

WOMEN DEPICTING WOMEN: INSTANCES FROM NOVIOLET BULAWAYO'S *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

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Abstract

The general belief is that when men write they seem to throw women under the bus by portraying them as characters that are weak, emotional, voiceless and subjugated by society in their fiction. It is taken that it is difficult for men not to write this way because of the cultural imperatives that seem to promote patriarchal tendencies in our social relations and the way the two genders engage on issues. Using the postcolonial feminist theory, this paper attempts to draw inferences from NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) to show that subjugation of female characters certainly exceeds the commonly known assumptions. It postulates that the cognitive dissonance and the 'subjectification' of women as espoused in most literary works are unintended outcomes of 'arrogant minds' and not direct products of primary intentions. The novel which is set both in the United States of America and the author's home country, Zimbabwe, and one that traverses the protagonist's childhood experiences through adolescence to adulthood is a good resource to demonstrate how females at various phases of life typify their gender. The work intends to show that the accusation of subjugation of women by male writers should be seen through the prism of power influences, wherein, females are treated as subalterns only because they lack all forms of relevant power. What this portends is that the portraiture of female characters in the fiction of female writers may not be a far-cry from how they are depicted in that of their male counterparts.

Keywords: depictions, female characters, patriarchal, postcolonial feminism, subalterns

Abbreviation

WNNN *We Need New Names*

1. INTRODUCTION

The specific reason of this critical appraisal of Bulawayo's debut novel, *We Need New Names* is to do a feminist reading of the text. In this instance, the postcolonial or cultural variant of the feminist theory is being critically applied. Doing this appraisal amounts to an analysis through the rear-view mirror of postcolonial feminism, a variant of the feminist theory that evolved a few decades ago. Given that the novel was written several years after the theory became propagated through critical engagements of the likes of Gayatri

Spivak, Chandra Mohanty and Trish Minh Ha; it thus becomes important to examine works like Bulawayo's to see how female African writers in their fiction portray female characters and the influence of postcolonial/cultural feminism on such works.

Bulawayo's novel which came years after the dialectics of postcolonial feminism had been negotiated, straddles two continents: her African home state of Zimbabwe and the United States of America, her 'hostland'. Colonialism in her homeland has rendered the colony subjects as the 'other', while the position of the female in her culture further makes her subaltern. While Bulawayo's novel can be seen from the perspective of a migrant literature through its thematic engagement, this work can be viewed as having a subtle and opaque significance. This is hinged on its candid gender depictions most especially character portraiture of the part set in Zimbabwe. Narrated by the protagonist, Darling, who at that point in time has done so from the point of view of a child, enables this study to explore the problematic of depictions within the text as represented by interstitial space within the themes and the characters.

We Need New Names (WNNN) is one that has generated rave reviews, critical acclaim and has won the novelist various awards because it partly chronicles contemporary history of the novelist's native Zimbabwe and migrant experience of Africans in the United States of America. Her seeming harsh portrayal of Mugabe's misrule of independent Zimbabwe has received heavy criticism from many including a fellow African diaspora writer, Helon Habila. He sees Bulawayo's novel as 'performing Africa' for the global audience, a charge the novelist denies. Pier Paolo Frassineli (2015) considers WNNN as belonging to 'the world republic of letters' because of the number of awards it has won while at the same time contorting the continent's past and present. The significance and function of names in the novel has been investigated in a 2015 undergraduate essay by Desiree Patrick. She considers the names used within the novel as challenging the linear narratives of immigration which reproduce false ideology of easy upward mobility of migrants.

The ambivalence of representation as concerned migration and citizenship by Bulawayo leads Isaac Ndlovu (2016) to surmise that WNNN represents Africa in a way that skewed its narrative in favour of the West. His conclusion must have been drawn based on the novelist's vivid and poignant portrayal of historical events in Zimbabwe. The affect of the social media on characters in contemporary African fiction is explored by Camille Isaacs (2016) in 'Mediating women's globalized existence through social media in the works of Adichie and Bulawayo'. The protagonists of Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's WNNN in the study are seen to have used the internet and the social media to question the disembodied and deterritorialized spaces that digital networks potentially engender. The focus here is however the depiction of Bulawayo's female characters in WNNN with specific focus on the part set in Zimbabwe.

