



Resisting The Politics of Cultural Pluralism in Nadine Gordimer's The Pickup and Narrudin Farah's A Naked Needle

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Paper Received:

15th December, 2020

Paper Accepted:

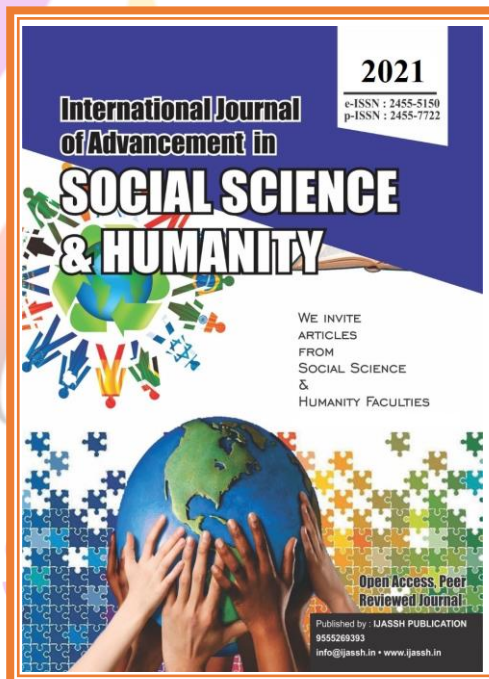
04th January, 2021

Paper Received After Correction:

15th February, 2021

Paper Published:

24th February, 2021



How to cite the article: Raphael Saka, Resisting The Politics of Cultural Pluralism in Nadine Gordimer's The Pickup and Narrudin Farah's A Naked Needle, IJASSH, January-June 2021 Vol 1; 20-30

ABSTRACT

Most Postcolonial writers in their narratives present characters who are interested in seeing a racially unified society and not a fragmented one, thereby creating space for cultural pluralism in these societies. However, despite the zeal and motivation by the postcolonial man to be involved in cross-cultural interaction, those concerned are most often than not, confronted with difficulties of trying to get used to, and understand another person's culture as well as struggling to satisfy or get used to ones in-laws as the case may be. This paper aims at projecting the link between postcolonial narrative discourses to explain the fact that for one to be involved in a fruitful intercultural dialogue, one must be ready to face challenges that might slightly or totally act as barrier to its progress. From the prism of postcolonial theory, this paper, therefore, hinges on the premise that Farah and Gordimer in their narrative fictions believe that even though cultural and racial negotiations and arbitrations are the panaceas for harmony in the postcolonial socio-political space, there are definitely a lot of challenges to grapple with in order to construct a society void of cultural variations.

Keywords: postcolonial, postcolonial narrative, cultural pluralism, intercultural dialogue, identity negotiation, postcolonial theory, and cultural and racial negotiations, cross-cultural dialogue.



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INTRODUCTION

In the context of postcolonial discourse, the concepts of interculturalism and hybridization are of paramount importance. The reason for this preoccupation is the fact that the citizens of postcolonial countries are involved in an intercultural dialogue. However, despite the zeal and motivation by the postcolonial man to be involved in cross-cultural interaction, those concerned are most often than not, are confronted with difficulties of trying to get used to, and understand another person's culture as well as struggling to satisfy or get used to one's in-laws as the case may be.

Foeman A. and Nance T. in an internet article entitled "Building New Culture, Refraining Old Images: Success Strategies in Interracial Couples", argue that: "Many parents express disapproval of their children interracial dating or marrying, therefore interracial dating couples may delay informing parents of their interracial union. After acknowledgment, they may avoid family outings and reunions" (6). From the above quotation, one can say that in spite of the effort by individuals to be united in an intercultural dialogue or relationship so many issues act as barrier to the progress of this type of relationship. In an internet article titled "Historical Analysis of College Campus Interracial Dating,"

Michael W Firminand and Stephanie Firebaugh contend that the reasons most people give against interracial relationship is "... lack of desire, lack of proximity, and personal, familial, or societal pressure" (20). To be involved in a fruitful intercultural dialogue, one must be ready to face challenges that might slightly or totally act as barrier to its progress; one must also have a liberal-minded spirit to tolerate and accept differences.

In Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* just like in Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle* characters such as Julie, Abdu, Nancy, Barbara and Mildred find it very hard to incorporate themselves in South Africa as well as Somalia due to lots of challenges. This article aims at analyzing opposing forces that slightly or totally hinder the characters in the novels under study from fully involving themselves in an intercultural dialogue. Put differently, this article will consequently authenticate the view that a social barrier such as cultural variations, is an impediment to intercultural dialogue and rapport. This difficulty will be seen from the correlative postcolonial concepts of centre and margin dichotomy and self and other.

Cultural Variations

Culture is a very important element in any given society. This means that anybody who wants to live harmoniously

in any society, should be prepared to learn the culture of the people. This is in context with the old adage that he who goes to Rome must be prepared to do what the Romans do. Culture in this given context is seen as the sum total of all the traditions, norms and mores of a people within a given social formation necessary for their life style or condition. In the postcolonial context in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* and Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle*, the émigrés are white women who move from their western cultures into an Arab, Muslim cultures in Africa where they do not find it easy to integrate themselves in their new environment due to cultural differences.

In *A Naked Needle*, Nancy migrates from London to Mogadiscio; in *The Pickup*, Julie migrates from Johannesburg to an unnamed African, Muslim country. It should be noted that most of these characters especially Julie, Mildred and Nancy find it very difficult to build intercultural relationships and reconstruct their identity due to cultural differences and this is because they did not foresee the cultural problems they will have to grapple with as they journey from one country to the other.

While in the desert country, the first obstacle to Julie's progress in the construction of an intercultural

relationship is her inability to communicate with Abdu's family because she is not versed with the Arabic language. This acts as a terrible barrier or hindrance because it bars her from fully integrating herself in this environment. One realizes that when Abdu Ibrahim and Julie arrive in the desert country, there is a conversation between Abdu and her parents that excludes Julie because she does not understand Abdu's language. The narrator explains that Abdu and his parents discussed at length "... in the language she (Julie) couldn't understand..." (124). Due to her incomprehensibility of the Arabic language, Julie becomes very upset as she believes that Abdu's parents might be gossiping against her. In connection to this, the narrator says that she had "... mixed tenors of hurt feelings and obduracy she felt intensity-somehow herself the cause of it in the presence of the father's and son's contestation and monumental silence of his mother ignoring her..." (124-125). Here, one can say that Abdu's parents are probably blaming him for bringing a white woman to the family house without their consent and this is done in a language that Julie does not understand and in this case, who can blame her for having "mixed tenors of hurt feelings."

Furthermore, this linguistic barrier compels Julie to study the language of this

Arab country. Coincidentally, Abdu's kinsmen's and neighbors also become very interested in Julie's own language (English) and she accepts to teach them in exchange of theirs. The narrator states that: "she agreed-but in exchange for lessons in their language. Why sit among his people as deaf-mute?" (143). This remark shows the importance of language in forming an identity. In addition, the decision which Julie takes to learn the language of the desert country shows that she is inadvertently learning the culture of the society. This is in context of Ngugi wa Thiongo's contention in "The Language of African Literature" that:

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next ... (289)

This shows that language is very important as far as cultural assertion is concerned. The language one speaks determines the degree of his/her belonging in the locale in which he/she finds himself. Julie's effort to learn the language of

Abdu's country already shows that Abdu's country has a culture because it has a language and therefore it ceases from being a desert. This is because it shows that people can live there and can succeed. Such is the case with Julie and Abdu's uncle who succeed. Therefore calling the land a desert is ironic because it is alive and people are happy living in it.

In addition, Julie also wishes to study the Koran as well, so as to change her religion and fit squarely in this Muslim context. This, notwithstanding, is impossible because this holy book is not written in the language she understands. It is for this reason that while in Abdu's country, she writes and pleads with her mother in California to send her the translation of the Koran. The narrator writes: "She wrote to her mother why she shouldn't be asked to order through one of the wonderful book warehouses in California a translation of the Koran, handbook and send it by courier..." (143). The above shows Julie's ambition to have the translated version of the Koran since she cannot read the one that is written in Arabic. The fact that Julie cannot read the Koran is a very big problem to her because to fully participate in the affairs of Abdu's country, she must be able to master the Koran. These differences in religious believe and the inability to speak the language of the desert country act as

opposing forces to Julie's building of an intercultural dialogue.

