

Migration, and the Search for the Self: A Postcolonial Reading of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* notably deals with many of the themes and issues such as migration, political instability, poverty, famine, identity crisis, and xenophobia. Migration is one of the major themes of African Postcolonial literature. It is an experience to go through, which comes as an aftermath of colonialism in many cultures, and it impacts different people differently. This paper will discuss how migration affects people in postcolonial locales. The hope for a 'better life', which instigates the will soon leads to alienation of the self as that person does not feel any sense of belonging from any place. This feeling of dislocation and 'otherness' will be probed into in light of the critical postcolonial theories, through the life and journey of the central character, Darling. how the xenophobia present in the post-colonial African society owes entirely to the white colonial masters (here shown through the characters like the Assistant Police Commissioner). The dominant European (English) culture and its impact on the central character will also be seen as a result of a colonial hangover. This constant need to be one with the dominant English culture and not of the 'self' and dehumanising the migratory experience of the characters.

Keywords: Migration, Xenophobia, Home, Diaspora, Otherness.

The word 'colonialism' is a very well-known word in continents like Asia and Africa. With this word comes the baggage of trauma that the colonized people went through. Postcolonialism is the aftermath of colonialism. According to the Macmillan dictionary, postcolonialism is "the study of the way Western colonialism affected former colonial countries." (*POSTCOLONIALISM (Noun) Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary*) It deals with issues like, loss of culture and identity, migration, displacement, poverty, famine, etc. In postcolonial situations, independence does not always lead to the path of freedom from colonial legacies. Society in postcolonial

situations often face instances of political instability, xenophobia, genocide, etc. In her book *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Mary Klages comments that postcolonial theory is “centrally concerned with examining the mechanisms through which the colonizing powers persuaded the colonized people to accept a foreign culture as ‘better’ than their own indigenous methods of government and social organization.” (Klages, 153)

The movement of a person from one locality or a country to another and their permanent settlement in that new place is called migration. It is one of the major themes of postcolonial literature. Migration is an absolutely painful experience to go through, and it impacts different people differently. One of the major forces that instigate migration in postcolonial situations is the hope for ‘a better life’. After being released from the shekels of colonial forces comes the evil of poverty, political turmoil, famine, etc. To save themselves from these after-effects of colonialism people of the Third World countries choose to migrate to the First World countries like America.

The 2013 debut novel *We Need New Names*, by NoViolet Bulawayo is one of the perfect examples of postcolonial African literature. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, making Bulawayo the first African women writer to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel deals with the key effects of colonialism in Africa, like migration, identity crisis, post-freedom political instability, etc. The idea of migration is very relevant in the postcolonial study of African literature. Whereas many of the postcolonial literary works choose to portray the migration of the so-called ‘elite’, this novel o Bulawayo depicts the immigration of commoners into the seemingly greener side of the grass (i.e. The Western countries). The post-independence quest for a better life led many people away from their homeland. In this novel, *We Need New Names*, the protagonist Darling always dreams of a better place to move from her own country, a place where she will be well-fed, she will have nice clothes to wear, etc. Eventually, she succeeds in doing so, but after reaching her dream destination, America, her illusion breaks, her first impression of America is, “With all this snow, with the sun not there, with the cold and dreariness, this place doesn’t look like my America, doesn’t even look real.” (Bulawayo, 150)

The story of the novel was inspired by a photograph of a child sitting in rubble after their house had been destroyed by a bulldozer during the Zimbabwean government’s Operation Murambatsivana 2005. In Bulawayo’s own words, “I became obsessed with where the people would go, what their stories were, and how those stories would develop – and more importantly, what would happen to the kid in the first picture I

saw... The country was a backdrop, and of course, it was a time when it was unravelling due to failure of leadership”. (*The Guardian*, November 15, 2013)

The novel depicts the journey of Darling, a ten-year-old girl and her struggle of finding a better way of life. The first chapter of the novel, ‘Hitting Budapest’ portrays Darling and her friends hunting for food because of their hunger, “... we are just going. There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I’d rather die for guavas. We didn’t eat this morning and my stomach feels like someone just took a shovel and dug everything out.” (Bulawayo, 1) The city of Budapest not only portrays a foil for Paradise (the shanty town where they lived) but the city also represents colonialism, as most of the inhabitants of Budapest are whites. Budapest is a place where the people of Paradise do not belong to and which gives them a constant sense of otherness. “This place is not like Paradise, it’s like being in a different country altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live... I keep expecting the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from.” (Bulawayo, 4)