1.1. Postcolonial Feminism and Female African Writers

Postcolonial feminism is understood to be a theory that came up after the United Nations (UN) Decade of Women (1975-1985) as a counterpoising force against Western feminist politics aimed first at achieving suffrage and ending oppressive discrimination against women. It presupposes that there is no generality of gender oppression in terms of a "universal sisterhood" against patriarchy wherein the challenges faced by women in all parts of the world are considered homogenous. Postcolonial feminist theorists are of the view that addressing these peculiar differences is in some cases more important to their school of thought than the rights of the individual woman. This is because there are distinctions of nationalities, class and race that exist between women in different parts of the globe. With this theory, women in differentiated existences have raised issues of peculiar concerns such as resistance by women in the Arab countries against purdah, veiling, forced marriages, child brides and urban restrictions. In Africa it has been about the right of women to inheritances, ownership of land, access to communal power and eradication of obnoxious practices against womenfolk in general. It is therefore expected that women writers from the 'third world' or societies affected by colonialism would reflect the cultural and local conditions in their writings.

Postcolonial or cultural feminism enables the understanding of the conditions of women from once colonized societies who remain largely the 'subaltern' and the 'other' as a result of patriarchy and colonialism with the latter inferiorizing them. The assumption is that imperialism is a thing of the past but the effects are still being borne by the once colonized. When writers, especially females, present their literary offerings, they also at times unintentionally portray their fellow women in less than glowing terms. Although the postcolonial variant of the feminist theory has given disempowered women a platform to express their voice, it has been fingered for promoting ethnocentrism. Bulawayo is viewed as empowering her female characters by giving them a voice and thereby engaging in what Gayatri Spivak (1988) in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' refers to as 'Darstellung', a philosophical concept of representation.

The analysis of Bulawayo's debut novel, *We Need New Names*, would therefore be based on postcolonial/cultural feminist theory with the aim of presenting instances where she may have written for or against the grain of the theory. Ritu Tyagi (2014) sets out clearly the following as agenda of the theory: representation of women in once colonized countries and in Western locations; construction of gender difference in colonial discourses; focus on works of women writers in anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses and raising conceptual problems with representation of gender generally.

Since the postcolonial feminist theory challenges the existence of a 'universal woman', it is expected that writings by women should reflect their cultural and environmental position in the construction of characters and the portrayal of their circumstances. Ordinarily, it is seen as reflected in feminism in the first place that women should stand up against the stereotypical portrayal of females in male-authored prose fiction, depictions such as, 'femme fatale', docile, weak, subservient, oppressed and voiceless being. It is generally assumed that when women write, they do portray their kind in a different light as against the male writers' portraiture; and that they do give voice and power to female characters and depart from the sexist perspective of male writers.

Using the postcolonial theory therefore enables a focus here that shows the extent to which female novelists in their writings and portrayals reflect the inner core of the espoused theory especially as it may betray imbibed cultural values and assimilated local customs that sometimes are difficult to excise from women writing from an African experience. The question that plagues the mind is if there is a departure from a communality of influence and power wherein it is assumed that there is no gender against gender oppression or whether the existence of a power relation from where each individual operates subsists? This is to say in other words that male writers portray women as weak because of the power they hold both as individuals and as a group largely due to patriarchal privileging and cultural imperatives.

It has been proven that most cultures of the world privilege men over women in all spheres of life and this is what feminism is out to address. Both male and female writers have the propensity to write from the point of view of their gender and thereby make their gender the focus of their works. So, when female writers portray female characters, they do so not only just as women but also from the perspective of individual power; in this instance access to publishing which does not set them apart from male writers but brings them into communality of power and influence that may not necessarily be gendered.

