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# Constructing Character in an Unequal World: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* and the Necessity of World Literature

Lucia Boldrini

**Abstract:** Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) tells the story of white South African Julie and illegal immigrant Abdu in cosmopolitan post-Apartheid Johannesburg. When Abdu is expelled from South Africa, Julie moves with him to his village at the edge of the desert in an unnamed Arab country, finally finding a sense of home and belonging in the very place that he is desperate to escape. The novel's concerns with migration, globalisation, the sense of home, inequality that robs individuals of geography and history, shame, prejudice, making assumptions, and the possibility and impossibility of love, are explored through the adopting of an apparently awkward, self-conscious narrative voice that complicates the illusions of realism and foregrounds the tension between mimesis and artifice. The adoption reflects how we seek to make sense of others in the world, including foreign and ghostly others. Gordimer's novel posits the necessity for literature to accept its responsibility to be world literature, enjoining us to be attentive to the languages we speak, or neglect to speak, or even refuse to hear, and the translations we perform and the untranslatabilities we recognize; to how we are caught, circulate, and are complicit in a world of economic, legal and historical inequality; to our own foreignness in what we call home, how we make others foreign in their home, and how we can open ourselves to the foreign.

**Keywords:** Nadine Gordimer; *The Pickup*; character; realism; migration; globalization; world literature

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标题：不平等的世界中的人物建构：纳丁·戈迪默的《偶遇者》与世界文学的必要性

内容摘要：纳丁·戈迪默的《偶遇者》（2001年）讲述了南非白人朱莉和非法移民阿布杜

在国际化的、后种族隔离的约翰内斯堡的故事。当阿布杜被驱逐出南非时，朱莉和他一起搬到一个无名阿拉伯国家的沙漠边缘的村庄，他们最终在这个阿布杜渴望逃离的地方找到了家园意识和归属感。这部小说关注移民、全球化、家园意识、剥夺个人的地理和历史的不平等，关注羞耻、偏见、假设以及爱的可能性与不可能性。小说采用一种明显尴尬又刻意的叙事声音来探索这些主题，这种叙事声音使现实主义的幻想复杂化，并凸显了模仿和技巧之间的紧张关系，折射出我们理解包含外国人和幽灵他者在内的他人的诉求和方式。戈迪默的小说提出，文学必须承担起作为世界文学的责任，要求我们关注我们所说的语言、被忽视而未说的语言甚至是拒绝听的语言，我们的翻译和我们所承认的不可译性；关注我们在一个经济、法律和历史都不平等的世界中如何被裹挟、传播以及成为同谋；关注我们在所谓的“家”中的陌生感，我们如何造成他人在他们自己家园的陌生感，以及我们如何接受异质性。

关键词：纳丁·戈迪默；《偶遇者》；人物；现实主义；移民；全球化；世界文学

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Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, published in 2001, tells the story of Julie, a young white South African woman, and Abdu, a mechanic that she "picks up" in cosmopolitan, post-Apartheid Johannesburg when her car breaks down. They become lovers, and when Abdu (whose real name, we later discover, is Ibrahim) is expelled as an illegal immigrant, they marry and she travels with him to his village at the edge of the desert in an unnamed Arab country, finally finding a sense of home and belonging in the very place that he is desperate to escape. At the end, he will emigrate again, this time to the USA, while she stays with his family in the village. Even such a short and simplified summary already reveals the presence in the novel of a number of topical themes and questions concerning migration, both legal and illegal; post-colonial globalisation and the inequalities it is built on and exacerbates; belonging and the sense of home; names, revealed or withheld. Some critics have seen *The Pickup* as a new departure for Gordimer: after her commitment to the black cause during Apartheid and her consequent status as a "national writer," she could finally disengage from her "national" role and turn to smaller and private concerns; while this move need not imply the abandonment of the political, it denoted a newly found freedom from the need to address the grand narrative of South Africa.<sup>①</sup> Several reviewers criticized the novel, on its publication, for the lack of realism, consistency or complexity in the depiction of the two main characters, as well as for the way the narrator's prose, in its stilted, at times even grammatically inconsistent

style, keeps the characters at a distance, preventing the development of readers' sympathy or even interest towards them. Others, however, highlight the insight that Gordimer's use of character-types enables the effectiveness of her deliberate style.<sup>②</sup> In this article I wish to focus on the novel's realism vs. the explicit deliberateness that breaks the illusion of realism, with regard especially to characters, and on how the handling of these formal features relates to the exploration of migration, identity, prejudice, and of our own reactions, whether conscious or unconscious, to otherness.<sup>③</sup> All of this will be considered in the context of how *The Pickup* can be seen to engage with the meaning and necessity of world literature in an unequal world.<sup>④</sup> First, however, I will briefly outline some main trends in the critical discussion of literary character and take a short detour through another story of migration.

### Characters, people, ghosts

Criticism on character in novels tends to divide between the (more traditional) referential or mimetic approach that treats character as similar to real people (e.g., Harvey, Hochman, Price), and the autonomous, non-referential approach, typical of structuralism in the late '60s and early '70s, that sees character as a linguistic construct: characters are words, and treating them as if they were people is misleading (Barthes, 184). In the '70s and '80s, poststructuralism extended the latter approach with a politically oriented rejection of the illusion of realism: by presenting itself as a transparent description of the world, realism naturalizes ideological constructions and encourages the reader's acquiescence in them (e.g., Docherty, Fokkema, Cixous; I will come back shortly to the latter). Other approaches have sought to avoid such stark opposition between referential realism and autonomous artifice. For example, Margolin integrated semiotic and possible world models to define character as "possible non-actual individual," positing that while we read characters knowing that they are fictional constructs, we also bring to them our knowledge of the world (10); Phelan rejected the definition of character as either mimetic or artificial, focusing instead on the different functions that characters may have within a text: writers may emphasize the mimetic element to point to analogy with the real world; or the artificial (synthetic) element to draw attention to their being artifacts; or the thematic element, making character a vehicle for ideas. These different, often co-existing emphases orient the reader's perception of character without precluding the reader's awareness of these strategies (2-3).

