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# Turning the Tables in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pick Up*\*

Hélène GODDERIS-TOUDIC\*\*

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans son treizième roman *The Pick Up* (2001) Nadine Gordimer aborde les questions portant sur l'identité et l'insertion d'un individu dans une société post-coloniale: l'intégration, l'acculturation et le multiculturalisme. Cependant elle apporte des réponses nouvelles par l'intermédiaire de la protagoniste chez qui l'héritage colonial et la culture autochtone se fondent en une synthèse harmonieuse, illustrant là le passage d'une "déconstruction" à une reconstruction d'identité.

**Key Words:** deconstruction – identity – belonging – relocation – unhomeliness

Nadine Gordimer, who won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2002, published *The Pick Up*, her thirteenth novel in 2001. It is first set in South Africa, the "rainbow country," and takes place in Johannesburg, where a mixture of people from all sorts of cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds inter-relate happily. The novel is centered on the quest of Abdu, an illegal immigrant working in a garage, who is desperately trying to find a country where he could settle and work. When Julie meets him, she intends to integrate him into her community, but the opposite will happen.

Abdu's quest gives the novel a classic structure with first a harmonious situation which will be disrupted by Abdu's deportation-threat. In the second part of the novel his forced return to his home country with Julie as his wife will reverse the situation and create a new equilibrium: Julie goes through a spiritual re-birth in his Arab village and finally refuses to return to modern urban life.

*The Pick up* describes a converging movement at first when two characters coming from opposed societies become a couple, and then a diverging movement when they grow apart, discovering the extent of their differences.

The evolution of the two protagonists illustrates various ways of dealing with the traditional questions of identity and belonging in a post-colonial world. Living in a multicultural society as heterogeneous as South Africa seems to endow Julie with the capacity of adapting to a new environment and therefore of re-defining her identity, while Abdu's situation leaves him little choice.

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\* Nadine Gordimer, *The Pick Up* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

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This paper will try to show that *The Pick Up* can be read as an illustration of "deconstruction"<sup>1</sup> at the level of the individual, in the sense that Julie distances herself from European values, which will transform her vision of life. Furthermore a universal dimension is reached by reading it in the light of Tzvetan Todorov's philosophical essay *Nous et les autres*,<sup>2</sup> which is particularly relevant to the topoi of *The Pick Up*, emphasizing the necessity for individuals to be confronted to other societies to be able to find a sense of identity.

### A Shifting Colonizer / Colonized Relation

At first the relationship between Abdu and Julie could be analysed as a modern version of a colonizer/colonized relation. The illegal immigrant qualifies as the colonized on two counts: he comes from a formerly colonized country and he is obviously a sort of underdog in South-African society working as a mechanic despite his academic education and living in a storeroom. His reification is emphasized by Julie's recurrent description of her lover as "the man who came to her one day from under the belly of a car" (Gordimer 91), or "the grease-monkey," a derogatory term reflecting other people's views, not hers. As to Julie her family-history qualifies her for the status of descendant of colonizer.

However a chiasmatic structure in the evolution of the relationship gradually emerges. Successive ironical comments of the narrator suggest the ambiguity of Abdu's motives; this is definitely confirmed when the narrative voice no longer focuses on Julie's actions and thoughts; the shifting focalisation revealing her friends' perception of the relationship acts as an eye-opener for the reader; "Julie's find" or "Julie's pick up" as they call Abdu is clearly using her: "He's not a bad guy, he just needed a meal ticket. A bed" (92) By then the reader is aware that Abdu also needed an extension for his work-permit as he has just received an official order to leave the country. The definite article in the title *The Pick Up* which initially seemed to refer to Abdu takes on a new meaning, reversing the parts and underlining Abdu's strategy of exploiting Julie's connections.

This reversal of situation is highlighted by two narratological devices: one is the deceleration of time, the other is the increasing participation of Abdu in dialogues. Until chapter nine there is no mention of duration, but time slows down dramatically from the moment when Abdu receives the official deadline; the description of the fourteen remaining days is spread over fifty pages, underlining all the discussions and actions undertaken to avoid his deportation.