2. FEMALE WRITERS AND THEIR FEMALE CREATIONS

In examining how female writers portray their female characters, an issue earlier raised is that of communality of behaviour wherein what drives every writer in their portrayals is power and influence. It is averred that a female writer may not necessarily write to portray a strong female protagonist. A vivid example is writer Christine Brook-Rose; who in a conversation with Ellen Friedman and Maryan Fuchs initially denies that she feels 'different' as a woman writer, even passing her works as having "indeterminate value". She later accepts that a female experimental writer has more difficulties than the male one; and that a female writer may not necessarily depict females differently when making portrayals. However, Brooke-Rose accepts a basic assumption of writers "that women cannot create new forms". This substantially betrays the mind of a female writer, her subconscious probably accepts this proposition and that she may end up not really creating "new forms" of female characters, but just the same old form influenced by patriarchal tendencies. In any case, in several instances of female characters portrayed by Bulawayo, her seeming obliviousness of her gender is observed. She strongly goes on and writes as if she is not a female. This attests to one thing: that Bulawayo's access to power/influence (through writing and publishing) has paved way for her to do what male writers do; throw the female folk 'under the bus'. Female writers themselves can be fingered in negative portrayals of their female protagonists as sometimes they write in psychological despair.

2.1. Bulawayo's Various Depictions of Female Characters

Male writers in their writings most of the time portray the female characters as listless and physically frail. Bulawayo in her character portraiture in *WNNN* has not departed from this assumption that men are always bigger and physically stronger. In her espousal of this assertion, she depicts the male character called Bastard as strong and typical of his gender. In a context in the text where Bastard throws a guava fruit against the Durawall of a house in Budapest (an upscale and prosperous part of the city), a house that the character Shbo admires so much and even appropriates, Darling (omniscient narrator) surmises "I said, why did you do that? Shbo's voice has hot coals in it, like maybe she will do something to Bastard, but really she won't because Bastard is bigger and stronger, plus he is a boy" (14). This scenario exposes Bulawayo as betraying what most male writers also do - linking physical strength to someone being a boy or of masculine

gender. Also, we see Sbho linking her future prosperity not to her own ability to do something with her life but by getting and marrying a man from Budapest. Sbho says "I'm going to marry a man from Budapest. He'll take me away from Paradise, away from the shacks and Heavenway and Fambeki and everything else" (14). In this narrative, the novelist inadvertently problematizes the challenges associated with gender and inter-gender beliefs and relationships. There also appears to be a cultural embedment of inferiority of a gender to the other, otherwise why will a female writer presented with 'power' enervate the female gender in the similar way that male writers do?

In *WNNV*, there is the portrayal of women as 'second place' gender when it concerns political matters. The novelist makes no difference to the long-held belief that the political structure is held by men and the space is fully their exclusive preserve. While this may be the truth about patriarchy and political discourses as exemplified by several male writers, Bulawayo makes no difference to the long-held presumptions in her depictions here: "Now when **men** (emphasis mine) talk, their voices [...]. We hear about change, about new country, about democracy, about elections, and what-what" [...] (61). In this case, and as in the fiction of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and many male African writers, it is again men talking and women hearing therefore reinforcing the voicelessness of women in the most important issues of politics and governance that affect both genders. And as male writers have always represented women as not being involved in serious but mundane things, the same notion is being enthused here. It is not just a one-off representation by Bulawayo; she reinforces same idea in the ensuing paragraph in the novel.

Just after portraying men as doing serious talk of politics, the womenfolk are presented in a vainglorious manner in the following quote: "The women, when the women hear the men, they giggle. Now there is something almost lovely in the women's eyes, and from the way they are looking, you can tell that they are trying to be beautiful. Painted lips. Made-up hair..." (61). In the circumstances of African politics, women here are presented as showing no main interest in the political happenings around them beyond trying to be beautiful and making the male folk feel happy, long for them and satisfied. Even the character called Mother of Bones, as a result of her apathy and disillusionment of what politics is about will not allow children to paste a campaign poster on her door. Darling says of her: "she would kill us if we ever put our nonsense on her door" [...] (83). This feeling of indifference shows the general apathy of womenfolk towards politics and governance, an attitude that leads to an expected occlusion of the female from political power and influence.

