



**Narrative of the Name : An Analysis of the Names in Noviolet Bulawayo's  
*We Need New Names*  
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**Abstract:**

*We Need New Names* by Noviolet Bulawayo is an evocative narrative which presents the coming-of-age of the protagonist, Darling. This novel, set in Zimbabwe and the United States, deals with the trauma of migration, and the resulting dislocation, and also the identity crisis that emerges as a consequence. In order to elaborate on these themes, Bulawayo has used names – of persons, places, and even pseudonyms – to emphasize problems which are rooted in cultural and political issues. This article attempts to explore the multidimensional significance of the names in the novel, primarily through the lens of Postcolonial Theory. It attempts to present how names function as agents of resistance, resilience and reinvention, in addition to mere identifiers or identity markers.

“What’s in a name?” asked Juliet to Romeo in William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*. In the context of the play, this suggests that the name is only a label which never affects or changes the essential nature of a person or thing. But as we move from the sixteenth century to the present day, we find that the significance of a name cannot be restricted to this aspect alone. A name is a primary identity marker which distinguishes a

person, place or thing from others of the same group. Names may be used symbolically by writers to convey traits, threats and even social commentary. *We Need New Names* (2013) is the debut novel of the Zimbabwean writer, Noviolet Bulawayo. Sarah Ilott praises the novel for its use of names to challenge the homogeneity of globalized identities. In this novel, the significance of names begin from the title of the novel itself. Most of the characters of the novel experience a desire for transformation and this is declared through the title. Considering new names for everyone provides opportunities to imagine new possibilities. Renaming is an act that is simultaneously trivial and profound because it is a way to assume control over their identities in a world where most things are beyond their control. According to postcolonial theorists, naming is an essential feature of literary representation which is deeply entangled with power, memory, resistance and the politics of identity. In this novel, Bulawayo employs naming both as symbolism and as a narrative strategy to critique postcolonial struggles, highlight transitions and commemorate histories. The names indicate historical periods, diasporic shifts and moments of resistance within African societies.

Darling, the name of the protagonist, has a

great significance in the evolution of her character arc as it reflects her shifting identity, cultural dislocation and the tension between her Zimbabwean roots and her life as an immigrant in America. In the early part of the novel, set in the Zimbabwean shantytown of Paradise, an ironically named place. Tsitsi Jaji regards this ironic naming as a strategy to highlight the dystopian reality of a postcolonial state. the protagonist is known simply as Darling, a name which suggests warmth, love and value, implying that she is cherished by her family and community, despite the harsh realities of poverty, political instability and violence. This is a name which evokes tenderness and innocence, aligning with her role as a young playful child navigating a challenging environment with her friends. In a Zimbabwean context, Darling is a somewhat unconventional name which reflects the creative and expressive naming practices of her community, as seen in names like Godknows or Bornfree. This could also be a postcolonial blending of influences because “Darling” is an English word which might have been chosen to signify hope or aspiration in a society marked by colonial legacies and economic hardship. But the name also carries an ironic undertone as the “darling” child faces hunger, loss and societal collapse. Once she moves to America, her name stands out as unusual and marks her as an outsider in a society that often demands assimilation. In America, her name becomes a reminder of her differences and the cultural gap between her Zimbabwean identity and her new environment. Darling’s home community was one which understood the emotional weight of her name. But in America, the name was viewed as an overly sentimental label, disconnected from the emotional and cultural contexts of her homeland. This reflects her broader struggle to

maintain her identity while facing pressure to adapt to American norms, such as changing her accent or behaviour to fit in. In America, the tenderness of “Darling” is placed in sharp contrast with the harsh realities of her immigrant life, including low wage jobs, cultural

alienation and the loss of the “American Dream” she initially imagined. Her name becomes a bittersweet reminder of the optimism she once had. Her optimism is now tempered by the realities of “Destroyedmichigan” which is dominated by economic decline and social isolation. “Destroyedmichigan” is how Darling refers to Detroit, Michigan. Katherine

Hallemeier remarks that the playful misspelling of the place name is a way to destabilize Western hegemony by reframing America through an African lens.

Unlike many immigrants who choose to adopt Western names to assimilate, Darling chooses to retain her name. This could be a deliberate choice made as an act of resistance and a refusal to fully erase her Zimbabwean identity. It also emphasizes her inability to fully integrate into the American society because her unusual name establishes her identity as a foreigner, a non American. She finds herself placed in a liminal situation – neither fully Zimbabwean nor fully American.

Darling has a friend named “Chipo”, which is a Shona name meaning “gift” or “present”, and carries a positive, hopeful connotation suggesting that the child is seen as a blessing to the family or community. This is in tune with traditional African naming practices where names often reflect values, circumstances or aspirations. Chipo’s name reflects a stronger tie to Zimbabwean heritage as it presents a sense of pride and cultural continuity

even in the impoverished setting of Paradise. This name which initially suggests promise and value, becomes tragic in the light of her experiences. She is raped by her grandfather, becomes pregnant and the “gift” of her life is robbed by her trauma. Her situation highlights the vulnerability of children in their unstable environment. Chipo’s name is not connected to an English derived universal sentiment as it is deeply rooted in Shona tradition reflecting a more explicit connection to Zimbabwean culture, grounded in local heritage and more culturally specific. The positive connotation of

Chipo’s name contrasts with her suffering, emphasizing the cruelty of her circumstances. The optimism of “gift” is subverted by her rape and pregnancy, which takes away her childhood and future prospects. Chipo’s name connects to the novel’s themes of lost innocence and the impact of systemic issues like poverty and patriarchal violence on vulnerable individuals.