Bulawayo depicts the political instability of contemporary Zimbabwe through the experiences of the teenager characters in the novel. The characters like Darling, Godknows, Chipso, Bastard, Sbhoo, and Stina, cannot afford to go to school because their teachers have migrated to South Africa. This shows the political instability of the time and the hope for a better life, that the people of contemporary Zimbabwe found in the so-called ‘better places’, like Europe and America. Darling, the protagonist of the novel thinks the same, “... I’ll not even be here; I’ll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing.” (Bulawayo, 10)

The hatred for the Whites in the people of Paradise is another instance of a postcolonial element in the novel. In one of the scenes of the novel, Assistant Police Commissioner Obey Marima hands a piece of paper to a White man, saying that the White man needs to vacate the property. And at this, the White man snaps and tears up the paper. In this situation the reply of the boss is very relevant, “Know this, you bloody colonist, from now on the black man is done listening, you hear? This is black-man country and the black man is in charge now. Africa for Africans” (Bulawayo, 118). This statement of the boss depicts the racial intolerance in the native people for the white men. Joseph Ernest Renan in his “What is a Nation” debunks this idea of race as subordinate to the identity of a nation, he writes, “The fact of race, a fact of the greatest moment at the outset, has always been diminishing. Race is not everything as it is amongst the rodents and felines and no one has the right to go about the world examining men’s heads and then grabbing them by the throat saying, “You are our blood; you belong with us”. Aside from

this anthropological trait, there is reason, justice, truth, and beauty, things that are the same for all.” (Renan, 7)

The concept of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ is also very relevant in this novel. The White man’s response to the commissioner of police is something that strikes in our mind, “I am an African, he says. This is my fucking country too, my father was born here, I was born here, just like you!” (Bulawayo, 119) The agonizing anger in the white man’s comeback is something that comes from being at the receiving end or being excluded. After the independence from the British government, the whites, who chose to live in Zimbabwe, were very much integrated with the culture of the land, like the natives. In the postcolonial situation, these white people serve as the social and political scapegoats who became victims of unjust violence and discrimination.

Another instance that portrays the political turmoil in the postcolonial situation is the conversation between the native folks, whose houses have been bulldozed by the government about the aftermath of independence, “They shouldn’t have done this to us, no, and they shouldn’t have. Salilwelilizwe leli, we fought to liberate this country. Wasn’t it like this before independence? Do you remember how the whites drove us from our land and put us in those wretched reserves? I was there, wasn’t it just like this? No, those were evil white people who came to steal our country and make us paupers in our country. What, but aren’t you a pauper now? Aren’t these black people evil for bulldozing your home and leaving you with nothing now? You are all wrong. Better a white thief to do that to you than your own black brother. Better a wretched white thief.” (Bulawayo, 75)

It is against this backdrop of political instability and joblessness that the youth of Africa migrated to the seemingly utopian lands of Europe and America in the hope of a better livelihood. The narrator of the novel depicts this image of migration in a very vivid manner: “Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves... when things fall apart, the children of the land scurry and scatter like birds escaping a burning sky. They flee their own wretched land so their hunger may be pacified in foreign lands, their tears wiped away in strange lands, the wounds of their despair bandaged in faraway lands, their blistered prayers muttered in the darkness of queer lands.” (Bulawayo, 145-146)

In the chapter titled “How They Lived” Bulawayo shows the reality of the migration and how the people lived in America, their dreamland. In this chapter, we also get the depiction of racism that put immigrants like Darling at the receiving end of the

American social system. This leaves the immigrants with the feeling of being an “illegal-alien”. In the words of the narrator, “And when they asked us where were we from, we exchanged glances and smiled with shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it that part where vultures wait for famished children to die... Is it there where dissidents shove AK-47s between women’s legs? We smiled. Where people run about naked... Is it where the old president rigged the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all, there where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we’ve seen your country; it’s been on the news.” (Bulawayo, 237-238) These racist comments hit Darling personally and although her country of origin is not mentioned in the novel, all these point to Zimbabwe. In reply to all these racist comments, the narrator of the novel does not know how to respond, so “...we [they] wept; wept for our blessed, wretched country...wept like widows, wept like orphans.” (238)

