



Deconstructing Racial Tension in the Post-Apartheid South Africa through the Prism of Nadine Gordimer's the Pickup

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Abstract

This paper has probed into South Africa's newly constructed identity subsequent to the dethronement of the apartheid system. The democratic administration upon taking the reins from the apartheid regime heartened South Africans to champion oneness, equality and human virtues in an effort to dismantle the racial division that the preceding government sought to eternise in the country. The apartheid government perpetuated the colonial dogma of separation amidst diversified racial groups in South Africa until 1994 when the country saw a political transition from apartheid to democracy. Despite the democratisation of South Africa, racial spells, which the apartheid system engineered, are still menacing the country in the democratic dispensation. This is reflected in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, which is a neat fit for this qualitative study that aimed to deconstruct racial tensions in South Africa from a literary perspective. Gordimer's post-apartheid narration above, inter alia, reveals that the country is still experiencing extreme racial problems due to select individuals whose reluctance to reconcile engenders a delay in terms of social transformation and attaining an undisputable democratic identity.

Keywords: *Apartheid; Democracy; Identity; Racial Tension*

Introduction

The dispensation of democracy in South Africa galvanised the citizens of the country to instigate mechanisms to delink South Africa from apartheid identities and unite her racially diverse people. Notably, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the former late President of South Africa Nelson Mandela devised the rainbow nation project, which made a clarion call to South Africans to unite (Montle 2020). Tutu and Mandela's contrivance is inspired by the climatological spectacle known as a rainbow arc, which usually appears in the sky after rainfall reflecting the unification of the seven colours: Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. The two icons above referred to South Africa as a rainbow nation given its diversity and emboldened the citizens of the country to cherish this democratic identity.

Sall (2018) opines that this identity is meant to reconstruct and unite the South African citizens irrespective of racial, cultural and religious diversities. Several scholars have risen to declare the rainbow nation project a failure mainly because of the racial tensions that the country is still grappling with. Nkondo (2017, 1) assumes that “South Africa, with its cherished image as a rainbow nation after a miraculous political settlement, should be an inspiring example of fair and just treatment of all its citizens. Instead, it is a beacon of failure...” whereas Sall (2018, 1) claims that “although the so-called rainbow nation proclaims unity in diversity, racialisation and identity politics in South Africa have not evolved much from apartheid’s pattern. Its contradictions can be observed through actual examples such as debates around land expropriation, fees must fall movements and the striking racial inequalities.” It is the apartheid administration that occasioned racial disparities in the country with inspiration from colonialism. The colonial government, which seized independence from Africans, used racial identity as a tool of othering and the apartheid regime, in the same fashion, used race to mete out oppressive conditions in South Africa. For instance, the apartheid government passed laws such as the Population Registration Act, 1950, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, 1953, the Immorality Act, 1927, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, 1949, the Immorality Amendment Act, 1950 and others mainly to maintain separation between White and Non-white citizens of the country. Notwithstanding the abolishment of these discriminatory laws, the colonial and apartheid mission of championing racial alienation is still enduring.

Methods

This study has employed a qualitative methodology to probe into the pinnacle of racial tension in the post-apartheid South Africa and its impact on the democratisation of the country from a literary perspective. Being purely text-based, the study has purposively selected Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* amongst many other post-apartheid literary texts that explore the issues of racial identities in the democratic South Africa. Gordimer’s *The Pickup* stands out as a mirror of racial tension and its genesis, and impact on the future of the South African society. Hence, the researcher chose to use this post-apartheid narration as a case in point. The collected data from the sampled novel is supplemented by information from critical materials such as journal articles. Furthermore, the study has relied on qualitative content analysis to critically discuss and deconstruct the findings from Gordimer’s *The Pickup*.