One of the most radical manifestations the poststructuralist theory of character is Hélène Cixous's "The Character of Character" (1974): by promoting the illusion of representation (the textual construct stands for a real person), realist fiction fosters the reader's mechanism of identification with the character by suppressing distance and doubt, thus enabling the ideological, economic, and social control of the reader through the manipulation of the imaginary. In what is perhaps the most striking expression in the essay, Cixous declares: "'Character' and I.D. card go together." For Cixous, "the more 'character' fulfills the norms,

the better the reader recognizes it and recognizes himself. The commerce established between book and reader is thus facilitated. A community consigns its comforts and its goods to this mirror relation. Literature thereby assumes value as a marketable form.” “This is all accomplished in the name of some reality principle (‘life,’ ‘truth,’ ‘biography,’ ‘sense’) to which the text is subordinated” (385-86). The link between “character” and “I.D. card” reveals the bureaucratic and capitalist control of subjects through the identification and manipulation of their subjectivities. The conclusion must be, therefore, that we should “put aside ‘character’ and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with [...] the appropriating economy that such reasoning supports” (387).

Yet, from our perspective of twenty-first century readers who have witnessed decades of mass migration and the creation of millions of refugees across the world, we must ask the following questions. What happens when the ID card (or a simpler residence permit) is precisely what is at stake? When does its lack entail humiliation, loss of dignity, let alone of rights, because societies expect that full participation in them (the recognition of the individual as a human being that can be part of a community) is certified by the existence of a document that endows the bearer with the demonstrable right to be, freely, in a certain place? And therefore, what if the writer’s interest, within her fiction, rests precisely in the deliberate observation of what happens when the character is subjected, just like individuals in the world, to this loss of legal, social, even *human* identity? How can a writer then do away with the literary tool (character) that—sometimes by encouraging mimetic recognition and sometimes by drawing attention to the artificial, aesthetic dimension—foregrounds and exploits the mechanism of identification, thereby enabling the exposure of marginalization, repression and control? These questions will be at the centre of my discussion of Gordimer’s novel. And now I’d like to make the announced detour through another story of migration.

In *I fantasmi di Portopalo (The Ghosts of Portopalo)*, the Italian investigative journalist Giovanni Maria Bellu describes his long inquest into a tragic episode of migrants trafficked from South East Asia to Italy and of a shipwreck that took place in the strait between Malta and Sicily on the night of the December 25th, 1996. Nearly 300 of the young men that were on the boat drowned, but the Italian authorities denied for years that this episode had happened at all. The fishermen in the area of Portopalo, the southernmost tip of Sicily, knew of the shipwreck. For a long time they kept pulling up bodies in their fishing nets – whole bodies at first, then parts, then bones, then fragments of bones; clothes at first, then rags. How could the authorities deny an event of such tragic size, when so much evidence existed? One main reason was a local practical reaction to bureaucratic inefficiency. On the previous occasion of a smaller shipwreck, a fisherman who had duly reported finding a body had his trawler impounded for two weeks by the investigating authorities. Given the magnitude of the shipwreck of Christmas 1996, the local economy could not sustain having the entire fishing fleet grounded. So, by tacit agreement, they threw the bodies back into the sea. The

second reason is directly related to Italian politics and European policies. Italy had applied to be part of the Schengen treaty (which abolished internal border controls between the European countries that adhere to it, but required increased security of the external borders of the area), and a shipwreck with 283 dead close to its shores would have prejudiced the application. Some years later, a fisherman picked up in his nets a bundle of clothes, a pair of jeans; the identity card of a young Tamil man, Anpalagan Ganeshu, which was surprisingly well preserved in one of the pockets. Faced with an ID card that clearly displayed a name and a photograph, the fisherman could no longer sustain the fiction that the shipwreck had never happened and contacted a journalist. It was the recovery of an ID that enabled the fisherman to see an imagined individual, decreed to be a fiction by the authorities, as a real person with whose plight he could identify. It was the ID card that led to the story being told and the tragedy being acknowledged. A bundle of clothes, a card with a name and a photo acquire a story. The story—based on Bellu’s investigation and on his sympathetic imagination—fleshes out the person. There is indeed a “mechanism of identification,” but it is not this that “enables ideological, economic, and social control” (Cixous 384). Control was exercised by the erasure of the real person’s identity and by turning the young man into a ghost, allowing traffickers, authorities, and those who just wanted to go about their business, to continue repressing him and erasing him. Finding the ID card, giving him an identity and telling a story is what enables restoring dignity and humanity to him, the other dead and other migrants.<sup>⑤</sup>

A novel by the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer may seem to be at a considerable distance from a journalist’s investigation into a shipwreck in the Mediterranean, but, at this particular time in our history, the humanity and dehumanization of migrant “others” and the daily creation of ghosts demands to be regarded with urgency. Bellu’s book shows what is also central to Gordimer’s novel: that the construction of character in writing reflects and has consequences for the world we live in. Both texts – one fictional, one based on real events yet frequently using literary techniques – can inform our thinking about world literature as literature in and of the world: literature that thinks of the ethical, political, economic relationships between person, home and world; that recognizes its own ability, even its responsibility, to shape the world; that reveals how the means and manner of representation affect our understanding of our place in the world and its communities; and that spurs us to keep asking, “Which world? Whose world?” as Gordimer does in her 1997 essay “The Status of the Writer in the World Today” (*Telling Times* 520-31: 521).

