

Love, Identity and Place in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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Abstract

*After the fall of the apartheid regime and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, South Africa went through a process of rebuilding a nation, as it attempted to move from a totalitarian system towards a democratic one. In this context, writers such as Nadine Gordimer tried to depict the socio-political climate of the liberation period in a series of intimate glimpses of the black and the white worlds in the Rainbow Nation to be. The aim of this paper is to analyze how Gordimer explores the ideas of freedom, love, responsibility and identity in one of her later novels, *The Pickup*.*

Keywords

Apartheid, identity, love, South Africa

Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, countries in nearly every corner of the world were affected by the experience of genocide, spoliation, systemic human rights abuses, severe repression, and/or intense social and political problems that amplified internal social divisions and in some cases led to collective violence. So it is not at all surprising that the twentieth century is mostly remembered for its legacy of “gross human rights violations and mass atrocities” [1, 1]. Nevertheless, as the century came to an end, the wind of political change began to be felt in several of these countries.

As a country that is still trying to deal with the cataclysmic events of the past, South Africa is very much aware of the fact that it is undergoing a period of transition “between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice” [5, 32] – which is known today as the apartheid regime – “and a future founded on recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence” [5, 32], that can only be achieved through reconciliation.

In this context, writers such as Nadine Gordimer tried to depict the socio-political climate of the liberation period in a series of intimate glimpses of the black and the white worlds in the Rainbow Nation to be. For the South African author who won a Nobel Prize in 1991, the complexities of the Other have always been at the center of her interest. Born in 1923, in Springs, a mining town just outside Johannesburg, Gordimer grew up in a post-colonial South Africa and witnessed the various stages of the apartheid regime; so it is not at all surprising

that she decided to undertake the task of analyzing how this drastic form of institutionalized “othering” affected people and their cultures. Almost all of her novels to date and most of her short stories deal with this topic.

Having chosen apartheid as her dominant theme throughout her writing career, Gordimer faced a paradoxical situation when this racist ideology finally succumbed in the early 1990’s. It might well be assumed, therefore, that the fall of apartheid deprived this writer of her main target and subject matter. Quite evidently this was not the case.

Taking the “New South Africa” as its starting point *The Pickup* (2001) continues to deal with problems of race, class, identity, displacement, immigration and the connection between the private and the political, but lift these problems from a local or national to a global level. It is a novel that can be framed in what Gordimer has called a post-apartheid “literature of transition” [2, ii].

The plot of the novel is very simple and straightforward. Julie Summers, the 29 years old female protagonist, is the well-to-do daughter of a rich family (who are now divorced) in contemporary Johannesburg. She has, nevertheless, imposed a distance from the bourgeois background in which she was raised and took life into her own hands. As a result she moved from “The Suburbs” and lives in a previously black part of town, works as a PR for a pop agency, drives an old second hand car, and spends her leisure time with a group of multiracial and liberal friends that are referred to as “The Table” at the L.A. / EL AY Café.

The story begins when her car breaks down and she begins a love affair with Abdu, the mechanic at her car garage. The latter, whose real name is actually Ibrahim, turns out to be an illegal immigrant with a degree in economics from some unnamed Saudi Arabian country; he also fosters great admiration for the world in which Julie’s father, Nigel, lives. When Ibrahim/Abdu is tracked down by the authorities, Julie, hesitantly, tries to use her family’s influence but is unable to find a way to keep her lover in her country. She takes the unprompted decision to accompany him to his home.

This is where the second part of the novel starts; the setting is now a small Arabian town, somewhere in Northern Africa. As soon as they get to Ibrahim’s home, he immediately starts to reapply for immigration desperately hoping to obtain legal entry into an economically prosperous country that would allow him to fulfill his dreams. Meanwhile, Julie quickly finds her place in the new surroundings and discovers an almost mystical affinity to the desert. The ending shows us Ibrahim who has finally obtained a permit to immigrate into the United States and Julie who, in another last minute decision, refuses to follow her husband.

One can easily notice, as Franz Meier did, that Gordimer's *The Pickup* is "dominated by structural parallels, chiasmic inversions and mirroring, as well as binary oppositions" [4]. The novel presents two radically different places that divide it into two almost symmetrical parts, and it is perpetuated by the relation between two radically different people, each of whom seems to be a somewhat split personality.

