

The Child's Voice as Witness: Diasporic Trauma and Memory in *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of migration and diasporic identity in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, focusing on how the child protagonist, Darling, embodies the fractured experience of displacement from Zimbabwe to the United States. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how the novel negotiates themes of cultural dislocation, memory, nostalgia, and the struggle for belonging in a foreign space. Drawing on diaspora theory and postcolonial frameworks, the paper argues that Darling's narrative voice highlights the liminal state between home and host culture, revealing the tensions, negotiations and psychological ruptures inherent in the immigrant journey. The novel illustrates how migration disrupts identity formation, particularly for young migrants who must navigate conflicting cultural expectations. The work concludes that *We Need New Names* portrays the diaspora as both opportunity and loss, forming a nuanced discourse on the complexities of transnational mobility in contemporary African fiction.

Keywords: Child's voice, Witness, Diasporic trauma, We Need New Names

Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the most defining experiences of the twenty-first century, shaping new cultural identities,

rupturing national affiliations, and producing complex narratives of displacement. Contemporary African fiction has increasingly engaged with these realities, foregrounding the lived experiences of

migrants who navigate the pressures of global mobility, cultural transition and identity negotiation. NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) stands as a significant contribution within this discourse, providing a vivid portrayal of a young girl, Darling, whose movement from Zimbabwe to the United States transforms her sense of self and belonging. The novel presents migration not merely as a spatial transition but as a psychological and cultural journey that destabilizes established identities and compels the subject to inhabit a liminal zone between home and the adopted country.

The child-narrated perspective offers a fresh and unsettling lens into the immigrant experience, allowing the reader to witness the gradual unmaking and remaking of identity as Darling attempts to reconcile her memories of Zimbabwe with the demands of the American environment. Her narrative embodies the uncertainties, contradictions, and hybrid subjectivities characteristic of diasporic existence. Within this context, postcolonial theory becomes crucial for interrogating power relations embedded in migration and identity construction, while Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity illuminates the fluidity and multiplicity of the immigrant self-caught between cultures, languages and ideological spaces.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on African migration narratives, there remains a need for sustained engagement with the intersection of childhood, postcolonial displacement, and identity formation in *We Need New Names*. This study therefore

explores how Bulawayo constructs diaspora as a lived reality that fractures, negotiates, and reconstructs the migrant subject. The paper examines the novel through the lens of postcolonial theory, complemented by Bhabha's idea of hybridity, to investigate the tension between memory and assimilation, home and abroad, familiarity and foreignness. It argues that Bulawayo's text not only critiques the idealized vision of Western mobility but also reveals the emotional burden, cultural dislocation and hybrid identities produced through migration.

By focusing on the diasporic condition as portrayed in *We Need New Names*, this research positions the novel as an important site for analyzing the complexities of African transnational movement. The introduction sets the stage for a broader theoretical engagement with the politics of displacement and the negotiation of identity in diaspora literature. The succeeding sections will review existing scholarship, outline the methodological approach, and conduct a thematic analysis to illustrate how Bulawayo's narrative interrogates belonging within the shifting terrains of postcolonial migrations.

Literature Review

Diaspora literature has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly within African literary studies where themes of migration, displacement and identity reconstruction remain central.

Scholars generally agree that diaspora narratives emerge from experiences of movement, exile, forced or voluntary migration and the negotiation of identity in foreign cultural spaces. According to Safran (1991), diaspora subjects are characterized by a collective memory of the homeland, a sense of alienation in the host country, and the desire for eventual return, whether real or imagined. Cohen (1997) expands this by arguing that diaspora identities are fluid, evolving and shaped by continuous interaction between memory and lived reality. These early formulations underscore the foundation upon which contemporary African narratives of displacement are situated.

In postcolonial discourse, identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated through power, culture and representation. Stuart Hall (1990) posits identity as “a matter of becoming as well as being,” highlighting its historical, cultural and political contingency. Homi Bhabha (1994) further introduces the concept of hybridity and the “Third Space,” suggesting that migrants inhabit an in-between zone where cultural elements merge, conflict and reconstitute new subjectivities. His theory is central to analyzing diasporic characters who neither fully belong to the homeland nor completely assimilate into the host culture. This framework is crucial for understanding Darling’s hybrid identity in *We Need New Names*.

