



# A study of identity in post-apartheid South African English literature<sup>1</sup>: *The Pickup* by Nadine Gordimer

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## Abstract

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*In examining aspects of identity in “The Pickup” (2001), Nadine Gordimer’s latest novel, this article indicates new trends in post-apartheid South African English literature as well. In the article it is indicated that identity has always been an important theme in Gordimer’s novels. Her earlier novels tend to focus on her characters’ struggle to attain political or racial rather than personal freedom, while her later novels increasingly tend to examine the construction of individual identities. “The Pickup” has continued this search for identity, but against a new and interesting perspective, a perspective that is in line with the political transformation of post-apartheid South Africa after 1994. Moreover, this theme is extremely relevant in the twenty-first century with its increased emphasis on place and globalisation. This article thus examines the theme of identity in “The Pickup”, first against a South African background and then against the backdrop of an unknown town somewhere in the desert – most probably in Northern Africa.*

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## Opsomming

### 'n Onderzoek van identiteit in die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse letterkunde ná apartheid: *The Pickup* van Nadine Gordimer

*In die ondersoek van aspekte van identiteit in "The Pickup", Nadine Gordimer se mees onlangse roman, dui hierdie artikel ook ander rigtings in die Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse fiksie van na die apartheidstydperk aan. In dié artikel word daarop gewys dat identiteit altyd 'n belangrike tema in Gordimer se romans was. Haar vroeëre romans het geneig om te fokus op haar karakters se stryd om politieke of rasse-identiteit, eerder as om persoonlike identiteit, terwyl haar latere romans toenemend aandag gee aan die konstruksie van individuele identiteit. "The Pickup" sit hierdie soeke na identiteit voort, maar vanuit 'n nuwe en interessante perspektief, 'n perspektief wat in ooreenstemming is met die politieke transformasie in die Suid-Afrika van die tydperk ná apartheid (na 1994). Hierdie tema is uiters relevant in die een-en-twintigste eeu met die toenemende klem op plek/ruimte en globalisering. Die artikel ondersoek dus die tema van identiteit in "The Pickup", aanvanklik teen 'n Suid-Afrikaanse agtergrond en dan teen die agtergrond van 'n dorpie iewers in die woestyn – waarskynlik in Noord-Afrika.*

## 1. Introduction

"Not yet time to despair" aptly heads Michiel Heyns' (2002:74) review of *The Pickup* by Nadine Gordimer, and *The restless supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavic. Heyns (2002:76) concludes his review of these two novels by remarking:

By now the old question of what South African authors will write about after Apartheid has been given a rich variety of answers. These two novels provide us with two more, suggesting that it's not time yet to despair for lack of a subject matter.

This view is underpinned by Andrew Foley's editorial in *The English Academy Review* (Foley, 2001:i-ii) in which he suggests that the tendency to speculate widely about South African literature as a composite phenomenon has weakened, and that the critical focus has in many cases narrowed to a more precise consideration of the particular distinctiveness of individual authors. A tentative inference, which might be drawn is that the passing of the old order has also meant the passing of the compulsively dominant theme of apartheid, so that authors and, consequently, critics have found themselves liberated and enabled to prosecute a far more heterogeneous range of projects.

This article aims to indicate that perceived new trends in South African English literature in general, and fiction in particular, have led to the creation of identities that have assumed new significance and more variety in current South African writing than in earlier protest or struggle writing where characterisation frequently veered in the direction of stereotyping. This point of departure will be followed by focusing on the theme of identity in Nadine Gordimer's most recent post-apartheid novel, *The Pickup* (2001) – written after the independence of 1994 and set against a post-apartheid backdrop.

## 2. Identity as central theme in Nadine Gordimer's novels

Identity has always featured prominently in the works of Nadine Gordimer. Having grown up in postcolonial South Africa and being one of the staunchest critics of the apartheid system that deprived people of their identity – the essence of their being – Gordimer has become “something like a moral institution in South Africa” (Meier, 2003:1).