The name of another character, Godknows, is significant as it symbolically and thematically reflects the cultural, spiritual and socio-political context of the Zimbabwean

community depicted in the novel. “Godknows” is a direct invocation of divine omniscience and it suggests that only God understands the full scope of life’s mysteries, hardships or outcomes. In some African communities, especially in postcolonial Zimbabwe, names often carry spiritual or aspirational weight. Names could also be a commentary on life’s uncertainties. This is a distinctly Zimbabwean name which asserts cultural pride and agency, while resisting colonial or Western naming conventions. In the context of the novel, Zimbabwe is depicted as being steeped in economic and political turmoil. In this context, a name like Godknows can be seen as an

expression of fatalism or a surrender to a divine will. The name implies that human understanding is limited and that a proper understanding of the chaos endured by the characters could be understood only by a higher power. This is in tune with the existence of a deep rooted spirituality in the community and its dependence on faith in God as a coping mechanism. The novel portrays a society which deals with multiple losses, yet clinging to spiritual or communal strength. "Godknows" is a name steeped in irony as the character's life is not marked by divine clarity, but only by uncertainty and hardship. The name could also be a subtle critique on the socio-political conditions of postcolonial Zimbabwe, a means through which the community acknowledges the unpredictability and injustice of their situation. But the name also carries a playful tone as it fits with the naming conditions of his group which includes names like

Bastard and Bornfree. Such names showcase their ability to find humour and agency in naming, despite their circumstances. The name "Godknows", reflects a collective need to find hope or understanding through faith, community or creative expression, even when answers are elusive.

The name "Bastard" is one of the most provocative and striking names in the novel. In the context of this novel, this name is bold and unconventional reflecting the creative and defiant naming practices within the community of Paradise. This particularly confrontational name could be an indication of the postcolonial Zimbabwean community's willingness to embrace or reclaim derogatory terms as a form of resistance or survival. The name could be a blunt acknowledgement of societal judgement concerning an absent parent, or it could be a

broader commentary on the "illegitimacy" of the marginalized in a fractured society. The negative connotations of the term "bastard" are subverted by the community when it is used as a child's name. This reinforces the community's resilience exhibited through its use of humour, creativity and boldness to cope with poverty, political violence and displacement.

Bastard's name has a darkly humorous edge which reflects the children's ability to navigate their harsh reality with defiance and wit. This reclaims a term of insult as a marker of identity. Eventhough this name suggests a personal or familial history marked by stigma, within the group he is not ostracized. His name is accepted as part of the community's unconventional naming culture. It reflects the idea of communal solidarity, where the hardships of the individuals are absorbed into the collective identity of Paradise. The bold name reflects a rebellious spirit, both in the character and the community that named him. The name is part of the novel's portrayal of childhood resilience, and also a provocative

symbol of societal judgement and defiance. It bluntly critiques the marginalisation of the poor in post-colonial Zimbabwe, while its acceptance within the community reflects a reclamation of identity and agency.

The name of the character Sbho is likely a shortened form of a longer name derived from the indigenous Shona culture. In the context of the instability and poverty of Paradise, this name represents an optimistic counterpoint to the struggles of the community. Sbho's name which means "blessing" reflects the community's hope for a better future, even as it contrasts with their present circumstances. This name is an assertion

of cultural pride and hope, emphasizing the community's ability to find meaning through traditional values. Another name "Stina" maybe a shortened or a variant form of a name like Christina or Kristina which means "Christian" or "a follower of Christ". This could reflect a Christian influence, common in Zimbabwe due to missionary legacies. It may also be a unique name within the Zimbabwean context, derived from local naming practices or a blend of influences. Unlike the names of the other characters, Stina's name is understated and may represent resilience through simplicity. This embodies the community's ability to find meaning in understated or ambiguous identities. The unclear origin of the name allows it to occupy a liminal space reflecting the hybrid identities of the children in a postcolonial context. This name may represent the fluidity of identity in a community navigating multiple cultural influences. Some names reflect the colonial and postcolonial history of Zimbabwe. Darling makes a shift from Paradise, a shanty town in Zimbabwe, to "Destroyedmichigan" (Detroit, Michigan) in the United States. The change of names and locations highlight the contrast between the roots of the characters and their new realities in the diaspora, which are often disillusioning. Names such as Victoria and Elizabeth are seen in minor characters, or used as references. These evoke the lingering influence of British colonialism, and effect a contrast with indigenous or invented names that assert cultural agency.

The lens of Postcolonial Theory suggests a connection between some place names and the idea of displacement. Paradise is an extremely ironic name for a shantytown in Zimbabwe as it represents poverty and struggle rather than an idyllic paradise. This name of the impoverished shantytown reflects the

aspirations of the characters, for a better life, despite their circumstances. Budapest, Shanghai etc are names of global cities which the children give their makeshift play areas. These names symbolise their dreams of escape and a broader worldview, even as they remain confined to their immediate reality. Darling's use of "Destroyedmichigan" could suggest the disillusion of the immigrant experience. The name challenges the narrative of the "American Dream" as it reflects the decay and economic hardship that she encounters in America.

Thus, it can be seen that most of the names in the novel are much more than mere identifiers as they are layered with meaning, reflecting personal and collective histories and identities, colonial legacies, cultural resilience and the challenges of displacement. Names highlight the tension between rootedness and reinvention, as seen in how Darling and her community navigate worlds that demand new ways of defining themselves. They serve as a lens through which Bulawayo explores themes of identity, complexity of belonging, the scars of history, the resilience of those caught between cultures, and the impact of socio-political forces on individual lives.

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