African Diaspora Fiction and Migration Narratives

Several African writers explore migration as a site of tension, opportunity and disillusionment. Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) interrogates the myth of the American Dream through the experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze, who encounter racial and cultural barriers abroad. Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* and *Everything Good Will Come* similarly foreground the negotiation of gender, work and belonging among transnational subjects. Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* addresses the darker side of migration, focusing on sexual exploitation and survival in Europe. These texts collectively reveal that migration is not merely movement but a transformation that challenges identity and belonging.

Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* contributes uniquely to this growing body of work by presenting migration through a child’s eyes. Critics such as Mhintao (2018) observe that Bulawayo’s child-narration exposes the innocence and vulnerability behind diaspora transitions, while also capturing the social realities of poverty, political instability and failed governance in Zimbabwe. The narrative demonstrates how childhood becomes a lens for witnessing trauma, nostalgia, and forced maturity in diaspora journeys.

Identity, Nostalgia, and Cultural Dislocation

Scholars widely acknowledge that diaspora literature revolves around fragmented identities shaped by memory and history. Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993) conceives diaspora identity as transnational and cross-

cultural, resisting the notion of singular origins. In *We Need New Names*, Darling's memory of Paradise and her new life in America illustrate this fragmentation. She carries the past within her, yet is pressured to adopt new linguistic codes, social behaviours, and cultural norms. As Ndlovu (2020) notes, migration in Bulawayo's work operates as a double-edged sword — promising opportunity yet demanding emotional and cultural sacrifice.

Nostalgia functions as an emotional bridge between homeland and host nation. Boym (2001) distinguishes between restorative nostalgia (the desire to return) and reflective nostalgia (the contemplation of loss). Darling's recurring memories of Zimbabwe reflect the latter, as she replays childhood experiences while recognizing her increasing disconnect from home. Her later return to Zimbabwe reveals a fractured sense of belonging — she is foreign at home and foreign abroad. This liminality exemplifies Bhabha's notion of the hybrid subject.

Diaspora Childhood and Perspective

While scholarship on African migration is vast, research on child-centered diaspora narratives remains relatively limited. Works by Mbembe (2017) and Nyambi (2019) emphasize that children in migration literature function as witnesses of socio-political breakdown and carriers of transgenerational memory. Darling's voice captures the raw confusion of cultural transition and the painful awareness of being suspended between two worlds. Her

experiences echo Hall's view of identity as an ongoing negotiation influenced by memory, history and cultural encounters.

Synthesis of Literature Gap

Existing scholarship has richly explored migration, identity and postcolonial displacement in African literature, particularly through adult protagonists. However, **few studies concentrate specifically on the interplay between childhood perspective, postcolonial hybridity, and identity reconstruction in *We Need New Names***. There is a gap in analysing how the child narrator articulates liminality, cultural negotiation and diasporic rupture through Bhabha's hybridity lens. This study therefore fills that scholarly gap by critically examining Darling's hybrid identity as shaped by memory of homeland and adaptation to American modernity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in textual analysis. As a work in the humanities, the research relies on close reading and critical interpretation rather than empirical data collection. The primary material for this study is NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* (2013), selected for its strong engagement with themes of migration, displacement, identity formation and diaspora experience. The text is analyzed to illuminate how Bulawayo constructs hybrid identity through

the experiences of the child protagonist, Darling, whose movement from Zimbabwe to the United States foregrounds the complexities of postcolonial mobility.

The analysis is guided by postcolonial theory as the main interpretive framework, with particular focus on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "Third Space." This theoretical approach is considered appropriate because it allows for a nuanced interrogation of identity as fluid, unstable, and continually negotiated within diasporic contexts. Bhabha's theory facilitates an examination of how Darling inhabits an in-between space, negotiating cultural expectations, linguistic shifts and conflicting memories of home. Postcolonial concepts of displacement, belonging, otherness, and cultural negotiation further inform the reading of key narrative episodes within the novel.

