"The desert is mute": Spatial and Linguistic Extremes in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to analyse Nadine Gordimer's representation of the desert as an extreme site located at the margins of her habitually fictionalized South African world. By exploring the hermeneutical meaning of 'a space beyond the edges', Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) describes the heroine's reconfiguration of her own place in the new Islamic lands she inhabits. Julie Summer's struggle for personal integration is strictly connected to communication and language, whose ultimate meaning is conveyed through the desert. Both silence and other non-verbal ways of expression portray, on the one hand, the final image of "the world […] receding from the communicative grasp of the word" (Steiner 2010: 37). On the other hand, they testify to the search for different ways of cultural and linguistic negotiation in the post-apartheid years.

Key-words: desert, Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup*, post-apartheid fiction.

1. *The Pickup*: dualism and fluidity

After the democratic elections of 1994, far from "whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change" (Gordimer 1988: 262), South Africa went beyond the years of imposed segregation and violence through a relatively unperturbed period of negotiations, the works of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission being the most evident example of a diplomatic transition to the new era. With very few exceptions, the novels written by Nadine Gordimer before 2001 were all set in South-Africa and dealt with the major socio-political issues of the apartheid years[1]. *The Pickup* (2001) is her first

[1] Gordimer introduced other African countries in two of her earlier novels, *A Guest of Honour* (1971) and *A Sport of Nature* (1987). However, as Stephen Clingman states, "While [her] novels have gone beyond a South African setting before, [*The*

work set in the post-apartheid, depicting a South Africa that has just emerged from the condition of interregnum. The context of social and cultural interregnum had previously been introduced in *July's People* (1981), but connections external to South Africa would not be developed until subsequent writings. In her later novels, more than revisiting her typical themes under the new light of change, Gordimer chose different subject matters in order to fictionalize the impact of ideological and individual mutations. As a consequence, wider perspectives were presented, while the focus shifted to other geographical and cultural locations. The thematic originality of *The Pickup* is built around the presentation of Islamic culture as a means of comparison with South Africa. Different settings further the action to a global level while introducing key contemporary themes and embodying a literary anticipation of the topical interest raised by middle-eastern countries. The issue of migration also takes distinctive forms in the novel, since movements within the African continent replace emigration to western countries. The social and cultural relationships emerging from these latest migratory phenomena produce a fictionalization of the interest in a country as part of a global dimension, which actively interacts with the surrounding world.

The Pickup is a novel steeped in the representation of place as a multifarious, fluid entity made up of continuously shifting boundaries and ever-fading horizons. However, geographical and ideological fluidity is hidden behind a set of socio-cultural parallelisms and individual dichotomies that establish the diegetic nature of the novel. Divided into two parts, set in two different, unnamed countries, the story focuses on the relationship between the young, bourgeois, South-African woman Julie Summers and the illegal immigrant Abdu/Ibrahim ibn Musa whom Julie meets in a garage after her car has broken down. Different in personality, social status, aspirations, Julie and Abdu are the personification of the two different worlds they come from. As far as the setting is concerned, the city where they live and meet is radically different from the small village they will move to, the noise of the traffic contrasts with the silence of the desert, the hectic city life is offset by the

Pickup] marks a different kind of transition, into a more overtly transnational domain" (Clingman 2009: 232).

slow, quiet existence of the Islamic community. These polarizations echo Edward Said's wider distinction between East and West, even though the two terms of comparison are modified here: replaced by a more specific Islamic reality on the one hand, and a more modern, westernized, almost Europeanized, South Africa on the other. This distinction affects the two protagonists, whose characterization is built on their personal and social conflict with the place they belong to, as "both […] reject "home" to find a sense of belonging in exile" (Kossew 2003: 24). Julie lives a privileged life made up of capitalistic values – while rejecting it and wanting to be free from it –, while Ibrahim feels entrapped when he returns to his own country, which he doesn't see as a nation, but just as a strip of land cut out from the desert. Despite these evident dichotomies, the whole narrative is endowed with an overall tendency to merge borders and combine opposites, first expressed in the description of places.

