

## **Fragments of Dystopia: Exploring *The Pickup* by Nadine Gordimer**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** The dystopian novel has evolved as a critical literary genre, reflecting societal anxieties about industrialization, authoritarianism, and global inequities. Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), while not explicitly dystopian, contains fragments of dystopian thought, exploring themes of migration, identity, and systemic inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel's portrayal of alienation, socio-economic divides, and existential uncertainty aligns with dystopian motifs, offering a critique of global power structures and neoliberal systems. This study positions *The Pickup* within a framework of fragmented dystopia, integrating postcolonial and critical dystopian theories to analyze its themes and narrative structure.

**Objective:** This paper aims to examine *The Pickup* through the lenses of postcolonialism and critical dystopia, highlighting how Gordimer critiques global systems of power and privilege while exploring the resilience of the human spirit. By synthesizing existing scholarship and applying theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to uncover the novel's implicit warnings about dehumanization, cultural dislocation, and systemic inequities in a globalized world.

**Method:** The analysis employs postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space," and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, to explore themes of identity, migration, and cultural othering. Additionally, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini's framework of critical dystopia is used to examine the novel's fragmented narrative structure and its portrayal of systemic inequality and resistance. Close textual analysis is conducted to elucidate the interplay between personal and political struggles in the novel.

**Findings:** The study reveals that *The Pickup* operates as a fragmented dystopia, critiquing global inequities and the dehumanizing effects of border regimes and neoliberal systems. The novel's protagonists, Julie Summers and Ibrahim ibn Musa, embody the tensions of cultural hybridity and systemic oppression, reflecting broader societal fractures. Gordimer's portrayal of alienation, socio-economic disparities, and existential uncertainty aligns with dystopian motifs, while the novel's ambiguous ending suggests possibilities for resistance and transformation. The desert setting serves as a metaphor for existential reckoning, emphasizing the characters' search for meaning in a fragmented world.

**Conclusion:** *The Pickup* transcends conventional genre boundaries, blending postcolonial and dystopian elements to interrogate identity, power, and resistance. By critiquing both colonial legacies and contemporary global inequities, Gordimer's novel offers a nuanced exploration of the human condition in an unequal and fragmented world. The study underscores the novel's relevance as a prescient commentary on the perils of systemic inequality and the potential for human agency in the face of adversity.

**Novelty:** This study introduces a novel interpretive lens by framing *The Pickup* as a fragmented dystopia, integrating postcolonial and critical dystopian theories. It contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the novel's implicit dystopian elements and its critique of globalization, migration, and systemic inequality. The analysis opens new avenues for exploring Gordimer's work in relation to contemporary global challenges, offering fresh insights into the intersections of identity, power, and resistance in a transnational context.

**Keywords:** Cultural dislocation, resistance, identity, post-apartheid South Africa, discourse

## **Introduction**

The dystopian novel emerged as a distinct literary genre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, shaped by the social and political upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, rapid urbanization, and evolving technological advancements. Writers such as H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) and E.M. Forster in *The Machine Stops* (1909) offered early explorations of futuristic societies where technological progress and unchecked authority led to dehumanization and repression. These works reflected anxieties about industrialization, class disparities, and the loss of individuality in increasingly mechanized societies. The genre flourished in the mid-20th century as global conflicts, totalitarian regimes, and the threat of nuclear war heightened fears of oppressive futures. Seminal works like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) critiqued authoritarianism, censorship, and societal conformity, resonating with Cold War anxieties. Since then, dystopian fiction has evolved, reflecting contemporary concerns such as climate change (*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, 2006) and technological overreach (*Black Mirror* series). Today, it remains a vital genre, examining humanity's resilience and vulnerabilities in the face of oppressive systems.