The study has sampled Gordimer’s *The Pickup* to fulfil its main objective, which is to examine the height of racial alienation in South Africa and its severe impacts on the country. The findings from the aforementioned novel are presented, discussed and analysed in themes through the adoption of a qualitative content analysis technique:

Interracially in the Post-Apartheid Era

Gordimer’s *The Pickup* mirrors racial problems in the post-apartheid South Africa through an interracial relationship between Julie and Ibrahim. It presents the odds stacked against the dismantlement of racial confines and advocacy of peace, unity and equality. Julie is a white South African woman who met and fell in love with the immigrant, Ibrahim, a black man who originates from an Arab country. The couple confronts a series of challenges, starting with the acquisition of identity as an interracial couple in the democratic South Africa. Interracial marriages and their challenges have been characterised in most of Gordimer’s novels.

The apartheid system had forged an identity of disunity and racial division amongst diversified racial groups in South Africa and officialised this when it passed The Prohibition of /mixed Marriages Act, Act No. 55 of 1949 which hindered South Africans of different races from getting married. Therefore, the ending of apartheid saw the abolishment of apartheid laws such as the one mentioned above. Today, the democratic society witnesses interracial unions; white and non-white South Africans

getting married. However, this newly formed identity of the democratic era is haunted by the heritage of the past. Gordimer's *The Pickup* examines the extremities and effects of the enduring legacies of apartheid in the present times of democracy. This novel has perpetuated the "search for identity, but against a new and interesting perspective, a perspective that is in line with the political transformation of post-apartheid South Africa after 1994" (Kumar 2014, 1). When Julie and Abdu met for the first time, stereotypical hesitations emerged:

The legs and lower body wriggled down at the sound of her apologetic voice and the man emerged. He was young, in his greasy work-clothes, long hands oil-slicked at the dangle from long arms; he wasn't one of them—the white man speaking Afrikaans to the black man at the machine—but glossy dark-haired with black eyes blueish-shadowed. He listened to her without any reassuring attention or remark. She waited a moment in his silence (Gordimer 2001, 7).

Julie fell in love with Abdu at first sight but had minor reservations about him mainly because of his "non-white" identity. This is a mind-set institutionalised by the apartheid system that reduced black people to impotence. It is a stigma that is found to delay social transformation in the post-apartheid South Africa. There are several cases in the present times where comments and acts are committed to reminding black people about apartheid's dehumanisation of them. For instance, Penny Sparrow, a white South African woman in 2016 received criticism from South Africans due to her comments on social media where she referred to black people as monkeys and she was found guilty of hate speech and fined R150 000 (News24/04/07/2019). Thus, during the State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa said, "Let us work with even greater purpose to unite our people - African, Coloured, Indian and White - to build a new nation in which all have equal rights and opportunities." It is the normalised tradition of the apartheid government that inspired Sparrow's thought to humiliate and reduce a black person to a monkey. *The Pickup* also exposes this thought through the inception of Julie and Abdu's romantic relationship. The two clashed in terms of class, lifestyle, privilege and societal perception. Despite these varieties, Gordimer presents love as a conquering and unifying element between the couple:

'Love'—I don't say. That is something different. It's just it's beautiful (his long had rose towards his face and opened, to the car). Many things can be beautiful. And mine is certainly isn't. What else's wrong apart from the whatever-it-is you have to get from the agent? Sounds as if it's going to be major overhaul (Gordimer 2001, 9).

It is love that conquers Julie's fears and reservations about Abdu. She ultimately succumbs to her feelings for him and the two become romantically involved: "Yet he must be equally experienced; they made love beautifully; she so roused and fulfilled that tears came with all flooded her and she hoped he did not see them magnifying her open eyes" (Gordimer 2001, 27). However, this was the genesis of problems in Julie's life as she has anticipated due to Abdu and her varieties. Her identity-worries have shifted from individual concern to family and societal interrogation. Julie, being a white woman and hailing from a privileged and wealthy lineage while Abdu is just an illegal immigrant, being black and working as a mechanic garnered criticism for her from her people. In Gordimer's fictionalisation of the issues against the couple of Julie and Abdu, her main concern "is the devastating effects of apartheid on the lives of South Africans – the constant tension between personal isolation and the commitment to social justice, the numbness caused by the unwillingness to accept apartheid, the inability to change it" (Kumar 2018, 4).

