

Review

Acculturation in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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Abstract

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This paper aims to explore the process of acculturation in the Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Pickup* (2001). *The Pickup* deals with universal problems of identity, race and class, bureaucratic impediments, and cultural differences. The setting takes place in post-apartheid Johannesburg and in an unnamed Arab country that dominates the largest part of the novel. Julie, the South African protagonist, willingly embarks on straddling another culture, very different from her own, and accustoms herself to adopting new habits, traditions, social practices and even religious beliefs. Julie's motivations are examined and her dialogue and actions are analyzed throughout her acculturation process. The context in which she acquires and embraces the new culture and chooses to place herself in is also examined. During the course of naturalizing herself to the new culture, Julie preserves some practices from her old culture and becomes open to a new set of norms. At the end, Julie's new identity is formed at the culmination of her acculturation process and becomes an amalgamation of the old and the newly-acquired culture; thus, resulting in the emergence of a stronger hybrid identity to the effect that she refuses to leave the Arab country to America with her husband.

Keywords: Acculturation, Adaptation, Assimilation, Culture, Identity, *The Pickup*

INTRODUCTION

A South African protagonist, Julie, lives in Johannesburg and falls in love with Abdu/Ibrahim, an Arab immigrant training to be a mechanic. In an unusually-reversed immigration process, she, a hippy-like, independent, liberal South African, embraces her husband's conservative, rather simple, poor life leaving behind a stable job in Johannesburg (working as a manager of pop groups) that secures her financial independence, her own apartment, and a circle of similarly liberal, multiracial, self-proclaimed intellectual friends (referred to as The Table) who regularly meet at the El-AY café. The hobo-like liberal Table Julie meets at the café discusses the pressing issues of their time and place: equality, racism, discrimination, and AIDS. Each meeting of The Table becomes a declaration in which they espouse revolutionary ideas in a time of conflict. They all agree on renouncing capitalist slogans and embrace an

independent life of a liberal intellectual working class. "When the novel opens, Julie, like Abdu, has taken on a new identity by renouncing the life of the "The Suburbs," represented by her wealthy and well-connected father and his new wife. Julie has instead a group of bohemian friends, known as the Table, which meets at the El-AY café" (Hunt, 2006).

Coming from a well-known, capitalist, bourgeois family, Julie rejects and abandons the privileged and luxurious life she is offered by her father. She insists on renting an apartment in the formerly-black area, and uses an old second-hand car that constantly needs fixing. In one of her car's 'fits', she meets Abdu/Ibrahim, the mechanic who holds a university degree in economics from his Arab country but works as a mechanic in a garage trying to make a living. Abdu/Ibrahim first introduces himself as Abdu, but Julie discovers that his

real name and the name he uses in his Arab country is Ibrahim ibn Mousa. Perhaps the act of “picking up” the poor unsettled immigrant Abdu/Ibrahim is another example where Julie revolutionarily renounces her father’s plans for her to marry a similarly rich white man.

When Abdu/Ibrahim first states his name and country, Julie thinks of the stereotypical image of such a country,

“One of those partitioned by colonial powers on their departure, or seceded from federations cobbled together to fill vacuums of powerlessness against the 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 apart 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” (Gordimer, 2001).

On another occasion, the images of “palm trees, camels, alleys hung with carpets and brass vessels” come to her mind when she first converses with Abdu/Ibrahim.

Literature Review

The term ‘acculturation’ is defined in the *Encyclopedia of Public Health* (n.d.) as follows:

“Acculturation is the process whereby the attitudes and/or behaviors of people from one culture are modified as a result of contact with a different culture. Acculturation implies a mutual influence in which elements of two cultures mingle and merge. The focus is on the group rather than the individual, and on how minority or immigrant groups relate to the dominant or host society. Ethnic identity may be thought of as an aspect of acculturation in which the concern is with individuals and how they relate to their own group as a subgroup of the larger society. The term “acculturation” was first used in anthropology in the late 1800s. Early studies dealt with the patterns in Indian-Spanish assimilation and acculturation in Central and South America, the consequences of contact between Native American tribes and whites, and the study of the culture of Haiti as a derivative of West African and French patterns.”