Although Gordimer's earlier novels such as *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), *A Guest of Honour* (1971) and *The Conservationist* (1974), tend to focus on her characters' struggle to attain political or racial, rather than personal identity, her subsequent works reveal the quest for personal identity as well. Where Gordimer's earlier writings examine the role of novelistic discourse in the broader context of ideological discursive practices, novels such as *Burger's Daughter* (1979) and *July's People* (1981) increasingly focus on the construction of individual identities, as encapsulated in Rosa Burger's words: “What is the meaning of any kind of commitment if there is no self to commit” (*Burger's Daughter*, 1979:59).

The overtly political nature of Gordimer's output has, nevertheless, afforded critics of African literature the opportunity to raise concerns about her ability to explore new ground after complete democracy had been gained in 1994. Gordimer's novels published after the end of apartheid – *None to accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998) and *The Pickup* (2001), however, undeniably proclaim her supremacy as an author who, in her late seventies, still had the flexibility to shift her paradigm from political/protest African writing to constructing novels that return “to the extended consideration of individual choice and responsibility” (Dimitriu, 2003:19) where her subjects “display marked autonomy in the explorations of their inner lives” (Dimitriu, 2003:19). Dimitriu (2003:20) thus aptly remarks that in Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction “[c]haracters vindicate their

individual selves in action and choice: as psychological, as well as social beings". Moreover, Dimitriu (2003:21) mentions that in these novels "a greater degree of realism appropriate to processes of character development vies to a greater degree with the symbolic pre-eminence of the representation".

### **3. Definition of terminology**

The term *identity* consists of a number of elements as the following definitions indicate. *The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2003:622) defines identity as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others". According to *The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1996:669) identity is "the state or quality of being a specified person or thing, which embraces who or what a person is" or "individual characteristics by which a person or a thing can be identified". The *Millennium World Book Dictionary* (2000:1048) explains identity as "who a person is or what a thing is, which aspects form his/her individuality". These definitions reveal the idea that identity is a complex phenomenon, as Raditlhalo (2003:15) mentions that "identity cannot *become* if it does not take into account the contestations between language, culture, history and power". Van der Waal and Wilcox (2004:8) emphasise that "the issue of identity ... [is] problematic (particularly questioning any idea that identity is stable)". The ensuing analysis of identity in *The Pickup* will be underpinned by the assumption that identity is unstable, in the words of Dimitriu (2003:31), this "is a post-apartheid world of global, unfixed identities".

For the purpose of this article, identity will thus be used to refer to the qualities, beliefs and ideas that make a person/persons feel that he/she/they stand out from others, as Mogoboya (2004:3) mentions: "It forms the outstanding features, traits, experiences, and attributes which serve as the tenets of a person, [a group] or a thing." The analysis of identity will show that "identity is not necessarily something that provides stability but can, under particular circumstances, become fractured and decentred, leading to a sense of doubt and insecurity" (Mogoboya, 2004:3).

Another key concept in this article is *otherness*, defined by *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1973:1470) as "the quality of being other; difference, diversity". Although otherness has been one of the most important themes in apartheid literature, Nadine Gordimer widens her scope to reveal otherness among exponents of the East and West, thereby extending her examination to veer in the direction of globalisation, an important theme in current literature.

#### 4. The theme of identity as expressed in *The Pickup*

The following brief plot resume indicates that difference or otherness plays a dominant role in the construction of this novel that is dominated by structural parallels and binary oppositions. In *The Pickup* the themes of identity and otherness are examined from a new and interesting perspective, a perspective that is in line with the political transformation of South Africa. Moreover, a theme that is extremely relevant in the twenty-first century with its increased emphasis on globalisation.

Gordimer develops her theme of the search for identity (on various levels) by narrating the story of the two young lovers, Julie Summers and Abdu (Ibrahim ibn Musa) – Julie being a young publicist from an affluent, prestigious white family and Abdu, a dark-skinned illegal immigrant who holds a degree in economics but works as a motor mechanic to prevent detection and deportation. The setting is initially contemporary Johannesburg, where Julie lives in a cosmopolitan environment but the setting then moves to a small town in the desert (most probably in Northern Africa) when Ibrahim is forced to leave the country and Julie accompanies him as his wife.