Racial Identity as a Tool for Othering

Julie and Abdu, subsequent to falling in love, discover a hurdle in their love nest. The couple faces societal rejection by virtue of their diverse racial patterns. This is an attestation of remnants of apartheid identities. The apartheid system normalised racial separation and officialised laws to enforce it.

The idea of racial separation defined South Africa for many decades and could be traced from the colonisation of Africa and it was perpetuated by apartheid in South Africa from 1948 when the apartheid National Party (NP) governed the country until the democratic African National Congress (ANC) took over in 1994. In the Big debate on racism (2016), Sisonke Langa concurs that apartheid had associated black people with inferiority, backwardness and unsophistication and this makes it difficult for the white counter to accept it when a black person demonstrates sophistication and success because of the culture of the apartheid government. In addition, Sall (2018) states that it could be argued that it is too soon to anticipate a non-racial nation and to stabilise inequalities after 24 years. This is confirmed in Gordimer's *The Pickup* where social stereotypes are still predominant in the post-apartheid South African community:

Someone shouted something...like *idikaza...mlungu*...what's that, 'white bitch', isn't it?--Her question to the black friend—Well, just about as bad. This city, man!--But it was black men who helped me, of course.—Oh come on---for hand—out! (Gordimer 2001, 6).

Gordimer's assertion above is a demonstration of stereotypes that often cloud people's judgement and delay their democratic progress. When Julie heard the uttered Zulu words, "*idikaza...mlungu*" (*The Pickup*: 6), she did not precisely know what they meant but she just assumed that she was being insulted, "What's that white bitch', isn't it?" (Gordimer 2001, 6). Sall (2018) asserts that there is still tension especially amongst the born-free South Africans although the apartheid's system has been disarmed, its ideology still permeates into the present day today's society. Gordimer highlights the stereotypes held by Julie and Abdu's friends about their relationship:

And the friends, who were ready to laugh at anything, in their mood, did so clownishly—O-HO-HOHOHO!—assuring him—Julie has a strong head, not to worry!—But she refused a second glass.—The cops are out with their breathalysers, it's the week-end (Gordimer 2001, 16).

Julie and Abdu's relationship challenges could be corroborated by Mojapelo-Batka's (2008, 15) study about interracial marriages: "the reaction from our families and society made me aware of how a private issue like loving someone could turn into a public and socio-political concern." Likewise, in the novel, the society did not find it usual to see a black man, Abdu and a white woman, Julie in a romantic relationship. Societal rejection gestures would often include the couple being left by friends, laughed at, given funny looks, isolated and made to feel unwelcome in public spaces. The problem aggravated when Julie took the initiative to introduce Abdu to her family. She thought, "if a man chooses a man for this, or a man chooses a woman, it is time for parents to know. To see the man. It is usual" (Gordimer 2001, 38). Julie deemed it right to introduce Abdu to her father:

When her father was introduced to her Someone there was across his face a fleeting moment of incomprehension of the name, quickly dismissed by good manners and a handshake. What was the immediate register? Black—or some sort of black. But what she read into this was quickly confused by what she had not noticed—there already was a black couple among the guests—amazing: the innovation showed how long it must have been since she came to one of the Sunday lunch parties in that house Nigel Ackroyd Summers had built for his Danielle (Gordimer 2001, 41).

