

## Cultural Collisions: Unpacking Identities in Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of cultural and social backgrounds as portrayed in Nadine Gordimer's novel, *The Pickup*, set against diverse cultural landscapes, the narrative unfolds with characters grappling with the complexities of varying norms, values, and traditions. This abstract aims to unravel the impact of cultural collisions on individual identities and interpersonal relationships within the storyline. It explores the tension between personal histories and societal frameworks, shedding light on how characters construct, negotiate, and sometimes transform their cultural identities in response to societal expectations. Through an in-depth analysis of character interactions, linguistic nuances, and narrative contexts, the study unveils themes of migration, assimilation, and resistance. It emphasises Gordimer's adept portrayal of cultural collisions as catalysts for self-discovery and societal critique. In conclusion, this abstract provides a key to understanding the intricate tapestry of identities woven into Gordimer's novel, offering profound insights into the universal human experience of navigating cultural and social complexities.

**Key Words:** Cultural collisions, Identities, Diversity, Migration, Resistance

Throughout history, people have traversed the globe, engaging with those of diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Many have chosen to settle in foreign lands, establishing homes and families, often with individuals whose upbringings starkly differ from their own. The potential consequence of such unions is the struggle to maintain relationships due to disparities in thinking, influenced by distinct social and cultural origins. Exploring how these backgrounds impact an individual is a captivating endeavour. Nadine Gordimer's novel, *The Pickup*, delves into the love shared between Julie and Abdu, individuals hailing from disparate cultural and social realms. The narrative unfolds the interactions between a middle-class, white South African woman and a working-class Arabic man, prompting an exploration of how their backgrounds shape their actions, thoughts, and behaviours. The central argument posits that their distinct upbringings lead to divergent behaviours; nonetheless, instances arise where they exhibit shared actions. This duality prompts introspection, encouraging contemplation on their conduct and the implications of their

circumstances. Consequently, the study also delves into the notion that differences can serve as assets, providing couples with positive new perspectives.

This novel highlights the significant impact of cultural and social backgrounds on individual identities. Drawing from Steven Lynn's perspective in *Texts and Contexts*, the argument is made that cultural values shape human beings. This **chapter** employs a cultural study lens to analyse the main characters, emphasising that while background influences behaviour, it isn't the sole determinant; personality and other factors also play a role. Cultural background encompasses religion, exemplified by the importance of Islam in Abdu's life, along with national values like Arabic and white South African values in **The Pickup**. Social background, involving family structures, friends, class, and living standards, further shapes characters. The characters' actions reveal a nuanced interplay between cultural and social backgrounds, contributing to the intricate tapestry of identity in the novel. It reveals through the words of Lyn as the following: "it can be argued from a cultural studies point of view that human beings are shaped by the underlying assumptions and values of a culture" (152).

Julie, a white South African woman, is one of **the** two protagonists in the novel and the character with whom the novel begins. Julie shows her affection and emotion openly because for her and her friends showing emotions in public is normal, they always do so. This is nothing 'wrong' or embarrassing among her friends. Julie does not have strong family bond **that** is why when a problem arises she first asks her **friends' advice** and not one of her parents. Thus, it is her friends that are her stability and security, not her own family. She also asks her uncle Arabic for help because she feels comfortable with him, she feels he knows and understands her better than her own parents. Her poor relationship with her parents is also demonstrated by her inability to speak directly to them even about daily matters. She cannot even ask her father if everything is alright with him, instead she simply gazes at him **when** she wants to ask him this simple question. This is because she feels she cannot be herself with her father. **She** grows up wanting to become a lawyer, but due to various factors, she does not end up doing this, instead she finds herself working as a PRO and as fundraiser, attending various benefit dinners and celebrity concerts. However, she is not happy with these jobs and she **wants** to do something else, but she is not sure of what. Partly because of her unhappiness with her job situation, Julie decides to follow husband Abdu to his country to start a new life.

Julie is adventurous and unafraid, she does not mind **taking** certain risks such as travelling to countries which she has never heard before. She also likes to camp out in 'wild' Africa, in the outback. There in the outback, she and her friends live the simplest of lives, bringing with them only absolutely necessary equipment.

I have camped out all over stayed in the villages, you know my **friends-we** didn't exactly look for tiled bathrooms. His eye brow twitched with impatience. You don't know this; She was overcome with love for him. He is in shock, coming back home.

She must make light of his irritation with her. Ibrahim.... .so what to do?. She laughed alone. She enthusiastically answer simply by all **at once**. (111)

Even though she is a rich man's, she has experienced simplicity and she does not feel the need for luxuries. Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* that Julie has distanced herself from middle-class background which is manifested by the fact that she for example drives a second hand car and lives in a non-luxuries apartment in a former **black** part of her town. Furthermore, although Julie was used to being surrounded by luxury when growing up, she feels completely content in her husband Abdu's family even with the smallest of things in exchange for unconditional love from Abdu's family. Sue Kossew states in her article **Nadine Gordimer**, "*The Pickup* that Julie had too little love in her upbringing therefore Julie feels comfortable in Abdu's family" (1).