Abdu and Julie are two completely different characters. They come from two diametrically opposed worlds with totally different cultures but are bound together by love or perhaps sexual attraction. Moreover, the story is narrated against two virtually opposed settings, cosmopolitan Johannesburg and a small desert town. Structurally, the novel is divided into two almost symmetrical parts as well. The article will thus investigate various aspects of identity and otherness that divide and simultaneously bind the two protagonists together while in South Africa, before examining changes in their identities and relationship when they stay with Ibrahim's extended family in his home country.

In *The Pickup* Gordimer portrays her characters' search for identity against a rich and finely woven tapestry of cultures, locally, nationally and globally. Gordimer, nevertheless, builds her revelation of culture on paradox. In Johannesburg Julie is the one with wealth and its resultant contacts, but she leads a "claustrophobic and protected" lifestyle (Kossew, 2003:2). She readily accepts Ibrahim's culture in his own country, finds her own niche and experiences the sense of contentment that she has never experienced in South Africa. The blossoming of Julie's cultural identity in the desert may be regarded as the concretisation of Gordimer's earlier ideas about "the ethics of mutual enrichment" of cultural globalisation. Ibrahim, in

turn, regards his own country as backward and impoverished, as he has warned Julie that his country is “not for you” (p. 95<sup>2</sup>) while her father has cautioned her against it as a place where women are “treated like slaves” (p. :98). Gordimer thus simultaneously depicts her protagonists’ sense of identity and displacement, as Sullivan (2001:1) remarks:

Julie and Ibrahim ... are clearly ciphers for two cultures in search of each other. This is the famous ‘clash of civilizations’ in human form. And Gordimer’s contribution is not simply to bring these civilizations into recognizable, human relief but to show how their mutual incomprehension is also related to their mutual attraction.

The examination of identity and otherness in *The Pickup* will be attempted in two parts, namely by tracing the development of these themes first in South Africa and then in a desert town in North Africa.

## **5. Gordimer’s portrayal of conflicting identities in *The Pickup* against a South African background**

The opening of the novel depicts a scene of complete cultural diversity. In the cosmopolitan society in which Julie moves, racial differences fade away completely while gender identities too are treated with ambiguity in that characters at times act in a traditional way while they sometimes break away from traditionally assigned gender identities. The opening lines of the novel depict a scene where Julie’s car breaks down and she has to obtain assistance from bystanders. The power relations between men and women depicted in the first lines of the text are typical:

Clustered predators round a kill. It’s a small car with a young woman inside it. The battery has failed and taxis, cars, minibuses, vans, motorcycles butt and challenge one another, reproach and curse her ... Get going. Stupid bloody woman. *Idikazana lomlungu, le!* .... She throws up hands, palms open, in surrender. They continue to jostle and blare their impatience (p. 3).

Her ensuing conversation with her circle of friends in the café stresses the domination inherent in white males:

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2      *Page numbers refer to The Pickup.*

- Nothing gives a white male more of a kick than humiliating a woman driver. –
- Sexual stimulant for yahoos –
- Someone else shouted something ... like *Idikaza ... mlungu* ... What's that, 'white bitch', isn't it? – Her question to a black friend.
- Well, just about as bad. This city, man! –
- But it was black men who helped me, of course, –
- Oh come on – for a hand-out! (p. :4).

Julie's illusions about the intention of her black benefactors immediately underpin her delusions about the new democratic dispensation – the black males help her only to receive a tip and not necessarily because racial relations have completely changed in post-apartheid South Africa.

The paradoxical nature of the novel is clearly evident in that Julie initially distances herself from her rich white middle-class divorced parents, lives in a formerly black part of the city, drives an old second-hand car, and spends her leisure time with her multicultural and liberal circle of friends in the EL-AY Café. Gordimer's description of the "mixed-race bunch" (Skea, 2004:1) clearly indicates that in Julie's circle race and colour play no part:

A place for the young; but also one where old survivors of the quarter's past, ageing Hippies and Leftish Jews, grandfathers and grandmothers of the 1920s immigration who had not become prosperous bourgeois, could sit over a single coffee. Crazy peasants wandered from the rural areas grabbed and begged in the gutters outside. Hair from a barber's pavement booth blew the human felt of African hair onto the terrace. Prostitutes from Congo and Senegal sat at table with the confidence of beauty queens.

*Hi Julie* – as usual beckoned. Her welcomers saw a graceful neck and face, ... Black and white, they fussed about her (p. 5-6).