### **The ethics of knowing, finding, telling**

*The Pickup* brings together two stories and two very distant worlds: that of Julie Summers, white, liberal, economically comfortable but seeking to distance herself from her family and longing to escape from the corruption and inauthenticity of her privileged world; and that of the migrant Ibrahim Ibn Musa, who seeks to escape from the corruption



and poverty of his world, who has overstayed his South African visa and is threatened with deportation, hides under the name of Abdu and “the underbelly of other people’s vehicles” (10-11), and lives “beyond the dim underworld of the garage” where he works (45). He knows that his only hope if he wants to stay, once the letter from the Department of Home Affairs finds him, rests in going “underground,” “the only place for those of us who can’t live, haven’t the means, not just money, the statutory means to conform to what others call the world. Underground. That darkness is the only freedom for him” (58-59). This uneasy coming together of opposite worlds and aspirations is reflected throughout the novel in the deliberate awkwardness of Gordimer’s style and her treatment of character and plot, which repeatedly highlight, rather than smooth over, the seams and the weld lines. The difficult relationship between aesthetic concerns and political commitment that Gordimer has repeatedly addressed<sup>⑥</sup> continues to be relevant in the post-Apartheid era.

The novel begins with a scene familiar to any large city: a broken car in the midst of a traffic jam, with the ensuing rage, insults, sexism and belligerence.

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, a traffic mob mounting its own confusion. Get going. Stupid bloody woman. Idikazana lomlunga, le! She throws up hands, palms open, in surrender. (3)

*Idikazana lomlunga, le!*: Julie doesn’t quite understand the Zulu words; she knows they are offensive but cannot repeat them correctly to her friends (6). Let’s take note that she does not speak this major language of her country.

The chaotic scene goes on for a while, until the narrator intervenes and addresses us directly:

There. You’ve seen. I’ve seen. The gesture. A woman in a traffic jam among those that are everyday in the city, any city. You won’t remember it, you won’t know who she is. But I know because from the sight of her I’ll find out—as a story—what was going to happen as the consequence of that commonplace embarrassment on the streets: where it was heading her for, and what. Her hands thrown up, open. (4)

“The gesture” of the “hands thrown up, open” is a gesture of giving up, of acceptance, of innocence or vulnerability.

While the “predators round a kill” may initially evoke images familiar from so many TV nature documentaries (plunging us in clichéd images of Africa), we quickly see that this is a metropolitan scene. But in fact, the scene could take place in “any” modern cosmopolitan city. It is Johannesburg where we wouldn’t take much notice of the anonymous young woman. The narrator does, however, know and wants to observe, to “find out” and tell a story for the character in this stereotype of the modern city. “I know” and “I’ll find out” sit together uneasily, the former implying already acquired knowledge and the latter knowledge being yet

to be acquired. There is on the one hand the implication that the story exists, out there, in the world (referential, mimetic realism); and on the other hand, a deliberate drawing attention to the artificial narrative device of storytelling (imaginative creation of a fictional world). Yet, knowing, finding and constructing are not really at odds. They are united, for example, in the classical rhetorical concept of *inventio*: finding and discovering in what we know and what exists (the repositories of mind and of culture) the materials for an effective discourse. The narrator, in other words, *invents* the story of the character, in a certain way and for a particular purpose.

There is an *ethos* involved in the scene, strongly asserted by the narrator as her own through the narratorial intrusion, and in the recognition of the power of literature to individualize and to extract identity out of that anonymity (“a” woman, “any” city, the “commonplace embarrassment”). Identity is in the particular story, and every encounter, event, gesture in the story shapes it in some way. Finding someone’s story is central to *this* story. Gordimer’s idea that “But I know because [...] I’ll find out—as a story” is driven by the same ethical principle that makes the fisherman who finds an ID card in the pocket of a pair of jeans fished out of the sea want to find out the truth “as a story,” and makes Bellu start his book by calling this ghostly other “one of my dearest friends” (Bellu 3).

### Like, other

Julie and her friends meet regularly at their table at the LA Café. These members of “The Table,” as the group of “elective siblings” (23) is repeatedly labelled, turn up or leave when they wish. Like the mix of customers of the Café (“the young; [...] old survivors of the quarter’s past, ageing Hippies and Leftist Jews, grandfathers and grandmothers of the 1920s immigration who had not become prosperous bourgeois [...]. Prostitutes from Congo and Senegal [...],” 5-6), they too are socially and racially heterogeneous, though alike in embracing the post-Apartheid narrative of South Africa. Their bohemian egalitarian attitude—“To be open to encounters—that was what she and her friends believed, anyway” (10)—leads Julie to “recognize” Abdu as being “like her”:

Most likely of Indian or Cape Malay background; like her, a local of this country in which they were born descendant of immigrants in one era or another—in her case from Suffolk and County Cork, as in his from Gujerat or the East Indies. (10)

Julie’s free indirect discourse betrays the assimilating gesture that shapes her perception of others. In their likeness, she thinks, they are both at home in the metropolis, even if neither is originally from there. Those that are really from South Africa would be “the other kind, the real blacks,” as the owner of the garage calls them (32). This perception of likeness or otherness, however, is more complicated. When Julie first sees Abdu, her reaction is that “he wasn’t one of them—the white man speaking Afrikaans to the black man at the machine” (7). He is other, belonging neither to the whites or the blacks, and it takes Julie a few days



to assimilate him (wrongly) as being “like her.” The recurrence and variable meaning of categories such as “like,” “real,” “other,” “one of them” is powerful. In the initial scene of the broken-down car, as the other drivers around her “continue to jostle and blare their impatience,”

One of the unemployed black men who beg by waving vehicles into parking bays sidles his way deftly through fenders, signals with his head [...] and mimes control of the steering wheel. Another like him appears, and they push her and her car into a loading bay. The street hustles on. (3)

“Another like him” is another black man, probably also unemployed and surviving on the tips of drivers helped into parking bays. But here “like him” means one of “the other kind, the real blacks”; it means *unlike her*. It also means unlike her friends at The Table, despite their supposed racial and social openness: “But it was black men who helped me” Julie says; “Oh come on—for a hand out!” one of them comments, dismissingly (6).

