

Dismantling the Notion of Identity, Belonging and Survival in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

NoViolet Bulawayo is a young and powerful Zimbabwean author. Her short story *Hitting Budapest* (2010) won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing and after that, there was no turning back in her life.

We Need New Names (2010) is her first novel which narrates the lives of Darling and her friends Bastard, Godknows, Sbho, Stina and Chipo. These are starving children who are observing and residing in a crumbling country. Bulawayo in the novel narrates the absence of parents, political disorder, lost childhood, and shame. The book earned her international fame and she became the first Black African Zimbabwean woman shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013. The novel traverses and shows personalities, national boundaries and ethnicities of Darling, an immigrant who fears of being an illegal migrant in an alien world.

Further, the concept of diaspora, homeland, and belonging has been dismantled through Darling's narration, focusing on the ideas of loose roots and broken identities. Therefore, the study attempts to discuss the definition of the diasporic belonging and the challenges that are faced by those cultural communities.

Key Words: Belonging, Immigrant, Homeland, Diaspora and Cultural Communities.

Introduction

NoViolet Bulawayo was born on 12 October 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe and her writing grows from this soil of loss and memory. *We Need New Names* is about a struggling African nation and its people. The novel questions who a person is, where he belongs, and what happens to a person when he decides to leave or chooses to stay at a certain place. It asks uncomfortable questions about the ways to fit into a new country and the part of oneself that needs to be erased to survive there. These questions become a turning point, a slow awakening of political, social, and personal discourse in diasporic belonging.

Cultural identity is not something that is fixed in diasporic belongings; rather, it shifts, cracks, and resists its definition. Culture shapes a life quietly, every day and gives the rules and meanings of belonging. In the modern world, culture includes beliefs, behaviors, values shared, transmitted, and inherited. Further, Globalization complicates everything about culture collision, and in this process, identities get blurred.

Identity is something that we perceive about ourselves through the lens of the world around us. It which mainly changes with migration, time, and pressure. Cultural identity emerges through differences and otherness. It is not just something personal, rather a collective attitude. It combines various other identities such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, generation, and geography proportionally.

The novel begins with some group of children of whom Darling is the protagonist child character. Along with her few friends, Godknows, Bastard, Chipo, Sbho, and Stina, she lives in Paradise, a shantytown of Zimbabwe. There they play games, but these games are not ordinary but rather a representation of sensitive and violent content such as murders, crimes, killings, and war borrowed from the real life happenings around them.

In the novel, there is one incident where these children, while roaming on the streets of Zimbabwe, saw a dead woman hanging from a tree. Frenzied to fear and awe, they tried to run away from the scene, but then they stopped after watching the brandnew shoes of the hanging lady and the bread that was lying there, which seemed too expensive to them. They went back there and collected all that stuff from the crime spot and returned, showing no sympathy for the dead.

Thus, this incident shows us how personality is something more than personal, a collective acquired trait, shaped by the pressure and the demand of the current needs.

Darling's mother, the only working member, leaves to trade across borders, and her grandmother seeks spiritual cures that cost her American dollars, a powerful and unreachable sum of money. Because of the poverty and the collapses in the currency, their savings turn into useless paper, and Darling's family is stuck in a miserable financial crisis. Thus, to her Paradise becomes unbearable, a kind of hell which she is no longer in the state of tolerating. In the midst of this chaos, a letter arrives from her aunt, Fostalina from America, and then a ray of hope enters quietly in her veins. She started imagining America as salvation, but reality appears differently to her.

In America she witnessed lots of new things, watched the things she never had witnessed back in her hometown such as the internet, and bags full of groceries. She made new friends there even though she is illegally always watching and hiding from interrogation. With time, she has now accessed to money and possibility but still America never feels like home. "There are times, through, that no matter how much food I eat, I find the food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that." (153)

Her childhood friends scatter across the globe such as Dubai, South Africa, and one of her friends, Chipo, remains behind. Their Skype conversation cuts deep:

"But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend. It's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feel the real suffering." (285-286)

Chipo somehow comments that Darling's decision of leaving her homeland is an escape from her misery and is not a sign for the love of the country. Darling is trapped between places, no longer fully Zimbabwean and never fully American, remains suspended and rootless.