In the following passage Gordimer stresses the fact that Julie has deliberately decided to change her lifestyle:

[She] joins the friends as usual at The Table to which she belongs – they are, after all, her elective siblings who have distanced themselves from the ways of the past, their families, whether these are black ones still living in the old ghettos or white ones in The Suburbs (p. 23).

When Julie takes her car to a garage to be repaired, the initial brief glimpse of Abdu reveals the inherent social difference between them:

The legs and lower body wriggled down at the sound of her apologetic voice and the man emerged [from under the car]. He was young, in his greasy work-clothes, long hands oil-slicked at the dangle from the arms: *he wasn't one of them* (p. 7; [my emphasis – MJC]).

Even the garage owner is later poignantly aware of the difference in social status between the two. He muses that the “young lady” who visits Abdu at the garage, drops him off and picks him up again “has class, you could see, never mind the kind of clothes all that crowd at the cafés wear, not all the whites had class around these streets, but she had” (p. 31).

Gordimer excels in revealing the ease with which the cosmopolitans who frequent this venue converse and jostle, as is evinced by the conversation when Julie first brings her pickup to the café: “but at once, he’s not a ‘garage man’, he’s a friend, one of them, their horizon is broadening all the time” (p. 14).

Julie initially takes the lead in the relationship that rapidly develops into a sexual union despite Abdu’s otherness, as Sullivan (2001:2) remarks:

The novel is a painful account of this unlikely coupling, its persistent misunderstandings, its interaction with a world that increasingly pits wealthy, globally connected Westerners with the often stateless, roaming poor of the world looking from the outside in. The constant anxiety that eats away at Ibrahim, his homelessness and his ambition, his being a nonperson and a person at the same time, captured by his two names, is a sad achievement of Gordimer’s narrative empathy.

Sullivan (2001:3) remarks that “[o]nly sex saves them” and heralds Gordimer’s ability “to write beautifully about the power of sex, of its capacity to elevate humans out of the worlds that would divide them, of its occasionally transcendent quality”, as the depiction of their first sexual encounter evinces “they made love beautifully; she so roused and fulfilled that tears came with all that flooded her” (p. 27).

Interestingly, their roles reverse when they go to Julie’s place for the first time to celebrate the buying of her new car. Abdu suggests not to do so at the café, thereby taking the lead in their relationship: “He had spoken: with this, a change in their positions was swiftly taken,



these were smoothly and firmly reversed, like a shift of gears synchronized under her foot; he was in charge of the acquaintanceship" (p. 17). With Julie's suggestion: "At my place then", Gordimer subtly underpins the reversal of roles: "in quiet authority, he had no need to enthuse accord" (p. 17).

Gordimer initially portrays especially Julie as spiritually immature and filled with delusions as the following passage early in the novel suggests:

She wants to respond with a surge of tenderness and guilt at having to have been reminded of this – the nostalgia she thinks he is expressing. But at the same time her self-protective instinct – *which is the image of herself she believes to be her true self* and that she has contrived to project on him – prompts her to head him off with an explanation commensurate with that image (p. 37-38; [my emphasis – MJC]).

Moreover, both Julie and Abdu lack understanding of their respective partner's views: "She is ashamed of her parents; he thinks she is ashamed of him. Neither knows either, about the other" (p. 38).

Since material aspects play such an important role in determining cultural identity, the description of Julie's cottage is important in portraying her cultural identity. In this instance, it undeniably serves as proof of the willed denial of her real cultural identity as a privileged white South African girl. The deliberation surfaces from Gordimer's fine choice of diction: "her 'place' was sufficiently removed from 'The Suburbs' ostentation to meet their standards of leaving home behind, and was accepted by the blacks among them as the kind of place they moved to from the old segregation" while her outhouse renovated as a cottage is "comfortable enough". She, however, fails in her pretentiousness of poverty: the "under-furnishings nevertheless giving away a certain ease inherent in, conditioned, by luxuries taken for granted as necessities: there was a bathroom that dwarfed the living-cum-bedroom by comparison", while the "cramped kitchen was equipped with freezer and gadgets" (p. 18).