In Abdu's country, the significance of family as the cornerstone of individuals' lives stands in stark contrast to Julie's South Africa, where family bonds hold less importance. South Africa is often perceived as a Western country due to its shared features with Western nations like the USA. Barry, Elliot, and Evans assert that "western countries are individualistic" (134), a characteristic evident in Julie's **behaviour** and personality. Julie's actions align with a sense of individualism, evident in her decision to travel to Abdu's country alone, without the company of her friends. Raised to be independent, her parents' long-standing divorce may have contributed to her inclination towards self-reliance. Julie's minor identity crisis is understandable, given these factors. Moreover, the fact that her mother resides in a non-native country reinforces Julie's belief in possibilities. This suggests that she can not only survive but also thrive in a country that is not her own, **emphasising** her adaptability and resilience.

Due to her background, Julie possesses a form of influence derived from financial resources and her white ethnicity. Although not immensely wealthy herself, being the "rich man's only daughter" (212) grants her access to substantial family wealth. This financial power enables Julie to shape a better future for herself, her husband, and his extended family. For instance, she funds the drilling of a well for water, allowing the community to establish a rice plantation, of which Julie becomes the owner. Additionally, her financial means support her journey to Abdu's country, covering flight expenses for both herself and Abdu. However, in Abdu's town, Julie must find alternative sources of income, as her wealth is the primary financial resource. Another facet of Julie's influence in Abdu's country is her proficiency in English, a widely used global language. Her fluency becomes a valuable asset, serving as a "door opener" in the Arabic country. Julie leverages her language skills by teaching English, which also becomes a means of learning Arabic, fostering connections with Abdu's family. Teaching English not only provides an avenue for earning income but also opens up opportunities for Abdu's family, such as better job prospects and university applications. "Arabic has a rich, big and diverse vocabulary and is difficult to learn" (318). This shows that

it really is a big effort Julie is undertaking when she decides to learn Arabic. It illustrates her determination.

Julie's multicultural mindset, rooted in the belief in the equality of all individuals irrespective of cultural backgrounds, enables her seamless adaptation to Arabic society. Embracing diverse perspectives, she not only considers her own white South African viewpoint but also **empathises** with her multicultural friends. Open-minded and receptive to different ways of thinking and acting, Julie intimately explores Abdu's culture, integrating its values into her own thinking. Dissatisfied with her family's values, she discovers solace in Abdu's family's principles, including concern, commitment, and consideration, filling a void within her. As her dreams and visions evolve over time, transitioning from South African goals to envisioning a good life in Abdu's country, Julie's aspirations are intricately linked to her abundant energy. Drawing strength from friends, not her perceived cold family, Julie finds renewed energy from the love and warmth of her new family, empowering her to pursue her visions and fulfil her desires with resilience. This newfound energy becomes a driving force for Julie's strength and determination in navigating the complexities of cultural assimilation and personal fulfilment.

Julie's resilience and energy stem not only from her multicultural outlook but also from her independence, a trait evident in her ability to make life choices autonomously. Having lived with divorced parents, she developed a sturdy **demeanour**, especially influenced by her strong mother who successfully built a new family post-divorce. Julie's strength manifests in her decision to stay in Abdu's Arabic country even when he departs, finding support in his family's love, despite initial strains with her mother-in-law. Abdu's mother, akin to Julie's own mother, embodies strength in navigating a patriarchal society, as highlighted by Rejwan's assertion that Arabic countries are patriarchal. The Arabic town, with its dynamic yet quiet facets, serves as a sanctuary for Julie, reminiscent of the tranquility she craved amid the chaos of her upbringing. The desert, particularly significant at the end of her street, becomes a daily source of meditation and tranquility, **symbolising** a stark contrast to the bustling city life in Johannesburg. This arid landscape, with its profound silence, holds Julie captive, offering harmony and solace akin to the calming effect of the ocean for some. Her connection to the desert becomes a pivotal factor in her decision to remain in Abdu's country, signifying a departure from her past and **an** embrace of a newfound sense of serenity.