In *the Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* (2006), David Sam contends that “in its simplest sense, ‘acculturation’ covers all the changes that arise following ‘contact’ between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds”. From the above definitions, one may see that in the process of acculturation, there is an act of acceptance of the foreign culture that ceases to be seen as foreign.

According to Samuel Huntington (1993), “People can and do redefine their identities.” In *The Pickup*, Julie forges her identity by coming to grips with her husband’s

distinct culture, though very different and more difficult to adapt to from hers, welcoming it and even refusing to leave it when her husband eventually acquires a visa to work in America. As part of her process of acculturation, Julie forms a new identity for herself. According to Stuart Hall, “identification as a construction, [is] a process never completed – always ‘in process’”(Hall quoted in Chuang, n.d.).Lui et. al. (2020) suggest that “when membership of a particular cultural group is salient (e.g., cultural, family, interest, community, and many other groups), a person’s behavior will be shaped by the norms and practices of that group — to engage in shared cultural activities, speak the language, or offer support when it is needed.” This is evident in Julie’s willingness to learn and practice new norms in the early stages of her acculturation. Barker’s (2015) study comes up with a similar conclusion regarding the incorporation of the norms of the salient culture.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The first argument that Julie has with Abdu/Ibrahim is over her broken car. As a poor man coming from a culture of passive consumerism, he cannot comprehend why Julie will not buy a new car. He understands that she has the means to do so as she arrives in her father’s Rover. “Why do you keep it? You should buy a new car. She lobbed the accusation back to him. Why should I when you can get it going again for me” (Gordimer, 2001).

As Julie familiarizes herself with Abdu/Ibrahim, she grows very fond of him and falls in love with the exotic darkness of his hair, skin and eyes. She is drawn towards his personal struggle and his country’s struggle that embody the beliefs she and the Table share, and allows him into her life as opposed to her comfortable upper-white class background that she distances herself from. As Sarita Chuang puts it, “She identifies her own lack in him.”Although the Table discourages her from relating to him, she grows more attached to him every day and eventually marries him. “[Julie] has long transferred her affiliation from the members of the Table to her lover” (Hunt, 2006,109). Her friends at the EL-AY café call him “bad news” and an “oriental prince of hers.”

Even Abdu/Ibrahim himself does not appreciate how Julie would accept a life opposite of the one she is living in South Africa and live in a country where women should obey their husbands. Abdu/Ibrahim does not comprehend how the free, independent Julie would abide by rules of conservatism, seclusion, and dependence in his country. He begins to think of her as an encumbrance. He thinks,

“Has she any idea of what a burden she would be. So there it is. Madness. Madness to think she could stick it out, here. He was angry – with this house, this village,

these his people – to have to tell her to her unacceptable things, tell her once and for all what her ignorant obstinacy of coming with him to this place means, when she failed, with all her privilege, at getting him accepted in hers”(Gordimer, 2001).

As Abdu/Ibrahim’s residence expires, Julie struggles to keep him in South Africa. She uses all her connections including her father’s to delay his departure. When all her attempts fail, Abdu/Ibrahim is forced to leave the country. At that point, Julie becomes determined to follow him to his own country. She confirms to him, “I am all the way with you” (Gordimer, 2001). Julie buys both tickets and travels with Abdu/Ibrahim to his unnamed country. To compensate him for not being granted permanent residence, Julie strives to comfort Abdu/Ibrahim and insists on traveling with him to a country that he himself does not find solace in. “[Julie] takes delight in nurturing and sheltering [Ibrahim], as in a process of incorporation – incorporating the otherness into part of her identification” (Chuang, n.d.).

Upon their arrival and with eyes wide open, Julie observes how her husband struggles to find a taxi, fights his way through the crowd and manages to get them both safely home. She observes with wonder the world she brought herself to from the window. Although he is conscious of her presence in his country, Abdu/Ibrahim adopts the role of the leader in his country, whereas Julie has assumed that role in Johannesburg. The switching of the roles in Abdu’s country allows Julie time and space to experience the cultural transition she goes through.

