

Drama Triangles in Nadine Gordimer's "Once Upon a Time" and the War in Gaza

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Abstract

Aimé Césaire stated that colonialism “dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal” (Césaire 2000, 41). The dehumanization bred from colonialism persists in a pernicious pattern of roleplaying theorized by Stephen B. Karpman in his Drama Triangle, a model for understanding how game and script roles perpetuate destruction. Describing his drama triangle, Karpman writes, “A person ‘living in a fairy tale’ usually has a simplified view of the world with a minimum of dramatic characters, acting in the destructive roles of victim, perpetrator, and rescuer” (Karpman 1968, 39). The drama triangle models the players’ actions as they move among the positions of victim, perpetrator, and rescuer. Nadine Gordimer’s short story, “Once Upon a Time,” brings readers into the hallucinatory world of the settler fairy tale while exposing its pathological dynamics. A constructive reading of Gordimer’s “Once Upon a Time” with Karpman’s drama triangle offer a way out, one that reverses the logic of fairytale roleplaying and moves toward a fuller sense of humanity. To get there, we must go beyond just mourning the dead and mourn the loss of our collective humanity to colonial fairytale roles and the dynamics of violence they entail.

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