

Praising a Global Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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Abstract

The article attempts to explore, in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, the collision between different identities through the love between Julie, a white South African woman and her husband Abdu also called Ibrahim, a muslim Arab. With regard to postcolonial theories which envisage flattening the post-colonial legacy, Gordimer promotes a global identity beyond the tribe, by taking into account issues of globalization, cross cultural and transracial identities that have changed the identical structure of the New World. Moreover she demonstrates that the force of identity is pervasive enough to transcend binaries and move freely in and out of spaces. The article supports that the beauty of a culture lies on the changing and the flexible nature of identity rather than a fix one.

Keywords

Global Identity, Cross Cultural Identity, Transracial Identity, Flexible Nature of Identity, New World

1. Introduction

From colonialism to date, the African continent, particularly South Africa, has gone through many events that have impacted the course of its entire history. Apartheid, as a dominant discourse, has developed through the logic of superiority the process of legitimization of oppression of the colonized. In South Africa, the apartheid champions tried to make their subjects confused and hybridized with regard to their cultural and authentic identity. Consequently, the question of identity has always been an important issue for all South African writers, either white or not. Hence, in the works of South African writers such as Brink (1979) and Coetzee (1977) one can witness a cross or a globalizing view of identity. In their texts, the notion of identity is no longer stuck to the tribe or the

origin. They promote a cross cultural and a transracial identity.

The perception of identity can also be evidenced in the writings of the first South African laureate of the Nobel Prize of literature, Nadine Gordimer and precisely in her second post-apartheid novel *The Pickup* published in 2001. In the novel, Gordimer displays a world in which individuals' identity is beyond their culture of origin and the borders of their homelands. The narrative presents a new way of looking at old questions of identity and origin. Through the love between Julie Summer—a daughter of a prominent white citizen and Abdu also called Ibrahim, an illegal Arabic immigrant earning his bread as a car technician, we notice a relationship only favored by the subliminal power of literature. The class difference and mutual incomprehension between Ibrahim and Julie arouse curiosity in each other.

Accordingly, this article aims at casting a glance, through Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall's post-colonial posture and their theories of hybridity, at the new perception of the notion of identity that Gordimer displays in *The Pickup*. According to their theory, a cross-cultural marriage like that of Abdu and Julie is a factor creating in-between or third space identities and cultural diversity in the current era of globalization.

As such, the concern is to show how the notion of identity has to be rethought. That is to say, how from a fix or authentic identity we are invited towards a flexible identity in this era of globalization.

Literature also provides the deepest possible exploration of identity, and its capacity to federate different cultural identities. The choice of the two main characters of this novel by Gordimer participates in this federation capacity of literature. Through the love between Julie and Abdu, from a total and different social background, origin and culture, Gordimer tackles a difficult subject.

The article will first discuss about fix identity in general and secondly show how Gordimer promotes a global identity beyond the tribe, by taking into account issues of globalization, multiculturalism that have changed the structure and the face of the New World.

2. Fix or Authentic Identity

To begin with, the word "Identity" is a very complex, dynamic and wide notion. It takes into account culture, gender and religion. Therefore, it is not easy to find a single and working definition of the notion of identity, notwithstanding, we tentatively provide conceptual definitions for an understanding of this article. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2003) defines identity as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others". According to the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (1996: 669) identity is "the state or quality of being a specified person or thing, which embraces who or what a person is" or "individual characteristics by which a person or a thing can be identified".

For Fortier (2008), identity is what makes a person being himself and not an-

other one. It is what permits to recognize him and distinguish him from others. The features concurring to his/her singularity¹. From the above definitions, it appears that identity varies from an individual to another, depending on the individual's community, culture and religion.

Seen the above definitions and concerns, the question of identity is crucial in a postcolonial society like that of the South African. South Africa has inherited a diversity of cultural, social and political hierarchies due to apartheid. Since the implementation of the apartheid system in the 1940's and its falling apart in the 1990's, South Africa has never remained the same. That change, does not only affect the social, economic and the political levels only, but also the ideology, culture and above all the identity which is said to be a process by many scholars like Dennis Haskell.

In fact, the history of South Africa is associated with a set of facts and realities affecting and changing the course of its intrinsic identity. The question of identity is necessarily complex as it takes into account the totality of a social experience, much of which is inextricably influenced by a shared history and culture of a community. In South Africa, we can notice the existence of at least three communities: the Blacks, the Whites and the Coloreds. This diversity of communities sharing the same living area necessarily leads to many real or supposed identical clashes.