As soon as she sets her foot in her husband’s house, Julie is determined to experiment with the culture she knows very little about. On her first trip to the market, Julie buys sandals like the ones Abdu’s sister-in-law has. During Muslims’ holy month of Ramadan, in which they fast from sunrise to sunset, Julie insists on fasting the whole month and even tries to observe some of its other rules. “I can do with losing some padding, I eat too much at these family meals, I’m getting a fat backside, look” (Gordimer, 2001). On many occasions, Julie is seen starving for knowledge and a sense of belonging in the unnamed Arab country.

Julie befriends her husband’s sister, mother and sisters-in-law. In order to learn more and fit more, she establishes a mode of communication with the people around her who know very little or almost no English. She starts to teach them her language in exchange for Arabic lessons. “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’”(Kossew, 2005).

She becomes aware of how significant her educational role is to the community, especially to the girls who are denied an education or any chance of intellectual

learning. “She [Julie] has come to be accepted as one of the women who share household tasks, and she makes use of her education to teach English to school children and anyone else in the village ... she thinks it’s the first time that expensive education has been put to use” (Gordimer, 2001). She also insists on taking part in house chores especially the ones that are related to her husband’s comfort. At the beginning of their arrival, it is Abdu/Ibrahim who carries the water for his bath, although it is a task usually assigned to the women of the household. Later on, Julie insists on doing that for her husband as an act of confirmation of her ‘fitting in’ and love. “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” (Kossew, 2005).

Julie is flexible enough to learn and embrace all aspects of the new culture of her husband. She is willing to learn cooking and housekeeping from her mother-in-law by using sign language. She is very eager to learn Arabic from her sister-in-law and even embarks on learning verses of the Quran by heart. “Julie... after having been accepted into the women’s social circle, almost perfectly fulfils the role of social harmoniser that might have been expected of a local woman, but combines her communal integration with a strong sense of self-determination and initiative” (Meier, 2003).

Julie understands the conservative culture of her husband and dresses modestly. She even wears the veil and finds it very practical later on when she starts frequenting the desert. “Even the veil the women advise Julie to wear when she leaves the house becomes a practical resource against the heat and dust rather than the symbol of oppression it is most often described as in the Western media” (Hunt, 2006). Furthermore, Julie is astonished at the religious devotion of her mother-in-law and her observance of other religious rituals. Observing her mother-in-law perform the gesticulations of prayer becomes Julie’s ritual, and that instigates her interest in Islam and the Quran. As Julie reads verses from the Quran, she becomes aware of the religious similarities between Islam and Christianity that establish a common ground between the two cultures she becomes part of. She reads in ‘Surat Mariam’ from the Quran and finds many echoes in the Bible she studied as a young girl. This is in line with what Stuart and Ward (2011) find when they examine how acculturating Muslims adapt to the new environment by minimizing differences and maintaining a balance between their identities to fit in the new milieu.

What draws Julie to Abdu/Ibrahim’s culture is what she misses in her own culture. Julie finds coziness and warmth in her new home “that was not large enough yet accommodated each in his and her place, home”

(Gordimer, 2001). Julie recognizes the value of familial ties, where each member has a responsibility and assigned tasks that are performed to solidify the harmony of the family. "You must understand, I've never lived in a family before, just made substitutes out of other people, ties, I suppose – though I didn't realize that, either, then. There are ... things... between people here, that are important, no, necessary to them" (Gordimer, 2001).

Though unable to wander around freely without an escort, Julie manages to create a secret ritual of waking up early in the morning to explore the desert nearby. She begins to converse with the arid, wild exoticness of the desert where she finds solace and contentment. The desert to Julie is a place without borders, a place "undisturbed by growth, even while you lift and place your feet it obliterates where they fall and covers their interruption as they pass on" (Gordimer, 2001).

Abdu/Ibrahim fails to see what his wife sees in the desert. To him, it is the reason behind his dissatisfaction with life in his country. To Julie, "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" (Kosew, 2005). The wilderness and the freedom Julie finds in the desert is a mere reflection of her own autonomous and liberated character. The desert becomes a space with "no measure of space... no demarcation from land to air" (Gordimer, 2001).

