

Identity and the Language in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

Humans have been migrating for centuries. This paper tries to delineate the formation of hybrid identities using the transnational theory of migration in a postcolonial context. Throughout the colonial and the postcolonial history, the voices of migrant experiences have been overlooked. They had accepted their position as silent spectators to their own stories without a voice, without opinion and without choice. Their Silence was being read as a form of acceptance and approval without delving much into the social, political and economic milieu of the era. This paper aims at understanding the dynamics of language and the choice of the migrant community to rise above their status as silenced subjects and oppressed people and share their experiences. It intends to explore the language differences and the search for an identity in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* which tells the story of a diasporic African teenager who tries to grapple with the host country culture while still holding to the memories of her homeland and a yearning to go back home. The paper tries to understand the search and development of a hybrid and transnational identity of the migrant.

Keywords: Migrant, Identity, Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, Hybridity

We Need New Names is the debut novel of No Violet Bulawayo, a Zimbabwean author living in the United States. It was published in the year 2013. *We Need New Names* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (2013), the Guardian First Book Award shortlist (2013), and was also a Barnes & Noble Discover Award finalist (2013). It won the Etisalat Prize for Literature (2013), and also received the prestigious Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for debut work of fiction.

We Need New Names depicts the life of Darling, a young impressionable girl, the story begins in the imaginary city of Paradise, a shanty town where she and her friends live. The story is narrated through the eyes of Darling as she describes her life in Paradise and then when she migrates to USA. It captures the life and struggle of the underprivileged in the world specially the ones coming from developing nations. The story begins with the protagonist and her friends, Chipso, Stina, Bastard and God knows searching for guavas in the rich neighbourhood called Budapest and the attack they witness in one of the houses. It comes as a surprise to the readers the conversations that the kids have about things they don't understand yet have become desensitized towards them. Violence, assault, poverty, disease, exploitation are all a part of their life and they have become accustomed to them.

Darling and her friends do realize their position as marginalized individuals who might never have access to the luxuries and amenities that exist in Budapest, yet they dream of leaving their ugly town forever and settling in beautiful places where they'll have plenty of food and will never be hungry.

Bulawayo narrates a diasporic story with a twist. The narrative is that of a child that's truthful and objectiveable to express multiple complex and difficult issues with ease. Darling's story begins in Paradise and reaches its climax when she reaches US and is unable to fit in the life over there, yearning to come back home yet afraid of facing the reality that her country is not her home anymore. "We stayed, like prisoners, only we chose to be prisoners and we loved our prison; it was not a bad prison. And when things only got worse in our country, we pulled our shackles even tighter and said "We are not leaving America, no, we are not leaving." (293)

The 'American Dream' that all of her friends had when they were younger stands shattered as she realizes she will never be able to realise her full potential in 'the land of abundance' because it will never provide her with enough opportunities to actually establish a career or even achieve her life goals. The harsh truth faces her and she eventually realizes, "this place doesn't look like my America" (180). She feels entrapped in the new country where she becomes the object of ridicule, of mockery and is discriminated and differentiated against.

All the kids in Paradise dream of settling in the western nations that they have seen on TV and have heard about. Even the games such as 'Country game' everyone wants to be

America or Canada or Australia and not countries like Nigeria or Cameroon or India. The hierarchy of the nations is quite evident even in the made-up games, a particular power order that is followed.

“To play the country-game, we have to choose a country. Everybody wants to be the USA and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and them. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, and not even this one we live in. . . who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (64)

Even young kids have been neocolonized wherein they see ‘West’ as the better option. Bulawayo depicts the postcolonial reality of Zimbabwe through a fictitious city which acts as metaphor for all the dilapidated underdeveloped parts of the world still recovering from the colonial regime. The shanty town with huts and slums and people living in abject poverty where the children are always hungry and there’s never sufficient food to fill their empty stomachs also looks like one of the pictures that BBC and CNN showcase every time they wish to talk about ‘Africa’. For these news channels, Africa is just one country with no diversity and no difference. All the children have dreams of going to America where they feel they will be able to live a better life. The countries might have achieved its freedom officially but the colonial mindset that the ‘West’ is better still lingers.

“If I’m lucky, like today, I get to be the U.S.A., which is a country-country; who doesn’t know that the U.S.A. is the big baboon of the world? I feel like it’s my country now because my aunt Fostalina lives there, in Destroyedmichygen. Once her things are in order she’ll come and get me and I will go and live there also.”(64)

Unlike most of her friends, she immigrates to America and that is where the harsh reality strikes her. Aunt Fostalina’s house is in Kalamazoo, Michigan where she enrolls Darling into a school. She makes friends with two other girls, Kristal and Marina, African-American and Nigerian respectively. Bulawayo then explores the world through the eyes of a teenager who wishes to explore, understand everything that is happening in the world. Darling consumes American culture as soon as she can by watching cartoons and aping people from her school and in her environment with a strong desire to fit in. Her attempts at acculturation might have been successful at the surface level as she is able to emulate the host culture and acts American but she eventually realizes that this will never be her true self and feels at loss from

her own. She struggles to establish her identity amongst her peers and even within herself trying to form better bonds socially but by the end of the narrative she realizes she belongs nowhere. She feels dislocated unable to find a safe space for herself. Further, Bulawayo also throws light on the difficulties illegal immigrants face in the host nation and social mobility through education becomes an unachievable dream.