Further social class also shapes her lives silently and differently. In Paradise, survival defines values, but in America, class speaks through consumption and gender too shifts across borders. Although in Zimbabwe, Darling fears men, their masculine power, and their violence, American exposures nearly replace those fears but do not completely heal her. It shows that how identity bends under cultural pressure and sometimes it adapts and other times it fractures.

Darling, being in a foreign land, always wants to go back home, which she cannot as her visa has expired, and she knew very well that back there her future is uncertain in Zimbabwe, but with time, America too is turning unwelcoming and hostile. Thus, she feels unsafe everywhere and in the end, Darling belongs nowhere.

Thus, Bulawayo through Darling suggests the modern migrant's condition where home exists but only in memory, unavailable, and without reach. "When our children were born, we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours." (247)

Home in novel is never shown to be a stable place, neither in the form of a house nor in the country, but rather more like a slippery feeling. It turns out to be a memory, a fear, and a longing. The idea of homing

in the novel is not where one is, but what one is moving toward, always in the threat of becoming but never being complete. For different migrants it means difference of opinion but especially for women, homing is work, daily exhausting, emotional past and present which bleed into each other and in the midst of this Zimbabwe enters America and America stains Zimbabwe.

Darling's body in the novel is strange because it is mostly absent, and tells us about other women's bodies along with her's as in the case of her grandmother who is Mother of Bones, the raped woman in church, the dead woman hanging, and Chipó's pregnant stomach, each body carries a different story. Women's bodies in Zimbabwe are sites of care, terror, warmth, violent protest, and punishment. Darling in her case learns this too early. In Chipó's case, who is eleven years old pregnant child, her companion children panic about her pregnancy and decided to abort her because pregnancy means death to them. So, they play doctors, borrow names from E.R. Borrow television show, and acquired the need new names because their own identities cannot survive the current moment. The act of these children is brutal and childlike, deeply gendered from the knowledge imparted by the whispering broken women. However, in the midst of this, MotherLove stops them, her body intervenes in their survival and she becomes a different kind of home for them.

America is no relief for Darling. It neither does heal her nor reshapes her discomfort. Darling in her case watches, learns, and observes herself in the mirrors, where she compares herself with her surroundings and tries to erase her identity. She watches her breasts, thighs, and bellies, which don't fit to the current surrounding, and so her identity disappears in the state of unfamiliarity. What Darling is doing is making her body a transitional place between privatized and publicized and between silence and performance.

Further, in the novel when she tries to speak English, the woman stares and her American friends mock her, forcing her into silence where displacement is not just a movement but rather a fracture. Darling survives by leaving her body behind, travels mentally back to Zimbabwe, to her childhood, back to imagined safety as in the foreign land porn scenes, phone calls and music all trigger collapse and remind her that she is nowhere.

To Aunt Fostalina, she kind of hates her body and thus walks, moves, stares and her thinness; in her case, thinness becomes her identity, and the lack of African curves becomes her shame.

"...picture to my mother, she actually cried, Ah, ah ah, my son, oh, please please please feed your wife and don't bah bring here looking like this, you will embarrass us. That's what she said, my mother. Squat, bend your knees. Squat. Bend your knees. Move to the left now, two jabs. And uppercut. One more time." (151-152)

To conclude, Darling's story is not just about migration and displacement; rather, it is embodiment delayed.

Western notions are like a breeze that flows too easily, and when they get lodged in the non-Western countries, they unravel their bags and in no time they start to talk as though they are in charge of the body and cultural belonging of the land and its people. What was through borrowing becomes law, something to worship and follow. The local cultures in the meantime requested to make way or even worse to be humiliated to exist.

Ironically, now it is those who are Western-educated and Western-exposed African writers who bring this canon along. They fluently talk in Euro-American idiom and are brilliantly arguing but the price is hidden. Cultural regeneration becomes peripheral and indigenous value systems become more frizzled.

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