Gordimer's writing deal with the issues of race, identity, and socio-political unrest, reflecting the fractured landscape of South Africa's apartheid and post-apartheid eras. *The Pickup*

continues this tradition, exploring themes of migration, class disparity, and cultural alienation. The novel's central characters, Julie Summers and Ibrahim ibn Musa, navigate a labyrinth of personal and societal challenges, embodying the fractured realities of a world marked by systemic inequities and disconnection. While *The Pickup* is not explicitly dystopian, it contains fragments of dystopian thought, articulated through its portrayal of alienation, socio-economic divides, and existential uncertainty. This paper examines these elements, positioning *The Pickup* within a framework of fragmented dystopia, where the personal intersects with the political. By analyzing the novel through postcolonial and dystopian lenses, this study elucidates how Gordimer critiques global systems of power and privilege.

### **Review of Literature**

Nadine Gordimer's [\*The Pickup\* \(2001\)](#) has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion and analysis into its exploration of post-apartheid South Africa, migration, identity, and the complex interplay of personal and political realities. This literature review synthesizes existing scholarship, identifying key issues and themes, and positing the emergence of dystopia as a new interpretive lens. Gordimer's *The Pickup* critically explores race and social stratification in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel presents a stark contrast between Julie Summers, a privileged white woman, and Abdu (Ibrahim ibn Musa), an undocumented immigrant from an unnamed Arab country. This juxtaposition highlights the systemic inequities that persist beyond the official end of apartheid ([Cloete, 2014](#)).

According to Cloete (2014), Gordimer's later works, including *The Pickup*, shift from overt political struggles to a more nuanced examination of identity and belonging. Julie's immersion in Ibrahim's culture serves as a metaphor for the fluidity of identity in a globalized world. Furthermore, the novel critiques post-apartheid racial and economic disparities, demonstrating that while legal apartheid has ended, economic and social divides remain deeply entrenched ([Cloete, 2014](#)).

The theme of migration has been a central issue to *The Pickup* as both a physical and emotional journey. [Ahmed \(2004\)](#) explores Ibrahim's quest for a sense of belonging, juxtaposed with Julie's voluntary immersion into a foreign culture. Migration is portrayed as a double-edged sword: a means of escape but also a source of alienation and struggle ([Van der Westhuizen, 2012](#)). The novel interrogates identity through its protagonists—Julie and Ibrahim—who fight for self-perception and societal categorization. Julie's romanticized embrace of "the other" reflects Western constructions of exoticism, while Ibrahim's rejection of victimhood complicates simplistic binaries ([Chambers, 2005](#)). Scholars such as [Gikandi \(2007\)](#) argue that Gordimer challenges essentialist notions of identity both as fluid and contingent.

Gordimer's portrayal of gender dynamics has sparked considerable debate. Julie's defiance of traditional gender roles, contrasted with the patriarchal expectations in Ibrahim's culture, underscores the intersectionality of oppression. Critics such as [Morris \(2013\)](#) suggest that Julie's agency is undermined by her dependence on Ibrahim, complicating feminist readings of the text. The geographic and environmental settings in *The Pickup* function as metaphors for the protagonists' inner states. As [Saayman \(2015\)](#) observes, the desert symbolizes both

barrenness and potential renewal, mirroring Julie's transformative journey. The urban sprawl of South Africa contrasts sharply with the desolation of Ibrahim's homeland, emphasizing the characters' dislocation and search for meaning.

Recent scholarship suggests that *The Pickup* can be read as a dystopian narrative, particularly in its critique of globalization and neoliberalism. The novel's depiction of systemic inequalities, bureaucratic indifference, and environmental degradation aligns with key dystopian motifs (Williams, 2019). Ibrahim's plight as an undocumented migrant reflects the dehumanizing effects of border regimes, evoking a grim vision of a world increasingly divided by wealth and privilege (Meier, 2020). The themes of race, migration, identity, and power in *The Pickup* have been extensively analyzed, offering valuable insights into Gordimer's nuanced critique of contemporary society. However, emerging interpretations framing the novel as a dystopian critique open new avenues for exploration. This lens foregrounds the novel's implicit warnings about the dehumanizing consequences of global inequities and environmental neglect, positioning *The Pickup* as a prescient commentary on the perils of an unequal and fragmented world.