This scene is of central importance in that it stresses the difference between the two protagonists' worlds, even between Julie's pretended one, and Abdu's lack of a cultural background in South Africa. Abdu does not intrude into Julie's world by helping to serve the wine and cheese "as *her* friends would ... But he ate *her* cheese and biscuits, he drank *her* wine, with her that first time" (p. 18; [my

emphasis – MJC]. They talk late into the night, mostly about her belonging and his not belonging, Julie's having an identity (although confused at this stage) and Abdu's being forced to have no identity: "They talked until late; about him; his life; hers was here, where they were, in her city, open in its nature for him to see in the streets, the faces, the activities – but he, his, was concealed among these" (p. 18). He then reveals to Julie that he is an illegal immigrant whose immigration permit has expired a year before. She is "bewildered" to learn that there exists "no record of him on any pay-roll, no address but c/o a garage and under a name that was not his" (p. 18). I regard this as a climactic moment in the novel where Julie is faced with the naked truth for the first time in her privileged make-belief world:

Another name? She was bewildered: but there he was, a live presence in her room, an atmosphere of skin, systole and diastole of breath blending with that which pervaded from her habits of living, the food, the clothes lying about, the cushions at their backs. Not his? No – because they had let him in on a permit that had expired more than a year ago, and they would be looking for him under his name (p. 18).

Julie regards such treatment as "[T]errible. Inhuman. Disgraceful" (p. 19) especially when Abdu refers to various criminal elements who have been let into the country. In her bewilderment she remarks: "But you ... you're not one of them." His answer drives home yet another cultural shock into Julie: "The law's the same for me. Like for them. Only they are more clever; they have more money – to pay" (p. 19).

Abdu must thus live underground, not in Gordimer's political underground of the 1970s and 1980s, but the underground of illegal entry to South Africa where the illegal immigrants "evade officialdom for expedient reasons, not on principle" (Dimitriu, 2003:30). The underground in *The Pickup* constitutes a post-apartheid world of global, unfixed identities. Although Julie initially regards Abdu's silences as signs of self-confidence, he later proves himself to be the everlasting nomad who is constantly hunting for greener pastures. He does so fully convinced that he has nothing to lose.

This scene in Julie's cottage is juxtaposed to Abdu and Julie's lunch with her father and stepmother on which Abdu insists and which Julie detests. This meeting takes the reader into the suave luxuriant world of the rich where exquisite food is served on the cool terrace while the conversation moves easily from relocation to global

finances. Although Julie is sickened by this display of wealth and plenty, Abdu seems naïvely impressed.

An important key to a fuller understanding why Julie finds solace in the materially poor but spiritually rich environment of Ibrahim's home is given at this stage. Julie is so sickened by the pretence of her father's house that she escapes the company by fleeing into the house. The following description captures the essence of her loneliness and spiritual neglect among the pomp and splendour of her so-called home:

But it is another house she's running away to hide in: she has never lived in this one ... The sense of being ashamed of them; the shame of him seeing what she was, is, as he must be ashamed of what he is, his being in the village where the desert begins near your house (p. 45).

She feels utterly rejected: "her rejection hid this origin of hers now expansively revealed before him, laid out like the margaritas and the wine and the composed still-life of the fish-platter, salads and desserts" (p. 45).

With the adroitness of the experienced social critic, Gordimer deftly exposes the expediency of Julie's father upon meeting Ibrahim:

When her father was introduced to her someone there was across his face a fleeting moment of incomprehension of the name, quickly dismissed by good manners and a handshake. What was the immediate register? – Black or some sort of black? (p. 40-41).

Julie, however, immediately notices the presence of a black couple and is once more struck by her father's expediency: as an international investment banker he needs to socialise with the right people!

Gordimer presents illegal immigration as testing the individual's emotional capacity to survive uncertainty although Julie initially tends to view it as romantic until Abdu's immigration papers arrive and his not belonging is forcefully exposed. Julie unsuccessfully tries to pull strings to keep him in the country. Her uncle's lawyer, however, bluntly tells Ibrahim that in having shed his identity, he has lost all credibility in the country:

You have placed yourself in the position where you have a criminal charge waiting against you [for having ignored the previous deportation orders], let alone an order to quit the

country ... That is what weighs against however many testimonies to your character, your desirability as a future citizen ... You stayed on illegally, you shed your identity (p. 79).

