NADINE GORDIMER AND THE ARAB WORLD

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Abstract: *The present paper is a study on several novels written by Nadine Gordimer, a writer committed to examining what Apartheid, this extreme form of governing based on the principles of 'divide and rule' and 'separate development', did to people. The novels* None to Accompany Me *(1994),* The House Gun *(1998) and* The Pickup *(2001) belong to what Gordimer calls the 'post-Apartheid literature of transition'. The first two novels concentrate on violence and its consequences in the new South Africa, whereas* The Pickup *illustrates Gordimer's change of focus from the African to the Arabian world introducing new themes and issues (such as displacement, economic exile, and alienation) along with the ones used in her previous works (migration, freedom, identity, 'the Self and the Other' theme).*

Keywords*: Apartheid, displacement, identity, migration.*

Having grown up in the post-colonial South Africa and having lived through the various stages of its Apartheid regime, Nadine Gordimer has examined what Apartheid, this extreme form of governing based on the principles of 'divide and rule' and 'separate development', did to people. After the abolition of Apartheid laws, her protest was directed towards the attacks of both white and black military groups on civil population, towards the violence that has situated South African cities on top of the list of towns having the highest crime rate in the world. The novels *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998) and *The Pickup* (2001) belong to what Gordimer calls the 'post-Apartheid literature of transition'. The first two novels concentrate on violence and its consequences in the new South Africa, whereas *The Pickup* illustrates Gordimer's change of focus from the African to the Arabian world introducing new themes and issues (such as displacement, economic exile, and alienation) along with the ones used in her previous works (migration, freedom, identity, 'the Self and the Other' theme).

In this respect, I shall look at the differences and similarities between the situations in the two worlds as presented by Gordimer, the impact that white people have on the two societies and the influence of these societies on the characters in *The Pickup*. In her Apartheid novels, the South African writer explores the world of the Other (the best example is *July's People* and her short stories, where she examines the dependence of white people on their African servants, and Jewish or Indian shopkeepers). Moreover, this exploration has been taken further in her post-Apartheid writings, as she completely enters and observes in minute detail this Other world in order to understand it and have it appreciated by her readers.

Many analysts of Gordimer's work have noticed her concern with the new South African social and political context correlated with the new world order imposed by the concept of globalization. Ileana Dimitriu (2006:159-160) has noted Gordimer's engagement in the 1990s with the concept of 'civil imaginary'. The critic has also underlined Gordimer's new preoccupation with private life "as not being inextricably linked to the public domain", which "can be seen in retrospect, to signal a kind of liberation from the burden of excessive social responsibility within large historical

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events". The South African writer resisted the temptation "to turn, or return, to the imaginative and literary circles of the northern hemisphere". In turn, J. M. Coetzee (2007:255) has remarked that Gordimer "has been exercised by the question of her own place, present and future, in history" since the beginning of her career.

However, in my opinion, her post-Apartheid novels, short stories and essays, maintain Gordimer's position of a white citizen and woman writer fighting for human rights, in general, not only for Black people's rights. It is not a feeling of relief that can be detected when reading her novels, a relief that society has defeated Apartheid rule (the abolition of Apartheid does not erase her responsibility to confront social and racial issues from her work) and that history has made an important step beyond oppression of non-white South African people. It is rather an impression that the new South Africa has more social than political issues to solve, more races and ethnicities to tolerate and integrate in this new post-Apartheid, postcolonial, multicultural and multiracial era. The new world order has imposed a new approach to social issues and Gordimer has complied with the new rules, especially because they were amended as she has predicted they would be:

> The nurture of our writers, our literature, is a priority which should not create for us a closed-shop African 'world literature', a cultural exclusivity in place of the exclusion, even post-colonial, that has kept us in an ante-room of self-styled 'world literatures'. (Gordimer 2000:28)

The point of departure for *The Pickup* is the new South Africa and its usual problems of race, class, bureaucracy and the connection between the private and the political life. These problems are taken from a local to a global level, with the setting changing from liberal post-Apartheid Johannesburg to an Arab country which she does not name: any country having a desert and a Muslim people could represent the setting of her novel. Another theme is that of interracial love related to the 'Self and Other' theme (on both a cultural and an individual level) and extends from the racial opposition Black versus White used by Gordimer in all her novels, to the cultural one.

The immigrant is situated at the center of the novel and the issues of nomadism and relocation are explored. People from less developed countries take advantage of South Africa's regeneration and consider it a habitat that offers better working conditions and decent residence. For the new generation of South Africans, the reconstruction of their country implies distancing themselves from the past and their families, whether they live in the ghettoes or in the white Suburbs.