### **Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism and Critical Dystopia**

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining *The Pickup*, as it interrogates the legacy of colonialism and its impact on identity and power dynamics. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is particularly relevant, as it captures the liminal spaces inhabited by the characters. Additionally, Edward Said's ideas on orientalism illuminate the novel's exploration of cultural othering. The critical dystopian framework, as articulated by scholars such as Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, offers another perspective. By integrating postcolonial theory and dystopian studies, the analysis underscores how Gordimer's work interrogates identity, power structures, and resistance in a transnational context.

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens to examine themes of migration, identity, and cultural hybridity in *The Pickup*. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, the third space, and mimicry are particularly relevant. Bhabha writes, "The 'third space' displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). He further elaborates, "It is that third space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (p. 55). Bhabha emphasizes, "The third space is a challenge to dualistic, oppositional models, offering instead a process of cultural translation where identity is negotiated and recreated" (p. 36). Bhabha argues that the "third space" is a liminal space where cultural meanings are negotiated, producing hybrid identities that challenge colonial binaries. In *The Pickup*, Julie and Ibrahim's relationship embodies this hybridity, as their experiences straddle global inequalities and local solidarities.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (1978) offers a complementary framework, critiquing the ways in which the West constructs and "others" the East. Said defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the

Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (p. 2). He elaborates on the West's representation of the East, stating, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (p. 1). Said emphasizes the power dynamics at play: "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (p. 20). He critiques the constructed and reductive nature of these representations, noting, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (p. 5). Said's insights are pivotal in unpacking how Ibrahim's identity as an undocumented immigrant intersects with broader systems of Western domination and prejudice. His portrayal in the novel reflects a resistance to reductive stereotyping, aligning with Said's call for nuanced representations of the "subaltern."

The novel's depiction of socio-economic disparities and bureaucratic control resonates with dystopian themes, as articulated by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. Moylan (2000) defines critical dystopias as narratives that critique oppressive systems while imagining possibilities for resistance and change. Baccolini (2003) extends this by emphasizing the "open-ended" nature of critical dystopias, which resist closure and promote hope. Moylan defines "Dystopia emerges as a critical vehicle to illuminate and critique the hegemonic order, offering resistance through its representation of dire social, political, and environmental conditions" (p. 189). Likewise, Baccolini and Moylan express the idea of resistance as they say, "Critical dystopias salvage a space of hope within the oppressive landscapes they portray, suggesting that change remains possible despite systemic crises" (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 7). In *The Pickup*, the tension between Julie's affluent background and Ibrahim's marginalization reflects dystopian elements of systemic inequality. The novel critiques the alienation produced by global capitalism, a hallmark of Moylan's critical dystopia, while offering glimpses of alternative solidarities through Julie's immersion in Ibrahim's community. Baccolini's concept of hopeful resistance is evident in the novel's ambiguous ending, which suggests the potential for transformative relationships across cultural divides.

### **Textual Analysis**

The novel, *The Pickup*, published in 2001, is a dystopian novel. It is entirely different from the novels which she has written during apartheid period. Most of her novels deal with the themes of socio-political issues such as racial inequality and exploitation of natives during the apartheid period. However, this novel presents post-apartheid problems in a new emerging Rainbow nation. The opening of the novel sets in a different atmosphere of post-apartheid period. It covers its distinct place in a post-apartheid literature of transition with the issues of gender, migration, and displacement. The new South Africa has come up with its new borders to a wide range of peoples, many of them settling as 'illegal immigrants' in the big cities like Johannesburg. This has given rise to reactions of xenophobia and resentment among local people, despite the fact that, as Gordimer has rightly pointed out, "apart from South African Africans themselves . . . we are all immigrants here" (Gordimer, 2001, p.



[115](#)). Thus, the issue of displacement is both an age-old and recent one that lies at the heart of a South African sense of belonging. She claims, "But a human being, she, she, cannot simply exist; she is a hurricane, every thought bending and crossing its coherence inside her, nothing will let her be, not for a moment. Every emotion, every thought, is invaded by another" ([p. 236](#)).

[Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini's \(2003\)](#) concept of critical dystopias emphasizes narratives that resist closure, leaving room for hope and transformation. *The Pickup* embodies this fragmentation. While the novel portrays the dystopian realities of migration, alienation, and socio-economic inequality, it also gestures toward potential change. Julie's decision to embrace life in Ibrahim's home country suggests a rejection of materialism, yet this choice remains fraught with ambiguities and unresolved tensions. The fragmented structure of the novel reflects these complexities, eschewing simplistic binaries of utopia and dystopia.

Alienation is a central theme in *The Pickup*, manifesting in both personal and societal dimensions. Julie Summers, a white South African from an affluent background, rejects the privileges of her class, seeking meaning in the marginalized spaces of society. Her relationship with Ibrahim, an illegal immigrant from an unnamed Arab country, serves as a metaphor for cultural dislocation and the quest for belonging. "The desert. No seasons of bloom and decay. Just the endless turn of night and day. Out of time: and she is gazing—not over it, taken into it, for it has no measure of space, features that mark distance from here to there" ([Gordimer, 2001, p. 178](#)). Gordimer's depiction of Julie's immersion in Ibrahim's community reveals the fractures of globalization. Julie's initial idealism clashes with the harsh realities of Ibrahim's precarious existence, underscoring the disparities between privilege and marginalization. Ibrahim's aspirations for upward mobility through migration to the West further highlight the dystopian aspects of a global system that commodifies human lives.

Julie Summers, who comes from a well-off white family, and Abdu, an illegal immigrant in Johannesburg from 'some unnamed Saudi Arabian country ultimately reverse roles. In Johannesburg, Julie is the one with contacts, money and power, no matter how strenuously she may try to evade them. But when Abdu's application for permission to stay on in South Africa is refused despite the best efforts of Julie's family connections and Julie decides that they will both return to his homeland, it is she who has to adapt and learn how to be a migrant in an Islamic Arab society.

The novel's settings amplify this sense of dislocation. The urban landscape of Johannesburg, with its stark economic divides, contrasts with the barren desert of Ibrahim's homeland. These settings function as symbols of alienation, reflecting the fragmented nature of contemporary life. Gordimer elucidates this:

You were told your permit had expired and would not be renewed; you elected to stay on illegally, you shed your identity and took on an assumed name. If you had left, gone back to your country of origin or wherever you might have thought you would get in, if you had re-applied for immigration from there, outside these borders—then the

testimonials from prominent citizens here might indeed have served you well ... guarantees ... Money is always useful. ([Gordimer, 2001, p. 85](#)).

The desert, in particular, becomes a site of existential reckoning, where Julie confronts the limits of her understanding and Ibrahim grapples with his identity. Central to this narrative are Julie Summers, a privileged South African woman, and Ibrahim ibn Musa, an illegal immigrant. The novel captures the dynamics of their relationship against a backdrop of economic inequality and societal tension. Utilizing Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space," Said's orientalism, and Moylan and Baccolini's understanding of critical dystopias, this analysis positions *The Pickup* as a fragmented dystopia that interrogates postcolonial realities and global power structures.

Gordimer is fascinated by the kinds of power shifts that occur when people become displaced from their comfort zones and have to adapt to new ways of thinking and being. She critiques systemic inequality through the experiences of her characters, exposing the interconnectedness of local and global injustices. Ibrahim's status as an illegal immigrant highlights the dehumanizing effects of border regimes and neoliberal economic systems. His struggle for a visa and the constant threat of deportation underscore the precarity faced by marginalized individuals in a globalized world. The novel also interrogates the lingering effects of apartheid on South African society. Julie's rejection of her privileged background can be read as a critique of the complacency of the white elite in addressing systemic inequality. However, her journey is not without contradictions, as her relationship with Ibrahim raises questions about power dynamics and the commodification of cultural difference.