Often the hope for a better life away from one’s own home turns out to be very anti-climactic and disappointing. If anything, migration often comes with a sense of otherness in the new country, with which comes the constant search for the self. In Stina’s words, “leaving your country is like dying...” As it turns out, leaving one’s own country means inherently abandoning one’s own ‘home’, which leaves oneself with the sense of not belonging. The portrayal of Darling in America seems to be portrayed directly from Bulawayo’s own experiences as a migrant: “I went to America at the age of 18... You get there and America makes you realise that you’re not one of us”. As the protagonist Darling grows up, she develops a greater sense of the categories of being, for example, race, gender, nationality, etc. All of these are by which others define her in the new social situation in America.

The sense of alienation and the need to feel belong is present throughout the novel. Darling tries to feel belongs in her dreamland, America, after she moves there with her aunt. But this only leads to her feeling of identity crisis. This falling between two stools-like situation is expressed by Darling as, “It’s hard to express, 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.” This identity crisis leads to the displacement of the soul, which generates the feeling of ‘otherness’. (210)

Darling’s serious attempt at mastering the dominant English culture is another aspect of postcolonialism in this novel. She makes coping strategies to deal with the feeling of alienation, like, mastering the English language like a native. In her words, “I have decided the best way to deal with it all is to sound American, and the TV has taught me

just how to do it. It's pretty easy; all you have to do is watch *Dora the Explorer*, *The Simpsons*, *SpongeBob*, *Scooby-Doo*, and then you move on to *That's So Raven*, *Glee*, *Friends*, *Golden Girls*, and so on, just listening and imitating the accents." (194) This aspect of Darling copying the dominant culture of the new land showcases the mimicry theory of Homi K. Bhabha, as she imitates the 'superior' American culture to fight her inferiority complex. According to Bhabha, mimicry is a process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as 'almost the same but not quite' (Bhabha 127). This feeling of being the 'not quite' creates the feeling of inferiority in the colonial subjects, which channels through them even after the end of colonialism.

The migration of Darling to America is associated with an intense sense of dislocation, which comes with the feeling of not belonging. The topographic representation of this is portrayed in the chapter titled, '*DESTROYEDMICHYGEN*', where Bulawayo deliberately misspelt the word Michigan as 'Michygen'. This destruction of the ways of being is related to the loss of correspondence between the people. "When I first arrived at Washington I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I talked or said things... I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything." (165) When Darling tells her Aunt Fostalina about her experiences in America, she doesn't help Darling with all the bullying but goes back to her past happy memories and recalls her childhood back home. This echoes the theory of "double perspective" as coined by Edward Said, which the immigrant uses as a coping strategy. In Said's words, "Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation." (Said, 267) The immigrant in this situation sees each thing he/she encounters in the new country in relation to something they have left behind.

For immigrant people, the concept of home gets utterly disrupted in the new social environment. In the host country, the migrants associate home with wicked selfishness and xenophobia, with which comes their sense of belongingness. In this novel, Darling portrays such a type of immigrant, who is made to rethink her notions of home and identity. "Some things happen only in my country; this here is not my country." (Bulawayo, 147)

One of the most prominent themes of colonialism present in the novel is language. Language is very often an important question in postcolonial studies. After colonizing a country, the colonizers imposed their own language on the colonized people, forbidding the natives to use their own languages. Many of the postcolonial writers

advocate the return to their indigenous languages instead of using the language of the colonizers. One of the pioneers in this trend is Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Though the novel *We Need New Names* is written in the English language, Bulawayo adopts this style of writing and uses her native African language very frequently in her writing.