After having visited a distant part of the desert with her father-in-law and sister-in-law Maryam, Julie confides to her husband of her dream of turning the desert green. Meeting with a local farmer, Muhammad Aboulkanim, who grows rice in the middle of the desert makes Julie excited to invest in an agricultural project. Her sense of belonging to her husband's country is heightened as she works on improving the situation there. She links the hope she has for the desert with the hope she has for the continuation of her life in her husband's country.

"Water's – water is change; and the desert doesn't So when you see the two together, the water filled of rice growing, and it's in the desert –there's a span of life right there-like ours-and there's an *existence* beyond any span. You know?" (Gordimer, 2001).

To her misfortune, her husband shocks her first with the fact that he does not plan to stay in his country and with the reality of Aboulkanim being a smuggler who uses the rice fields as a cover.

The climax of her process of acculturation is when Julie becomes more than comfortable in Abdu/Ibrahim's home and refuses to leave it. After much struggling with bureaucracy, borrowing money and bribing government officials, the couple manage to obtain a visa to the United States. Nevertheless, Julie eventually shocks her husband with her decision of refusing to travel with him.

She foretells her husband's humiliation in finding demeaning jobs in America and strives to protect him from the grim future awaiting him. Abdu/Ibrahim, full of awe, fails to understand the change that has taken place in his wife. He wonders, "What is she, who is she now?" (Gordimer, 2001). During his absence at work, Abdu/Ibrahim misses to see Julie's subtle metamorphosis. In the few weeks they spend in his country, Julie manages to transform herself into an "insider" and blends successfully in the community. She becomes a positive addition and a substantial element in the "hell of a place" that Abdu/Ibrahim describes.

Not only does she fit in her husband's culture, but Julie also manages to create a team of supporters out of her mother-in-law, her sisters-in-law and the whole community she briefly affects. Abdu/Ibrahim's mother becomes "an ally, that's it; but not his. An ally of the foreigner—she [Julie] will be the one to restore the son to the mother, lure him, bring him home at last" (Gordimer, 2001). The women of the family indirectly support Julie in staying;--possibly and secretly-- as a vicarious act of defiance towards her husband, and as a center point to which Abdu/Ibrahim will want to return later when he most probably fails. Unlike Tayyib Saleh's (1970) hero Mustafa Saeed in *Season of Migration to The North* who enjoys manipulating English women who love him; and Doris Lessing's (1961) hero Moses in *The Grass is Singing* who dominates and destroys the woman who loves him, Julie overcomes the obstacles of immigration, displacement, and alienation, and reaches out to people she loves in order to cross cultural divides.

In order to save face, the brothers of Abdu/Ibrahim agree to announce to the public (neighbors and other relatives) that Julie will follow her husband later until he settles down and finds a home for them. To the brothers and the other male members of the family, the idea of Julie's disobedience is unacceptable. They all fail to see the radical effect of their culture upon Julie. Her act of 'disobedience' is actually a confirmation of her acculturation. She emerges as a woman who understands the culture she chooses to adopt, finds a home among the women of the family and refuses to leave it to either her past life of emotional and spiritual bankruptcy in South Africa, or another possible life of 'nomadic' suffering in America.

CONCLUSION

Through the process of familiarizing herself with her husband's culture, Julie becomes aware of her own identity. In her process of acculturation, Julie acquires and masters the behaviors and norms she is to encompass to be accepted in her new community. To use Gilberto Freyre's term, Julie 'interpenetrates' with her

husband's culture. (Freyre quoted in Burke, 2009). The South African multicultural society Julie comes from prepares her for this process. (Godderis-Toudic, 2007). Contrary to her husband's belief, Julie manages to find a comfortable, homely niche in her husband's unnamed Arab country. 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'" (Kossew, 2005) and finds her sense of belonging with the female members of her husband's family and in the sensually-appealing conversation with the desert. Her final act of settling down without her husband marks an important milestone in her acculturation. The love relationship and the marriage cease to be the only connections she has with Abdu/Ibrahim. The 'new' acculturated Julie embraces both the differences and the similarities that she finds in her husband's culture and hers. She is willing to give up a life full of materialistic 'comforts' that her husband dreams of to hold on to a stable, more spiritually nurturing family life especially with the bonds of sisterhood she has created.

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