And who says or thinks “another like him” in that initial scene? Is it Julie’s free indirect discourse? Or is it the narrator describing the man? Or is it perhaps the crowd around her, observing the scene, that labels him thus? These indeterminacies are what many critics have found uncomfortable, especially as they exist alongside explicit narratorial interventions. The discomfort is understandable: in the words “another like him” there are implied decades, centuries even, of racism. Not knowing to whom these words should be attributed is unsettling. If we attribute them to the narrator, Gordimer herself seems tainted with the implicit racism of the expression. If we attribute them to the main character’s free indirect thought, it becomes difficult for readers to develop any kind of sympathy with the protagonist whose story we are going to read (I note my own assumption of a “liberal” reader who shares Gordimer’s political positions). It is tempting, then, to attribute them to the crowd, those who cluster like predators, and to the mob who jostles, blares, and finally hustles on. Yet, the grammar remains stubbornly and discomfortingly indeterminate.

### **One of those countries**

Julie is not the only one that mistakes Abdu for an Indian. At a party at Julie’s father house in “The Suburbs,” a woman enthusing about a holiday in India asks Abdu, “I suppose you were born here, but your ancestors... have you ever been home to India?” As Abdu explains he is not an Indian without offering another identity, the woman walks away. “The set of her back is the conclusion: some sort of Arab, then” (44).

Julie’s assumptions about Abdu being “like her” prove mistaken. He is not a settler, her country is not “his”:

Isn't this our country. That's a statement, from her.

For you.

Oh I thought you were—like me—this's home [...].

I go where they'll let me in.

He named a country she had barely heard of. One of those partitioned by colonial powers on their departure, or seceded from federations cobbled together to fill vacuums of powerlessness against the regrouping of those old colonial powers under acronyms that still brand-name the world for themselves. One of those countries where you can't tell religion apart from politics, their forms of persecution from the persecution of poverty, as the reason for getting out and going wherever they'll let you in. (12)

Of this country, Abdu says: "I cannot say that—'my country'—because somebody else made a line and said that is it" (15).

The country remains nameless even when he and Julie move there. Critics have interpreted it as North Africa (e.g., Dimitriou "End" 23; Lahti 39; Lebdai, 10), which is made plausible by, for example, the use of couscous as ceremonial dish (120) and a reference to the tomb of Sidi Yousef (this major destination for pilgrims and tourists is in Marrakesh old city, however the novel locates it at the edge of the desert, where no tourists go, 125). Others place the country in the Arabian Peninsula, based on Gordimer's suggestion, notable for its vagueness, that "My character is a Muslim from some unnamed Saudi Arabian country living here illegally" (Kossew, "Living" 61). It is tempting to try to guess the country by following textual clues; and so, world map and encyclopaedia at hand, I indulge in the challenge. What we know is that the country's main language is Arabic, with English as the major international language; its borders are drawn in the desert by departing colonial powers; it is "run down" and "deprived"; "even the oil is over the border" (95); it cannot have a major international or historical role since Julie has barely heard of it (12). We can therefore exclude Western Sahara, Mauritania, Morocco, Djibouti and Chad (French or Spanish are the main international languages), Mali and Niger (Arabic is not the main language); oil-producing countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, Yemen, which had a significant oil industry before the civil war until 2005, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria). Egypt and Lebanon are difficult to describe as "barely heard of," and Jordan's abundance of historical and archaeological sites attracting large numbers of tourists makes it more than a nondescript state defined by colonial lines drawn in the desert. Sudan shares a border with oil-producing Libya and English is widely spoken, but it seems unlikely that no reference would be made to the civil war in which it was engulfed at the time of the novel. Leaving aside other wars and ongoing tensions, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Palestine have no oil economy across a land border.

This game of trying to identify a real-world country from a fictional description and a vague authorial statement about a generic "Saudi Arabian" country is surely futile; yet, trying

to trace it and being frustrated in the attempt resonates with the uncomfortable realism of Gordimer's text, unsettling in the way it claims to both *know* and need to *find*—to invent-as-finding in the world and in the imagination. It also responds to our need to place the text and the work of a committed writer such as Gordimer in the context of real-world global, racial and economic politics. What we know about it is that it is a poor Muslim country, at least partly in the desert, indeterminate in the imaginary of the West and of South Africa. What we have are the assumptions we make about it. We may conclude that it is a *possible non-actual country* (to use Margolin's definition of character). The lack of a name (correlating with Abdu not being his real name) contributes to the country's de-individuation, its fictionality; *some sort of Arab country, then*. Is Gordimer stereotyping, essentializing all Arab countries into a nondescript cardboard poverty? Or is she pointing to the way we keep doing that in the real world? Or is she espousing Abdu/Ibrahim's refusal to acknowledge this real-yet-fictional country, made up by others who have the power to do so rather than emerging from the self-determination of its people – a predicament that bears analogies with the dispossession of indigenous South Africans peoples? Once again, the uneasy realism unsettles.<sup>⑦</sup>

In the absence of better knowledge, Julie relies on stereotypes, like those of tourist brochures:

She asks about his home, does he have photographs—when she makes assumptions, she doesn't even have a photograph to go by, faces to learn from. [...] he's a cut-out from a background that she surely imagines only wrongly. Palm trees, camel, alleys hung with carpets and brass vessels. [...] No, he has no photographs. (25)

By not being “like her,” a settled later-generation immigrant, he has regressed from a person to a “cut-out,” a stock or cardboard character. She is trying to imagine him within the frame of what she knows, making assumptions. She wants to find out the truth (“as a story,” perhaps), but asking questions is perceived as intrusive and “patronizing” (11), as if she were treating him as object of exotic interest: “What about you? It was the wrong thing—there! She'd done it, it came out god-awful as Showing Interest” (12).