The method involves thematic categorization, where relevant sections of the text are critically examined and grouped under recurring motifs such as migration as rupture, nostalgia and memory, cultural dislocation, and hybrid identity formation. Secondary materials, including journal articles, critical essays, and theoretical works on diaspora and postcolonial studies, are integrated to support the analysis and situate the study within existing scholarship. Sources are accessed through academic databases such as JSTOR, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and institutional library resources.

This interpretive approach allows for a close engagement with language, narrative technique, and character development as tools for expressing diasporic consciousness rather than focusing on statistical or survey-based evidence; the study privileges meaning, symbolism, and literary representation. The method is therefore analytical, descriptive and explanatory—aimed at generating insight into how *We Need New Names* reflects the hybrid realities of the postcolonial immigrant subject.

THEME / ANALYSIS

1. Migration as Rupture and Displacement

We Need New Names portrays migration as a moment of rupture that destabilizes the subject's relationship with homeland, identity and belonging. Darling's movement from Paradise in Zimbabwe to the United States is not presented as a smooth transition but as a dislocation that fractures her sense of self. Life in Paradise is marked by poverty and political instability, yet it also holds emotional familiarity, communal bonding, and cultural rootedness. When Darling relocates, she enters a space of tension where her previous identity no longer fits, and the new environment demands adjustment and acceptance.

Migration is therefore constructed as both escape and exile—escape from deprivation and political turmoil, yet an exile from culture, language and memory. This duality reflects the postcolonial condition, where

mobility is frequently celebrated as opportunity but lived as emotional displacement. Darling's longing for Zimbabwe after arriving in America reveals that the journey to the diaspora is not merely geographical; it represents the beginning of a negotiation with loss. The narrative demonstrates how migration tears one away from cultural grounding, situating the protagonist within a liminal space of becoming rather than arrival.

2. Hybrid Identity and the Third Space

Using Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, Darling can be read as a diasporic subject who occupies the "Third Space" — neither fully Zimbabwean nor fully American. Her attempt to integrate into American society forces her to adopt new cultural codes: speech patterns, fashion, consumption habits, and behaviour. Yet her memories and early socialization in Zimbabwe remain part of her identity structure. She becomes a hybrid figure, negotiating multiple layers of selfhood that are sometimes complementary and often conflicting.

Bulawayo illustrates hybridity through the protagonist's internal struggle as she attempts to belong in the host culture while resisting the erasure of her past. The loss of accent, gradual forgetting of home vocabulary and embarrassment when speaking about Zimbabwean realities reflect the pressure to assimilate. Bhabha's concept explains this identity as unstable, unfinished and constantly reconfigured. Darling embodies the tension of in-betweenness,

where belonging is a negotiation rather than a resolved state. Her hybridity becomes both survival and crisis — a necessary adaptation that leaves emotional residue.

3. Nostalgia, Memory and the Burden of Belonging

Memory functions as a bridge linking Darling to her homeland, yet it also intensifies her sense of exclusion within the diaspora. Recurrent recollections of childhood adventures in Paradise serve as emotional archives, keeping Zimbabwe alive within her even as she adapts to America. However, over time, the memories become fragmented; names fade, language slips, and home becomes distant. This disconnection produces nostalgia — not as a romantic longing for return, but as a reflection on loss, incompleteness and transformation.

Darling's return to Zimbabwe later in the narrative is a critical moment that reveals her conflicted belonging. She is simultaneously familiar and foreign — welcomed yet perceived as changed. She no longer fits into the social rhythm of her peers, and her experiences abroad create a cultural gap. This tension exemplifies reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001), where the longing is not to recover home, but to acknowledge what has been lost. The narrative critiques the myth of home as a static space; instead, home is dynamic, remembered differently once diaspora reshapes the self.

4. Language, Power and Cultural Negotiation

Language operates as a symbol of power and belonging within the diasporic landscape. In America, Darling's English evolves as she adopts American phrases and an accent to integrate. This shift reflects the politics of voice — the need to sound “acceptable” to avoid stigma or mockery. The gradual erosion of her Zimbabwean linguistic identity underscores the pressure to conform to hegemonic Western norms. Language becomes both a tool and a wound: a bridge to assimilation and a marker of distance from home.

