Nadine Gordimer’s The Pickup
Immigration/Emigration in Today’s World

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Nadine Gordimer’s The Pickup is compared to a “bittersweet Romeo and Juliet for our cynical age”\(^1\) because of both the love story between the two protagonists, Abdu and Julie, and the issues raised: i.e. migrations and the difficulty of sharing places. Hence my interest in looking at Gordimer’s fiction through Edward Said’s critical work Orientalism,\(^2\) which discusses these very questions. The justifications for migration and the consequences of the perceptions people have of each other, race, and class relations, the construction and deconstruction of expectations, will be central themes of this essay. I will discuss these issues by examining the narrative techniques used by Gordimer to bring out the complexities of human behaviour. I will show how, through such a powerful story, the novelist addresses the difficult question of the quest for happiness in this harsh ‘global village’.

By narrating a beautiful human relationship between Abdu and Julie, the novelist counterbalances the difficulties imposed by external forces as in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. The beginning of The Pickup suggests a film scenario: Julie’s car breaks down in Johannesburg’s city centre, not far from a garage where Abdu works as a motor mechanic. The by-accident meeting triggers a mutual attraction which would have been commonplace if the mechanic were South African. But Abdu is an illegal immigrant, an Arab, probably from Mauritania, seeking a new life in Nelson Mandela’s ‘rainbow

\(^1\) In The Times, cover of the novel The Pickup (London: Bloomsbury, 2002). Nadine Gordimer won the Nobel prize in 1991. Page references to The Pickup are in the main text.

country’. As the story develops, questions such as integration and/or exclusion hover in the background, as a subtext, through a sensual narrative expressing the need for human beings to migrate, to look for an elsewhere in order to discover other horizons. Such an urge is sociologically significant; "migration events relate to an individual’s whole life – both past experiences and projected future expectations - and tend to have a wide variety of causes – some highly prominent and others more hidden but [...] essential.” Gordimer’s moving characters become paradigms for such an essentiality insofar as their story is anchored in a global political reality, which is the difficulty nowadays for people from ex-colonies to cross frontiers and migrate to Western countries. The character of Abdu is a case in point, as his experiences with entry visas show the pain and the humiliation he goes through. The fear of the ‘Other’, the apprehension of being swamped by immigrants, added to the dread of international terrorism, labels Abdu’s country “as a place of origin from which immigrants were undesirable” (140). The narrator, through external focalization, explains in a didactic way the reasons behind Abdu’s wish to emigrate, giving him an astoundingly modern role, as he is constantly attempting to flee his country, desiring a new life in the First World. Such hopes followed by such frustrations become psychologically disastrous. The depiction is powerful, as it is from the inside, from Abdu’s point of view.

A tragic character, Abdu is always in search of an impossible dream. His life in South Africa is that of a pariah who works like a slave, comparable to such other tragic destinies of illegal immigrants as the “prostitutes from Congo and Senegal” (6). The description of his despair through silences conveys a character at war with the Western world, which rejects people like him without offering convincing arguments. Gordimer’s story demonstrates, in fact, that he is not a danger, that his dreams are commonplace for a young man, as he wishes to live a different life from his compatriots, even if other explanations are forwarded by a heterodiegetic narrator designating the responsibility of History. The consequences of colonialism in today’s world justify Abdu’s desire to emigrate:

He named the country she had barely heard of. One of those partitioned by colonial powers on their departure, or seceded from federations cobbled together to fill vacuums of powerlessness against regrouping of those old colonial powers under acronyms that still brand-name the world for themselves. One of those countries where you can’t tell religion from politics, their forms of persecution from the persecution of poverty, as the reason for getting out and going wherever they’ll let you in. (12)