However, depicting women's apathy to serious issues of politics might be a wakeup call to them by the novelist to take action in order to effect a change in their predicament and that of their society. Bulawayo may not have been generous enough to venerate any woman with a political voice and may have regaled her readers with women who are trying to look beautiful while men engage in serious political talks, but just like all feminists, she is envisaging a change of attitude.

Infidelity is almost a taboo in the African cultural setting especially when it involves the female. While society acquiesces to male infidelity, it frowns gravely when women engage in such. Portrayal of men engaging in marital infidelity catches no attention especially when the writer is male. Even in instances where women writers do the same, it is taken that they are doing the usual. Expectedly therefore, where female infidelity occurs, women are not to tell on one another as such are usually consigned to the level of hush talks which should not be spoken about in the open. In a bold representation, Bulawayo describes an infidel woman, the narrator's mother, who while her husband is away in South Africa, allows an unknown man into the house for casual sex as narrated by Darling: "Now mother is moaning; the man, he is panting. The bed is shuffling like a train taking them somewhere important that needs to be reached fast" (66). Such a poignant depiction of a sexual scene attests to the moral decadence of the novelist's society. It is a decadence that has the connivance of both males and females and one with untoward consequences leading to HIV/AIDS pandemic hinted at several times in the novel and symbolically referred to as the 'sickness'.

Bulawayo can be said to have however prepared the ground of defense for the vile sexual act narrated in the preceding paragraph before the act takes place. She creates an avenue of defense, perhaps as a woman to advance evidence ahead of Darling's mother's act, that sexual need at a certain phase of a woman's life is a physiological one. The narrator makes the readers to understand that Darling's father is never home to fulfil his conjugal obligations to his wife and likewise his filial responsibilities to his dependants.

The novelist creates a perfect alibi for Darling's mother's infidelity, but masterfully uses subterfuge to present her as guilty in that she covers her act and even endeavours to shield her daughter from both the emotional and psychological consequences of witnessing her 'shameful' but justifiable act in the following excerpts from the novel: "[...] because he always knocks five times [...] and so softly too", (65) and the adulterers talk in whispers: "they are speaking like they are stealing" (66) but before daybreak, the man sneaks away, "something too terrible to be seen in the light" (66).

Great effort is put into shielding the daughter, Darling from seeing the man or being psychologically affected by the mother's infidelity. The novelist is likely advancing the notion that for all women who cheat in their marriages, even though not totally blameless, they are most of the time constrained to do so due to several reasons beyond their control. Or simply put, they may be fulfilling physiological needs. As a female writer, she accepts that infidelity may not be right and subtly describes it as stealing, but heaps the blame on larger workings in Zimbabwean society being against the stability of the family unit.

And like all other feminist writers, no topic is off limit. When Bulawayo's female characters engage in reprehensible acts, she exposes them, draws the attention of the readers to the unacceptable behaviour and in same vein shows empathy. The novelist can also be ascribed the task of deconstructing the stereotypical chaste African woman by situating the character Mother at the center of infidelity. The analysis here reveals a contradictory posture by the novelist of her character portraiture of the female gender. In *WNNN*, Bulawayo straddles herself with the responsibility of presenting the foibles as well as the strength of the women in her society.

In a bold portrayal of very young females, the novelist raises questions about how young ones can be so impressionable by living in a world with several cultural influences. Here Bulawayo makes depictions of Chipo, Sbho, Forgiveness and the protagonist, Darling as female children with criminal innocence at their ignorant attempt to abort a foetus. This can be seen as an attempt to present her characters as existing in dual environments; the first being their materially deprived 'African Paradise' and the other being the materially-rich American society represented by the electronic transmission of American life using ER (an acronym for Emergency Room). The following excerpt from the novel presents the influence of globalization. She writes: "This is what they do in ER, Sbho says. I think, what is ER? [...] I saw it on TV in Harare when I visited Sekuru Godi. ER is what they do in a hospital in America. In order to do this right, we need new names" (84).