The narrative technique based first on a heterodiegetic narration, interspersed with few dialogues, imparts the evolution of their relationship. Sex is described as a substitute for the words he doesn't know. His minimal expression emphasizes his isolation among her friends at their local café referred to as "The Table," an isolation reinforced by his different cultural background: he rarely drinks, doesn't display

<sup>1</sup> Derek Attridge, "Deconstruction Today." (*Etudes Anglaises* 58-1, 2005) 42-52.

In this article D. Attridge analyses the impact of Derrida on post-colonial studies and quotes Robert Young's *White Mythologies*: "deconstruction involves the decentralisation and decolonisation of European thought" op. cit., 46.

<sup>2</sup> Zvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres*. (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

emotions. Their first misunderstanding is conveyed by an omniscient narrator when Abdu is hurt by her reluctance to introduce him to her two sets of parents, each having remarried. The focalization of Julie from within (Rimmon-kenan 80) is abruptly interrupted by the narratorial comment, underlining their failure to communicate: "She's ashamed of her parents; he thinks she is ashamed of him. Neither knows either, about the other." (38)

Later on as Abdu's English improves, dialogues take a growing part in the narrative; however they emphasize differences, revealing aspects of his personality that she dislikes. Focalization imparts her disappointment when she realizes that he admires her father and his friends, all successful businessmen when he eventually meets him in his posh suburb. She, on the opposite, hates her social class and lives in a modest backyard cottage "adapted from servants' quarters." (8) But she is so wrapped up in her love that she remains unaware of being used as a means to safeguard his future. The discovery of his conformism and his materialism is shown to affect her attraction to Abdu: "Interesting people there. They make a success. Those were the words he was looking for round the room. The wonderful desire drained from her instantly." (51) His remark, inserted in the text without quotation-marks and followed without transition by Julie's thoughts, breaks the spell and acts as a revealer of their divergences. This scene will prove to bear a cataphoric value and is one of the stepping stones provided by the narrator to prepare the reader for the end of the story. On another occasion differences appear again when they are out in the veld, and she marvels at the silence. "To him this was not silence, this lullaby of distant traffic she took for it! Silence is desolation; the desert." (34) The last sentence is Abdu's; he shuns the desert, while she will feel a mystical attraction to it when she discovers it, which will contribute to reversing their roles: she will conquer his background turning him into the dispossessed.

The opposition resulting from their different cultural backgrounds is compensated for by a number of similarities, which account for the convergence of their lives. Both are ready for new experiences. There is little description of Julie at the beginning of the novel, but her friendly conversation with a mechanic in a garage is explained by her general attitude in life: "To be open to encounters- that was what she and her friends believed, anyway, as part of making the worth of their lives." (10) Julie and Abdu reject their family-circle and have loose ties with their fathers, while an uncle acts as a providential father-figure. But the lack of communication, particularly when they live in his village, will prevent them from acknowledging their mutual longing for a different life and will separate them. The day before they are to emigrate to the United States thanks to the help of her mother, he discovers that she wants to settle in his home, exchanging families and backgrounds in a dramatic turning of the tables. But only the reader is given to perceive Abdu's thoughts through a focalisation from within: "Confusion is ringing in his ears. But what is the confusion? No confusion; I should know that. Like me, like me, she won't go back where she belongs. She looks for somewhere else." (263)

### A Sense of Belonging

Julie's final decision proves her adaptation to a totally different culture and raises two sociological questions: what factors make someone feel a foreigner? What does belonging in a country mean?

Defining what a foreigner is in a multicultural society such as South-Africa is shown as complex. Abdu's thoughts reveal that he is aware of the special status of white South-Africans; remembering the day he first met her, he thinks: "I don't think I really looked at her. That day. Well: European—but they don't call themselves that, they are not in Europe—they belong here. So—white. (94) The suggestion that she, or whites in general, may be considered as foreigners by an outsider visiting South Africa has been expressed earlier in the novel. In the same passage the narrative voice suggests that "relocation" another word for "immigration" may be motivated by other reasons than ambition, privilege or fear. It may be the wish "to discover and take over possession of oneself." (48) In retrospect this remark bears a cataphoric value, preparing the reader for Julie's change of identity resulting from her new environment.

