



THE SELF VERSUS THE OTHER IN NADINE GORDIMER'S NOVEL "THE PICK UP": A CULTURAL APPROACH

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Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel prize winning South African author, deals with the complexities of "the Other" in most of her novels. She has grown up in a post-colonial South Africa and lived through the various stages of its apartheid regime. One of her main concerns was to analyze the impact of this discriminating "the other" on people and their culture.

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Nadine Gordimer's novel "The Pickup" deals with problems of race and class and the connection between the private and the political. She lifts these problems from a national to a global level by changing the story setting from the liberal Johannesburg to an unnamed Arab country. The interracial love story between the protagonists of the story, Julie and Abdu picks up Gordimer's theme of the self and the other (on both a cultural and an individual level) and widens its scope from the racial opposition "black and white" to the cultural one between East and West. Though the happenings of September 11th put the relationship between Western Christian and Eastern Arabic-Islamic cultures on the agenda of political debates.

The story revolves around Julie Summers, the female heroine, the daughter of a rich white Middle class parents in Johannesburg (234). She has, however, early distanced herself from this bourgeois background. She lives in a formerly black part of town, drives a second hand car, works for a rock 'n roll agency and spends her leisure time with a multiracial circle of friends, the so called "Table" (23). The story begins when her car breaks down and she starts a love affair with Abdu, the mechanic at her garage. Abdu, whose actual name is Ibrahim, turns out to be an illegal immigrant (with a degree in economics) from an Arab country.

Only days after the book's publication, the happenings of September 11th have put the relationship between the East and the West into a critical situation. Relatively, the story takes place in two radically different settings, neatly dividing the novel into two symmetrical parts, and it develops between two completely different people, each of whom seems to be sort of split personality. Their relationship is like an experimental installation in a chemical lab to test the reaction of two opposing elements in different milieus. Nevertheless, the intercultural love story of Julie and Abdu clearly functions as a site of opposition.

In this binary opposition, each character gains clarity and contour through his confrontation and comparison with the others. This process of self-definition through difference takes place on several discursive levels such as the racial, the social, the psychological and the cultural other. My concern is basically focused on the intercultural relationships through analyzing the immediate reactions of the characters towards their encounter with different social surroundings.

Skin color no longer seems to be an important distinctive feature in the liberal post-apartheid climate at the L.A. Café. In other words, racial diversity is relished by the whites as an element of post modernism. Actually, the issue of blackness does play a role in the novel. It features in the successful ex-lawyer Hamilton Motsamai (who, incidentally, had already figured prominently in Gordimer's previous novel, *The House of Gun* (1998) with his "black voice" (74) and his tribal beard (76), as well as in the address "Bra" at "The Table". But blackness is no longer a distinctive feature of "otherness". The lawyer, who fought for the rights of blacks has meanwhile moved into finance, where he is as successful as his white colleagues.

The idea of Abdu's blackness poses itself in a more complex way, as he is of, Arab not of African descent "not one of them" (87) as somebody at "The Table" puts it. Thus he bypasses the traditional racism which already lost much of its radical power of "othering" anyway. Meanwhile, The question of Julie's whiteness in the unnamed Arab Country, on the other hand, is not even mentioned in the second part of the novel, nor does it seem to be a distinguishing feature in the Arab society described.

The difference between Julie and Abdu is not only racial, but also social. I try here in this paper to highlight the idea of self-definition through being different. Julie, the rich daughter of a white bourgeois family in "the suburbs" (8) attempts to emphasize her independence and identity by moving into a flat in a formerly black district of Johannesburg, earning her own money in the rock 'n roll business and driving an old second-hand car.

In the first part of the story she has to use her father's Rover while her own vehicle is in repair, she does so with a sense of shame, not realizing that her radical resistance to bourgeois norms has become the norm in her liberal social world of "The Table". While Julie is referred at as the illegal "grease-monkey" (49), Abdu has no problems with the capitalists. On the contrary, he is full of admiration for Julie's father's car and, for his successful business partners and their jet set world. For both heroes, The respective other represents their ideal self. At the same time, their desire for one another is, in each case, "the desire of the other" (10) in both senses of the phrase, is only out of being different.