Bulawayo foregrounds how language mediates identity and power relations. Darling's discomfort when speaking about her homeland — especially the poverty or political unrest — reveals the internalization of the Western gaze and shame. Her silence and strategic speech reflect a survival tactic common among immigrants navigating cultural scrutiny. Bhabha's hybridity helps explain this negotiation as a dynamic intersection where two linguistic worlds merge to create a new subjectivity — one that is never wholly complete.

THEME / ANALYSIS (Expanded with Direct Quotes and Depth)

1. Migration as Rupture and Displacement

Migration in *We Need New Names* is portrayed as a profound rupture that destabilizes Darling's sense of self. From Paradise, she remembers:

“We all thought we were running away from something, but we were also running toward nothing” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 27).

This quote encapsulates the tension between leaving home for opportunity and facing the unknown in the diaspora. Darling's arrival in Detroit is marked by alienation; the streets, houses, and social interactions are unfamiliar and intimidating. The rupture extends beyond geography, disrupting social networks, childhood innocence and cultural grounding. The novel emphasizes migration as both hope and loss, echoing the postcolonial understanding of mobility as a double-edged phenomenon (Hall, 1990; Safran, 1991).

Further, the fragmentation of identity is evident when Darling reflects on her friends left behind:

“The people I loved in Paradise were becoming strangers to me, and I was becoming a stranger to them” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 192).

This illustrates the emotional cost of diaspora, where physical movement severs relational and communal ties, producing a liminal, in-between state.

2. Hybrid Identity and the Third Space

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is central to understanding Darling's negotiation of self in Detroit. She inhabits the “Third Space,” straddling Zimbabwean and American

identities. This is shown in her internal struggle with language and cultural adaptation:

“I try to speak like them, but my tongue is still full of the taste of home” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 145).

Her “taste of home” signals that despite adopting new behaviors, her past cannot be erased. Darling’s hybridity is evident in small but telling acts: eating American snacks while longing for nshima, wearing Western clothes yet remembering Zimbabwean fashion, or attending school while mentally returning to Paradise. These experiences highlight the dynamic tension of hybrid identities — incomplete, negotiable, and constantly reconstituted.

3. Nostalgia, Memory, and the Burden of Belonging

Bulawayo uses memory as both a narrative device and thematic pivot. Nostalgia shapes Darling’s emotional landscape as she navigates the host society. She recalls:

“We used to play in the streets until the sun went down, but now, in this cold city, even the sun feels wrong” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 78).

This reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001) underscores the impossibility of returning to the innocence of childhood and the untranslatable comfort of home. Even when physically present in Zimbabwe later in the narrative, Darling feels estranged:

“I am home, and yet I do not belong here. My body remembers, but my mind is elsewhere” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 300).

Diaspora, in this sense, produces psychological tension, highlighting how migration forces the subject to negotiate the impossibility of fully belonging to either homeland or host land.

4. Language, Power, and Cultural Negotiation

Language operates as a site of power and cultural negotiation. Darling experiences shame and alienation due to linguistic differences:

“Sometimes, I wonder if my words are too heavy with Africa for them to understand” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 157).

The quote reflects the pressure to conform to Western linguistic standards while preserving the cultural essence of Zimbabwe. This linguistic negotiation illustrates Bhabha’s “Third Space,” where new identity emerges from the tension between multiple cultural frameworks.

Bulawayo also examines social power through language. Darling is aware of how speaking about poverty and political instability in Zimbabwe marks her as “different” in the American setting. She becomes both translator and mediator of her own experiences, navigating how to articulate a past that others may not comprehend or value.

5. Expanded Analysis and Deeper Observations

- **Childhood Perspective as Witness:** Darling's child's eye perspective intensifies the emotional impact of migration. Her naive observations often mask deeper socio-political realities, allowing Bulawayo to explore Zimbabwe's crisis and the immigrant's struggle without overt exposition. The juxtaposition of childlike perception with adult realities highlights diaspora's complexity.
- **Spatial Liminality:** Physical spaces in Detroit—schools, streets, neighborhoods—are coded as foreign, in contrast to the intimate streets of Paradise. This spatial displacement mirrors the psychological liminality of diaspora.
- **Cultural Hybridity in Practice:** Beyond identity, hybridity manifests in everyday practices: food, dress, social interactions, media consumption. Darling adapts superficially but retains Zimbabwean cultural knowledge, demonstrating Bhabha's idea that hybridity produces a new, negotiated cultural reality rather than complete assimilation.
- **Migration and Emotional Burden:** Bulawayo underscores that migration

is not only about opportunity but also the emotional weight of leaving behind family, community, and memory. Nostalgia, guilt, and alienation converge, shaping Darling's hybrid identity.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