Abdu, reflective of his Arabic cultural background, refrains from openly expressing strong emotions, reserving such displays for more private settings. Public affection, like kissing or hugging, makes him uncomfortable, as emotions are considered private matters in his cultural context. Abdu consciously restrains his feelings, even after intimate moments with Julie, viewing strong emotions as a luxury or "temptation" that might divert energy from pursuing his dreams. As the eldest son, Abdu bears a profound sense of responsibility for his family's well-being. This duty compels him to strive for success not only for personal

fulfillment but also to fulfill obligations to his family. The pressure to meet societal expectations becomes evident when he returns home with Julie, feeling ashamed for not achieving the expected level of success. Abdu's responsibility is particularly directed towards his mother, whose expectations he seeks to fulfill, even if it means resisting lucrative job offers that conflict with his personal aspirations. The internal conflict between societal expectations and personal dreams torments him, manifesting in his dreams as he grapples with the perceived pressure to conform.

Out of concern for his family's **honour**, Abdu marries Julie before returning to his home country, as bringing an unmarried woman would be deemed inappropriate and bring shame to his family. Despite his deep love for his family, Abdu feels a sense of discomfort upon rejoining them, as he struggles to fully align with traditional family duties. Desiring an escape from his cultural and societal constraints, he envisions a life similar to Julie's in Johannesburg. Abdu rejects job offers from his family, **emphasising** his determination to create a life on his terms. His vision is fueled by a dissatisfaction with the political situation and poverty in his home country, which he believes hinder the quality of life. Feeling trapped in the Arabic-Islamic culture, Abdu admires Julie's father's lifestyle and aspires to the cultural freedom he perceives in Julie's country. He sees success as essential to his happiness and associates it with a top career and the liberties **offer** by a liberal society. Abdu's protective nature, shaped by cultural norms, manifests in his insistence on ensuring Julie's safety in a country he deems less secure due to its economic challenges and perceived backwardness.

Abdu displays remarkable determination, facing obstacles with resilience and an unwavering focus on his goals. Like a missile aimed at its target, he persists in pursuing his objectives, undeterred by frequent visa rejections, where he is labeled as a potential burden on the state. Despite this negative perception, Abdu's determination to live in another country is evident as he actively seeks to enhance his English proficiency, **recognising** its significance for securing a decent job and further studies. His insistence on conversing in English with Julie, even when she attempts to communicate in Arabic, underscores his commitment to mastering the language. Abdu's belief in gender equality, instilled by his family where his strong-willed mother holds a dominant role in the household, influences his views on independence. Despite hailing from a patriarchal society, he supports Julie's autonomy and encourages her to pursue a job outside the family, aligning with his conviction that men and women are equal. Abdu feels he needs to speak English as he says:

We must talk English. I must speak English if I am going to get a decent job any where job anywhere. I can be able to study some more there. Only with English. He tipped the water to the tub. Scrubbing himself as crouches he feels the grease-stains of engine innards, the dirt- coating of tools blackened under his nails, as if all over his body, the condition of his life she has never known, how could this one. (152)

The words “must” and “anywhere” indicate Abdu’s necessity of talking in English. Abdu believes that women and men are equal which means that he does not want to dominate even though he comes from a patriarchal society where the men dominate by being the persons making important decisions for example. Abdu’s views on equality come from his family where his mother is the one who is in the top of the family hierarchy. His mother is the ‘boss,’ the one who has the power in his family because she is strong. She has the power in the domestic sphere in Abdu’s family. How come she dominates in this specific domestic sphere and has less power in the rest of the society outside the household, clearly men dominate for some reason which does not seem clear-cut. Evidently Abdu’s culture allows his mother to be in the top of the family hierarchy, but not outside it. For the reason that Abdu believes in equality, he lets Julie have a job outside the family and lets her be independent.

Abdu's career as a mechanic in South Africa stems from his early fascination with cars and his familial connection to an uncle who owns a car repair business. Despite holding a degree in economics, Abdu's practical skills in car mechanics become crucial for his survival in a financially challenging environment. His willingness to take risks and venture into unfamiliar territories, driven by the desire for a better life, is evident in his journey to countries about which he has limited knowledge. Abdu's courage in taking such chances is rooted in the lack of fear due to the security provided by his supportive family. As a thoughtful and observant individual, Abdu prefers to understand others before expressing himself, valuing concise and relevant communication. Both Abdu and Julie share an active and adventurous nature, constantly seeking new experiences and exploring unfamiliar surroundings. Their adaptability to diverse situations, emphasised by Meier, becomes a binding factor in their relationship, fostering unity and acceptance of each other's distinct personalities.

This paper aims to explore how Julie and Abdu's distinct backgrounds shape their actions, thoughts, and behaviours. The analysis underscores that their varied upbringings significantly influence their identities. Julie, lacking strong family bonds, finds solace in Abdu's family and her role as an English teacher in the Arabic country and its desert. Her happiness is derived not only from personal connections but also from a sense of belonging in her new roles. In contrast, Abdu, despite having a strong family bond, is discontented with his country's values, compelling him to seize any opportunity to escape. Ultimately, their backgrounds play a pivotal role in shaping Julie and Abdu's behaviour, thoughts, and actions.

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