Identity is a noun, and as many nouns, identity gives the appearance of a fixing meaning once and for all. As such we wonder what can be a fix identity. According to the online Webber's dictionary, fixity has the quality or state of being fixed; steady or permanent. However, in a dynamic social and cultural climate, how can one protect or preserve one's identity? Is a fix identity possible today in a melting world?

A fix or an authentic identity can be seen as an identity which is preserved from the influence or the exchange between other external identities. That is to say an identity evolving in an environment without interconnexion with the other culture. How can it be possible as we are living more and more in a globalized world? Specifically in South Africa, where more than three communities: the Blacks, the Whites and the Coloreds are sharing the same living area? This concern is echoed by [Bangura \(1994: p. 48\)](#) when talking about some issues like how individuals are socialized during the course of their lives. For him, like Gordimer—as members of different races, families, neighborhoods, villages, professions, social groups are trans-cultural organizations—it should be important to be taken into consideration when one attempts a discussion on search for identity in general.

In the current paper identity is studied and explored at numerous levels and from various approaches. In recent sociological studies, however, the focus has shifted from the analysis of the individual to the collective, some of the re-

¹Translation mine "L'identité, c'est donc ce qui fait qu'une personne est elle-même et non une autre; ce qui permet de la reconnaître et de la distinguer des autres, l'ensemble des caractères qui concourent à sa singularité." Vincente Fortier, *Les incertitudes juridiques de l'identité religieuse*, 2008.

searchers regard identity as a source of mobilization rather than a product of it.

Identity is seen as an unstable entity. Moslund (2010: p. 23) confirms this instability by giving a vivid picture of this globalized century through the passage below:

It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, [...] reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities.

In consequence, for Giddens (2000), globalization can be defined as the intensification of social relations throughout the world, linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are formed as a result of events that occur many miles away and vice versa. Beerkens (2004: p. 47) is right when he says:

Globalization is a process in which basic social arrangements like culture, market, politics, values, and ideology become disembedded from their original territory context, mainly the nation-state due to the acceleration and expansion of transnational flows of people, finance and information.

Held et al. (1999: p.5) posit that globalization can be thought as a process or a set of process which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions assessed in terms of their extensity and flexibility generating transnational flows, interaction and interconnectedness between people. It is an epoch characterized by an increased mobility of people, goods, capitals and ideas. It is a period of history that has induced the building of transnational networks and interconnectedness of peoples. All in all, we can say today that, we are living in the era of globalization characterized by increase flows of migration, transnationalism, interconnectedness and cultural exchange. As Hall (2003: p. 84) said we are at an epoch, defined by:

Those processes operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organization in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected.

Indeed, nowadays people are crossing borders than at any past period of the mankind history. International trade, military service abroad, immigration, student exchange programs, employment opportunities, tourism, political asylum, refugees, technology development, internet chatting, and the evolution of transport.. This instability of identity is also recognised by Obama (1995: p. 7) at the preface of his autobiographical novel *Dreams From my Father* when he acknowledges that: "...the fluid state of identity—the leaps through time, the collision of cultures—mark our modern life. Van der Waal and Wilcox (2004: p. 8) emphasise that "the issue of identity [is] problematic (particularly questioning any idea that identity is stable".

Consequently, in such a configuration of the world, the notion of identity

grasped during past centuries as singular and uniform construction within the boundaries of a culture and a nation now seems to be untenable. These ways of conceiving identity are interwoven. Thus, they are in crisis in this global age. This is the reason why Papastergiadis quoted in the *Journal* (Volume 14, 2008: p99) in an article entitled *The hybrid self and the ambivalence of boundaries* says “As we become enmeshed in the globalizing process it becomes all the more urgent to develop a more subtle understanding of the politics of translation and incommensurability.”

The idea of transnationalism and interconnectedness of peoples that one can draw from the above quotations, leads us to contend that the way the notion of identity is conceptualized so far is affected. It is in that view that Albrow (1996: pp. 93-94) says “globalization involves a [...] destabilization of old identities, whether of nation-state, communities or individuals”

The notion of identity has to be reconsidered in the sense of Gordimer for a peaceful modern era and specifically a rainbow nation for all South Africans.

3. Rethinking Global Identities beyond Tribes

The verb “rethink” can be defined as the fact of reconsidering, thinking over again about a given problem or a situation. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2007) defines the verb “rethink” as “to think about a plan or idea again in order to decide if any changes should be made”. In South Africa, we need a culture of diversity. Because fixing identities can lead dangerously towards clash of identities and problems of cohabitation, Gordimer’s *The pickup* is a true reflection in a South Africa confronted with identities issues.