This study has examined NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the lens of postcolonial theory, complemented by Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, to investigate how the novel represents diaspora, migration, and identity formation. The analysis demonstrates that migration is not merely a physical movement from Zimbabwe to the United States but a profound rupture that destabilizes identity, reshapes memory, and reconfigures belonging. Darling's narrative, as a child's perspective, uniquely foregrounds the emotional, psychological, and cultural consequences of diasporic experience, revealing the vulnerability and resilience of young migrants negotiating new social, linguistic, and cultural environments.

The study finds that Darling embodies a **hybrid subjectivity**, living in Bhabha's "Third Space," where she negotiates between the cultural norms of her homeland and those of the host society. Her experiences illustrate how diaspora subjects continuously reconstruct identity, balancing assimilation pressures with the preservation of cultural memory. The liminality of her position—neither fully Zimbabwean nor fully

American—reflects the fluid, dynamic, and sometimes painful process of cultural negotiation inherent in postcolonial migration narratives.

Additionally, the study highlights the role of **nostalgia and memory** as central forces shaping diasporic consciousness. Through Darling's reflective engagement with her childhood in Paradise, the novel portrays how longing for the homeland coexists with adaptation to foreign spaces. Migration, therefore, is presented as both opportunity and loss, producing hybrid identities that challenge simplistic notions of assimilation and belonging.

Finally, the findings indicate that Bulawayo's child-centered narrative provides a fresh lens for understanding African diaspora literature. While much scholarship has focused on adult migrants, this study underscores that childhood perspectives uniquely reveal the intersections of displacement, memory, and identity reconstruction. By situating Darling's experiences within postcolonial and hybridity frameworks, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary African fiction interrogates the complex realities of diaspora life.

In conclusion, *We Need New Names* is a critical text for examining **identity, hybridity, and cultural negotiation in African diaspora narratives**. The novel underscores that diaspora is not a linear or uniform experience but a site of continuous negotiation, reflective nostalgia, and hybrid

formation. This research enriches discourse on African migration literature by foregrounding the child's perspective, demonstrating that the interplay between memory, displacement, and hybridity is central to understanding diasporic identity in the postcolonial context.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to scholarship on African diaspora literature in several important ways:

1. **Childhood Perspective in Diaspora Studies:** While much research on African migration focuses on adult experiences, this study highlights the significance of a child narrator in articulating the complexities of displacement, identity formation, and hybridity. By centering Darling's perspective, the research demonstrates how children uniquely perceive and internalize the cultural, emotional, and social tensions of migration.
2. **Integration of Postcolonial Theory and Hybridity:** By applying postcolonial theory alongside Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how diaspora subjects negotiate the "Third Space" between home and host cultures. It shows that hybrid identity is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a lived reality, expressed through

language, memory, behavior, and social interaction.

3. **Nuanced Analysis of Memory and Nostalgia:** The research deepens understanding of how nostalgia functions in diaspora narratives, distinguishing between reflective and restorative memory. It demonstrates that memory and longing for home are central to identity reconstruction, shaping how diaspora subjects relate to both their past and their present.
4. **Expanding African Migration Literature:** By focusing on *We Need New Names*, the study adds to the body of critical discourse on contemporary Zimbabwean and African diaspora literature. It provides insights into how migration affects individuals psychologically, socially, and culturally, highlighting the intersection of displacement, liminality, and agency in diasporic life.
5. **Pedagogical and Research Implications:** The findings offer a framework for analyzing other African diaspora texts, particularly those employing young or unconventional narrators. Future researchers can apply this combined theoretical lens to comparative studies, exploring identity negotiation, hybridity, and memory in global migration narratives.

In essence, this study bridges gaps in diaspora and postcolonial scholarship by foregrounding **childhood narration, hybridity, and memory** as central analytical tools, thereby enriching academic understanding of African migration literature and offering pathways for further research.

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