The two main characters in the novel ultimately reverse roles. In Johannesburg Julie is the one with money, contacts and power although she desperately tries to evade her condition; she wants a different type of life, not the one that she 'inherited' from her rich parents, so that she affirms her independence and identity by moving into a flat in a formerly black district, earning her own money, and driving an old car. But when, despite her best efforts, Abdu's application for permission to stay in South Africa is denied and she decides that they will both return to his homeland, it is Julie that has to adapt and learn how to be a migrant in an Islamic Arab society. Strangely enough, this experience is an empowering one for Julie who finds a place for herself that she has never experienced in her country, where she lived an emotionally sterile and meaningless existence. Julie discovers in her husband's family all the values that she was missing in her own country and in the midst of her family, such as harmony, kindness, humanity and spirituality. She is happy to remain there and teach English to the natives as long as she gets the chance to see each morning the endless desert lying at her feet. As Sue Kossew observed, the desert becomes "a place of spiritual growth for her: deprived of the material privileges that she was accustomed with, she finds a spiritual one that is more comforting and fulfilling" [3, 2].

In perfect complementarity to Julie, Abdu, "the illegal grease-monkey" [2,49] – as he is referred to in the novel – has no problem with the delights that capitalism has to offer. He is full of admiration for Julie's father and for his successful business partners; he admires the very people that Julie is embarrassed by. Therefore, Franz Meier was right to say about the two protagonists of the novel that for each of them, the respective other represents "their ideal self, the imaginary *objet petit a* in Lacanian terminology" [4].

Place is of the essence in the novel under discussion. Gordimer is fascinated by the paradigm shift that occurs when people are displaced from their comfort zones and must adapt to new ways of thinking and being. Warned by both Ibrahim that his country is not for someone like her, and her father who says that it is a place where "women are treated like slaves" [2, 98], Julie is nonetheless determined to take the plunge and expand her limited horizons by immersing in a

culture that she knows nothing about. Ibrahim, who is desperate to get out of his desert village once and for all, cannot understand why Julie, who has so many choices about where to live, would settle in the very place from which he is trying to escape. This idea, that Julie has the power to leave that place whenever she wants, whereas Ibrahim is stuck there, is permanent throughout the story.

This can also be relevant for an interpretation of the title which, apart from the fact that it echoes the sexual charge that brought the two together and the randomness of their encounter, can also be interpreted in a more global tone: only those from privileged countries are really free to ‘pick up’ other cultures and to drop them, too, whenever they want – “the freedom of the world was hers” [2, 59], Julie thinks for herself at one point. Yet there is one more way in which we can interpret the title and this is in the light of the cross-cultural language exchange. When Julie starts teaching English to the natives, the omniscient narrator makes the following remark “they and others came unobtrusively to join the exchange, picking up Julie’s language, Julie picking up theirs” [2,156]. This quote could very well justify the novel’s title because Julie and Ibrahim’s family are exchanging and picking up words from each other’s language, so they can understand each other.

There is, however, one sphere in Gordimer’s novel that is apparently immune to hierarchic discourses of culture: the sphere of love and sexuality. These two tend to form “an essentialist utopia in which a pre-stabilized harmony seems to exist between the two partners” [4]. Of course, the outside world is able to menace this utopian haven – as is for instance the case of stress induced impotency or religious taboos: “A Muslim doesn’t fall in love with a woman, but only with Allah,” [2, 180] – says one of his Ibrahim’s friends at one point – but once secured, it seems to be an eternal paradise regained.

Ibrahim/Abdu is generally cold throughout the novel and has problems leaving his feelings for Julie grow; he refuses to translate “love words” into his own language for Julie. Latent feelings do, nevertheless, appear to force their way to the surface of Ibrahim’s consciousness:

She had come ... all the way with him ... Love. He had to believe it, existing in her. He felt something unwanted, something it was not necessary, no obligation on a penniless illegal to feel for one of those who own the world, can buy a ticket, get on a plane, present a passport and be welcomed back into that world any time ... he felt responsibility – that’s it – responsibility for her [2, 173].