2. From 'non-places' to 'meaningful' places

Melting boundaries and redefined spatial and cultural horizons metaphorize the definition and redefinition of personal identity experienced by both protagonists, fully accomplished by Julie when she reaches the 'extreme end of the world', that is the desert near Ibrahim's village. Even before that moment, liminal areas are described in the novel, while the insistence on boundaries as spatial and individual limits is replaced by the representation of place as the locus of exchange and transition. A telling example is the description of the airport Julie finds herself in as soon as she arrives in Ibrahim's nation. By conforming to Michel De Certeau's definition of 'space' as 'the intersection of mobile elements', 'a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities' (1984: 117), the airport designates an area of movement and convergence in which none of the passers-by seems to fit in:

> An airport in a country like this is a surging, shifting human mass with all individualism subsumed in two human states, both of suspension, both temporary, both vacuums before reality: Leaving, Arriving. Total self-absorption becomes its opposite, a vast amorphous condition. The old women squatting, wide-kneed, skirts occupied by the to-and-fro of children, the black-veiled women gazing, jostling, the mouths masticating

food, the big bellies of men pregnant with age under white tunics, the tangling patterns of human speech, laughter, exasperation, argument, the clumps of baggage, residue of lives, sum of lives (which?), in a common existence-that-does-not-exist. Julie is no different, she has no sense of who she is in this immersion, everyone nameless. (Gordimer 2001: 109-110)

Posed in two suspended conditions, that of leaving and arriving, and triggering the cancellation of personal individuality in the name of "a common existence that-does-not-exist", this dynamic space only comes to foster the blurring of identity, at first establishing a limit to Julie's desire for self-renovation. As a matter of fact, the space described by Gordimer is an example of the modern, globalized 'non-place', which Julie will try to transform into a place conceived as 'relational, historical and concerned with identity' (Augé 1995: 77). The shift from a meaningless 'non-place' to an 'anthropological' place (p. 78) endowed with social and cultural values is represented in *The Pickup* through the heroine's individual appropriation of the new lands she inhabits. Julie has decided to follow Ibrahim to his hometown and the journey turns into a symbol of the woman's achievement of her self-realization. When she reaches the village, she gradually reconstructs her own identity by moulding it according to its customs and traditions. The recovery of her own self will take place through her interest in the Islamic landscape, the village people, and Ibrahim's family.

In order to settle in, Julie needs to appropriate the land. She has to internalize places, perceive the space around herself and see it through her own individuality (Bachelard 1994: 5). Her spiritual fulfilment occurs during her habitual morning walks at the end of the road, where the world ceases to exist and the desert begins:

Where the street ended, there was the desert. Led by the children down the row of houses [...] dusty plants, leaning bicycles, cars sputtering from broken exhausts, men lounging, women at windows, [...] the man selling bean rissoles calling out – this everyday life suddenly ends. (Gordimer 2001: 131)

Notwithstanding its geographical continuity with the village, the characterization of the desert in terms of permanence and spirituality, together with its representation as a 'space beyond the

edges', makes it an isolated spot whose silence and stillness connect Julie's mind to the surrounding natural order. In observing the desert, she notes that "it has no measure of space, features that mark distance from here to there" (p. 168); this consideration results in the woman's perception of a site which is material and ideal at the same time, a real location and a projection of the mind. The desert has an important role in self-redefinition; being a place without any measure of space, having no feature marking distances from one specific point to another, it symbolizes eternity. As Clingman states, it is "the place of non-definition where, precisely because it is unfixed and unmappable, the self can find other co-ordinates of existence" (Clingman 2009: 237-238). A metamorphosis involving both personality and, at an even deeper level, identity, takes place in Julie due to a close physical contact with the spiritual dimension of the desert. The relationship between the self and the natural order of landscape triggers an epiphanic state resulting in an interiorization of place, which is both physical and spiritual. The desert holds a mystic value that makes it not only a place, but 'the' place where a new, more stable identity is to be found. This stability, seen as the symbol of eternity ("There is no last time for the desert, the desert is always" [Gordimer 2001: 246]) is opposed to the transitory nature of the town.

