

**Racial Discrimination in Nadine Gordimer's
A Sport of Nature and *The Pickup***

M. Mallika, M.A., M.Phil.



Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014)

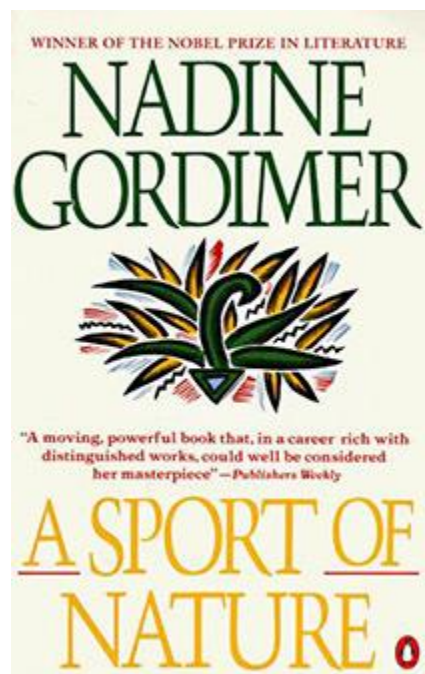
Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadine_Gordimer

Abstract

Nadine Gordimer, the African Nobel Laureate for 1991 represents the multicultural reality of South Africa as she herself is an heir to more than one cultural tradition. Gordimer's novels offer an insight into the most crucial period of South Africa's history. Her writing career ran parallel to the era of apartheid in South Africa. A majority of Gordimer's works are

variations on racial conflict and this conflict transposed from observation to a psychological level that leaves both blacks and whites uncertain about their position. The paper is entitled “Racial Discrimination in Nadine Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature* and *The Pickup*”. Gordimer’s ninth novel, *A Sport of Nature* deals with her native land and with the emerging black leadership of surrounding states and with the ways in which human beings survive physically, emotionally and morally under a struggle against racism and injustice. As a novel of cultural transition, *The Pickup* reflects power shifts in private and public domain through a chance encounter between Julie, the privileged daughter of investment banker and Abdu, an Arab mechanic who allows the author to examine immigration and cultural conflict. Thus racial misunderstanding is loudly pronounced in Gordimer’s different novels. As a committed writer, Gordimer’s interpretive function that determines her policy of representation stems from her anti-colonial ideology.

Racial Discrimination in Nadine Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature* and *The Pickup*



African literature in the late colonial period showed themes of liberation, independence, and (among Africans in French-controlled territories) negritude. In 1948, the National Party gained power in South Africa. It was all-white government immediately enforcing existing legal policies of racial segregation under a system of legislation that it called apartheid. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning ‘separateness’ or ‘separate development’. Separate development was

primarily based on land; the long conflict between Africans and whites was settled with the military defeat of the Africans. Hence- forth land would be unilaterally allocated by a white government representing white interests. The official evidence underlying apartheid was that South African people were stiffly divided into “Whites,” (all Europeans) “Blacks,” “Coloureds” (people of mixed race) and “Asians” (Indians and Pakistanis who had been brought to South Africa as labourers). Nelson Mandela defines apartheid:

Apartheid is the embodiment of the racialism, repression and inhumanity of all previous white supremacist regimes. To see the real face of apartheid we must look beneath the veil of constitutional formulas, deceptive phrases and playing with words. (SML 190)

A Representative Voice from South Africa

Nadine Gordimer is recognized all over the world as a representative voice from South Africa who bravely reveals the political turmoil, social segregation of the people and examination of the effects of the apartheid system, on the entire population of the Whites, the Blacks and the Coloureds of South Africa. Gordimer as a Novelist, essayist, screenwriter, political activist and champion of the disenfranchised, has written fourteen novels and published a number of essays and short story collections.

Gordimer’s South Africa is a plural society that reveals a vertical split. The pervading Manichean binaries of white/black, master/slave, powerful/powerless, hegemonic/subversive, reactionary/revolutionary, ruler/ruled, urban/rural, make an interminable play of endless significations in the South African context.

A Sport of Nature

To those who suffer from apartheid conditions - whether they are racial, political or gender related – Nadine Gordimer offers a solution. Having grown up in South Africa, she well understands the pain, the confusion, and the unfairness that exist in such situations of discriminatory separation. In her novel *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer illustrates her revolutionary solution to resolving the biases ingrained in apartheid life: total union in a hybrid marriage.