When a copy of the Koran finally enters Julie's hand "by door-to-door service pre-paid at high cost" (144). She reads it at random and "the verses did not come in the order in which Maryam had happened to name them" (145). One can say that, Julie is not going to find it easy reading and understanding this book because the facts in it do not appear in the order in which Maryam had mentioned to her. The mix-up in the translated version of the Koran justifies the fact that this will slightly hinder Julie from fully understanding the principles of her new found religion.

While in the desert country, Abdu and Julie find it difficult to consummate their love for the fact that it is an abomination for Muslims to have sex during the holy week of Ramadan. This hindrance acts as another barrier in the redefinition of Julie's character and identity. It is in consonance to the above fact that the omniscient narrator comments that Julie

[...] felt desire rising in indulgence her and unfolding, thickening those other lips of hers, overwhelming the latitude of hunger and the drought

of thirst. And she was ashamed; she knew that sexual acts, like other forms of, were forbidden during these dedicated days, though this abstinence proved to add differed excitement to love making in the nights. (155)

Here one realizes from the above quotation that Julie is very eager to have sex with Abdu, but she cannot because it is strictly forbidden during the month of Ramadan. The narrator also states that: "Between them was the knowledge of the taboo, to be observed absolutely, that a husband and wife must not retire together to their bedroom during the daylight hours of Ramadan, when any intimacy between men and women is forbidden" (154). The narrator's remarks show that Julie has to wrestle with the Christian tradition in which she had been brought up and a new found Muslim tradition in which she is gradually being initiated into. This conflict of cultures is enough prove that Julie will not find it easy in negotiating her identity and also building a fruitful cordial relationship with Abdu and his people. The conflict of culture as seen in *The Pickup* is because Islamic beliefs are deeply rooted in Abdu's country, hence, the way things are done in this country is definitely contrary to what Julie expects

and that is why she struggles day and night to adjust in order to fully integrate herself in The desert country.

The aspect of Islamic religion in Abdu's Arab country which does not permit them to freely make love to each other during Ramadan slightly hinders Julie from integrating herself fully in this type of society that practices a religion that is totally different from hers. Even though the two lovers succeed in making love contrary to the teaching of Islam, it should be noted that, this makes the mother of Abdu very upset. The omniscient narrator comments that:

The mother did drink deeply. Not only of water, but of the shame and sin of what he had done; she could not look at this beloved face, as if she would see it horribly changed, only for her – others were still seeing him handsome and full of grace – into corruption and ugliness. And that face, since she had bequeathed her own features to, would also be her own. (157)

Abdu's mother knows of their behaviour and also knows that Abdu could be seriously punished according to the law of Islam if this got into the ears of his uncle.

By so doing, she then decides to keep it to herself in order to prevent her son from leaving the country again. The narrator states that: "If he is disgraced, nothing will stop him. He will leave, she will lose him. Any punishment, *in sha Allah*, rather than that" (158). This argument shows that Abdu's mother decides to keep the secret to herself not to lose her son. She knows that if Abdu's uncle hears of this, Abdu will obviously run away from the country because of the humiliation and shame that this type of crime can bring. In addition, by not wanting Abdu to leave the country, Abdu's mother is inadvertently insinuating that he can live and prosper in his own country. When one of the men wants to know why Abdu disappeared from the company of the men in the course of the afternoon, Abdu's mother "responds before he. - He needs rest" (158). By deceiving these men that Abdu needed rest is her own way of concealing Abdu's behaviour from them since she is aware of the consequences if they become aware that he slept with Julie during Ramadan.

Apart from this idea of sexual intimacy which is forbidden during Ramadan, it is also outlawed for a woman to move in town without anybody accompanying her. It is for this reason that when Julie expresses her wish to go to Abdu's country, he wonders aloud in the following words: "Does she realize that a

girl like her couldn't go out, where I'm being sent back to" (94). In posing this rhetorical question, Abdu is circuitously foreshadowing the problems that Julie is going to face in his country.