At its core, *The Pickup* is a meditation on the human condition, exploring themes of love, identity, and existential uncertainty. Julie and Ibrahim's relationship serves as a microcosm of broader societal tensions, embodying the intersection of personal and political struggles. Gordimer's protagonist Julie Summers is a twenty-eight-years old South African of English origin. She is the daughter of a wealthy investment banker named Nigel Summers. She is always a free spirit. She is a Public Relation officer. She has all the privileges that the suburbs have to offer. She prefers to live in "a series of backyard cottages adopted from servants' quarters" ([p. 8](#)). She has rejected the Northern Suburbs and her rich father in support of a crew of happy friends. Her friends are young and selective tolerant, and have liberal thinking mind like her. They are of mixed-races who frequently meet at the EL-AY Cafe in downtown Johannesburg. Entering to the cafe of that bazaar was restricted to the people of different races. Only privileged one was allowed to that Cafe during her parents' generation. Their attempts to forge a life together, despite their differences, reflect the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

The novel's ending, which leaves many questions unresolved, reinforces this sense of uncertainty. However, this choice is fraught with ambiguity, as it raises questions about the possibility of true belonging in a fragmented world. Gordimer succinctly clarifies Julie's decision to remain in the desert with Ibrahim's family, rather than returning to her privileged

life in South Africa, suggests a rejection of materialism and an embrace of alternative ways of being.

The desert. No seasons of bloom and decay. Just the end- less turn of night and day. Out of time: and she is gazing— not over it, taken into it, for it has no measure of space, features that mark distance from here to there. In a film of haze there is no horizon, the pallor of sand, pink-traced, lilac-luminous with its own colour of faint light, has no demarcation from land to air. Sky-haze is indistinguishable from sand-haze. All drifts together, and there is no onlooker; the desert is eternity. ([Gordimer, 2001, 178](#))

Despite its bleak portrayal of systemic inequalities and cultural dislocation, *The Pickup* contains fragments of hope and resistance. Julie's transformation and Ibrahim's determination to carve out a better future exemplify the potential for agency and change. The novel suggests that, even in a fragmented dystopia, individuals can resist oppressive systems and create spaces of connection and meaning. This theme is particularly evident in the depiction of Ibrahim's family and community. While their lives are marked by hardship, they also embody resilience and solidarity. Gordimer's nuanced portrayal challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood, emphasizing the complexity and agency of marginalized individuals.

By synthesizing postcolonial and dystopian frameworks, *The Pickup* can be understood as a narrative that critiques both colonial legacies and contemporary global inequities. Bhabha's hybridity and Said's Orientalism highlight the cultural and ideological tensions at play, while Moylan and Baccolini's critical dystopia underscores the systemic nature of these conflicts. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Gordimer's novel operates as a site of critique and possibility.

## **Conclusion**

Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* offers a profound exploration of identity, migration, and systemic inequality, framed within a fragmented dystopian reality. Through the intertwined lives of Julie Summers and Ibrahim ibn Musa, the novel critiques global systems of power and privilege, exposing the dehumanizing effects of border regimes, neoliberal economic systems, and cultural dislocation. By examining the novel through postcolonial and critical dystopian lenses, this study has illuminated how Gordimer interrogates the legacies of colonialism and the pervasive inequalities of a globalized world.

The novel's fragmented structure and ambiguous ending reflect the complexities of contemporary life, where personal and political struggles intersect. Julie's rejection of her privileged background and her immersion in Ibrahim's world symbolize a search for meaning beyond materialism, while Ibrahim's struggle for belonging underscores the precarity faced by marginalized individuals. The desert, as a central metaphor, encapsulates the existential reckoning of the characters, emphasizing the tension between alienation and the possibility of renewal.

Gordimer's nuanced portrayal of systemic inequality and cultural hybridity challenges simplistic binaries of utopia and dystopia. While the novel critiques oppressive systems, it also



gestures toward hope and resistance, embodied in the resilience of its characters and their communities. By integrating postcolonial theory and critical dystopian frameworks, this study has positioned *The Pickup* as a narrative that not only critiques global inequities but also affirms the potential for human agency and transformation.

Thus, *The Pickup* transcends traditional genre boundaries, offering a rich and multifaceted critique of contemporary society. Gordimer's exploration of identity, power, and resistance resonates deeply in an era marked by globalization, migration, and environmental crises. The novel's fragmented dystopian vision serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring human capacity to navigate and resist oppressive systems, even in the face of profound uncertainty. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Gordimer's work, opening new avenues for exploring the intersections of postcolonialism, dystopian literature, and global justice.

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