Gordimer's proposal is an entirely new genre of marriage—a marriage in a category all its own, which cannot be restricted or classified. Hybrid marriage literally entails a pledging and intertwining of minds and souls, leaving behind selfish jealousies and in their place forging brotherhood, camaraderie, and kinship between partners.

Implementing Gordimer's claim to resolve apartheid differences through marriage mandates that one who would dismantle apartheid must hybridize his or her established perceptions of life. Marriage first requires the transcending hybrid to see beyond and accept values outside of the conventional, capitalist, bourgeois belief structure of his or her birth. The second is requirement concerning gender: a Hybrid must thoroughly re-script the traditional role of the female body to create conditions of unity between cultures, colours, and races in order to produce parallel gender roles within marriage. Third, the new marriage requires the Hybrid to gain an understanding of untainted charity and a willingness to serve the family of humanity. Such charity requires one to bear with patience, society's reprimands for discarding traditions and transgressing cultural taboos in favour of a higher version.

A Sport of Nature deals with Gordimer's native land and with the emerging black leadership of surrounding states and with the ways in which human beings survive physically, emotionally and morally under a struggle against racism and injustice.

Apartheid Regimes

By nature apartheid regimes are based on bodily, physical discrimination – as made evident through apartheid laws that oppress black African physical features, through border disputes based on culture and regional stereotypes, and through gender discrimination and repression. Since the body plays such an integral role in apartheid's existence, it stands to reason that apartheid must be destroyed through physical means. This happens particularly through dismantling the beliefs and practices of bourgeois family. Gordimer implies in her novel that the key to harnessing those physical means lies within marriage – both metaphorical and material. She illustrates this with the evolution of woman, Hillela Capran – who finally achieves a

marriage that effectively combats apartheid and serves as both a physical and spiritual model for whites in Africa because of her hybrid nature.

Abnormal Variation

The title *A Sport of Nature* comes from the translated Latin term 'Lusus Naturae'. Oxford English Dictionary defines *A Sport of Nature* as "A plant or animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type . . . a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way". Hillela is the sport of nature in this novel and the whole story revolves around her. She is a beautiful girl but naively unaware of the reactions of those around her to her powerful presence: she is Jewish White South African whose 'Spantaneous mutation' causes her to break the taboos of the tribe.

Gordimer's novel is fused with the yearning for a free South Africa. The tensions between the mixed race couples of Gordimer's preceding novels are resolved in this novel. She terms Hillela's exile:

On the bare boards of this no-place, no-time, she was an assertion of here and now in the provisionality of exile, whose inhabitants are strung between the rejected past and a future fashioned like a paper aeroplane out of manifestos and declarations. (SN 230)

Transition to a Politically Conscious Activist

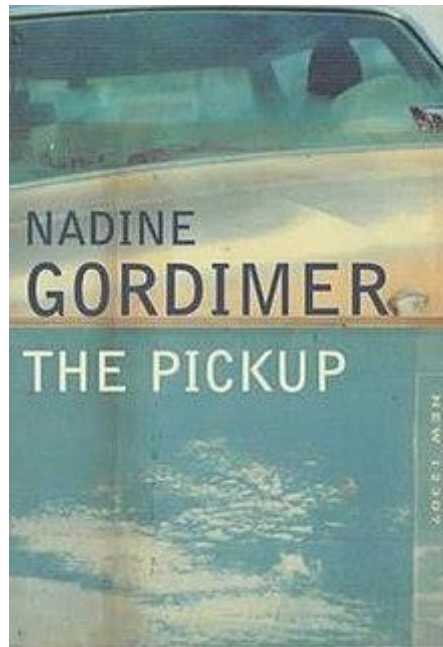
The real point of transition from Hillela's life as a drifting teenager to a politically conscious activist occurs with her marriage to Whaila Kgomani, a powerful fugitive leader in the black revolution that aims to overthrow the apartheid regime. Hillela and Whaila's marriage is one of the embracing of otherness through a literal union of races, as they become the most dramatically striking couple among the revolutionaries. It is not, however, until Whaila shares the plans for a top-secret guerrilla infiltration of South Africa with Hillela following a lovemaking episode that they symbolically clasp hands in kinship. This indicates symbolically that though their marriage is one of procreation-Hillela is already pregnant with their second child at this point-it is also a union of colours and a site of friendship. In this marriage, Hillela

expresses an open fascination with their differences of skin colour. While white liberals would probably seek to ignore differences in colour, and the apartheid regime would exaggerate those differences, Hillela creates a category for herself: one of appreciating colour differences. She unabashedly explores Whaila's body and compares it with her own, watching and swelling within her pregnant belly with fascination as she speculates what colour their child will be. Revolutionary Hillela declares,

“I love not knowing what it will be. What colour it is, already here inside me. Our colour.-She buries her head on his belly”.