The couple thus realise that Abdu has no choice but to disappear: "Either way. He disappears into another city, another identity, keeps clear; or he disappears into deportation" (p. 91). At this stage Julie feels herself estranged from her former friends at the café and attracted to Abdu – another reversal of roles in the text as well as an indication of Julie's gradual growth in self-perception:

The struggle stays clenched tightly inside her. It possesses her, alien to them, even to those she thought close; and makes them alien to her. She feels she never knew them, any of them, in the real sense of knowing that she has now with him, the man foreign to her who came to her one day from under the belly of a car, frugal with his beautiful smile granted, dignified in a way learnt in a life hidden from her, like his name. Her crowd, Mates, Brothers and Sisters. They are the strangers and he is the known (p. 91-92).

Julie resultantly decides to join him on the flight to his home town. When she presents him with the two airline tickets, Julie appears as a stranger to him:

And now's the time: there has been no description of this Julie, little indication of what she looks like, unless an individual's actions and words conjure a face and body ... So what she was, and now is – what the woman Julie looks like comes through his eyes (p. 91).

After a time of struggling to come to terms with Julie's offer to accompany him to his family, Abdu finally comes to realise that Julie's gesture is not born out of stubbornness but is the result of her love for him: "Nothing for her to say; she knows *nothing*. That is true but he sees, feels, has revealed to him something he does not know: this foreign girl has for him ... devotion" (p. 96).

The impotence he has experienced since having received the deportation papers thus finds expression in a new tenderness in their lovemaking:

The capacity returned to him, for this foreigner makes him whole. That night he made love to her with the reciprocal tenderness – call it whatever old name you like – that he had guarded against – with a few lapses – couldn't afford its commitment, in his situation, must be able to take whatever the

next foothold might offer. That night they made love, the kind of *lovemaking* that is *another country, a country of its own, not yours, or mine* (p. 96; [my emphasis – MJC]).

The reference to another country is especially significant, since it reiterates the epigraph of the novel and forms the end of the first section of the novel:

Let us go to another country  
The rest is understood  
Just say the word. (William Plomer)

Ironically, too, it is only in their sexual union that they find perfect fulfilment because their geographical move to Abdu's homeland separates rather than unites them, as the next section of the article will indicate.

## 6. Shifting Identities and a sense of belonging in another country

Sue Kossew (2003:1) remarks on the aspect of globalisation especially discernible in the second part of *The Pickup*, by inter alia also referring to Gordimer's own comments in this regard:

This is a significant change in Gordimer's work which has always been specifically South African based, and it is no accident that this move has coincided with a new South Africa, one that has emerged. In Gordimer's words from 'the epitome of cultural isolation cut off not only from Europe and the Americas, but also from the continent to which we belong, even countries of some of our closest neighbours' (Gordimer, 1979:212).

The three words "Ibrahim ibn Musa" form the striking opening paragraph of this part of the novel, thus focusing on Abdu's change of identity as the second paragraph highlights:

He stands at the foot of the stair where the aircraft has brought its human load down from the skies. Lumbered and slung about with hand-luggage and carrier bags, he turns to wait for her to descend from behind him.

He is home. He is someone she sees for the first time. ...

An airport in a country like this is a surging, shifting human mass with all individualism subsumed in two human states, both of suspension, both temporary, both vacuums before reality: Leaving. Arriving. Total self-absorption becomes its opposite, a

vast amorphous condition. ... Julie is no different, she has no sense of who she is in this immersion, everyone nameless: only him, officially: Ibrahim ibn Musa (p. 110).

This paragraph forms a stark contrast with the opening of the novel that reveals Julie's confusion when her car has broken down in the heavy traffic. In this scene Ibrahim is in full command of the situation: Ibrahim is "very efficient, speaking his own language, making enquiries, engaging in exchanges of colloquial ease with those he approached" (p. 110).