Another aspect of the social difference is the role of the family. In Julie's eyes the family is a relic from times past, an element of bourgeois ideology that she wishes to leave behind and whose reality, characterized by divorce and adultery exposes it as a shame. For her "The Table", the liberal network of friends sufficiently satisfies her desire for community.

For her, the "outcast" Abdu, without family and friends in a foreign country, somehow mirrors her own ideal of independence, while Abdu himself, who stays at the margin of the Table regards this 'independence' as deficiency and cannot understand why Julie shies away from contacting her parents. Back with Julie in his hometown he stoically accepts many of the traditional duties in his family. Julie, on the other hand, after having been accepted into the women's social circle, almost perfectly fulfills the role of social harmonizer that might have been expected of a local woman, but combines her communal integration with a strong sense of self-determination and initiative.

Thus, with regard to family attachment, each protagonist seems to prefer the other's family structures to his own. We find out that instead of having two contradictory concepts about each hero's cultural backgrounds, we go through a changing positions game in which both protagonists enrich their respective others' family models with elements of their criticized own. Julie adds to the traditional female solidarity in the Arab family her western sense of self-determination. Abdu on the other hand, who is willing to waive family privileges and planning to leave his family, nevertheless retains the vision of fetching his mother as soon as he will have 'made it' in 'the garden west'.

The novel's very beginning depicts a situation of sexual discrimination that may be typical in the so called civilized countries: a woman causing a traffic jam when her car breaks down. Her gesture of helplessness is answered by horn-blowing from the surrounding men. "Clustered of predators round a kill", those are the first words of the novel. When Julie, the victim, is finally helped to get her vehicle off the road, it is by a couple of black men out of purely economic reasons "for a hand out!"(6). It reflects how race, class and gender are actually intertwined. That's completely reserved in the love affair between Julie and Abdu and very surprising as it contradicts the stereotyped expectations of an intercultural relationship with Arabic-Islamic man. It's Julie who 'picks up' Abdu, invites him for a coffee in the El-

Ay Café and initiates their sexual contact. Actually, this has to do with their different economic and social positions, but traditional gender roles are clearly questioned in this relationship.

Julie is as conscious of her privileged status as she is careful not to appear patronizing towards her partner, and Abdu is also unwilling to risk giving up his self-esteem. Each adapts to, not dominates the other. This motivation for this mutual tolerance may be not only noble on both sides, but also one of Gordimer's ironic twists. Julie Partially uses Abdu for the gratification of her exoticism and the self-confirmation of her anti- bourgeois liberalism, while Abdu clearly hopes to take advantage of her social contacts and money.

Things again change when after 100 pages when Julie and Abdu set out on their journey Eastward. The more the couple comes under the influence of the Arabic- Islamic world, the more they adapt to that world view. Ibrahim seems to be much more willing to accept these new gender-relations, but Julie- out of respect for the foreign culture- is also prepared to comply with his and his family's wishes in this respect. She consents to marriage (107) and adapts her dress to Eastern standards (115). But again power relations are not completely reserved, and Abdu for example resists his family's expectation that Julie should wear a scarf (123). Actually, Julie voluntarily covers her face to protect herself (163) or during her journey into the desert (207).

So, while the changing cultural framework clearly makes for a shift in gender relations between Julie and Abdu, power structures are far from being definite in either context. In Ibrahim's family it is less the father than the all-pervading "presence" (121) of the mother that resides over the symbolic order. Besides, the segregation of men and women in this culture creates a space of female solidarity and agency, that in Gordimer's country seems to be less limited than is usually assumed for Islamic cultures in general.

Thus, Eastern and western gender patterns get interwoven in both the novel's contrasting settings. The gender of the liberal South Africa as well as those in the unnamed Arabic-Islamic country cannot be easily pinned down and opposed. As the relationship between Julie and Abdu shows, they are continually modified through negotiation.