The Pickup 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.

The novel reminds of an older short story, "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight", from the 1991 collection, *Jump*. In the story, a young South African woman falls in love with a man from an unnamed Islamic country, gets pregnant, and leaves South Africa to meet his family. The man is one of those foreigners who are always together but look alone, with a "strange expression of a caged animal, far from wherever it belonged"

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(2003b:720). The woman receives a toy as gift from her husband -- a toy containing a bomb that destroys the plane. The bomb is used to make a statement "in some complication of vengeance for holy wars, land annexation, invasions, imprisonments, cross-border raids, territorial disputes, bombings, sinkings, kidnappings no one outside the initiated could understand". And the innocent woman "had taken them all, taken the baby inside her; down, along with her happiness" (88).

The novel starts with what seems to be a romance at first glance. The similarity with the short story ends at this point, as Gordimer prefers not to present the violent side of the Arab world but to insist on a peaceful multicultural and multiracial 'global village'. Julie Summers meets Abdu, falls in love with him and decides to follow him back to his country when his work permit expires. If the love story is simple, the presentation of the two countries is elaborate; Gordimer characterizes them using her characters' thoughts and feelings and the events that take place in the characters' lives either as citizens or as immigrants. Both Julie and Abdu change identities from resident to emigrant and immigrant (Julie goes from South Africa to the Arabian country, Abdu from the Arabian country to South Africa, then back to his homeland and then, away from it, to America).

Julie meets Abdu on the streets of Johannesburg, when her car breaks down, causing a traffic jam. The mechanic who offers to help her decides that it is impossible to repair it and that the best solution would be to buy a new one. The search for the new vehicle brings them together on several occasions, enabling her to learn that he has a degree in Economics in his unnamed country of origin. His stay in South Africa is illegal, as his work permit has expired and it is not likely that he could obtain a renewal. They become lovers and Abdu is introduced to Julie's friends at the EL-AY café – also known as the Table, because their favourite pastime is to sit around a table, have some drinks and chat. When, Abdu receives the deportation order, Julie reconnects with her wealthy family in order to procure some money and a work permit. Unfortunately, she does not succeed in prolonging his stay and makes her final decision to accompany him back to his family in his natal village. Motivated by his mother and her position in the Arab community, Abdu decides he must marry Julie before leaving South Africa. As for Julie, she is unaware of the responsibilities of a wife and daughter-in-law in a Muslim family, but, at the same time, she is enthusiastic about visiting an exotic country.

During his stay in South Africa, Abdu is hiding from authorities for fear he may get deported. The moment when the officials force him to leave the country, he starts hunting for the next exit, for a possibility to live away from the Arab community. He seems more concerned with his future as an emigrant than with his wife and his family. The time spent in his village is divided between either standing in a queue at the Australian embassy or applying for entry to Canada or the United States of America. In the meantime, Julie falls in love not only with her husband but also with the world her husband is so keen to leave behind; she also struggles to integrate and find her place in the middle of a society she knew nothing about before meeting her husband. Unfortunately, Abdu is unable to understand why Julie chooses that place to live when she is presented with so many other options that she could take. The very place he would like to escape is her only choice for resettling.

Gordimer is ironic about her protagonist's cultural and material South African heritage and the choices and advantages that it confers. Julie's physical journey is also an inner journey towards self-discovery. She seems to find her peace in the desert itself, and experiences a kind of relief from her guilt originating in her material privilege (although the writer is ironic about Julie's redemption process).

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The fact that Gordimer has been interested in power shifts that occur when people become displaced from their patterned life is noticeable in all her novels, without exception. Thus, *The Pickup* presents a world of "unfixed identities" (Dimitriu Sora 2006:167), an asymmetrical world of "skewed power relations" (169) in a post-Apartheid South Africa that has to redefine its identity in order to enter the 'global village'. The intercultural marriage is Gordimer's 'silver lining' for the postcolonial world, just as interracial marriages were for the colonial period. Barbara Temple-Thurston (1999:116) observed that "[T]he multitude and flux of cultures or subcultures based on race, ethnicity, class or gender in South Africa – each with their own discourse that may or may not challenge the dominant discourse – result in a complex and confusing society with no cultural unanimity". *The Pickup* is the novel that exemplifies the importance of cultural diversity for troubled societies, such as the South African and Arabian communities.

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