It is in the intimacy of lovemaking that Julie and Abdu can access “another country, a country of its own, not yours or mine,” where they need no passport or permit. It's not just sex that takes them there, but “reciprocal tenderness” (96). Earlier, the narrator had refused to describe their lovemaking:

You're not there; I am not there: to see. It's not a traffic tangle in the streets, hands going up in culpability, surrender, owing this, open to the public.

It's not the spectacle available late-night on adult TV (23)

The narrator doesn't “know” or will not try to “find out” this story. It is not out of prudishness. It is a country which only they who inhabit it, however precariously, have a right to name and

call *theirs*.

In the real world, Abdu's limbo of identity and legal status also confers a kind of freedom, a living-in-the-moment and living-in-the-place that, however, prevents the possibility of imagining oneself in space or time beyond the here and now:

He is here, and he is not here. It's within this condition of existence that they exist as lovers. It is a state of suspension from the pressures of necessity to plan like others have to plan; look ahead. There is no future without an identity to claim it; or to be obligated to it. There are no caging norms. In its very precariousness the state is pure and free. (37)

Hélène Cixous is right: ID equates with responsibility, with restrictions, thus with control. But having an ID also entails having a story and a future—the kind of story that Bellu is able to endow the drowned young man with, the possibility of justice that the story makes available. There is no future for the individual without an identity to claim it, nor is there justice or the comfort of mourning for the community. Unrecognized, “undead,” the young man in *I fantasmi di Portopalo* remains a ghost, with all the other drowned, unnamed ghosts. In Gordimer's novel, the “openness” of Julie and her friends risks turning the other into a “ghost” too. Lacking a frame within which to view and understand him, Julie's friends fall into orientalist cliché (not unlike the palms and camels of Julie's imagination) and quickly forget the little they had found out about him, revealing their lack of interest: “It was his—his unfamiliar response that disquieted. There was talk: That relationship's getting heavy, our girl's really gone on that oriental prince of hers. Where was it she picked him up, again?” (36). The assumed IDs of the immigrant, the oriental prince, some sort of Arab, and the cardboard cut-out quickly fades out of consciousness.

### **Shame, responsibility, and the (im)possibility of love**

Outside of their private country of intimacy, and subject to the pressures of real-world prejudices, legally determined identities and sanctioned destinations, both Julie and Abdu are afraid to know and be known by the other; each makes assumptions about the other, fearful of what the other will assume about them. Julie wants to reject her racially and financially privileged background by embracing the new South Africa and distancing herself from “The Suburbs.” She fears that Abdu will associate her with those who imposed Apartheid—“She is overcome by embarrassment”; “She's responsible for *them*”; “the shame of being ashamed of them; the shame of him seeing what she was, is” (45)—yet she carries on benefiting from that background (when her car breaks down, she borrows her father's vintage Rover, pretending it is not her family's; she won't ask her father for financial help, but will ask her uncle). There is hypocrisy in her superficial rejection of what continues to sustain her comfortable life. Abdu assumes that she will despise him for his poverty. Once they are in his country, they see a dead sheep on the road, and “he is ashamed and at the same time angrily resentful that she is

seeing it [...] it will be an image of his country, his people, *what he comes from*, what he really is" (133). Finding mutual openness is impossible in their shame. Each interprets the other's closure as rejection: "She is ashamed of her parents; he thinks she is ashamed of him. Neither knows either, about the other" (38). Neither is able to cross the divide between their positions in South Africa, in the unnamed Arab country, and in the world. The acquisitive values she despises are the values he admires. He cannot afford to reject the dark, shameful underbelly of wealth because he has only ever known and lived in the dark underbelly, and has been shamed by it. When he insists that they should ask her father for help, she responds, "Almost weary"—the weariness generated by too many similar arguments going round in circles—that he "can't understand." "And then she is taken by remorse because by saying this she has made him understand: it's because he is not one of them" (63). Caught in this vicious circle, refusing to talk to her father in order to preserve her own moral integrity, she reconfirms what she wants to avoid admitting: his not belonging in South Africa, not even the new South Africa she wishes to foster.

When Julie buys two tickets to go with him, he assumes this is yet another adventure for her; only, now he'd have to be responsible for her:

Can't you understand? I can't be for you—responsible—

She became stiff and clipped with anger.

Nobody has to be responsible for me. I am responsible for myself.

For yourself. Always yourself. You think that is very brave. I must tell you something. You only know how to be responsible for yourself here—this place, your café friends, your country where you have everything. I can't be responsible. I don't want it. (95)

Having embraced her (assumption of) independence from her family, their values, and her country's past, she bridles at his (possibly patriarchal) assumption that he will have to take care of her in his country. He is right, however: living in the world—and what's more, a world of relations determined by the colonial past and the economic imperialism of the global present—means that our actions bind others too, and once she goes with him to inhabit a space of which she does not speak the language or know the customs, he will be responsible for her, even if it were only as cultural interpreter. Her choices are not made in a world of complete freedom. If this point sounds like an existential one, it is. But it is also political and ethical.

