

## THEMATIC CONCERNS OF THE POST-APARTHEID NOVELS OF NADINE GORDIMER AND J M COETZEE

By

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### Abstract

*South African texts published after the first democratic elections in 1994 are commonly referred to as post-apartheid literature because, despite the lingering after-effects of the former political system, this event marked the eradication of legalized racial segregation. Post-apartheid writing is marked by an abrupt shift away from a racial focus towards a wider concern with all the many and various dimensions of human existence. The end of apartheid witnessed the emergence of new social problems that writers have attempted to confront in their works. This major political shift prompts many questions. What happens to the many committed writers who used to denounce political oppression in their texts? What themes do they take up? Whether the South African writers would be able to adjust their writing to the new political climate, since the end of racial oppression implies liberation from the old racial discourse. How different will their literature be from the literature written during the apartheid period? This paper tries to explore these possibilities. The paper tries to analyze critically the different themes and topics of South African novelists-Nadine Gordimer and J M Coetzee-and a thorough study of their novels-Disgrace and The Pick Up-written during this period looking for the new dimensions and new themes that they focus on.*

**Keywords:** *post-apartheid, themes, racism, oppression, social evils*

### Introduction

The focus shifted all of a sudden from racial concerns towards wider concepts with different kinds of human survival in the works of Post-apartheid writings. The writings were considered as 'black' and 'white' during the apartheid regime. Nowadays, it is referred to as Zulu literature, or

Afrikaans, or Xhosa or English. The language used by these writers is making a huge difference and impact in the Post-apartheid era. The end of apartheid in 1994 gave writers much anticipated and much-awaited liberty of expression, and also, a chance to view life as a whole, instead of brooding over the same old social evil of apartheid.

The Population Registration Act of 1950 formalized the racial classification and identity card was made compulsory for all the adult citizens mentioning their racial identity. Many coloured people, belonging to one family, were divided as there were no specific rules or regulations about their ethnic identity and they were allocated into different races. The Group Areas Act of 1950 divided the living establishments as different races were not allowed to live in the same locality. Each race was allotted one specific area. The Prohibitions of Mixed Marriage Act of 1949 didn't allow any mixed-race marriages and The Immorality Act of 1950 considered any kind of physical relationship with a person of another race a punishable offence. In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, where Lucy, a White woman willingly marries the Black man, for the sake of protection, indicates the vanity of all those laws and practices. Gordimer's *The Pick Up* also asserts about the violations of these laws after apartheid to show the meaninglessness of such legal sanctions during the apartheid period.

Apartheid had a big impact along with Colonialism on women as they suffered on either side of racism and gender. African women had almost no rights or

access to education or even to own any property. Many African women worked as agricultural labourers or domestic workers as other kinds of jobs were not easy to get. The Natives Urban Act of 1923 and the pass-laws separated the family members, as men usually worked in city and women were forced to stay in rural areas, which we can descry in Gordimer's *July's People*.

### Thematic Concerns

Writers like Nadine Gordimer and J M Coetzee played a major role in bringing the heinous condition of apartheid rule by portraying the life of common man under the regime. They allured global attention then, and the same authors also exposed life after apartheid in South Africa. There is a shift of thematic concern in post-apartheid writings. The *Race* was the main theme during apartheid but the themes of *poverty, rape, crime, bloodshed, immigration, responsibility, desire and revenge* were some of the themes of post-apartheid writings.

*Disgrace* was appreciated for its ruthless honesty but it was opposed vehemently in South Africa as many members of the ruling party felt that it portrayed a high sense of pessimism. *Disgrace* is a post-apartheid novel,

where the constitution had given equal rights to each individual, abolishing all the apartheid legislation, which can be seen Lucy (the white) marrying Petrus (the Black)

*Post-apartheid South Africa was by no means idyllic*, however, violence increased significantly in the country. Incidents of car jackings escalated, and many commercial farmers either emigrated or gave up farming because of violence committed against them. From 1989 to 1994 the murder rate doubled, and a young South African woman could be expected to be raped twice in her lifetime on average. (Dodd, 330)

The changing scenario of post-apartheid was not a welcome to many white landlords whose life was always in danger as can be seen with Lucy's life. Many of them moved out of Johannesburg or emigrated, as another choice offered to Lucy by her father, which she rejects. Coetzee seems to suggest that South Africa is the land to which his people belonged and they must survive here with all sorts of adjustments.

