

## **THE THEME OF IDENTITY IN NADINE GORDIMER THE PICKUP**

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*Abstract: Gordimer addresses the issues of identity and belonging connected to the notions of home and exile, emigration and immigration, and the way they affect the Self and the Other. Her interest in the phenomenon of immigration is due to the reactions of resentment and xenophobia that it triggers. In this respect, she has joined the writers around the world in an attempt to raise awareness and diminish the negative manifestations against immigrants.*

*The beginning of the novel *The Pickup* is set in post-Apartheid South Africa but there is a quiet and more relaxed atmosphere than that from the other two post-Apartheid novels written during the 1990s. The immigrant is introduced in the novel neither for the sake of obtaining a controversial love relationship nor for the sake of exploring a new kind of romance. It is because the post-colonial and post-Apartheid period made South Africa regenerate. This regeneration is taken for granted by people from less developed countries who consider South Africa nothing more than a habitat offering better working conditions and decent residence.*

*Keywords: identity, exile, the other, immigration, emigration*

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The novel is seen by Coetzee (2007:251) as “Gordimer’s personal odyssey” due to the characters she has chosen to explore. Thus, one can distinguish the portrayal of the “confused and conflicted young man, emotionally bound to his mother”, disregarding the “history and culture that have formed him”. Then, there is the “unexceptional young woman who trusts her impulses and finds herself by humbling herself”. It is arguable whether one can read humiliation in her attitude to please the others or simply a desire to integrate. Nevertheless, both characters expect a remake of the Self that should take place when they relocate to a new country.

Julie, the rich white daughter of a well-known businessman, detests the suburbs of her childhood and, above all, the privileges that the suburbs have to offer. She now lives in a “series of backyard cottages adapted from servants’ quarters” (8), which she sees as a radical departure from her father’s house, but which, in fact, is not because leaving the Suburbs to live in a black neighborhood and going to clubs in Soweto (the black neighborhood where bloody Johannesburg riots started on several occasions during the Apartheid years) on Saturday nights has become a norm in the new South Africa. Julie considers that her ‘place’ was sufficiently remote from the Suburbs’ ostentation and “was accepted by the blacks among them as the kind of place they themselves moved to from the old segregation” (Gordimer 2001:18).

The white South African girl is exploring an unknown territory (the desert), on a quest for her true self, whereas the Arab man is displaced from his territory, removed from his home and compelled to deal with the Other for economic reasons. Julie is “the right kind of foreigner: one who belonged to the internationally acceptable category of origin” (140); and, for this reason, she is able to choose ‘one of her own kind’ at any time, a kind to which she decides whether she belongs or not (80).

In opposition to Julie, who is entitled to alternatives, Abdu’s living conditions are specific to an immigrant: he inhabits the room “redolent of fuel and grease” (28) above the garage where he works, thanks to the owner of the garage. His childhood village that he was so eager to leave is surrounded by desert and, from his point of view, desert means nothing but silence and desolation. His only choice is to depart without being able to opt where to settle down. He takes what he is given as long as he is away from the silence of the desert, listening to “the lullaby of distant traffic” (34). Furthermore, Abdu’s experience of life is full of contradictions, migration and multiple return and removal, on account of the fact that his life as an immigrant unfolds in a multitude of communities worldwide. He does not like to speak about

his country or his home and Julie does not learn anything about it before the moment she sets foot on the airport. He has no photographs of his family or his village and the only description he provides is that of a person who wants to detach himself from the world of his childhood:

Nothing much to see. It's a village like hundreds of others there, small shops where people make things, cook food, police station, school. The houses; small. A mosque; small. It's very dry- dust, dusty. Sand. [...] a big family, of course. (25)

Although Julie despises her father's capitalistic values and privileged lifestyle, and even the "beautiful terrace of her father's house" that "she didn't care to call...home" (45), it is exactly to her father's lifestyle that Abdu aspires. Julie, the 'insider' to the South African white liberal and bourgeois lifestyle wants out, wants to break loose; Abdu, 'the outsider', who belongs to a third world country, wants in, he wants to be accepted and somehow integrate, although he is considered "the one from outside who has been let in" (19).

Desire and responsibility continuously come into conflict with each other. Abdu cannot help considering Julie's relationship with him "another of the adventures she prided herself on being far enough from her father's beautiful house always to be ready for" (112). "Yet he felt something unwanted...he felt responsibility - that's it - responsibility for her. Though he had none" (173).

As Meier (2003) observes, "structural parallels, chiasmic inversions and mirroring, as well as binary oppositions" dominate Gordimer's *The Pickup*. The story takes place in two radically different settings, dividing the novel into two almost symmetrical parts. Although the characters are radically different people, they each seem to be a complementary part of the other, supplying mutual needs or compensating for mutual lacks.