The novelist here presents young female characters as impressionable children, perhaps unguarded by transmitted parental values, who are willing to believe and practice what they see on TV from foreign land. In a way, the whole manifestation here is that of parental failure which the writer inadvertently uses this subterfuge to characterize. It is another case of the female novelist portraying her female characters negatively. The female children's attempt to abort a foetus is an exercise which if they have gone ahead with would have changed their lives forever. The writer engages a different gear when she presents them as wanting to impersonate foreign characters by changing their names. Darling narrates: "I am Dr. Bullet, she is beautiful, and you are Dr. Roz, he is tall, Shbo says, nodding at me" (84). This attempt to change identity by the children or to morph into television characters is an act of subversion of the culture of the once colonized people which is discouraged by postcolonial feminists. The wide-reaching influence of globalization through a television series produced and aired thousands of miles away is undisputed.

However, in her ever-present contradictory espouses, Bulawayo has the protagonist, Darling refusing to accept a male ascription and at least affirming her preference for her female identity. Darling says "you said he? I don't want to be a man, I say" (84). With an emphatic consistency the author brings in the elderly and respected female character, MotherLove, who saves the day and intervenes at the right time to metaphorically abort the process of abortion. She seems to have been used to reinforce the positive attributes of a typical mature African woman who abhors anything that truncates the sanctity of human life. Her reaction in the following lines is an epic:

MotherLove shakes her head, and then her body heaves downward, like she is a sack falling. But she is not angry. She doesn't yell. She doesn't slap or grab anybody by the ears. She doesn't say she will kill us or tell the mothers. I look at her face and see the terrible face of someone I have never seen before, and on the stranger's face is this look of pain, this look that adults have when somebody dies (89-90).

MotherLove not only stops the process, she equally comforts Chipo who would probably have lost her life if the process is carried out. This typical African mother (MotherLove) characterizes deep love for the children irrespective of whether they are her biological or not. She also grieves the perceived failure of parenting exhibited by the girls through the abortion attempt boosted by their exposure to a foreign television program. When the omniscient narrator declares: "this look that adults have when somebody dies" (90), the novelist is expressing the loss of innocence of the African children exposed to foreign influence. She is affirming not just their loss of innocence, but loss of self and identity as well.

Bulawayo presents Chipo, the little pregnant girl as voiceless. Darling avers: "She'll have it one day, I say speaking for Chipo because she doesn't talk anymore... when her stomach started showing she stopped

talking" (4). The portraiture here is that a pregnant female has to be spoken for and that there is something inherently wrong about underage pregnancy that reduces the female's self-esteem even if she is not directly responsible for her state of being. It is later revealed that Chipo's grandfather, the one the society expects to defend her dignity and protect her, is the one responsible for the pregnancy.

It is not all gloom for the female folks in Bulawayo's depictions. The attention drawn on a female character which no doubt is positive is thrown up where in spite of the hunger and collective material deprivations suffered by the inhabitants of the shanty tin city - Paradise, MotherLove refuses to partake in the distribution of the foreign NGOs' handouts. Despite all entreaties even by a fellow woman, Sis Betty, MotherLove declines the handouts from the Western NGO whose intentions she clearly does not know. Bulawayo does not hide her admiration for MotherLove's choice in the following quote: "The NGO people hold out more little packages to MotherLove, and the two white women even bare their teeth like grinning dogs. [...]. She turns and strides away, head held high, the bangles on her arms jingling, the stars on her dress shining, her scent of lemon staying in the air even after she is gone (58).