The contrast is reinforced by the reversal of their respective attitudes to each other in the introductions to the two parts. Whereas Julie has earlier been immediately attracted by Abdu's physical appearance when emerging from beneath the car, his "brows twitched with impatience" (p. 111) when she wants to go to a toilet after their flight because he knows how backward the place is. Julie remains in her romantic dream world: "She was overcome with love for him: he is in shock, coming back home. She must make light of his irritation with her. Ibrahim ... (trying out the name, listening to it, feeling it on her tongue" (p. 111). Ibrahim, however, regards their whole relationship, from "the first cup of coffee at the EL-AY Café, the love-making in her bed, the wild decision to come to this place ... the marriage he then had no choice but to insist on" as "another of the adventures she prided herself on being far enough from her father's beautiful house always to be ready for" (p. 111).

In her review of *The Pickup*, Ann Skea (2004:2) mentions that the "way in which Julie and Abdu/Ibrahim cope with the move and with the many necessary cultural adjustments is again beautifully and realistically imagined by Gordimer". In this respect she mentions the "differences in attitude to family, friendship and connections; the questions of independence, values and responsibilities; the problems of being a stranger in an unfamiliar culture and of bringing a stranger into your own family". Gordimer's feat lies in her gradual unfolding of the developing identities of both of her protagonists which is done "not analytically or didactically but imaginatively". Skea (2004:2) thus remarks: "Subtly and surely the reader is drawn into the scene and begins to sense and feel the tensions, the fascination, the needs and the pressures which govern the characters' lives."

Julie's journey to self-discovery starts when she meets Ibrahim's people: "in the faces that turned in curiosity to study her, close by in the bus, it came to her that she was somehow as strange to herself

as she was to them” (p. 117). When she thus moves forward with her new husband to meet his family, she does so “with an intruded detachment ... she went forward to his family in this state, with him, the son who belonged to them” while feeling that “if she was strangely new to them, she was also strangely new to herself” (p. 117).

Ibrahim’s irritation with Julie’s ignorance of the deprivation of her new home again surfaces when she mentions to him: “What I need now is a long, hot bath. Where is the bathroom?” (p. 122). The following passage expresses his loathing for his own country as well as being having been forced into marriage to Julie, which he regards as a commitment and burden:

There was no bathroom. Had she thought of that, when she decided to come with him. This place is buried in desert ... Had she any idea of what a burden she would be. So there it is. Madness. Madness to think she could stick it out, here. He was angry – with this house, this village, these his people – to have to tell her other unacceptable things, tell her once and for all what her ignorant obstinacy of coming with him to this place means, when she failed, with all her privilege, at getting him accepted in hers (p. 122).

Julie might initially be suspected of resembling Gordimer’s idle, rich white liberals, who relish racial diversity as “an element of postmodern *savoir vivre*” (Meier, 2004:3) but her changed perceptions in the later part of the novel indicate a real change of heart, an attainment of contentment and commitment as she devotes herself to teaching Ibrahim’s family English and as he suspects, simultaneously infuses them with feminist ideas. Like in Julie’s bohemian circle in Johannesburg where Abdu’s mixed racial descent has made no difference, Julie’s whiteness does not affect her acceptance into Arab culture either.

As someone who has always resented commitment, Ibrahim finds the strain of introducing Julie into his country and home rather troublesome as the following passage, for instance, reveals:

He has sharply resisted his mother’s taking him aside to insist that his wife put a scarf over her head when leaving the house or in the company of men who were not family; resisted with pain, because this is his mother, whom he wanted to bring away to a better life. And *she*, the one he has brought back with him, all that he has brought back with him, is the cause of this pain (p. 123).

One of the finest instances of ironic reversal of roles is situated in the fact that Ibrahim, who has been so impressed by the material grandeur of Julie's parents, rejects the opportunity his uncle offers him to take over the wealthy family business when back home. This might indicate that culture is not easily acquired but inborn, as York (2001:2) states: "Through Julie, Gordimer illustrates how privilege is not something that can be easily renounced. The latitude it allows to those born to it persists even when their circumstances change." He thus suggests that the

... divide between Julie and Ibrahim hints at an unnerving gap – not just between cultures but between individuals as well – that isn't easily bridged. Despite all the intimacy, Julie and Ibrahim remain strangers to each other, each on a personal, but parallel journey. Instead of trying to grasp the truth about each other, they are ultimately unable to see beyond themselves.