Through *The Pickup*, Gordimer gets onto the delicate topic of identity. By doing so, she demonstrates the power of literature in transforming complex situations into acceptable ones. Literature works with a fluidity that permits flexibility even concerning identity matters. It allows for openness, change, curiosity, and avoids closing of possibilities. In fact, Julie Summers, the female protagonist, is the daughter of rich white middle class parents (meanwhile divorced) in contemporary Johannesburg (2001: p. 234). She has, however, early on distanced herself from this bourgeois background.

The story begins when her car breaks down and she starts a love affair with Abdu also called Ibrahim, the mechanic at her garage. Abdu, whose actual name is Ibrahim, turns out to be an illegal immigrant (with a degree in economics) from an unspecified Arab country, and to foster great admiration for the jet set world of Julie’s father. The love between Abdu and Julie in Gordimer’s novel, “is like the Shanghai rain, a drizzle that forms and unforms in the thin air until everything is soaked” (2007); the above quotation tells us more about love than any definition.

Further, literature can provide a testing ground, it is a discourse for the exploration of possibilities. The Mandarin-speaking Australian novelist Nicholas Jose quoted by Haskell (2007) in *The Australian* in an article entitled “*Identity is*

a process, not a fixity" has claimed that in an article "the journey of mind to make intelligible what we perceive at first to be only dimly part of our world is what we are all about". That is to say, the role of literature and authors in solving the problems human beings are facing is part of the missions of any intellectuals or novelists.

In a postcolonial society, like that depicted by Gordimer, identity crisis is considered as one of the dominant phenomena. It is not only because a postcolonial subject fails to identify himself/herself either with the colonial burden or with the subsequent postcolonial existence, but it is because s/he is in the present context enchained to the dynamics of the New World Order. Nevertheless, postcolonial identities are never static, but rather as a vortex they are ever spinning in a violent motion.

Gordimer prepares the mind of her compatriots to take into account the fact that no one can serenely be self-sufficient in a changing world. The notion of identity needs to be revisited and be conceptualized within a more open-ended and contingent cultural politics. As such, Gordimer's position is that in a globalized world the best way to have a national identity is to have an international one first; as multiculturalism is an enrichment, but not a threat. Here, one can posit in short that the notion of identity has reached a stage where it has to be represented in surpassing the monolithic national culture. There is a need at this era of globalization to devise an identity that crosses cultural barriers.

It is that idea of identity renewal that is echoed in *The Pickup*. Indeed, in the narrative, Gordimer brings to the fore an identity that originates from the intermingling of cultures. It is offered to us to see a society where individuals bear identities constructed at the confluence of cultures. And these kinds of identities built at the confluence of different cultures are the ones praised by Gordimer. For her, no reasoning individual can fix him/herself in a culture or environment that does not favor openness and connectedness. From such a point of view one can say that Bhabha's (1994) intention is to show that connectedness and openness lead individuals to a new kind of cultural hybridization.

In the online *Webster Dictionary* a hybrid is defined as a "person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions."² As it can be noticed, a hybrid person is the product of at least two or diverse cultures. Brian Stross (cited by Tahsildar Abir, 2013: pp. 29-30) in his article on the evolution of the term "hybrid," asserts: "a cultural hybrid... can be a person who represents the blending of traits from diverse cultures or traditions." In short, we can say that a cross-cultural identity is the one constructed or resulting from the combination of two or many cultures.

The first element that deserves to be probed in keeping with cross-cultural identity in the narrative is undoubtedly the protagonists *Julie Summer* and Abdu known also as *Ibrahim Ibn Musa*. In fact, they both hold an identity that rises beyond their places of origin. Julie, a girl from a western cultural background

²<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>, accessed on 10 July, 2018.

living in South Africa, got married with Abdu, an Arab Muslim coming from an unnamed Northern African country. To testify this hybrid relationship we can quote the following passage:

If you must live with me then we must marry. I cannot take a woman to my family, with us like this. (...) Two days before the aircraft took off they went to Magistrate's Court and before a marriage officer (Gordimer, 2001: p. 107).

What is more is that Julie, after her marriage with Abdu, travelled to her husband's country and started learning Arabic language and converted herself to Muslim religion. In the novel it is written: "I have to learn the language" (Gordimer, 2001: p. 121). We can also quote this:

Sutras, the footnotes said they were called. She read aloud to herself as if to hear in the natural emphasis of delivery which had been the passages come upon for life_ in these choices out of much advice and exhortation, inspiration, consolation people find in religious texts (Gordimer, 2001: p. 144).

Here, despite Julie's western beliefs and cultural identity, she is crossing those borders to set up a new selfhood. Therefore, it is worth saying that in this twentieth century with its increased emphasis on place and globalization, identity has to be thought in terms of hybridity and multiculturalism.