The distinction between East and West is a binary opposition that has fundamentally shaped our cultural discourses particularly since the 18th Century. As Edward Saeed said that "the orient as an arbitrary construct of Western culture, invented as a sweepingly wholesale and basically negative, though fascinating", 12 which serves to give the concept of the West a firmly grounded positive definition. In other words, to confirm the Western image as characterized by rationality, progress, honesty and self-control while the stereotype of the East as irrational decadence, violence and corruption. In terms of race, class and gender the west is depicted as white dominant and masculine, the East as black, submissive and feminine. And the Arabian Country which provides the setting for almost 160 pages of the novel, is clearly described as the "New South Africa's cultural other". It seems unavoidable that Gordimer in the depiction of that setting falls prey to at least some of the stereotyping that Saeed Said (whom she counts 'among the truly important intellectuals of our Century) 15 criticized more than two decades ago.

The fact that the foreign country's name remains unspecified adds to that danger of stereotyping implying that all Arabic-Islamic countries and cultures are somehow alike! Thus 'in a country like this' (109) Julie at the airport finds all the picturesque images of the Orient that one would expect her to find: "the old women squatting, wide, kneed, skirts occupied by the to-and-fro of children, the black-veiled women gazing, jostling the mouths masticating food, the big bellies of men pregnant with age under white tunics, the tangling patterns of human speech, laughter, exasperation, argument..." (109).

Similar descriptions follow when she visits the local market (126) or when "for the first time in her life two old men actually sharing a water-pipe" (128). This quote shows an ironic awareness of her stereotyping and typifying Arabic-Islamic culture in her attempt to create a cultural other in contrast to the liberal and permissive "New South Africa", the interesting thing about her novel again is the way in which this other is conceived of by the two protagonists. While Abdu sees in his own Arabic Islamic culture little more than the prison he desperately wants to escape from, Julie increasingly finds in it, what she obviously had been missing in the liberal "New South Africa", values such as commitment, solidarity, family and spirituality. One of the central themes of Gordimer's the Pickup is identity. Both protagonists' identities are problematic, either doubtful or doubted, either by themselves or by others.

Abdu's own attitude towards the question of identity is a different one altogether. Like love, identity for him is a sort of luxury only the privileged can afford. Unwilling to accept the role that his family and tradition ascribe to him, he makes himself a nobody in his own culture and he stays so in those Western states that paradoxically agree with him in the rejection of his oriental self. But if they are not willing to take and value him for what he is, neither are they willing to grant him the possibility to become what he would like to be.

Julie defines herself in opposition to the culture of her past. She finds her own identity through radical difference from the bourgeois world of her parents, making herself a 'home' instead in the social network of liberal friends at the El-Ay café. Or so she thinks. The symbols of her father's Rover and the expensive suitcase both indicate that her break with the luxury of her past may actually be only another sort of luxury she can afford. Even when she 'picks up' Abdu, one almost suspects her to do so (at least in part) in order to prove (at least to herself) how far she is away from her parents' bourgeois life. Abdu is the significant Other of the world she comes from and despises, and so she makes use of his difference to define herself. "It is she who is looking for herself reflected in those eyes" (129).

But once Julie has picked up the other, it cannot be contained in its purely contrastive function. As Abdu turns out to sympathize with many of the values of her parents, Julie is increasingly forced to give up her neat distinction between 'Us' (The Table) and 'them' (the parents). The more she loses her sense of clear cut differences, the more she is ready to become really "open to encounters" (10), as the liberal slogan at "The Table" goes. And with her radical decision to accompany Abdu to his hometown she again faces the Other in order to find out about herself. Under the eyes of the locals at the airport she still sees herself "as a stranger to herself as she was to them: she was what they saw" (117). But through her contacts with the oriental women she positions herself more and more within their culture. At the same time, she alienates herself from Abdu, who tries to define himself precisely through his distance to that culture. But even this is not the final step in her development. (still her luxury suitcase figures prominent as a permanent reminder that her new adventure might be bound to remain just an episode.'218')

"The Table" for Julie represents a kind of collective mirror image of herself, a communal object petit which the subject wrongly takes for him/herself during the mirror stage. The Oriental culture for Julie can be seen to represent the realm of the symbolic. She learns Arabic, reads the Quran and submits to the laws of this culture. Within the symbolic register, according to Lacan, the subject defines his identity not through identification with the imaginary other of his mirror image, but by entering the discourse of what he calls *le grand Autre*, the big other, that is, the ordered world of laws and symbols.