Julie, nevertheless, grows in the course of the novel. Although her decision to accompany Abdu to his home town might be regarded as yet another whim of a rich white man's daughter, Julie's decision to remain behind with Ibrahim's family signals her attainment of an exceptional degree of psychological growth, as Michiel Heyns (2002:75) observes:

To compare the outcome with that of *July's People* is to recognize the distance Gordimer has travelled as writer and as social critic. Whereas the Smales family had indignities heaped upon them that was difficult not to imagine as sponsored by the author, Julie, misguided liberal though she may be, is afforded agency of her own: not the absurd gesture of accompanying Abdu to his desert settlement, but the decision to stay on without him.

Finally, Julie finds her own psychological identity in the beauty of the Arabian desert. While Ibrahim feels imprisoned by his own Arabic-Islamic culture, Julie is increasingly attracted to it as she finds what she has unconsciously been looking for in South Africa, namely lasting values, such as commitment, solidarity, family cohesion, and spirituality. By contrast, Ibrahim "shuns the desert. It is the denial of everything he yearns for, for him" (p. 262). Dimitriu (2003:32) fittingly remarks that the "desert becomes the physical embodiment of an increasingly sterile communication" between the couple. Dimitriu regards it as "a sobering reminder of the psychological damage that has been inflicted on Abdu by neo-colonialism. His is the personality of the 'other', scarred by cynicism and mistrust". Dimitriu then refers to the fact that Ibrahim and Julie both yearn to "find a home in exile,



to be integrated and accepted in a different social space”, but that “Abdu’s damage is beyond healing” because he “has lost his ability to love, other than sexually; he cannot reciprocate in genuine intimacy. He interprets his wife’s tenderness as her patronising infatuation with his otherness: as her appropriation of his self” (Dimitriu, 2003:32).

Ibrahim neither understands nor appreciates Julie’s psychological maturation. Towards the end of the novel he still sarcastically refers to “her rich girl’s Café ideas of female independence” (p. 256) and states that “her decision was a typical piece of sheltered middle-class romanticism” (p. 262).

Julie’s finding of her own spirituality completes her psychological identity and may perhaps be indicative of the possibility that Ibrahim might one day return to his own home in the desert, as his mother senses that it might be Julie who will “bring him home at last” (p. 259). Although the novel thus ends on an ambiguous note, there is a possibility – although rather slight – that Ibrahim might perhaps return after having followed the call of wealth and prosperity beckoning him to the Western world.

Importantly, however, the novel ends with a perplexing reversal of roles. Dimitriu (2003:32) suggests that

... Abdu, the illegal immigrant to South Africa, proves to be the eternal nomad, the eternal other, but one who no longer manifests his earlier dignity. Tragically, he is a phenomenon of the 1990s: a global mercenary condemned by history to be ever seeking opportunities elsewhere.

By contrast, the initially materially spoilt but emotionally neglected Julie does not exchange her privileged position for another, but turns her back on material gains. In Dimitriu’s (2003:32) words

... she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that proves to have no boundaries other than those imposed upon her by her own inner dedication. Rejecting what she comes to regard as the superficial landscapes of global opportunities, she identifies the map of her own inner life as a new country of exploration.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has underlined Van der Waal and Wilcox’s (2004:8) statement that “identity should be considered as a shifting process, rather than a fixed essence, and that this process is profoundly

influenced by individual experience, which itself is situated within a particular historical context”.

In addition, Gordimer’s creation of authentic Muslim characters adds to the cultural richness of the novel, as Betsy Kline (2001:1) commends Gordimer’s “insight into Islamic beliefs and how Muslim families see themselves not only in the context of their own villages but in the larger world”.

To conclude, although perhaps not constructed with the passionate intensity of her greatest literary works, *The Pickup* is undeniably a fine and skilfully woven novel, a continuation of its author’s epic narration which has made her such a worthy recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature more than a decade earlier. *The Pickup* undeniably satisfies as an exploration of questions about freedom, responsibility, love, and identity. In addition, it is a valuable contribution to post-apartheid South African English fiction in aiding readers who are still endeavouring to come to a better understanding, and perhaps acceptance, of current issues resulting from change in this country, especially by examining identity in the context of the different meanings of “another country” as artistically done by Gordimer.

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