviousness to the reality that their behavior, which disregards the suffering of Black individuals, is discriminatory. The writer observes that the alert icon was "masked; it could not be determined if he was Black or white, and thus proved the property owner was not a racist." Posting a warning notice on the gate outside their house satirizes the couple's ignorance of the fact that their prejudice toward Africans is racial. The skin tone of the robber is obscured by the mask. The wall serves as a metaphor for the family's "walling off" of the outside world and their inability to understand their consciousness in this context. He attempts to climb over the wall as a way to escape this symbol of isolation but becomes trapped on top and ultimately perishes. One possible analogy might be the exposition's frame tale, which illustrates the range of acceptable reactions to terror.

### **Irony**

According to McArthur and Muhammad (2022), irony is the difference between what one would expect to happen and what occurs. There are three types of irony: situational, dramatic, and verbal. **"YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED over the silhouette of a would-be intruder"**.

The dramatic irony resides in the phrase "you have been warned" displayed over the silhouette of a masked "would-be intruder," illustrating that it is impossible to determine whether he is Black or white, thereby suggesting that the property owner is not a racist. Ironically, as white individuals living in apartheid-era South Africa, this couple is indeed prejudiced; they fear that Black people are different from them. The situational irony involves the alarm of the "electronic harpies discourse." The neighborhood residents believe their alarms protect and assist them, yet they are only occasionally effective at deterring theft. The verbal irony pertains to the story about apartheid and the death of a boy. This fairy tale is set in the present era and is devoid of magic, monsters, and morality. The irony allows us to communicate the true message about the dangers of apartheid and the impossibility of isolating one home from the surrounding world.

### **Lexical Choices**

The analysis of lexical choices, particularly nouns, adjectives, and verbs, reveals deep-seated apartheid by portraying individuals and actions to build and strengthen ideologies. When reflecting on memories of murder, the writer categorizes people clearly as defenders or intruders to evoke suspense and incite fear. A strange sound fuels her anxiety in a stream of consciousness. The arrhythmia of her heartbeat races uncontrollably against its bodily confines, driven by the fear of external threats. They install electronically controlled gates at home. Anyone wishing to enter must announce themselves by pressing a button and speaking into a receiver connected to the house. The Chopi and Tsonga were Black Africans, depicted as colonized people buried beneath the earth. The term "Dragon teeth" refers to razor-bladed coils surrounding the house's walls. However, this setup leads to the tragic death of their son. The child, pretending to be a prince from a fairy tale, jumps onto the deadly coils, resulting in a horrific demise. The little boy's body is mutilated as he is hacked out of the security coils with saws, wire cutters, and choppers.

The use of adjectives qualifies the degree of nouns that the trustworthy housemaid displays regarding the social situation under apartheid, which is repeated throughout the story. It indicates that the maid does not harm the family. The wise old witch portrays negative stereotypes as she

provides instruments to a white family, leading to the child's death. Ultimately, this contrast highlights the complex dynamics of power and vulnerability within the narrative, illustrating how societal structures influence the actions and perceptions of both the housemaid and the witch.

The author uses verbs to depict horrendous actions, such as the murder of a woman near the suburbs. This illustrates fear in her subconscious. "**You have been warned**" serves as a warning symbol. The presence of people of another race and the plaques mentioned on the nameplate evoke fear. However, the riots were suppressed by white police and soldiers, reflecting the external political situation under apartheid conditions.

### Conclusion

This research reveals the ideology embedded in the selected text by examining literary and linguistic devices. In this study, "Once Upon a Time" is analyzed through the lens of systemic racism, deconstructed, and evaluated via stylistic analysis. The initial challenge lies in identifying systemic racism using stylistic methods. This issue was addressed by analyzing two key components: figures of speech and lexical choices. Figures of speech, including metaphor, personification, and symbolism, were closely examined. Additionally, two parts of speech—nouns and adjectives—were analyzed within the lexical category. The systemic racism uncovered through these stylistic analyses in "Once Upon a Time" plays a crucial role in revealing the underlying meanings of the story. Nadine Gordimer, the author of the narrative, effectively integrates systemic racism and stylistic techniques to convey these meanings. The study also highlights that stylistic analysis is a valuable tool for uncovering and interpreting the deeper meanings within a story. Future research could expand on this analysis by exploring additional levels of language, as the current study focused on only two. Therefore, a more comprehensive and holistic analysis could be achieved through further investigation.

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