During Apartheid, Gordimer's social and political commitment to the cause of the black majority was a responsibility she could not decline, even if she may have wanted, as a writer, to have the freedom to write about something else. Political conditions determined that she had to be responsible for the white people whose ethnicity she shared, and for the black people whose equality she had to assert, for without justice for them, there would be no right for her to write otherwise. Now, in post-Apartheid South Africa, it may seem that such a responsibility could be shed and she could write what she wanted.<sup>③</sup> However, the world refuses to be just and to be equal; it continues to make assumptions about others not like us,

turning assumptions into laws. Therefore, responsibilities must continue to be taken.

Abdu's assumption that Julie is a spoiled girl for whom he is just an adventure makes him keep his emotional distance from her: "He resists residue feelings of tenderness towards this girl. That temptation" (8). Critics frequently describe Abdu as only exploiting Julie's infatuation for his own benefit; yet sentences like these, however detached the narrator—or precisely because of the detachment of the narrator—suggest something different. He is preventing himself from falling in love despite his own feelings; falling in love is a privilege for those that can afford it: "His animus the protection he must take to guard against that thing, luxury, people who could afford it called love" (137). They are foreigners to each other, each of them *abroad* (etymologically, "widely apart," "at a distance from each other") whether in South Africa or in his unnamed country. In his condition of being abroad, he keeps his distance.

### Characters, people, and the possibility of the future

After one of Julie's and Abdu's disagreements about seeking help from her father and his connections, we see both protagonists in profile: "He sulks; or is it lonely sadness in that profile? She is distanced and distressed. Love engraves a profile definitively as the mint does on a coin" (38). Whatever the perceptual point of view (is each character observing the other or is it the narrator choosing to describe them thus, from an external observing position?) it is useful to consider that the word "character" derives from the Greek *kharaktér* (the tool that allows a mark, a seal, a stamp to be impressed on an object such as a coin, as well as the imprint itself, which determines the value of the coin, stamp or seal). In this sense, character is literally stereotype: the impression left by a plate or type. Although it is love, here, that engraves this "character," enabling identification and thus a story to reclaim the future, we are reminded of Cixous's insight that there is a link between character, money, markets; of the fixing of the subject in ways that enable its control and prevent its freedom.<sup>⑨</sup>

It is interesting therefore that only when Julie buys the tickets Abdu sees her as if for the first time:

And now's the time: there has been no description of this Julie, little indication of what she looks like, unless an individual's actions and words conjure a face and body. There is, anyway, no description that is *the* description. Everyone who sees a face sees a different face [...] the face he sees is the definitive face for the present situation. The two tickets he holds in his hands, turns over, unfolds, verifies, materialize a face, her face for him, that didn't exist before, the face of what's impossible, can't be. (93)

As a *character*, Julie has no features unless a description is given. She is visualized differently by different characters, as if each were a reader that imagines her. Now, however, through her action of buying the tickets, she has acquired a reality of her own and has become more than



a type (such as *a young white woman*). It's almost as if she has become a mimetic character after having been a synthetic, artificial one. Abdu now describes her: her hair, her eyes, the size of her ears, the eyebrows, and her lips that “move slightly, unconsciously, while she follows what someone is saying to her. As if she's learning a language” (94). The description of this young woman who has finally materialized by deciding to emigrate with him reveals her unconscious willingness to learn the language of the other, literally embodying it, adapting her features to it—as if she had always unknowingly been ready to go abroad to find home.

When Julie buys the tickets, his retort “I can't be responsible. I don't want it” (95), leads to a reaction that appears to breach a barrier:

He saw, could not stop himself seeing—everything change in her [...] And his words *I don't want it* struck the staggering blow.

You don't want me.

[...] she knows *nothing*. That is true but he sees, feels, has revealed to him something he does not know: this foreign girl has for him—there are beautiful words for it coming to him in his mother tongue—devotion. [...]

The capacity returned to him, for this foreigner makes him whole. That night he made love to her with the reciprocal tenderness—call it whatever old name you like—that he had guarded against—with a few lapses—couldn't afford its commitment [...] (96)

What overcomes his resistance and restores to him the capacity for reciprocity is the hurt shown by this girl-foreigner who in her “devotion” has already crossed their distance and shown her attachment (one of the “beautiful words for it coming to him in his mother tongue” may be إخلاص, *ikhlas*, devotion, dedication, loyalty, sincerity, constancy, from the root *kh-l-s*, to be pure, free, sincere; it is not only Julie's love but her sincerity, her freely given loyalty that “makes him whole”). But this acceptance also brings to an end the “state of suspension” in which they had been able to “exist as lovers.” The arrival of the letter had already precipitated them into time: “they had lived with nothing but the present and now they talked about the future that would come or never come. It was there, theirs, existed for them” (83). Now, with the possibility of a future restored, accepting love also entails responsibility, bonds of necessity: “With the acceptance of love there comes the authority to impose conditions” (97). However, making assumptions remains the default position, as they, like each of us, can only understand from within the frames that they and we have. Learning to understand and see differently is a difficult, laborious process. How can love, desire, intimacy, go beyond the exoticizing of the other and allow the foreign lovers to give and receive *without prejudice* (in all the senses that this expression can take, including the legal; without renouncing their autonomy and independence while acknowledging the mutual dependence that the relationship entails, without abandoning their past and their identity, and thus their claims or rights, and without binding, constraining the other and their future)? How can intimacy survive the mismatch of worlds and of worldviews, of aspirations and values in the unequal postcolonial,

post-apartheid, globalized world? It survives precariously, through the difficult acceptance of responsibility, and of the unending struggle to turn the foreign into the familiar and to allow the other to have an identity that permits them a future.