Our colour. She cannot see the dolour that relaxes his face, closes his eyes and leaves only his mouth drawn tight by lines on either side. Our colour. A category that doesn't exist: she would invent it. There are Hotnots and half-castes, two-coffee-one-milk, touch-of-the-tar-brush, pure white, black is beautiful – but a creature made of love, without a label; that's a freak. (SN 227)

In Hillela, Gordimer takes to an extreme level her thoughtfulness of the fundamental political potential which embodies Hillela's personal advancement, and her influence upon others is expressed at every stage of the novel. Gordimer's characters recurrently dwell on physical difference; this is an important feature of Hillela. She is knowledgeable about racial difference and is supportive of interracial harmony, which depends upon an initial celebration of racial distinction instead of repudiating it. Such a celebration is made possible by Hillela's sensuality.



The Pickup

In *The Pickup*, the theme of identity is examined from a new and interesting perspective that is in line with the political transformation of South Africa. The story takes place in two radically different settings. In the first part, Abdu is an illegal migrant in a South African city. Julie who picks him up is a native there. In the second part, the couple fly to Abdu's (now, Ibrahim's) country, and this time Julie feels as a stranger there. The story has a reverse structure. In the first part, Abdu is an outsider and, in the second part, Julie. Abdu craves for Julie's life and vice versa. However, they both try to dispense with their past and look forward to starting over. Generally, this is a stimulus to migrate. Although the characters are radically different people, they each seem to be a complementary part of the other, supplying mutual needs or compensating for mutual lacks. Moreover, there is a mutual exploitation of the other: Abdu picks up Julie to remain an immigrant in South Africa, Julie picks up Abdu to experience the exotic and to start the quest for herself. Regardless of the fact that her family and friends see him as a disguised "grease monkey" (TP 15) without a name, working at a garage, Julie sees him as her 'oriental prince', an exotic other. The Arab man accepts the two identities and acts accordingly, depending on the social situations he encounters. He even assumes the nick name he is given, admitting that there is no longer any sense in playing the "grease-monkey" (TP 71). He feels like

a prince with a spell cast upon him every time he is able to free himself from his monkey suit, that is, his working overalls.

Identity on Various Levels

Gordimer develops her theme of identity (on various levels) by narrating the story of the two young lovers, Julie Summers and Abdu (Ibrahim ibn Musa) – Julie being a young publicist from an affluent, prestigious white family and Abdu, a dark-skinned illegal immigrant who holds a degree in Economics but works as a motor mechanic to prevent detection and deportation. The setting is initially contemporary Johannesburg, where Julie lives in a cosmopolitan environment but the setting then moves to a small town in the desert (most probably in Northern Africa) when Ibrahim is forced to leave the country and Julie accompanies him as his wife.

Abdu and Julie are two completely different characters. They come from two diametrically opposed worlds with totally different cultures but are bound together by love or perhaps sexual attraction. Moreover, the story is narrated against two virtually opposed settings, cosmopolitan Johannesburg and a small desert town. This chapter investigates the various aspects that bind the two protagonists together while in South Africa, before examining changes in their identities and relationship when they stay with Ibrahim's extended family in his home country.