The most plausible way to account for Ibrahim's lack of feelings towards Julie would be to think of Ibrahim as being afraid of commitment, since this would not allow him to pursue his dreams. But he still marries her before coming to his home country and he is the one who comes up with the idea. Therefore, his feelings and attitude towards his companion and wife, Julie, seem to be split; he cannot make a decision about what is more important for him: a free life outside his country or a family in his native land?

Sex is the only thing that saves them. It is particularly hard to write beautifully about the power of sex, of its ability "to elevate humans out of worlds that would divide them, of its occasionally transcendent quality" [6]. But Gordimer writes about it so easily we barely notice the accomplishment. Julie and Ibrahim's relationship is kept together, is cemented by the wordless communication of sex. Gordimer understands how sex speaks:

She bent over him, her arms going around his waist and her cheek against his bare back. To her, the essence of him, the odor of his skin, overcame his silence and received her (...) That night they made love, the kind of lovemaking that is another country, a country of its own, not yours or mine [2, 148].

Julie is the one who seems to be more affectionate, loving and she proves this many times. She has no second thoughts when she decides to follow Ibrahim to his country and she doesn't regret her decision, not even for a second throughout the entire novel. She always respects her husband's decision and tries to help him with as much as she can. What is surprising, however, is her resolution at the end of the novel, when she makes it clear that she doesn't want to go to the United States with Ibrahim. Perhaps Julie is trying to escape her inherited privilege, both in South Africa where her father belongs, and in America, where her mother enjoys the Californian lifestyle. In opposition, Ibrahim is attempting to escape the opposite of privilege, the poverty, the hopelessness, the sense of entrapment.

Another central theme in *The Pickup* is identity. The identities of both protagonists pose very interesting problems and are doubtful or doubted either by others or by themselves [4]. The most obvious is the case of the male protagonist; what is his real name: Abdu or Ibrahim ibn Musa? Abdu is an alias or a persona that he uses in South Africa in order to avoid being caught by the authorities, while Ibrahim is his real, birth name. Like love, identity is for Abdu/Ibrahim a luxury that

only the rich can afford. Not wanting to accept the role that his family and culture have imposed on him, he turns himself into a nobody in his own culture and remains so in the western states that he appreciates so much. Thus, being suspended at the border between his eastern past and a prospective western life he has “neither history nor place in which to anchor his identity” [4].

Julie also defines herself in contrast to the culture of her past. She discovers her own identity through a rejection of everything that has to do with the “late bourgeois world” of her divorced parents. Even the fact that she picks up Abdu can be seen as a gesture made in order to prove how far she is from her parent’s life standards. As Meier points out: “Abdu is the significant Other, representative of a world that she was brought up to despise, and so she makes use of his difference to define herself” [4]: “*It is she who is looking for herself reflected in those eyes*” [2, 129]. Even her drastic decision to follow Abdu to his hometown was made so that she could again face the Other in order to find out more about her true self, a self which was suppressed in the world in which she was brought up.

However, Julie’s last phase in her quest of discovering her “true” identity is triggered by her encounters with the desert, the end of time and space, and maybe death. In her regular morning trips to the end of the road, where the desert starts, she gradually creates there what we could call, after Virginia Woolf’s terminology, “*a room of her own*” at the border of the civilized world. When at the end of the story Ibrahim finally obtains his immigration permit for the USA, Julie decides to stay. Yet the question ultimately remains open: has any of them really found his or her ‘true’ identity in the realm of the other?

In the end, Gordimer leaves some important questions unanswered: why did Julie decide to stay home with Ibrahim’s family? Why did she help him get a working visa after all? What is she going to do after Ibrahim leaves? Will Julie stay in the desert village? Will Ibrahim come back? Will he go to America or change his mind at the last moment? Maybe it is fitting that the novel ends ambiguously, with these questions unanswered, and with Julie facing a peculiar type of freedom. Julie and Ibrahim remain faithful to their own selves until the end, even if they have to sacrifice their love for each other. But is it really a sacrifice or did they use each other as a means to reach what they were aspiring to? Like the value of muteness that Julie discovers in the desert, these closing questions that might surface in the reader’s mind are met with silence.

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