

**Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup*  
(London: Bloomsbury, 2001): 270pp**

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Nadine Gordimer's most recent novel, *The Pickup*, has already picked up a major literary award – the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book from Africa – in addition to having been included on the final 24 Booker Prize 'longlist' for 2001 (awarded to Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*). It is a novel that has its place in what Gordimer has called a post-apartheid 'literature of transition', taking as its subject-matter the issues of displacement, economic exile and migration. Having been cut off from the rest of the world and, particularly, from the rest of Africa for so long under apartheid, the new South Africa opened its borders to a wide range of peoples, many of them settling as 'illegal immigrants' in the big cities like Johannesburg. This has given rise to reactions of xenophobia and resentment among local people, despite the fact that, as Gordimer has pointed out, 'apart from South African Africans themselves ... we are all immigrants here'. Thus the issue of displacement is both an age-old and recent one that lies at the heart of a South African sense of belonging.

The two main characters in the novel, Julie Summers, who comes from a well-off white family, and 'Abdu' (the false name taken by Ibrahim Ibn Musa), an illegal immigrant in Johannesburg from 'some unnamed Saudi Arabian country', ultimately reverse roles. In Johannesburg, Julie is the one with contacts, money and power, no matter how strenuously she may try to evade them. But when Abdu's application for permission to stay on in South Africa is refused (despite the best efforts of Julie's family connections) and Julie decides that they will both return to his homeland, it is she who has to adapt and learn how to be a migrant in an Islamic Arab society. Paradoxically, this experience is an empowering one for Julie: she finds a 'place' for herself that she has never experienced in her own place, Johannesburg, where she led an emotionally sterile and unproductive existence. In Ibrahim's desert village, she discovers aspects of herself as teacher, as 'sister' and as a member of Ibrahim's extended family, that she was unaware of previously in her cold, middle-class blended

family from 'The Suburbs'. The desert that adjoins the village becomes a place of spiritual growth for Julie: deprived of the material privileges to which she has been accustomed, she finds a spiritual element within herself that is far more fulfilling.

Gordimer is fascinated by the kinds of power shifts that occur when people become displaced from their comfort zones (a theme she has, of course, already minutely explored in *July's People*) and have to adapt to new ways of thinking and being. Much of this adaptation occurs through language – what initially seems to be a barrier to communication can become a means for productive cross-cultural exchange. Warned by both Ibrahim that his country is 'not for you' and her father who cautions Julie that it is a place where women are 'treated like slaves', Julie is nonetheless determined to expand her limited horizons and experience a culture of which she knows nothing. Ibrahim remains desperate to escape from his village to the wider world – trying to get to Australia, Canada and the United States. He is unable to understand how or why Julie, who has so many choices about where to live, would choose the very place from which he is trying to escape. And one is always aware that Julie still has the power to choose to leave whenever she wants to, while Ibrahim does not. The idea of the world as a global village is still an extremely one-sided one: only those from privileged countries are really free to 'pick up' other cultures and to drop them, too, when they wish to – 'the freedom of the world was hers'.<sup>i</sup> Maybe this is another layer in the meaning of the title.

There is some evidence in the novel of the kind of fetishistic Orientalism that has Julie see Ibrahim as an 'oriental prince' while her Johannesburg friends describe him less romantically as a 'grease-monkey' who works as a mechanic in the local garage. Their mutual 'picking-up' raises a number of questions: is he simply using her as a ticket to stay in South Africa; is she using him as an exotic other to create some excitement in her somewhat mundane existence? How this mutual exploitation leads to the more profound loving relationship we are expected to believe has evolved during the course of the novel is never fully articulated. There is always a sense of impermanence in the relationship, a fragility, that seems to me to originate in this initial sense that each is imposing an identity on the other for their own selfish purposes. However, the frequent shifts in perspective and the awareness within the narration of this spectrum of attitudes anticipates these kinds of criticisms. This is especially focussed in Julie's final decision to refuse to emigrate with Ibrahim to America, a decision that she believes is brought on by the desert itself. Ibrahim's reaction to this decision pre-empted that of the reader – 'for him ... her decision was a typical piece of sheltered middleclass Western romanticism. Like picking up a grease-monkey.'<sup>ii</sup> But, at the same time, he recognises within her the same spirit that moves him to try to escape from the place he belongs. She is attempting to escape her inherited privilege, both in South Africa where her father belongs, and in America, where her mother lives the privileged Californian lifestyle. He, of course, on the other hand, is attempting to escape the opposite of privilege, the poverty, the hopelessness, the sense of entrapment. In the end, she chooses the solidarity of his family's women, those whom Ibrahim suspects she has taught not just English but also communicated 'her rich girl's Café ideas of female independence'.<sup>iii</sup> Ultimately, Julie is able to form an unspoken alliance with Ibrahim's steely mother who understands that Julie is the one who will 'bring him home at last'.<sup>iv</sup>

Julie's somewhat romanticised response to the desert as 'eternity', as a space with 'no measure of space ... no demarcation from land to air'<sup>v</sup> is contrasted with Ibrahim's description of the village as 'this dusty hell of my place'.<sup>vi</sup> Julie's ability to ask for money from her uncle shields her, and Ibrahim's family, from the desperate

poverty around them and raises the question of whether she would really have been so keen to stay and commune with the desert if she had had to live ‘authentically’ without the benefit of her privilege.

There has often been a coldness and detachment in Gordimer’s novels that has made the reading process seem somewhat formulaic. This novel, though, like its predecessor, *The House Gun*, (from which, incidentally, the black attorney, Hamilton Motsamai, makes an appearance again in this novel), has a spareness of prose and a more intimate sense of character that makes it one of Gordimer’s ‘mature’ works. Perhaps a better word is ‘mellow’. There is a sense here of an understanding and a tolerance of her characters that escapes her previously relentless irony, an even-handedness that acknowledges the tenuousness of all decisions and choices. It is fitting, then, that the novel ends ambiguously, with the questions unanswered, and with Julie facing a perverse kind of freedom. Will Julie stay in the desert village and, if so, what sort of life will it be for her? Will Ibrahim come back? Will he go to America or change his mind at the last moment? Like the quality of muteness that Julie finds in the desert itself, these final questions raised in the mind of the reader are met with silence.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup>Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) 115.

<sup>ii</sup>Gordimer 262.

<sup>iii</sup>Gordimer 256.

<sup>iv</sup>Gordimer 259.

<sup>v</sup>Gordimer 172.

<sup>vi</sup>Gordimer 173.