Julie's final step towards her true identity, however, cannot be described in terms of either the imaginary or the symbolic alone. It is triggered by her encounters with the desert, the ultimate sublime, the end of time and space, and maybe death. In her regular forays to the end of the road she gradually creates there what could be called 'a room of her own' at the border of the civilized world. In approaching this realm, that is comparable with Lacan's register of the real, she finally seems to find meaning in her life. This meaning has its root in the unconscious (Lacan "the discourse of the other"²¹) and it manifests itself in a dream – a dream in green (173). Although Julie initially does not understand this vision (and Abdu misinterprets it completely), it suddenly gains meaning when she finally gets a chance to take a drive into the desert. Fascinated by the sight of the a rice plantation in the middle of the desert, she translates her dream accordingly and decides to cultivate the land. In this utopian image of rice in the desert the opposing symbols of water and sand – long prepared for in the novel and associated with other opposites such as life and death, time and eternity – it's Julie's quest for her 'true' identity.

When at the end of the novel Abdu finally obtains his permit for the USA, Julie decides to stay. But whether any of them really finds his or her 'true' identity in the respective realms of the other remains ultimately open – not to say questionable. Abdu's prospects in the states seem anything but promising and Julie's dream of a rice plantation in the desert is based on a camouflage enterprise for an arms-smuggling. Gordimer would not be herself if her utopias did not show ironic twists (23).

Finally, we find that the Pickup is an odd love story as one feels that the characters are looking for something other than the romantic love they appear to be building their world around. Julie, often has the sense that he is not looking at her when his regard is on her; it is she who is looking for herself reflected

in those eyes". By shifting person, without any indication that this is what is happening, the narrator allows us into each others' thought process, and their continual misunderstandings of one another, and of themselves. Julie's self-image "the image of herself she believes to be her true self", is built on her 'liberal' views. Ibrahim considers her spoiled and playing at adventure with him.

He expects her to walk away from him at any moment, to pack her elegant suitcase and fly home to the LA Café' and her equally privileged friends. One could imagine that Julie is using Ibrahim, her 'oriental prince' to validate her liberty, and justify her rejection of her parents.

We can also see how Ibrahim attempts to use Julie's influential parents to obtain a visa. His admiration of her father and his friends surprises Julie, as her affection and adaptability surprises Ibrahim. Neither really understands the desperation the other feels to escape his past, nor do they understand what exactly the other character wants or needs. Neither knows how the other perceives him/her, but the reader is able to hear Ibrahim's thoughts on Julie's nativity: " she is a child, they are all children, and what she wants to do now is not something for her, the living she's totally innocent of, hasn't any real idea of, innocence is ignorance, with them."

He feels her devotion and feels the obligation that it imposes upon him, and his desire for the things she has, hunger and obligation, and his desire for the things she has, and his strangeness is attractive to her. They certainly feel lust and tenderness towards one another at times, but love is something else. It isn't Ibrahim that Julie was searching for, as her final, surprise decision indicates. It's this kind of spirituality which she gains from the desert "Nirvana – this place where we are, what there is here. A kind of proof. "Ibrahim cannot understand her, because he is slouching towards America, towards the kind of life she has left. She cannot understand him, because his obsession with the West makes no sense to her, as she reaches her Eastern conclusion.

Finally, this novel includes a hidden sense of competition between Islamic and Western civilization. It derives its subject matter both from the geopolitical tensions of the present and from the politicized cultural legacies of the past. For European Christians developing a sense of collective self-consciousness amidst tumultuous internal rivalries, the idea of an Islamic "other" provided a basis for articulating a shared identity, a set of common values and, at times, a common political program. The notion of a struggle between "Islamic Civilization " and "The West" is a recent transmutation of a much older theme; the terms of reference for Western Christian cultures have been redefined by secularization of the public sphere.

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