Coetzee inserts phrases in Afrikaans, German, Italian, Latin, and French in

the text. David Lurie, a Professor of Romantic Poetry, also speaks about the Romantics in his conversation but was finally made to teach only communications. Coetzee seems to suggest the change that one has to accept, suggesting the end of that romantic era (apartheid) for the whites, if anyone wants to continue in Post-Apartheid South Africa.

Lurie's language is just one symptom of his detachment from South African society. In the country, the people of the land (the majority) speak Xhosa, and Lurie's opera and philosophy does not matter. Lurie is a man of exile. With two divorces behind him, Lurie at the age of fifty-two has not been able to sustain an intimate relationship.

The legacy of apartheid has not completely rooted out of South Africa. The remnants of it were still haunting the country. Robbery, vandalism and rape were common occurrences immediately after 1994 and *Disgrace*, a post-apartheid work was published in 1995. J.M. Coetzee brings racial tensions to the forefront of the novel when David Lurie arrives in Salem. His daughter, Lucy, is one of the few white farmers remaining in the region. An African named Petrus, lives next to her property, tending the garden and

helping with the farm. He is in a subservient position. The racial dynamics become more strained when Petrus is implicated in indirectly facilitating a robbery on her land. He disappears when three men attack and come back with building supplies to renovate his new house. The division becomes clear when Lurie confronts Petrus. The end of the novel, however, does not allow for such a clear distinction when Lucy becomes pregnant with one of the robbers' children and thus becomes a part of Petrus' family, though unwillingly. The crimes of history haunt the present. A nation conceived in hatred gives rise to more hatred. It's violence-under which white farmers suffer; post-apartheid-is the natural result of prior unjust policies toward blacks. Rape begets rape. Hate begets hate.

The love for land is something that is very special for Lucy, for which she becomes a third wife to an African when she had every chance to get out the country or that place. This is something that Coetzee seems to be presenting to the next generation that immigration is not the only option for the Whites. Lurie, incapable of redeeming himself for crimes that seem to follow from his very being, resigns himself to bringing dignity to

dead dogs. Each shoulders his or her disgrace, resigned to live for small private satisfactions in a wounded nation.

Coetzee's novel seems to suggest that there is colonial society which is caught between the past and the present. The colonized has gained power and the colonizer has lost the power, who should accept the reality and continue life without any bitter feelings, which can be seen through the acceptance of life as it comes to Lucy and Lurie. Nadine Gordimer seems to have understood this fact way ahead of Coetzee which is depicted in her novel *July's People* in 1981, where a white couple runs away to the slave country in order to escape the brutality against them by the blacks. It is remarkable to see that white and black children get along very well and there seems to be no discrimination at all in their life and games that they played in July's village. Probably Gordimer suggests the ways of future for the whites towards the fag end of apartheid era in South Africa.

After the release of Nelson Mandela, the question of every literary critic was just one- what will a creative writer now choose to write on? Especially writers like Nadine Gordimer, the prime opponent of Apartheid regime,

who criticized it vehemently, as a white author. *The Pick Up* is the right answer for those critics. Gordimer seems to have many more themes to ponder upon in her works in post-apartheid era too. Conflict of desire and responsibility being a major theme along with immigration, a new concept for the whites after 1994.

The novel begins in South Africa where Julie, the white, meets Abdu, an illegal immigrant from an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Abdu was not excited in any kind of relationship as his intention was very clear from the beginning that he wanted to get out of his home country and make a living anywhere,, anyhow. Lucie marries him and he was deported to his country, much against his wish. She was determined to carve her way in life, free from her overbearing father's money.

*The Pick Up* is a novel where both the protagonists try to escape from their realities to an exploration of freedom, love, responsibility and identity. All these are the themes for any writer at the end of 20 century. *The Pick Up* begins in an unnamed country that is clearly South Africa, where Julie Summers, a young publicist from an affluent, prestigious white family, sets

her sights on the dark-skinned foreigner who has repaired her car. Abdu (or, as she learns much later, Ibrahim Ibn Musa) stands out dramatically from her usual circle of cohorts, a group of like-minded intellectuals, poets, and freethinkers, identified collectively as The Table, who meet daily at the EL-AY Café. The open-minded and seemingly worry-free Julie invites a serious, reserved, and cautious Abdu to join the life of The Table. As Julie and Abdu become lovers, we learn that he is an illegal immigrant who is working as a mechanic only because he can do so unofficially. We also learn that Julie despises and is embarrassed by her father's capitalistic values and privileged lifestyle, the "beautiful terrace of her father's house" that "she didn't care to call... home" (TPU, 138). But it is precise to her father's lifestyle that Abdu aspires. As an "insider," Julie wants out; as an "outsider," Abdu wants in.