In even drawing attention to her shimmering star-filled dress and the lemon perfume, the writer performs a paradoxical representation of a character that is both strong and vain. However, the positive in this instance is that apart from showing MotherLove's reprehension of what the NGOs stand for, she equally paints her as neat and clean. This female character represents the novelist disavowal of what most foreign NGOs exemplify; and MotherLove will rather walk away and have her pride intact than receive their gifts. There is a strong representation of the females in MotherLove in a contradictory come-together of strength (refusal of the gift) and weakness in describing her clothes, jewellery and perfume (as if that is what gives her strength and not her inner strength of foregoing material things for inner peace and dignity of her people). Overall the impression that is taken away here is that Bulawayo has depicted this female character positively, but in doing so, the writer still introduces contradictory descriptions thereby muting the overall importance of this character in a sublime manner.

Religion is always an important aspect of African culture and it elicits different emotions by different people based on their experiences and circumstances. First, as in most of societal cultural existence, it is again a male character, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro that heads the church in Bulawayo's novel. He is the only one who hears from God, and performs God over his hapless congregation. This no doubt confirms the hegemonic hold of the male in almost all spheres including spiritual matters that are meant to be personal. The character, Mother of Bones, is seen to be portrayed in a positive light, albeit not totally at variance with male writers' presentation of women as pious and religious. The novelist, in spite of the distractions that the Prophet brings, presents Mother of Bones as being true to her Christian faith. To buttress this the narrator observes "I look to the side and see Mother of Bones listening with all her might, eyes half closed, head tilted, and arms clutching at the stomach [...]" (37) while the prophet goes on with his sermon.

Bulawayo's depiction of women just as men also do is further captured in the case of Simangele who confesses that when things are not going well with her jealous cousin, who she sees as attempting to take over her husband, Lovemore, seeks the help of the pagan Vodloza (a kind of native medicine man). This confirms with certainty women's feeling of insecurity in marriages that male writers have always portrayed. The following quote aptly captures such insecurity: "She says the cousin is also a witch who keeps sending her tokoloshes because she wants her dead so she can take over Simangele's husband, Lovemore" (39). Here the novelist remains blunt and unprotective of female inanities.

About the most important positive depiction of women in *WNNN* by Bulawayo is their portrayal as the custodians of history of the race and the key part they play in transmitting orature from generation to generation. Darling says in Paradise, where they are holed up in shacks for accommodation, they have nothing "except of course memories, their own, and those passed down by their mothers and mothers' mothers. A nation's memory" (77-78). This is very much an affirmation of the significant role of women in oral tradition in many African societies, one Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) acknowledges as the validation of women as performers and producers of knowledge in orature; as well as their influence on female writers and their creations. Women's stabilizing role in moments of crisis is expressed in the following quote from the novel:

But then the women, who knew all the ways of weeping and all there was to know about falling apart, would not be deceived; they gently rose from the hearths, beat dust off their skirts, and planted themselves like rocks in front of their men and children and shacks, and only then did all appear almost tolerable (*WNNN* 79).

3. CONCLUSIONS

As a feminist, Bulawayo may not have depicted the feminine gender in too much a positive light in many of the instances sighted above, but her commitment to the cause of her gender and her society is never in doubt. She has portrayed her female characters in a way not totally at variance with that of the male writers but has simply given a realistic representation of the people in her society. Through her depictions of women and female characters in her novel *WNNN*, she betrays the contradictions that are assumed to be embedded in her inner core. This may have been occasioned by an identity crisis as a migrant in the United States of America faced with the process of acculturation and adaptation; a process which calls for negotiation of new identities. Bulawayo, although now lives in the metropolis, remains tethered to her Zimbabwean background and this reflects in her character portraiture and landscape depiction.

Bulawayo presents female characters within the socio-cultural milieu that enervates them and as such they remain oppressed, suppressed, and without a voice. Paradoxically in certain portrayals, she takes no prisoners of these female characters as she presents them 'raw' just like a non-female and a non-feminist writer would also do. In certain circumstances, one could even accuse her of being ambivalent about her commitment to the status of women in her society. The inference drawn at the end of it all is that the portraiture of women by women in fiction may not be a total departure from that of their male counterparts.

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