The reaction of Julie's father towards her and her black lover, Abdu, unravelled the racial tension that is still prevailing in the post-apartheid South Africa. In the Big debate on racism (2016), a white man was asked how he would feel if her daughter decides to marry a black man and he said, "I cannot see that happen, [if she does] then it is her choice, she can go on with her choice and live with it. I don't see you as a lesser to me, I just see you as a different person to my culture and I love my own." A white woman amongst the panellists on the show who said, "I can't imagine some [black] dude coming into my house and bringing me six cows for my daughter," advocated this. Moreover, it is racism that discourages

interracial unions and has led to mixed relationships and marriages in the democratic era still regarded as immoral and socially disapproved in South Africa (Mojapelo-Batka, 2008). This pattern could affect the future generations and structures of the country. South Africans such as Julie in the novel are often pushed to the point of having to choose between their families and their partners in such circumstances. The excerpt below could motivate this:

Relocate they're saving. It's the current euphemism for pulling up anchor and going somewhere else, either perforce or because of the constrictions of poverty or politics, or by choice of ambition and belief that there's even more privileged life, safe from the pitchforks and Ak047s of the rebellious poor and the handguns of the criminals. It's not matter unpacking furniture in new premises, some of the dictionary definitions of the root word 'locate' give away the inexpressible yearning that cannot be explained by ambition, privilege, or even fear of others (Gordimer 2001, 48).

Displacement and Clash of Identities

Julie and Abdu facing discomfort in the post-apartheid South Africa, decide to migrate to another country in search of a new identity. This comes after Julie chooses love over her country of birth, friends and family. It is the sacrifice that Julie made and was deemed odd and foolish by her dynasty as Mr Motsamayi, the Summers' lawyer, resentfully muttered, "he's not for you" (Gordimer 2001, 80), arguing that Julie shouldn't be with Abdu. Julie's father also further extended the same words of disappointment at Julie's departure from South Africa for man:

I've never thought the people you mix with worthy of you—don't smile, that's not to do with money or class—but I've always thought as you grew older you'd find that out for yourself. Make something of your life and all advantages you've had—including your freedom. You are nearly thirty. And now you come here without any warning and simply tell us you are leaving in a week's time for one of the worst, poorest and most backward of Third World countries, following a man who's been living here illegally, getting yourself deported—yes—from your own country; thrown out along with him, someone no-one knows anything at all about, someone from God knows what kind of background (*The Pickup*: 98).

Julie and Abdu's desperation to find and acquire a new identity impels them to leave South Africa and seek a new beginning in another country. They are willing to adapt and be acquainted with new identities than endure the stereotypes in South Africa. Julie left South Africa for her partner Abdu's Arab village. This is a great transition for Julie; a woman from the city seeking a life in the village. Gordimer uses this change to unveil the identity-crises that emerge from displacement. Caravan (2014) postulates that *The Pickup*'s change of scenery, from the South African city; Johannesburg to the village of the Arab country and its deserts, and Muslim believers is uncommon for Gordimer who would usually devote her focus to the precision of South African. The couple's reasons to relocate exclude Abdu's illegal stay in South Africa but include the desire for societal acceptance, comfort, love and a sense of belonging. However, issues that come to grips with identity threaten the couple's desire for a new beginning. Julie tussled to subscribe to the new identity that she witnessed in the Arab village. Abdu anticipated this clash of identities and tried to prevent them from leaving South Africa for the Arab village. Hence, he states:

Who asked you to buy two tickets. You said nothing to me. Don't you think you must discuss? No, you are used to making all decisions, you do what you like, no father, no mother, nobody must ever tell you. And me—what am I, don't speak to me, don't ask me—you cannot live in my country, it's not for you, you can't understand what it is to live there, you can wish you were dead if you live there (Gordimer 2001, 95).

Abdu observes the gap between his and Julie's familial background. Julie originates from an upper-class family in South Africa. Julie was privileged and could be independent, as she believed, "Nobody has to be responsible for me. I am responsible for myself" (Gordimer 2001, 95). These notions appeared to be a hurdle to her successful acquisition of a new identity in the Arab village. It is in this village that she was introduced to the roles of women that she has never performed before. Abdu predicted Julie's identity-crises in the Arab, especially because she is a woman.