This precarious capacity for reciprocity that leads them to marriage, to emigration to his country, and to Julie's difficult but advancing integration in her new environment, can only last so long, until Ibrahim manages to get a visa to the US, with the help of Julie's mother and of her uncle's money. Now Julie refuses to go with him. As she tries to explain her decision, "her hands are up, palms open" (248), recalling the initial gesture of giving up that had led to the finding out of what would happen, as a story. This final, specular gesture—"fingers splayed, holding him off. No, it's not that. I'm not going" (248)—is not, however, a giving up.<sup>10</sup>

Most critics read Julie's refusal to accompany Ibrahim to the US as a definitive decision that she will stay in the village. And of course, as characters made of words, their lives end with the last page of the novel. But if we treat the character mimetically and extrapolate their lives from the confines of the fiction, we may wonder whether without him she will feel as grounded as she does in the moment she decides not to leave, especially when we know how important the erotic is to her. Her integration has been made somewhat easier by the perhaps shallow, but now useful, habits of the Cafè: its "ethics" "did not allow oneself to be waited on except in a restaurant" (136), so she naturally takes part in the household activities with the other women; at The Table, everyone was "free to come and go" (192), so she accepts her husband's movements without needing to question them, as is expected here. However, once Ibrahim has gone and she, more integrated, becomes more liable to the pressures that bear on the other women, will she start resenting them? Her newly found sense of authenticity and stability still rests on the knowledge that she has access to financial resources and the possibility of a ticket out. Similarly, we don't know that Ibrahim won't come back: his chances of success in the USA are already low, and the historical world further feeds this extrapolation of the characters' future lives with the poignant and unsettling realisation that the novel was published just a few days before 9/11 and the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. What can Arab Muslim Ibrahim's life be in the USA after this? What assumptions will be made about him that may force him back to his unnamed country? These speculations are, of course, entirely outside the novel. I indulge in them—as I indulged in trying to pin on a map of Ibrahim's unnamed country—it is because this is not much different from the way the novel had started, with the speculation, the wanting to "find out" "from the sight of her," "as a story," what the consequences of a gesture would be, "where it was heading her for, and what." It is this kind of inquisitive imagination that gives characters in fiction and people in life (including those who are made ghosts by the law) their identity, their stories, their future, their justice; that re-inscribes anonymous places and individuals into geography and history. This form of inquisitive imagination, in itself a form of responsibility, is required of readers as

much as of writers; it gives substance to individuals and to the world.

### Languages of the self and of the other

In the village at the edge of the desert, while Ibrahim complies with the “responsibilities [...] expected of the return of a son experienced in the ways of the world outside” (134), Julie stays at home and reads, waiting for a time when they would decide what “their project (the vocabulary of her public relations period slipped in, like an accent discernible in a second-language speaker)—what a new life, here, was going to be” (134-35). The bracketed words (presumably by the narrator, but possibly Julie’s free indirect thought), are striking. In this new world, the PR language she spoke fluently in Johannesburg slips in, like the trace of an accent. This can be read at one level as realist description of how her past continues to manifest its legacy in her thoughts; at another level, the infiltration of that language into her speech, now, signals something else. There is a kind of untranslatability between the self that spoke PR confidently in a home that felt alien and the self that seeks to belong in the village at the edge of the desert. Not unlike the exhibited lack of seamlessness in Gordimer’s frequently awkward style, this pointing to the untranslatable residue of the self is integral to the psychological, literary, ethical, political questions investigated in the novel, including the quest for a more grounded self; the problem of constructing character in fiction and understanding people in reality beyond the assumptions we make about them; and the problem of existing, as a responsible individual, in a global world of unequal relations.

The translatability or untranslatability of the self and of the other, and of the other’s language, is as central to any notion of cosmopolitanism and of world literature as is economic inequality, insofar as it determines the legal and perceptual status of the other at home and abroad: the other either as “ghost” or as endowed with a name and a story; as able to belong to more than one location or as restricted in his or her movements across boundaries; “the right kind of foreigner” (140) with the correct passport, like Julie, or the wrong one. The high humanist ideal of cosmopolitanism as citizenship of the world, of having the entire world as home—the utopian ideal that Kant, for example, defines as *ius cosmopolitanicum* (cosmopolitan right) and describes as the “highest purpose of nature,” the “matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop” (Kant 51)—is always at risk of being traduced into the glib “enlightened” liberalism of “The Table,” the shallow assumption of being equal and free, an attitude of which Julie’s PR language, with its jumbling together of “benefit dinners, celebrity concerts, visiting pop groups” (Gordimer 11) was an integral part. Any ethical cosmopolitanism that aspires to be more than owning a first-world passport facilitating unhindered travel will be laborious, fraught with difficulties and responsibilities. It will demand constant negotiation, the acceptance that one cannot be or feel at home in one’s city, in one’s nation, or in the world for as long as there are inequalities, and for as long as there is no acceptance that one’s home can also be someone else’s home.<sup>①</sup> Along the

humanist utopian ideal of citizenship of the world, there has to be the effort of learning to get out of the comfort of one's own language, too; of recognizing that others are not assimilable or translatable into our familiar systems of framing and interpreting the world; that our home may also be an "abroad" where we are "at a distance from each other." One may think of what Hugh of St Victor, famously cited by Edward Said in his "Reflections on Exile," conceives as the ideal of surrendering the attachment to one's home to progress to the perfection of seeing the whole world not as home but as a foreign land (Said 185); or of what Adorno, also cited by Said, claims as moral necessity in the aftermath of war and genocide: "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's own home" (Said 184).