The novel *We Need New Names* by Bulawayo provides us with the literary texture, necessary to interrogate the racial formation and its relation to language itself. How Aunt Fostalina's language and her accent are racialized and perceived as an 'Other' while talking to a teleshopping company is proof of this phenomenon. The child protagonist of the novel, Darling learns to finesse her accent only after facing bullies from the children of her age at her school. Television and the mass media help her to polish her accent and her grasp of the 'American' culture. In this novel language and identity are organic essentials. The shifts in language also highlight the shifts in the characters' own identity. When the novel begins, the protagonist, Darling beholds her own cultural identity along with her own native language. But as the novel progresses and she migrates to America, the scope of her use of her mother tongue decreases and with this comes her sense of identity crisis.

When in the chapter titled "This Film Contains Some Disturbing Images" Darling gets a phone call from her home, we can feel her sense of identity crisis. While speaking on the phone with her mother and her friends, she realises that she is not the ten-year-old Darling, who ran around Budapest stealing guavas. Now she has changed and now she cannot relate with the people from her home. She recalls her being at home as "We're hungry but we're together and we're at home and everything is sweeter than dessert." (206) And she describes her current condition as: "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." (210)

In this novel, we are shown the trauma that comes with migration through characters like Prince and Tshaka Zulu. Prince is the cousin of Darling's Aunt Fostalina. He is one of the survivors of the post-independence political turbulence back in Zimbabwe. He "has burn scars on his arms and back where they burned him. He is young but now he looks aged... His face is hard and terrible and the light in his eyes is gone." (155) He always plays with his wooden animals and it is only Aunt Fostalina who understands that, "he is coping with everything that happened there." (158) Tshaka Zulu is a character who lives in a mental asylum. As the costs of migration affect the psyche of the immigrants, as a result of his own migration to America, Tshaka Zulu falls into madness.

He was the one who spent almost every penny that he had to get into America, but after reaching his dream destination he forgot who he was. To find his sense of belonging and his own self he used to remain in his own mental reality. He became schizophrenic. His instance is very symbolic because in his case there is an intertwining of cultural idioms of suffering and forms of historical consciousness. That is, on one hand, he has spent almost all he had to come to America, on the other he engrosses himself in the delusion that he is fighting back the colonizers and protecting his culture and tradition.

In this novel, Bulawayo uses the first-person plural pronoun “we” in chapters like “How They Appeared”, “How They Left”, and “How They Lived”. This plural “we” not only includes fellow Zimbabweans but also represents all the foreign immigrants in America in a collective sense. They are described as being taken by the fits of bulimia as they have not seen so much food in their whole life, they “ate like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries, we ate like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters...” (239) but their dreams soon come to an end because in their dreamland, America they have to work for their livelihood instead of going to school, as they are the “illegals”. And once they become illegals, they start providing fake names; they even start calling each other by the name of their countries. They start crafting a different subjectivity for themselves. They start finding odd jobs and any bad jobs become good jobs for them; low-paying backbreaking, cleaning toilets, picking tobacco, butchering animals, working like donkeys, like slaves, like madmen to send money home, without any chance to go back to visit their relatives and old parents, for the lack of right papers. The life of a migrant becomes the life of the exile, forever excluded and never to be able to enter the land of ancestors.

The construction of the protagonist of the novel, Darling reflects the experiences of displacement that the female immigrants face. By layering memories of the past and the present time, Bulawayo subjects the readers to the process of finding their true selves of Darling. Darling associates her home back in Zimbabwe, with her family, her Mother and Mother of Bones and her friends. But as the novel progresses, she is uprooted from her home and placed in a new land foreign to her that is America. The collisions between past/present, private/public and USA/Zimbabwe capture the psychological dilemma she goes through as she struggles to find her sense of belonging and her ‘home’.

Migration literature is an eye-opener for many people as it depicts a wide range of traumas and horrors that the immigrants have faced. Behind the story of every immigrant, there is the horrifyingly heart-rending story of separation, lack, exclusion, marginalization etc. As it seems in the novel, migration is both a by-product of colonialism and more significantly, the failure of the leadership in post-independence

Africa. Through the lead character's physical and mental hardships, Bulawayo portrays the universality of suffering as well as poverty. The desperate search for a better life that leads people from continents like Africa and Asia to the countries of Europe and America often results in sheer disillusionment. The world that is being questioned in *We Need New Names* is that of the post-independence African leaders' whose gross betrayal of the people of Africa is the main driving force for the continuous migration of young people from Africa to Western countries as well as the racism and xenophobia.

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