Her colonial elementary education that taught her English, she realizes isn't the same language that Kristal speaks despite the fact that it's Kristal first language and she is an American citizen. Hitting Crossroads (ch.15) depicts Darling and Marina negotiating their immigrant African and Black identities so differently from Kristal, that she tries to establish her superiority and showcase her understanding of language politics to them; 'it's called Ebonics, and it be a language system, but it be our own ...Uh-huh, I beg your pardon, my ass, tryna sound like stupid white folk' (222). The accented English that Darling speaks with her peers takes effort and thought. The moment she loses track of it or becomes aggravated the façade seems to come off, "I am starting to talk fast now, and I have to remember to slow down because when I get excited I start to sound like myself and my American accent goes away" (263).

She starts to realise her status as an immigrant as everywhere she goes, she finds people asking her questions about Africa, not realizing it's a vast continent with different ethnicities, cultures, countries, languages. She becomes the girl from Africa, an identity she tries to shrug off yet holds onto dearly as a remnant of her childhood, of what was happiness to her.

'It's hard to explain, this feeling; it's like there's two of me. One part is yearning for my friends; the other doesn't know how to connect with them anymore, as if they are people I've never met. I feel a little guilty but I brush the feeling away.' (250)

It highlights Du Bois' double consciousness where Darling is seen as "Africa" and as the novel progress it is through the lens of triple consciousness that her position as a female, black, African teenage migrant becomes more complex to decipher and understand even by her own self. She tries to reclaim her subjectivity in the homogenized pool of identity that cannot beyond her color and continent. The dilemma isn't solved through the text but she accepts her position as a hybrid and not actually belonging to a particular nation or one singular identity after her conversation with Chipu who mocks her superficial awareness of

her country through media and television. She admonishes her for her choices and explicitly states that the homeland that she talks about with such love and adoration now is the same place that she left years ago and her conversations about Paradise are feeble attempts at being empathetic to the conditions of her friends and family without actually understanding their circumstances.

Aunt Fostalina's character delves deeper into the assimilation of the American identity and the way she wishes to be seen, as an American. It seems farcical and a mockery of living the American Dream. She starves herself in order to achieve the beauty standards she has internalized through media, tries to speak in the American accent in the hope that she will not be treated as the 'other' and hence with respect. Back home, she is perceived as a successful immigrant who has been successful in achieving the American Dream as she is able to send money to her family, but the reality is daunting. She is still treated as a 'foreigner' and hasn't been accepted by the society as one of their own. She has lost her true self in the hope of being socially accepted and treated as an equal. The imitation, the innate desire to belong to America gnaws away at her individuality and the narrative finds her struggling to comprehend and accept her position that she will always remain the 'other'.

The employment conditions of illegal migrants are deplorable as is evident in the narrative and describe that Darling and multiple other immigrants from different nations have to resort to all kinds of jobs in order to earn money. Their illegal status prohibits them from applying for positions that might be less exploitative and more aligned to their education and work experiences but they are never able to.

"Others with names like myths, names like puzzles, names we had never heard before: Virgilio, Balamugunthan, Faheem, Abdulrahman, Aziz, Baako, Dae-Hyun, Ousmane, Kimatsu. When it was hard to say the many strange names, we called them by their countries. "So how on earth do you do this, Sri Lanka?. . . Come, Ethiopia, move, move, move; Israel, Kazakhstan, Niger, brothers, let's go!" (288) The loss of their actual names is symbolic of the loss of their individuality. They aren't perceived nothing more than machines that function. The loss of names is the loss of voice, of culture, of languages and subjectivity. The heterogeneity of the immigrants is cloaked under the name of the country that they originally belong to, further implying that their individual names hold no importance or status in the

America they came to. Their transnational identities have become muddled in their own minds as they struggle to survive in a land that is as foreign as it is dear to them.

We Need New Names is an acute commentary on the status of illegal immigrants and the reality of the American Dream. The narrative compels the readers to understand the grim conditions in developing countries and the struggles of migrating to a new land and finding all your dreams and aspirations out of your reach. The novel is also able to explore how the postcolonial world is still suffering from the idea that the West is better and their minds have been neocolonised that they are not able to see beyond material comforts. Bulawayo also beautifully captures the dilemmas of the diasporic individual who wants to belong somewhere and struggle to find a place of their own.

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