It becomes significant therefore that in Ibrahim's village Julie decides to learn Arabic, even though previously she had not learnt the Zulu language which she assumed were equal to her in her (their) home country. In Johannesburg, she assumed a liberal open attitude but in effect remained apart ("abroad") without acknowledging it. Once she is literally abroad, she seeks to bridge her distance from the women of the household and the village by learning Arabic and teaching English. Significantly, the decision is taken almost immediately after her arrival, when she asks Ibrahim's sister if she will show her the village and the sister replies, exposing the cultural chasm between them, that Ibrahim will: "The two young women looked at one another with deep incomprehensibility, each unable to imagine the life of the other; smiling. It was perhaps right then that she made the decision: I have to learn the language" (121). Just as significantly, in an inversion of the beginning, at the end of the novel her sister-in-law speaks Arabic to her, knowing that she will understand (268).

### **The necessity for literature to be world literature**

As I have argued, Gordimer's exploration of character in the novel is carried out also through the adopting of an apparently awkward, self-conscious narrative voice that complicates the illusions of realism and foregrounds the tension between mimesis and artifice. As readers we are both made aware of these fractures and seek reconcile inconsistencies and fill the gaps on the basis of our own assumptions about people living real lives. This exploration of character-making reflects, thematically, how we seek to make sense of others in the world, including foreign and ghostly others. Even when we seek to acknowledge the other's right to self-identity and individuation, we rely on categories of thoughts that reveal our more or less conscious biases, on stereotypes that shape our perception of others and of the world (the Arab, the illegal immigrant, the unemployed black, the white liberal wealthy woman..., all these exposed by Gordimer's repeated use of labels such as "The Table," "The Suburbs," "the poet," etc.). An ironic example of the way our language is shaped by these categories occurs during the party at Julie's father's house. The occasion is a farewell for a friend who is *relocating* with his family to Australia ("To discover and take over possession of oneself, is that secretly the meaning of 'relocation' as it is shaped by the tongue and lips

in substitution for ‘immigration’?” (48); the earlier description of the relocating couple as “emigrants” (46) highlights the difference, rather than an analogy, between them and Abdu. In the conversation, Australia is described as “Down Under” (46), as one would see it from Europe or the US, through the customary assumption that North is up and South is down – only, from South Africa, Australia is barely “down,” let alone “under,” Johannesburg being at approximately the same latitude as Brisbane, Cape Town as Sydney. Language reflects and reinforces the assumptions and prejudices that structure our minds and the world. That’s why Julie’s moving her lips as if learning a language when listening to others, and her moving from not knowing Zulu to learning Arabic, instil a potentially positive note, notwithstanding the shallowness of her liberalism, the inherent hypocrisy of her privileged position.

In exhibiting its awkward form, Gordimer’s *The Pickup* enjoins us to be attentive to the way we make assumptions about others; to the languages we speak or neglect to speak (or even refuse to hear), the translations that we perform and the untranslatabilities that we recognize; to how we fashion our sense of home and of abroad, of being connected and being apart, our own foreignness in what we call home, how we make others foreign in their home, and how we can open ourselves to the foreign; to how we are caught, circulate, and are complicit in a world of economic, legal and historical inequality. It is in this sense that Gordimer’s novel posits the necessity for literature to accept its responsibility to be world literature, while asking, “Which world? Whose world?”

### Notes

① For different angles on this discussion, see, e.g., Dimitriou, “End of History” and “Nadine Gordimer”; Heffernan, “Unspeakable Phrases”; Lahti.

② Examples of critical reviews are Jaggi; Duguid; Guarducci; for more positive interpretations of the style and structure see Kaye/Kantrowitz; Dimitriou, “End” 20-21; and Spain, who argues that “Gordimer’s grammatical ambiguity reveals forces of a complex world bound up with the facts of postcoloniality” (759).

③ I have discussed aspects of this in “Making Assumptions.”

④ Although I will not directly address, for reasons of space, different theories of world literature, the questions that emerge in the following pages are informed by ongoing discussions on the interrelations of world literature with world economic systems, globalization and inequality (see the various approaches by Casanova, Moretti, Spivak, WReC); on transnationality, circulation of texts, languages and people, translatability and untranslatability (see e.g., Rosendahl Thomsen, Damrosch, Apter); on the relationships between world, globe, planet; globalization, postcoloniality and neoimperialism (see e.g., Spivak, Cheah, Ganguly, WReC), and how literature, as a practice and as an institution contributes to making the world (e.g. Helgesson and Vermeulen, Cheah). A nuanced discussion of Nadine Gordimer’s work of the early 2000s in relation to postcoloniality and world literature can be found in Dimitriou, “Postcolonialising.”

⑤ I have discussed *I fantasmi di Portopalo* in “Uncertain” 448-53.

⑥ See Gordimer’s “Living in the Interregnum,” in *Telling Times*, 2010 (374-96).

⑦ On the tensions between the notions of home, belonging and exile in relation to globalisation, in particular



in relation to Gordimer's own discussion of global and local, see Kossew, "Beyond the National."

⑧ See Gordimer's essays in *Telling Times*, in particular "The Essential Gesture," published in 1985 (409-24); "Turning the Page: African Writers on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century," 1992 (485-93); "The Dwelling Place of Words," 2001 (590-94).

⑨ Kossew ("Beyond") discusses Julie and Ibrahim as stereotypes, quoting Gordimer's ironic awareness that "these stereotypes are so hard to resist or overcome, even in a global world where cross-cultural understanding is promoted" (25).

⑩ On the significance of "gesture" for Gordimer's reflections on the writer's relationship with the world, see Lahti.

⑪ On the critique of cosmopolitanism in *The Pickup*, see also Mount 107; Eze, 77-101.

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