Lucy comes to the Middle Eastern country with Abdu, where she has to live in a big family, which she had never pined for. She was a single child of divorced parents. She embraces this life as a challenge and adopts surprisingly well, whereas Abdu has been trying to get out of his homeland

to any other country. Gordimer has taken up the global issue of immigration which was a hot topic for many South Africans after 1994. Gordimer also touches deftly on the entire range of questions raised by cross-cultural relationships - from the intimate and domestic to the broad and metaphysical ones of religion and identity. She also provides a fascinating study of how two people who love each other can fail utterly to understand one another.

Their mutual attraction is also very strange like their motives behind it. Julie wants to escape from her affluence whereas Abdu is searching for the same. In the course of their relationship, there are unpredictable consequences, and overwhelming emotions will overturn each one's notion of the other. Set in the new South Africa and in an Arab village in the desert, *The Pick Up* is

"a masterpiece of creative empathy . . . a gripping tale of contemporary anguish and unexpected desire, and it also opens the Arab world to unusually nuanced perception" (Edward W. Said, 6).

The Complex relationship between Julie and Abdu is a reflection of our

global trend in human relationships- each with his or her unique attempt to create an identity of one's own. It is not exactly loved as there is some kind of desire and responsibility, more with Abdu, and Julie wants to escape from her life. Desire and responsibility continuously come into conflict with each other. Abdu can't help considering Julie's relationship with him "another of the adventures she prided herself on being far enough from her father's beautiful house always to be ready for" (TPU, 112). Yet he "felt something unwanted...he felt a responsibility—that's it—responsibility for her. Though he had none" (TPU, 173-174). Gordimer introduces a twist in the story at the end of the novel- the plot of which is archaic- the Boy meets the girl- but nothing changes even after that; nothing is the same ever again.

There is a bond which keeps their relationship going- a powerful erotic tension. The goals and values of each have a widening gap. Julie has been attracted by the kind of life that Abdu and his family are leading into which she wanted to plunge in and Abdu is attracted by the kind of life that Julie wants to escape. In spite of their differences, the bond continues till Julie reaches Middle Eastern county with Abdu. She establishes a bond with his

family and seems to be settling down with ease and comfort. Strange new world, culture, religion and status that she encounters seems to fascinate her the most.

When the couple arrives in Ibrahim's homeland—for, from this point of the novel onward he is referred to by his real name, Ibrahim—the unnamed desert country emerges as an oasis for Julie, while remaining for Ibrahim a place he desperately aspires to escape. Ibrahim is not convinced that his country is anything more to Julie than the location of another of her adventures, but Julie prides in it the kind of home that neither her father nor even The Table could provide:

"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" (TPU, 187).

Most important member of Ibrahim's family, for Julie, is his mother. With her simple faith and humble nature, she allures Julie who had longed for a family like this with its warmth (missed by all modern affluent

children) and care of a human being. Gordimer has touched another important theme of alienation which is common among all the affluent boys and girls. Julie has found some meaning to her aimless life in Ibrahim's family and she even begins to take up household chores to gain some dignity and respect of the family. She opposes Ibrahim's plans of getting out this country. Julie matures and finds her comfort in the family ties and bonds, for which she has been yearning throughout her life in South Africa. She has become more cognizant of reality than her agitated husband. Gordimer handles these psychological nuances with understated finesse.

Gordimer addresses the theme of religion with great nuance, contrasting, on the one hand, the mechanical call-to-prayer that breaks the reflective silence of Julie's early morning desert walks with, on the other, the way the religious life in Ibrahim's family contributes to a web of care and to the significance of daily life, neither of which Julie has ever felt to this degree.

The novel concludes with Ibrahim leaving for America and Julie stays back- each finding own ways of gratification. Gordimer does not

endorse any view but allows the readers to form their own conclusions. The novel has an open ending. Despite their intimacy, Julie and Abdu remain, strangers, as they try to find out their ways of finding solace and peace of mind, each in its unique way. Both of them never try to understand each other, instead follow their own journey on parallel lines, but in opposite directions.

*The Pick Up* is one of Gordimer's novel which is rich in meaning and motifs as it explores different themes of race, culture, identity, the divide between rich and poor and east and west, and immigration. But Gordimer has underplayed all these allowing the

readers to build their own meanings and interpretations. But this is a demanding read, one that requires plenty of space and time to digest properly.

### Conclusion

Both the novelists have tread upon different themes of global importance. These two writers have proved that there is no deficiency of themes in post-apartheid South Africa. The change in perspective of these writers suggests that life continues in both the situations with people coming across many new challenges, for which they must adapt and go on.

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