Besides the case of Julie, we have Abdu her husband whose constant attempts to leave his culture and his desire to live in the West places him in an "in-between" state, in which he oscillates between his intrinsic cultural and religious principles and those of the West. Abdu's cross cultural identity can be illustrated by this passage: "I was in America for a year some other country would have been better idea for me. I go where they'll let me in" (Gordimer, 2001: p. 12). Without any further delay, one may posit that Abdu holds an identity that results from the mixture of oriental and western cultures.

In analyzing all these cases of cultural hybridity that pervade the novel, I want to say that identity in our today's life must be seen as the water which spouses the different forms and the different colors of the recipient in which it is poured. Such a conception of identity reminds us these words from the famous actor Bruce Lee:

Empty your mind, you must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. Become like water my friend³.

From such an assertion, one can notice that the question of identity must be renewed and adapted to the new deal. The discourses of the past centuries have to be set off to forge new ones which are freed from nationalist homogeneities. It

³Lukas Schwekendiek, "What did Bruce Lee mean by his saying 'be like water'?" <https://www.quora.com/What-did-Bruce-Lee-mean-by-his-saying-be-like-water>, Accessed on 23 July, 2018.

has to be relocated in what Bhabha (1994: p. 168) terms the “Third space”. Bhabha believes that the postcolonial world should valorise spaces of mixing, because these spaces of hybridity offer the most profound challenge to colonialism. For him, hybridity represents the triumph of the postcolonial or the subaltern over western hegemony. Hybridity subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures.

Here, we have to perceive hybridity as a means to destabilize dominating powers, eliminate binaries, and provide voice to the subaltern. Bhabha asserts that the formation of hybridity “from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized, challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity” (Bhabha, cited in Paul Meredith, 1994: p. 2). He evokes the notion of “third” or “in-between” space that he likens to the metaphor of the stairwell, which represents connection between disparate cultures, and in which interaction takes place.

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identities opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994: p. 4).

Bhabha’s concept of hybridity will be important to cast away the colonial ways of defining identity that was limited to the national boundaries and reconsider the notion of identity taking into account the new cultural configurations imposed by our globalized world. So, we have to extend the use of the concept of hybridity from its colonial context to celebrate cultural blends, identities’ reconstruction, and border crossings in our global era. What I want the reader to grasp here is that the notion of identity should be shaped according to human beings’ needs that progress accordingly to time and spaces. Because, as Bhabha (1994: p. 1). asserts “it is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond” Bhabha perceives the “beyond” as a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (*Ibid*, p.4)

Furthermore, identity should not be taken as a fixed essence; neither permanent nor enduring, but tends to undergo changes and transformations through time and spaces. Identity is to be shaped and reshaped. A new sense of identity needs to be elaborated to emerge and transcend national, religious, ethnic and racial boundaries. The identity of individuals should not be confined in one nationality, one culture, one religion and one ethnic group. A position dear to Maalouf (1998: p. 110):

I do not dream of a world where religion no longer has room, but of a world where the need for spirituality is dissociated from the need for be-

longing. [...] Separating the Church from the State is no longer enough; just as important would be to separate the religious from the identity

What is more, it should be envisioned a new religious, the one who is eager to lay out moral and ethical actions than obeying to codes and taboos. In addition, the solution would be that belonging to the community appears as the major component of the identity: for the author, it is indispensable and seems to be the most apt to go beyond religious belonging like the others, without erasing them.

In other words, time is up for the whole humanity to reconsider the way it understands and displays identity. We should no longer be fearful of assimilating and espousing the cultural beliefs and practices of the host culture. That is to say, one should stop running away from the notion of hybridity put forth by Bhabha. I should like to say that we have to accommodate the identifiers of the individual to the current world order which is the global, like Bhabha says:

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation -that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. (op.cit. p.1)

In leaning on the assertion, I would like to draw the attention of the reader on the stakes of the new expressive ways of identity. Indeed, regarding the representation of identity in crossing culture, one is prompted to assert that it promotes the idea of cultural exchange.

His identity of uncivilized, marginal and dominated by the former colonizer is to be discarded. He should stop being considered as the other, but rather as a brother. Indeed, in our corpus we have the female main protagonist who teaches her English language to the Arab Ladies and in return learns their Arabic one.