As he knew they were coming close to the village where, there was the image of the family waiting, he looked at her. up and down, in a way that made her turn, smiling enquiry. Have you got something else to put on. In one of the bags. Put on? What? He touched at his breast-bone in the open neck of his shirt. Here. To cover up. But it's so hot. Don't I look all right? She hitched at the shoulders of the indeterminate sort of garment she wore as a comfortable travelling out of it with her jeans, the movement of muscle lifting for a moment into view the soft cupping of her breasts. A scarf or something. I don't see how I can get at things—in our stuff—among all these people, I'll be tramping over them. Wait. Wait—I've got a safety pin somewhere (Gordimer 2001, 121).

In most villages such as the one in the novel, women's roles are underpinned by cultural perceptions. To this note, Julie had to adapt to village culture and the Muslim religion that domineered in the Arab village. Kalu (2001) states that the societal roles of women have been consistently interrogated in societies as women have, for many years, struggled to own their territory in patriarchal dimensions. It is blatant that the identities in the Arab village flabbergasted Julie as they were "all new to her" (Gordimer 2001, 114). Moreover, Skea (2004) postulates that Gordimer has pragmatically fictionalised the manner in which Julie and Abdu manage to live with the changes that include cultural adjustments. Julie's identity-crises begins when Abdu asks her:

Have you got something else to put on. In one of the bags

Julie: Put on? What?

Abdu: He touched at his breast-bone in the open neck of his shirt. To cover up.

Julie: But it's so hot. Don't I look all right? ...

Abdu: A scarf or something (Gordimer 2001, 115).

Gordimer unravels the village's depiction of women. Abdu could not let her meet with his people wearing a top that revealed sensitive flesh: "He touched at his breast-bone in the open neck of his shirt. To cover up" (Gordimer 2001, 115). Abdu's suggestion for Julie to cover up her revealing part with a top was to circumvent unpleasant remarks that the village would pass at Julie. According to Caslin (2014), the harsh comments that Julie was likely to receive because of the manner in which dressed include "whore", "savage" and "heathen". Julie's identity-crises heightens when she discovers her anticipated comfort in the village could be thwarted:

What I need now is a long, hot bath. Where is the bathroom? There was no bathroom. Had she thought of that, when she decided to come with him. This place is buried in desert ... Had 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 other 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, 122).

The quest for identity coerces Julie to make compromises. She acknowledges the fact that she did not expect to find another challenge of identity in the Arab village subsequent to eluding one in South Africa. Gordimer integrates the “themes of identity and place through a focus on the impact of physical and mental barriers (typical of South African society) in the characters’ lives” (Tecucianu, 2014: 13). This is substantiated by Julie’s challenges in her husband’s world. The Arab society along with her husband’s family subject Julie to stereotypical rejection. They do not understand her lifestyle, thinking and behaviour. This is Gordimer’s presentation of intricacies revolving around the acquisition of a new identity. Dimitriu (2006) asserts that the novel depicts a dimension of fragmented and unfixed identities. Patriarchal and cultural stereotypes against women are some of the unfixed identities that Gordimer portrays in the novel. The Musa family thinks Julie is “accustomed to living, pleasing herself” (Gordimer 2001, 122). This is unacceptable according to their culture and to them, it is “impossible here” (Gordimer 2001, 123). Thus, Sarup (1996) avers that identity could be observed as a multi-dimensional space with different forces that unite and at times collide.

Conclusion

This paper has unpacked racial tension in the post-apartheid South Africa through the lens of Gordimer’s *The Pickup*. It has been found that racial problems in the country have not ended with the apartheid government but persist in threatening the authenticity of democratisation, which aimed to usher in an era of equality amongst racially diverse South Africans. In the novel, Julie has fallen in love with a man whom she introduced to her father who did not accept mainly due to his non-white identity. Their interracial relationship was stigmatised by the society until they decided to leave South Africa and live in another country where they will be together without societal backlash. This ordeal from Gordimer’s novel indicates that racial tension is an ordeal that needs to be addressed.

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