On several occasions the novel questions what belonging in a country means. Both Julie and Abdu exemplify the lack of feeling of belonging that results from various factors in a post colonial world; in Abdu's case it is due to political history; as he explains to Julie's friends: "I can't say that—'my country'—because somebody else made a line and said that is it. In my father's time they gave it to the rich who run it for themselves—So whose country I should say, it's mine—" (15) As to Julie she lives in a country where cultural and linguistic specifications are disappearing, blending in an anonymous mixture: "Her familiars are the young who have lost the more grandiose, eloquent traditional African resources in self-expression and have passed on easily [...] only those adapted to general usage, across all local cultures, heard all over coming from those of their generation, all colours and kinds." (77) Not only language is altered by this kind of acculturation but also religious tradition and the division of time. When Julie is physically distanced from South-Africa, she realizes that the new year has gone by in the western world but is still to come in his Arab village; she explains to Abdu-Ibrahim: "Indian shopkeepers closed for what we said was the birthday of God's son and the day we'd decided was a new year beginning—oh I know the cycles of the moon and the changes of season were mixed up in it, but this was the Christian cycle." (160, my emphasis)

Julie is only now becoming aware of the superimposition of European values on other traditions, religions and cultures, the mixture of which may bring about a destabilizing effect and the deconstruction of the post-modern individual. Putting into perspective social patterns and values of her homeland will result in the re-definition of Julie's own identity. Geographical displacement was the necessary condition for this to happen, as it produces the "unhomeliness" described by Homi Bhabha as "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations."<sup>3</sup> (13) As he further explains, "in that displacement, the borders between home and world

<sup>3</sup> Homi K Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006) 13.

become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (13) However in the case of Julie the whole process will be experienced positively.

### **Changing Identity, but taking diverging Ways**

Belonging is a necessary component of the definition of one's identity, be it social, political or ethical. The two protagonists, being deprived of this feeling, are described as individuals in the making; the first part of this novel shows them as disguised people, while the second, beginning with their arrival in his native country, imparts their new identity as a married couple. Spending a year in a new environment will affect Julie and reveal Abdu-Ibrahim's duality.

The evolution of people living abroad has been studied in Todorov's *Nous et les autres*; it applies to French writers through the centuries but ends with a typology that proves relevant to analyse the evolution of both characters. They hide behind appearances and are literally disguised. Julie rejects her bourgeois origin and her privileged background by living in a humble flat, putting on casual clothes, driving an old car and mixing with unconventional people. But the internal focalisation of Abdu shows he is not taken in and considers her as "too indulged and pampered to understand" (Gordimer 95) that she can't come with him to his backward country.

Abdu's dual personality is symbolized by his two names Abdu, the illegal's name and Ibrahim, the real one. The vocabulary used in the narrative underlines the double image with phrases such as "the disguise of his overalls," "the nobody Abdu," (31) "in the persona of the grease-monkey." (60) When Julie sees him elegantly dressed for his appointment with a lawyer, her thoughts convey best Abdu's changing status: "she sees that an illegal has to be some sort of chameleon." (82)

The second part of the novel begins with their new life as a married couple arriving in his home-country. The importance of the new identity is imparted by the place of his real name taking up the whole first line, while a few lines further down she becomes "the" wife; the definite article reminds the reader that this marriage was not a choice but an obligation resulting from circumstances: he could not take a girlfriend home to conventional Muslim parents. From then on their parts are reversed; she used to take him places in South Africa, now he leads her along, explains the local customs and takes all the decisions.

Their new life provides the author with the opportunity to show the stages of the same process at a different time: diverging at first, that is rejecting home values, and then converging: joining in the new social environment; Julie adapts to her new environment while Abdu repeats his rejection of his old one, each one going through the re-definition of their own identity. The absence of the ironical narrative comments that supplied a sort of contrapuntal reading in the first part embodies the new stance of the author/narrator.