Apart from the metaphorization of Julie's personal growth and identity renewal triggered by her immersion in stillness and silence, the desert is variously represented as a symbolic *locus* of extremes, where not only landscape, but also language, interpersonal relationships, and various aspects of life undergo a process of ideological and epistemic tension. Among these extreme manifestations, J.M. Coetzee observes the characterization of the desert as a place echoing the idea of death:

> For [Julie] the desert has another meaning, one that she can pin down only by saying that it "is there always". It is hard not to infer that in her lone daily confrontation with the desert, this young woman, who has already turned her back in most ways that matter on the allure of the materialistic West, is learning to face her own death. (Coetzee 2007: 250)

More than concentrating on spiritual and religious metaphors, which are unquestionably fitting in the present case and commonly

abound in literary representations of the desert, the analysis will focus on Julie's relationship with herself first, and subsequently with the world around her, as a fictional example of individual displacement after the end of apartheid. The symbolization of the desert as a new space to relocate oneself follows a complex epistemic path involving different aspects of human existence. In the case of *The Pickup*, Gordimer chooses to fictionalize written and spoken words as the main conveyors of meaning in articulated interpersonal relationships. Julie Summer's use of English and interest in Arabic, together with the illustration of language and silence both in the characters' life and as expressed in symbolical terms through the desert itself, all suggest the centrality of communication despite the limits imposed by geographical and cultural differences.

3. Overcoming linguistic and cultural boundaries

In *The Pickup* language is introduced in its oral, written, practical and literary manifestations, while carrying the modes of expression and symbolic practices typical of the different places where it is spoken. The first part of the story, in fact, presents words and sentences in Zulu (e.g. *Idikazana lomlungn, le!, Idikaza...mlungu* [Gordimer 2001: 3, 6]) while several Arabic expressions appear in the text once the setting shifts to Ibrahim's North-African village (e.g. *ma sha allah, Al-Hamdu lillah* [Gordimer 2001: 255, 256]). However, the main linguistic focus of the novel revolves around the use of two idioms: English and Arabic. When Julie arrives at the village, she is worried on how to communicate; as she realizes during her first words with Ibrahim's sister, language is the way to penetrate a world which is distant and unknown to her: "The two young women looked at one another in 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" (p. 121). Julie's decision supports her awareness that integration comes out of an act of will, represented in this case by her appropriation of the foreign idiom. Ready to learn Arabic, Julie immediately recognizes its great potential, feeling it "on a wave-length of meaning other than verbal" (p. 118). On the other hand, Abdu is more interested in the practical use of verbal communication; he finds Julie's decision to learn the foreign language a mere fancy, considering that it will

never be of any use to her. Instead, he believes English is essential for him: "We must talk English. I need to speak English. I must speak English with you if I am going to get a decent job anywhere" (p. 152). Strictly related to his obtaining a visa for a foreign country, Abdu's conception of language is merely instrumental, while Julie grasps the deep meaning of words and regards them as elements that can express the essence of life; they become the vector for the interiorization of experience and the way to explore her migrant's mind.

As far as the distinction between the practical and literary use of language is concerned, written words in *The Pickup* either take the form of literary manifestations – such as poems – or are used in everyday life – such as in the case of Ibrahim's expulsion letter. Apart from dialogues, examples of oral language can be found in the rhetorical formulas of greetings and gratitude pronounced by Abdu's family. Moreover, there is an additional use of the written poetic word which often endures a process of 'verbalization', being said out loud, almost recited. Oralization in *The Pickup* takes two main forms; quotations by the 'Old Poet'[2], and Julie's own reading of the Koran, which she performs aloud. If, as Martin Heidegger states, "Saying is showing" (1982: 126), the 'Old Poet' gives shape to the world through his literary quotations; his mode of communication is a way to approach reality through literature and, at the same time, verbalization becomes a moment of interpretation and interiorization of the world. Julie's reading of the Koran, too, constitutes a crucial step for the understanding of reality. After taking the decision to learn Arabic to communicate with her husband's family, she also starts giving English lessons to a small group of women from the village. Additionally, she reads some parts of the Koran, those her husband's mother knows by heart – namely, "The Chapter of The Merciful, the Chapter of Mary, the Chapter of the Prophets":

Suras, the footnotes said they were called. She read aloud to herself as if to hear in the natural emphases of delivery which had been the passage come

[2] He is a friend of Julie's, one of the members of "The Table", a group of people the woman meets every day at the EL-AY café when she is in South Africa, a community she considers as an important point of reference in her life. The man communicates with his friends by quoting poems.

upon – for life – in these choices out of so much advice and exhortation, inspiration, consolation people find in religious texts. She read at random; the verses did not come in the order in which Maryam had happened to name them. (Gordimer 2001: 144)

In Julie's opinion, the inspiration derived from the *suras* must be searched for in their 'diction', that is in the sound of words. By reading the Koran, the woman aspires to understanding the links between her own South African culture and the Islamic one. As a result, 'to say' does not only mean to describe and to interpret; words are also an instrument of inspiration and integration.