Furthermore, in *A Naked Needle*, one equally finds aspects of cultural differences where Koschin compares Somali women with Barbara, an American, and wonders if Nancy will be like her. Koschin interrogates Nancy thus: "-Nancy, Nancy ... wouldn't you do better than Barbara? I bet you would. But then who is this Barbara, the woman who has refused the child breast-sucking right?" (67). This comparison of Somali women with Barbara is a way of letting Nancy realize how Barbara has failed culturally and it is another way of making her realize the value of breast-feeding as far as the Somali society is concerned. This is also another way of showing the differences between African and European cultures hence, highlighting the value of breast-feeding a child in an African context as compared to Europeans who often times breast-feed their children artificially. So for Nancy to fully identify herself in Somalia, she must be ready to breast-feed her child, if she eventually has one, in order to avoid unnecessary problems from husband and in-laws. Koschin further opines that:

[...] A woman's breast is a symbol of life. It represents living. Life takes its substance from no other place but the Milky Way, that road, that path up in the sky, among the stars along which death was dragged to deceptive hell by the angels of mercy. And to deny a child that ... (67)

Koschin feels that a woman's breast is a symbol of life and according to him, life takes substance from it. Koschin is aware that Nancy is new in Somalia and this orientation is definitely of great importance, since it is going to educate her on how culturally valuable a woman's breast is to the child. He also tells Nancy that denying the child her breast-feeding right "... is the most hideous crime anyone could ever commit against any human being. A crime, Nancy" (67). From the above citation, Koschin believes that it is not just wrong to deny a child this right, but a crime as well. So, this is one of the realities that Nancy must grapple with in Somalia.

Furthermore, one can say it is very impossible for Mildred one of the characters in *A Naked Needle* to integrate herself in Somalia due to the unbearable customs, traditions and the nonchalant

attitude of Barre's people. Barbara comments that Mildred is obviously tired of the:

[...] number of relations one has to be loyal to, the number of unwritten codes and laws a woman from a foreign land has to abide by, the dull life one has to lead, the rigid customs of this nomadic nation, Barre's dislike and Vanity's demands to go out to the movies together! On top of all this Vanity couldn't bear living with her mother-in-law, and Barre's brothers and sisters who number ten. (64)

If one must comfortably integrate oneself in a foreign society then it is absolutely necessary to accept and learn another person's culture with few complains, and it is only in this context that you can fully feel free and interact with all and sundry. From the above quotation, one realizes that Mildred is not ready to accept the customs and laws of Somalia reserved for foreign women like her, she is also not ready to accommodate the brothers and sisters of her husband and this attitude by Mildred, is definitely an opposing factor as far as intercultural dialogue is concerned.

Furthermore, Nancy finds it difficult to build an intercultural dialogue in Somalia due to religious differences. Commenting on how Somalis will perceive Nancy, Koschin tells Nancy that:

Believe it on trust from me, Nancy, your religion is more repulsive to them than your skin. Seeing your repellent hide, the Somalis will immediately ask me if you are a Muslim. If you are not (which you are not, to the best of my knowledge), they will enquire further if there is any likelihood of your ever embracing the Islamic faith. (10)

It is very clear that Nancy is not going to find things easy in Somalia given the fact that Somalis find her religion repulsive and if she must construct a reasonable intercultural dialogue or integrate herself in Somalia, then she must be ready to embrace the Islamic faith. This means that she must sacrifice her religion in order to construct the type of identity she desires, and this is obviously an opposing factor to attaining an intercultural dialogue. Koschin further tells her that Somalis don't find her skin repulsive they:

[...] fear what you represent: a threat. Black

skin and kink hair seem not to pacify their annoyance either. Because if you were from Nigeria and a non-Muslim at that, they would create just much fuss about it as if I ate pork. So watch your words on this issue. (10)

In terms of religious adherence, Somalis fear what Nancy represents simply because she is a Christian. In fact, the colour of her skin means nothing to them. What they fear the most is the fact that she could be a bad influence as far as the Islamic religion is concerned, and that is why Koschin warns her to watch her words. This interaction characterized by fear definitely acts as barrier that slightly

hinders her from fully integrating herself in Somalia.

In a nutshell, one can conclude by saying that the search for self-fulfillment and identity by the characters concerned as seen in the above paragraphs proves difficult due to language barrier and cultural differences. Here, one realizes that this is going to slightly hinder the construction of the identity they desire. In *A Naked Needle*, Koschin tries to protect Nancy by advising and warning her on some of the religious and cultural aspects of Somali society. He thinks she will find it impossible to accept and reconcile with, where as in *The Pickup*, Abdu does not think Julie can find anything reasonable and attractive in his village.



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