The ambiguity of Abdu-Ibrahim's feelings appears in his contradictory attitude resulting from having two widely different cultures. Although he spends his time trying to find a new destination to emigrate, he is happy to mix with his former friends, shares their frustrations and is tempted to join their fight against a traditional

Muslim society; but the will to emigrate is stronger: "the future of this place the world tried to confine him was not his place in that world." (179) In his relations to the women of his family he resorts to male domination, hating himself while doing so and realizing he would never behave like this to his wife: "It is part of what he emigrates from every time he gets away." (257)

If we take up Todorov's typology of the traveller, which is composed of ten different types, Abdu's case is easily found. His attitude regarding adaptation in a foreign country corresponds to the "assimilé" described by Todorov as "celui qui ne fait que le voyage aller simple: l'immigrant [...] il va chez les autres, non pour les rendre semblables à soi, mais pour devenir comme eux (pour participer, par exemple, au rêve américain)" (Todorov 381). This is what Abdu is aiming at. The duality exposed previously results only from his frustration of not achieving the legal and social status he wants in the western world; but if the future comes up to his expectations, he will blend in with the society that will allow him to do so. His determination makes him resort to all possible means as he cynically admits to himself: "even if this girl had failed in the purpose, he must not forget he had counted her as a source of Permanent Residence in her country." (219)

But Julie is a different type of traveller whose evolution Abdu-Ibrahim fails to notice, unlike the reader who has been given a few clues along the narrative. Julie has easily settled in the family-circle despite the language-barrier at first, and she discovers "there was another construction-perception of herself formed in—by—this village that was his home." (197) And a few months later when they finally both have a visa, a focalisation from within reveals Julie's reluctance to leave: "There is something beguiling about submission, for one who has believed she has never submitted. Something temptingly dangerous too: The Suburbs; The Table; a third alternative." (239)

According to Todorov's typology Julie can be considered as what he calls "the philosopher," defined as follows: "Il y aurait deux facettes du voyage philosophique: humilité et orgueil et deux mouvements: les leçons à prendre et les leçons à donner. Observer les différences: c'est un travail d'apprentissage, de reconnaissance de la diversité humaine [...] le but est de se connaître soi-même." (Todorov 385)

These topoi resonate in the description of Julie's evolution, which may read as an exemplification of this typology. Living in a small village in the middle of the desert makes her distantiate herself from western values. Thinking back on her former life-style, she considers it with derision, comparing her cellphone to "the tag on the leg of a homing pigeon" (Gordimer 170) and making her own Abdu's uncle's rhetorical question: "What else is really worth having out there in the world of false gods?" (205)

Her evolution goes deeper than a mere rejection of materialism, which had partly begun in South Africa; it also involves her spirituality; discovering the desert has an overwhelming effect on her. The extent of her transformation goes as far as to read the Koran—although she has never shown any religious interest before—and to comply with the fasting rules of Ramadan despite Abdu's protests.

All these changes can be considered as "the lessons to learn" to take up Todorov's phrase; but there is also an interaction between the two worlds; it is

illustrated by Julie's activities and particularly by her acquisition of language. She learns Arabic with Abdu's sister but teaches her English and organizes lessons for the women in the village, thereby discovering a purpose in life she had never felt when working in public relations. The transformation does not apply to Julie only, but also to the female community which is influenced by "her ideas of female independence." (256) As to Abdu, he leaves the country distressed, discovering to his own amazement that he is capable of love.

The novel ends with an ironical twist: their sharing the same life in his home country, instead of bringing them closer, induces them to take diverging ways; but Julie is enriched by her new cultural experience while Abdu appears as the loser.

The story has come full circle and in a way illustrates the movement of a pendulum, giving first the advantage to Julie who seemed to have "picked up" Abdu, then to Abdu exploiting her connections. Finally the pendulum swings back to Julie's side when she appropriates his environment and family-ties as a way to compensate for her homelessness in South Africa, letting him fend for himself in "her" western world.

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