The opening of the novel depicts a scene of complete cultural diversity. In the cosmopolitan society in which Julie moves, racial differences fade away completely while gender identities too are treated with ambiguity, in that characters at times act in a traditional way while they sometimes break away from traditionally assigned gender identities. The opening lines of the novel depict a scene where Julie's car breaks down and she has to obtain assistance from bystanders. The power relations between men and women depicted in the first lines of the text are typical:

Clustered predators round a kill. It's a small car with a young woman inside it. The battery has failed and taxis, cars, minibuses, vans, motorcycles butt and challenge one another, reproach and curse her . . . Get going. Stupid bloody

woman. Idikazana lomlungu, le! . . . She throws up hands, palms open, in surrender. They continue to jostle and blare their impatience. (TP 3)

Silencing of Abdu

Another passage of the novel that reveals the silencing of Abdu is the scene in which the couple goes to Julie's father's dinner and he is not regarded by his name, but as "Someone" (TP 40). In this passage, Abdu reaches such an ultimate place of displacement in terms of global citizenship that he is not even treated throughout this passage by his name, but as "Someone" by Gordimer's narrator. Julie also feels uncomfortable for being in the middle of her father's friends. The dinner episode starts when Abdu insistently asks her to take him to meet her family. Although Julie is not willing to visit her father, Abdu insists on meeting him as they have been together for some time. Against her will, she consents, but she does not call on her father Nigel Ackroyd Summers: she waits for his next Sunday lunch invitation and "says she will bring someone along" (TP 39). In the passage in which Julie and Abdu go to her father's dinner, she sees a black couple among the guests – an unusual situation for her father's standards. She calls her father who accepts immediately while she hardly gives news about her life. Then, she explains to Abdu that it is a good idea to observe some convention for guests – even if she is supposed not to be a guest in her own father's house, her "'Someone' is – so on the way she asks him to stop the car at a corner where a flower-seller has a pitch, and she buys a bunch of roses" (TP 39-40).

Julie

Julie's relationship with Abdu certainly plays a major role in her transformation, which leads to a process of boundary-crossing between spaces and cultures. Julie's belief is constantly challenged by her lover. Abdu asks why Julie chooses those friends instead of people like her family who prefer making progress than "just talking intelligent" (TP 62). After the deportation order is issued to Abdu, Julie reluctantly seeks out a Senior Counsel for help. Nevertheless, the Senior Counsel severely criticizes the illegality of Abdu's status, eradicating any hope for Abdu to remain in South Africa. He also implies condescendingly that Julie, on the other hand, is able to choose where to be a global citizen. And when it comes to grounding herself in a place, she

does not care about her Western family, even with the strong attempts of her father, who tries to persuade her not to go to the East with arguments against Abdu, who is being deported, and his country:

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. (TP 98)

Ibrahim is the wrong guy for Julie. Immediately, Julie is full of resentment towards the Senior Counsel and the upper class he represents: “the famous lawyer is one of *them*, her father's people . . . it doesn't help at all that he is black; he's been one of their victims, he's one of *them* now” (TP 80).

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Choice of Language

It is interesting to notice how Julie is thus compared to an immigrant in an under developed country as she cannot have the same profession she had in her hometown. One relevant aspect that links the two characters is the fact that they both want to speak each other's

language to feel part of each other's world. On one hand, Julie affirms: "talk to me. You'll see. We must use your language together . . ." stating that language could be a link between them (TP 151). This suggests her desire to construct herself as being on his side – the side of otherness which he refuses – although her friends in the West called him her 'pickup', Julie's desire for his otherness rather than for him reveals that she is the 'pickup', on the back of his supposedly unproblematic, homogeneous (desert-like) culture. On the other hand, Abdu affirms: "we must talk English. I need to speak English. I must speak English with you if I am going to get a decent job anywhere. I can be able to study some more there. Only with English" (TP 152). Abdu also wanted to speak her language (as eagerly as she wanted to speak his), but he clearly has an interest to acquire English in order to have better opportunities in other countries, to get out of his village and have access to what Julie already has: money, permission to go wherever he wants, better work conditions, among others.

Racial Misunderstanding

Thus, racial misunderstanding is loudly pronounced in Gordimer's different novels. As a committed writer, Gordimer's interpretive function that determines her policy of representation stems from her anti-colonial ideology. She criticizes the colonial apartheid for imposing the color bar on the people, privileging the minority and depriving the majority. She criticizes this policy, which maintains the priority of preserving the interests of whites in ruling South Africa. Further, the whites maintain the regime's unique official, racial, and ethnic identities, ensuring the separation of the different racial and ethnic classes.

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M. Mallika, M.A., M.Phil.

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M. Mallika, M.A., M.Phil.
Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women
Thiruthangal Road
Sivakasi - 626123
Tamil Nadu
India
Mallikapommu.ma@gmail.com