Julie's great concern with language, while eliciting closeness to her husband's family, promotes her estrangement from him. She asks Ibrahim to speak to her in his language, namely, she asks for love words: "I don't know […] the love words… I'd like to learn them. You've never said to me…?" (p. 152). But the man's identity does not belong to those words any longer, nor to his native language, since his efforts are directed at the search for a new individuality, linguistically represented by his will to become fluent in English. Deprived of reciprocal understanding, and unable to establish a shared linguistic ground with her husband, Julie gradually withdraws from him, while learning to connect with the surrounding environment through other ways of communication.

Julie and Abdu's linguistic connections – and disconnections – can be read in the more general context of communication and culture. Specifically, the idea of communication as a producer of culture, and of culture as a means of communication (Ngugi 1986: 15-16) is brought to the fore. Language expresses a culture in a way that is not accessible to people not speaking that same language. That is, speakers of other languages are destined to fail in the understanding of a given culture. In this sense, Julie and Abdu's difficulties in communication are caused by their conceptually belonging to two different societies – Abdu's wish to become an EU citizen parallels Julie's desire to be part of the new Islamic world she has just come into contact with. Their inability to communicate gradually drives Julie to change her approach to language, leading her to experience an introspective linguistic practice, which considers using two different idioms – the one she handles perfectly and the one she wants to learn – in order to build a personal bond with the people at Abdu's village. Abdu's 'orientalism' has been spoilt by the years

spent in a too Westernized world, and Julie decides to address a 'pure' Oriental vision represented by the people living in the small village built at the end of the desert. As a consequence, her double relationship with the two languages comes to symbolize the attempt to overcome not only linguistic, but also cultural limitations.

4. The new language(s) of globalization

As already mentioned, the desert in *The Pickup* has variously been analysed as a real and symbolic space going 'beyond the edges'. For example, the deep immersion in the soundless landscape Julie experiences during her walks at the extreme end of the civilized world has been read by Hilary Dannenberg as the ultimate portrayal of a relationship with a personified lover, whom Julie substitutes for Ibrahim:

> [T]he novel's transference of a quasi-romantic role from Ibrahim to the "character" of the desert becomes most explicit when the text says that Julie spends hours *with* the desert and not *in* the desert. In Gordimer's reversal of the traditions of romance, Julie's growing relationship with the desert is represented in terms of the conventional pattern of the estranged lovers and romantic infidelity plot. Ibrahim is cast as the abandoned lover who is ignorantly oblivious to the deterioration of his romantic relationship and his wife's initiation of a new one "with the desert": he ceases to understand the aspirations of the woman who loves him, but ultimately leaves him, because they literally have no common ground. In addition to its other shifting significations of either mundane local or eternal terrain, the desert therefore here becomes anthropomorphised lover. (Dannenberg 2008: 83-84)

Julie's encounters with the desert are often hidden to her husband, and never much spoken of with the other people of the family. This 'extreme' reading of the desert as a secret 'anthropomorphised lover' contributes to determining the importance of Julie's individual development in a noiseless environment. As far as language is concerned, in the desert the meaning of words is nullified, the whole representation of life being absorbed in "nothing. Sand. No shapes. No movement" (Gordimer, 2001: 131). This is true for any type of sound, as well as for the literary word, which loses its power every time Julie leaves village life to venture into the "stillness of perfect

clarity" (p. 167). In fact, while she is in the desert, she thinks about the books she has ordered from Europe, seeing them as the symbols of a colonial tradition she considers useless, sarcastically identified with "that woman Hester Stanhope, and that man Lawrence, English charades in the desert, imperialism in fancy dress with the ultimate condescension of bestowing the honour of wanting to be like the people of the desert" (p. 198). While negating the literary value of the colonial tradition and the communicative power of words and sounds, the desert introduces another type of communication belonging to a universe of voiceless signs exchanged by individuals. During her walks, Julie establishes a mute connection with a Bedouin girl she meets every day:

> There was one morning when they were discovered close; close enough to be advanced to. The woman turned out to be hardly more than a child – perhaps twelve years old. For a few moments the desert opened, the two saw each other, the woman under her bushveld hat, the girl-child a pair of keen eyes from a small figure swathed against the sun.
> She smiled but the other responded only by the eyes' acknowledgment of a presence.
> The encounter without word or gesture became a kind of daily greeting; recognition. (pp. 199-200)

The silent relationship shared with the Bedouin woman opens a new communicative dimension that will be crucial in Julie's decision to remain in the Islamic village, after her husband has decided to emigrate to the United States. As far as the story progresses, verbal communication weakens in the name of wordless connections. By introducing a further paradoxical quality of the desert, Gordimer matches its silence, immobility and aridity with a sudden explosion of life. During a trip with Ibrahim's father and sister, Julie suddenly sees a green oasis in the sand:

> The intoxication of green she entered was *audible* as well as *visual*, the twittering susurration of a great company of birds clinging, woven into the green as they fed; their tremble, balance, sway, passing through it continuously like rippling breeze, a pitch of song as activity, activity as song, filled her head. *The desert is mute*; in the middle of the desert there is this, the *infinite articulacy*: *pure sound*. Where else could that be? That coexistence of wonder. (pp. 210-211)

Sight and sound reveal the natural forms around Julie, the cohesion of both generating a 'coexistence of wonder'. Visual and auditory perceptions can be identified as two complementary phases of the same act, as most of the natural elements catching Julie's attention are simultaneously perceived by both senses. Moreover, the perfect communion between the twitter and the green of the landscape is interiorized at a mental level – 'activity as song' fills her head. The silence characterizing the desert is interrupted by the pure sounds of nature which, together with the vision of colours and images, originate an extraordinary euphony. The desert speaks against Ibrahim's silence, against the perspective of a capitalistic life in America, and in favour of the reconstruction of individual and ideological spaces to be performed in isolation, away from metropolitan chaos. If the desert portrays a final image of "the world […] receding from the communicative grasp of the word" (Steiner 2010: 37) through the representations of stillness and silence, still its connotation as an extreme place of imagination opens up to the discovery of new ways of communication, metaphorically represented by the coexistence of different forms of perception.

Unsurprisingly, the message hidden behind Gordimer's novel shows important socio-political tones. As far as South Africa is concerned, the desert represents the end, the 'edge' of the whole post-apartheid system, encouraging a reassessment of geographies, boundaries, and transitions. By addressing further means of personal and social interaction, the author is actually stating the possibility to find alternative ways of negotiation, namely to establish another idea of the transnational. The desire for freedom claimed by many writers after the end of apartheid (Vivan 2005: 199-226) and here represented by Julie's search for a new, 'extreme' space to build her own individuality in, is matched with the socio-cultural representation of other people and places located at the margins of society. By introducing the figure of Ibrahim and his Islamic community, not only does Gordimer explore edges of identity, but she also fictionalizes the smooth passage from one culture to the other. Geographical and ideological Islamic spaces are not depicted in terms of contrast with a previously established social order. Nor are they excluded from negotiations and interactions with the rest of the world.

In this context, the role played by communication in the novel takes on interesting implications, if we consider language as the

direct expression of the globalized culture Gordimer frequently refers to (1999: 207-213). Far from promoting the imposition of English and distancing itself from linguistic homogenization, *The Pickup* contributes to the revaluation of verbal differentiation in a multifaceted world. The author shares the awareness that intercultural dialogue cannot be thought about seriously "without coming to grips with the linguistic dimension of today's planetary social, ecological, economic, political, and imaginary realignments" (Pratt 2004: 29). While acknowledging the notion of language as "a revealing symptom of current transformations" (p. 29), Gordimer also claims the need to extend and further develop forms of communication. Moreover, in *The Pickup* she seems to warn us about the use of English in globalized terms. English is not sufficient as a global language, it must be accompanied by – while being influenced and transformed by – other languages, as well as other means of communication.

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