To take a case in point, it is worth quoting the following passages:

Julie was teaching English not only to Maryam and the quiet young neighborhood girls and awkward boys who sidled into the lean-to whispering and making place for one another cross-legged on the floor. [...] she agreed—but in exchange for lessons in their language. (2001: pp.142-143)

It is important to notice that in accepting to relocate identities beyond our nativeness, it leads us to earn something new from the other. Gordimer herself underscores the value of the blossoming that cultural exchange promises to the whole humanity. She is herself the fruit of this cultural intermixture. In fact, she was born from a Jewish immigrant watchmaker from Žagarė now Lithuania, and her mother, Hannah "Nan" (Myers) Gordimer was an English woman from London. She suggests "there is no need to fear the various cultural intersections, exchanges and networks; no need to fear mixing with foreign cultures, as "all civilisations—including China and Japan—have been the result of clashes." (1999: p. 28). This cultural interdependence suggested by Gordimer, has to be considered as

a way to cope with any cultural hegemony, for if each culture is in a position of indebtedness vis-a-vis the other that will set up a state of esteem of culture difference.

What is more is that this ideas of cultural intersection appears in *The Pickup* under a more metaphorical and symbolic image. She lives in a formerly black part of town, drives a second hand car, works for a rock 'n roll agency and spends her leisure time with a multiracial and liberal circle of friends, the so called "Table".

Indeed, "The table" in the *Pickup* (2001: p. 23) is a symbolic place that deserves a particular attention in the narrative. "The Table" is a place where young people from different cultural, racial and social backgrounds meet and enjoy themselves and share ideas. Accordingly, we can quote the following passage:

She still joins the friends as usual at *The Table* to which she belongs—they are, after all, her elective siblings who have distanced themselves from the ways of the past, their families, whether these are black ones still living in the old ghettos or white ones in The Suburbs like one member who has adopted Buddhism as "a faith that is a way of life not a bellicose ethnicity. (p. 23)

"*The table*", as a symbol, is to be read as a place teaching interconnectedness and multiculturalism. It is a new "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) in which identity is not defined in terms of purity and uniformity, but rather on the basis of difference and heterogeneity. It is a society in miniature in which Gordimer promotes "the ethic of mutual enrichment" (*Idem*, p. 209).

In other words, the symbolism of "*The table*" in *The Pickup*, is an invitation to create a world in which it should be put forward the rendez-vous of the give and take of cultural, racial and social values. A rendez-vous where there is no minor, nor advanced culture to phagocytose the others, but a convivial place where all type of cultures is accepted and respected with its strengths and weaknesses. Because according to Gordimer's own words "whatever you do, love, whatever happens, hits you, mate, Bra, that's all right with me." (p. 23) Henceforth one has to keep in mind that despite the differences that separate the ones from the others, in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, religion and social origin, the most important thing is the "Dasein" (Heidegger, 1964) for as human beings, we are all brothers.

In this sense, hybrid individuals seem to play a key role: that of hyphens or mediators in the era of globalization, such a new conception of identity is essential for all. Now, "to go resolutely to the other, you must have your arms open and your head high, and you can only have your arms open if you have your head up" (2001: p. 53).

The same idea is evoked by Bhabha while talking about stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, [which] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white (op.cit., p. 4). This view point consolidates that

of Norton when he says: “Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity” (Norton 350). To paraphrase Bourdieu, the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. That is to say identity must be perceived as the sum of all our affiliations, and in which belonging to the human community would take more and more importance, until one day we become the main membership, without erasing our multiple particular belongings. Identity is a process, not a fixity that binds us “to something larger than ourselves”. That space includes the space of national borders and above.

4. Conclusion

In conducting this article according to post-colonial theories and Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, I have decided to contribute first and foremost, to enable the evaluation of the effects of globalization on national or intrinsic identities. Then, to shed light on the idea that identity is not a static and completed entity, but rather in perpetual reconstruction, as such *The Pickup* is surely one of the post-apartheid novel that satisfies with a high sense of responsibility questions of global identity—cross cultural identity—transracial identity—multiculturalism and the flexible nature of identity. In addition, it is a serious contribution of literature in helping readers and South Africans to come to better understanding, acceptance and tolerance by examining identity as a global issue but not as narrow or national issue.

In this era of globalization like the one depicted by Gordimer, identity should be rethought as a fluctuating issue, rather than a fixed and static essence. Therefore, it should be privileged hybrid and global identities. That is to say, identities are constructed from the combination of different cultures. To paraphrase Bhabha (1994) “those located in the between or the third space”. For Bhabha it is such kind of identity emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence (*Idem*, p. 9).

Finally, it may enable to lead humanity to understand and accept the new conceptions of identity induced by globalization. South Africa is particularly invited to make of its specificity a strength. The fact of having different cultures sharing the same area can be seen as a richness, but not a malediction.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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