Moreover, there is a mutual exploitation of the Other: Abdu picks up Julie to remain an immigrant in South Africa, Julie picks up Abdu to experience the exotic and to start the quest for herself. Regardless of the fact that her family and friends see him as a disguised 'grease monkey' without a name, working at a garage, Julie sees him as her 'oriental prince', *an exotic Other*. The Arab man accepts the two identities and acts accordingly, depending on the social situations he encounters. He even assumes the nickname he is given, when thinking about himself, admitting "there is no longer any sense in playing the grease-monkey" (2001:92), and he feels like a prince

with a spell cast upon him every time he is able to free himself from his monkey suit, that is his working overalls.

The ‘outcast’ Abdu without family and friends represents the mirrored image of Julie’s ideal of independence. Abdu does not understand her reluctance when he asks to meet her family, especially her father, or when he needs help to get his visa. Julie cannot ignore her principles and her embarrassment in order to confront her father and help Abdu in his struggle to avoid deportation - an omission she tries to rectify by accompanying Abdu on his return home. In Abdu’s country, the roles are reversed: Julie cannot understand his detachment from the family, his performance of everyday tasks and duties without completely identifying. She manages to find the ideal environment she has been searching for - free of any constraints – and thus, fully integrates in Abdu’s family:

You must understand, I’ve never lived in a family before, just made substitutes out of other people, ties, I suppose, though I didn’t realize that. There are ... things... between people here, that are important, no, necessary to them. (187)

Meanwhile he is queuing for the exit ticket both from his own family and from his country. For the Arab, the ideal environment is where he can find work for real money, a job and social security (which Julie used to have) being the independence standard that he seeks in the Western world. His inability to understand Julie’s determination to remain in the desert is expressed in a stereotype about women of her condition, brought up in wealthy families, an oversimplified conception that he has learnt in South Africa: “Her decision was a typical piece of sheltered middle-class Western romanticism” (262).

Using JanMohamed’s comments on the function of racial differences, Abdu may be seen as the ‘savage’ who has already been civilized and is now searching for a place in the civilized world that refuses to accept its final product. Julie is part of the reverse process: the colonizer returning to the primitive world to discover its essence. The colonizer’s moral superiority is questioned, as well as the validity of her own formation and the social rules of the South African society. Unlike her family and friends, Julie is prepared to understand “the worthless alterity of the colonized”, to value the differences of his society, although she will try to change its mentality and teach her language and culture, at the same time, respecting the others and their

‘otherness’. In her attempt not to judge the Other according to her own cultural values, Julie “assumes that the Other is irremediably different”, and she finds it impossible to adopt his point of view (JanMohamed 1985:65). For example, her perspective of the desert is entirely different from the Arab’s view: Julie seeks to understand and tame the desert, whereas Abdu wants to escape from it.

In fact, both Julie and Abdu are on a continuous quest for the self, permanently doubting their identities, looking for the Other in order to be able to define themselves as unique personalities. There are several levels for their quest: *the racial, the social, the cultural and the sexual level*, representations of ‘otherness’ which are all connected with the two protagonists and their developments within the novel’s main plot.

In *The Pickup*, the quest for belonging demands a return to the concept of place, although not necessarily to the bordered space. Gordimer presents numerous alternative spaces including the multicultural/ multiracial city. Her protagonists’ attempts to locate the self are examined through these spaces and through their sexual, racial, familial, spiritual, and cultural dimensions/ approaches. Johannesburg is the stereotypical example of the global city and it is left unnamed because it corresponds to any cosmopolitan city in any developing country. The Middle Eastern country does not have constituent elements from different parts of the world, yet the fact that it accepts a white woman of a different religion, whose husband chooses to leave, represents the first step towards its transformation. The desert is paradigmatic and it has a strong identity, influencing people from all cultures.

Julie’s displacement is the beginning of her journey from the Self to the Other. Her identity is constituted by a series of choices and the relationships between the Self and the Other. In the end, Abdu no longer represents that ‘significant Other’ as Julie can no longer relate to his choices and future achievements in the Western world. The writing of the Self on the Other and the writing of the Other on the Self have as effect the ‘unfixed identities’ of the characters. The Other in their relationship is both to be desired and to be suppressed.

As Michael Chapman (2008a:11) remarks, the new South African literature “portrays a multiracial, multicultural society rather than a society marked by cultural isolation or political ideologies”. Nadine Gordimer’s post-Apartheid critical and creative works such as *The Pickup*, *Loot*, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* present “metropolitan centres” that are neither “African nor Asian nor Latin-American, nor indeed East European peripheries, but multiple

margins and centres that are imbued with different degrees of significance”.

Thus, we can conclude that there is a road between South Africa and the rest of the world: the emigrant’s road to another country away from conflict and war, the road between the diamond mines and the oil fields. It is either the road of the emigrant or the road of the refugee depending on the point of reference. It is the road between the colonized English-speaking and Christianized territory and the new, not-yet globalised Muslim territory. It is the road to anywhere else, there “where the world is” (Gordimer 2001:230) as Abdu defines his America.

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