

**“A Question of Cultural Identity in NoViolet  
Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”**

**Bharati Deshmukh**  
**Research Student**  
**Shivaji University**  
**Kolhapur**  
**Maharashtra**  
**India**

**Abstract**

NoViolet Bulawayo is an emerging prolific Zimbabwean writer. Hitting Budapest, her short story won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing. With this prize, a new literary star was born. She has published her first powerful and promising novel *We Need New Names* in which she intricately tells story of her lead character Darling and her peers Bastard, Godknows, Sbho, Stina, and Chipso. She explores the themes of parental neglect, political instability, lost childhood and the burden of shame. The novel of NoViolet Bulawayo has multiple implications. Through this novel, NoViolet describes different aspects of immigrant people and their experiences. NoViolet portrait the vivid stages of immigrant people’s life like; arrive in the new culture, the struggle to adapt it as well as the feeling of illegal immigrants. With this novel, Bulawayo has thoughtfully explored the notion of home, roots, and cultural identity. This novel was made her the first Zimbabwean and black African woman who shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013.

Key Words – NoViolet Bulawayo, Cultural Identity, immigration, homeland.

## Introduction

NoViolet Bulawayo is a prominent Zimbabwean author. The present research is a study of cultural identity in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. She is born 12 October 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. NoViolet's story "Hitting Budapest," won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing. *The novel, We Need New Names* is about a struggling African country and suffering of its people; the immigrant experience in their adopted country. This is novel about examining yourself, what is your actual situation; how do you decide to move, what are you doing for fit in that country, left your own culture identity for accepting new one and the pain which you feel when they reject you as their own. The question of cultural identity is the process of exploration of learning more about one's culture and realize the implications of membership in that culture. A person will begin to question why they hold their beliefs and compare it to the beliefs of other cultures. This stage is a turning point in their life or a growing awareness of other cultures. It characterized by growing the awareness in social and political forums and a desire to learn more about the culture.

## Concept of Cultural Identity

Culture is a community sufficiently large enough to be self-sustaining; that is, large enough to create a new generations of members without relying on outside people. Our culture provides regulation for life and provides individual identities. Nowadays the term culture refers to the totality of a large group's thoughts, behaviors, and values that socially transmitted, as well as to members who consciously identity with the group. Globalization led to intense intercultural encounters. It is a complex of processes and forces of change. It explores some of these questions about cultural identity in contemporary society.

## Identity

Identity understands as the entirety of how we as individuals view or perceive ourselves as unique from others. Bhugra (2004) state as follows,

‘Racial, cultural and ethnic identities form part of one's identity, and identity will change with development at a personal as well as at a social level along with migration and acculturation.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration, distress and cultural identity. *British Medical Bulletin*. 69:1–13.

## Culture

There are many interpretations of what defined and known as culture. Some believe it acquired and passed down through generations. Remains believe it is a system of beliefs and values within a society. Shah also has been described culture as follows,

'...shared features which encapsulate people together in a community'.<sup>2</sup>

## Cultural identity

The identity principle of individual cultures in fact established through the principle of otherness. Cultural identity is a meeting point of several cross-cultural implications. The problem of cultural identity mainly includes the question of the self and culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning.

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to, as part of the self-conception and self-perception to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality and any kind of social group that have its own distinct culture, in this way that cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also to the culturally identical group that has its members sharing the same cultural identity.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural identity is similar and overlaps with, identity politics.

In our society, there are different sources that lead to an individual's own cultural identity. Each can affect different people at different times in their life. For example, a person might refer to themselves as a young, affluent, and athletic Middle Eastern female who is a teacher in the rural village. This description uses several sources to describe a person's cultural identity. They are:

- young (age),
- affluent (social class)

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<sup>2</sup> Shah, S. (2003) The researcher/interviewer in intercultural context: a social intruder! *British Educational Research Journal*. 30:4, 549-575.

<sup>3</sup> Moha E., *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2005, pp.19-23

- athletic (ability)
- Middle Eastern (ethnicity)
- female (gender)
- who is a teacher (social status)
- in the rural village (geography).

These sources are, in general. It is not necessary that all these sources are appearing in all societies, but these are the significant selection of main sources of identity in modern societies.

### **A Question of Cultural Identity in *We Need New Names***

*We Need New Names* is a great and extraordinary debut novel by Zimbabwean author Bulawayo. She is in America now. This novel was recently long-listed for the 2013 Booker Prize. This nomination made her reputation in the literary world as a new talent. *We Need New Names* is about the young protagonist, Darling. She lives in a shantytown named Paradise with her best friends Godknows, Sbho and Stina, Bastard, Chipso. Introductory chapters explore the story of all children in a child's voice, but Bulawayo's writing is very serious. Bulawayo discusses the serious subject through the child game or their behavior in this novel. At the beginning of the novel the children come across a dead woman, which suicide and her body hang from a tree. They are frightened and run away. Then one of them, Bastard reminds that the woman's shoes are very new, and if they sell the shoes they could buy themselves fresh bread. All the children are going back to remove the shoes from the hanging body. Through this passage, Bulawayo beautifully draws the serious times. Though there are play and laughter, the harsh realities of empty stomachs, fractured families, and social decay are never far away.

This novel pictures the harsh reality of African society. Darling's father is returns with 'sickness' from South Africa. At that time, no one can say the AIDS loudly. Her mother is gone to trade for run the home to the border. Her grandmother forced her to find a spiritual cure for her son's disease. The religious charlatan demands the U.S. dollars for this cure. These days are of dynamic and catastrophic change. The national currency does now not exist. The people's savings is now useless. U.S. dollars are diamonds now for all the citizens of Paradise. It is very difficult to obtaining them. Darling is getting a chance to overcome this situation when she comes know that her aunt Fostalina sends a letter for her to come to America. Her dreams finally come true. In this novel here is a transition from Darling's life. Bulawayo gives a detail description of the Darling's childhood, and suddenly the readers dislocated themselves into the new reality. The second part or the later chapters of the novel is

quite slow compare to earlier. In this new world, Darling faces new problems. America is a Darling's dreamland but in this land she struggle for daily survival. She was making new friends, discovering the internet and for survival bagging groceries in a supermarket. She now comes to know that her dreams will not come true. Though she has now money, internet and friends but she realizes that America can never be her home. She has an illegal immigrant in America. America is for Darling a land to be an experience and cope with prolonged pain or difficulty.

*We Need New Names* is about the question of cultural identity and belonging. Through the Darling's journey in this novel, we realize that she unknowingly trapped in her new home. She has distracted from her country as well as what she wants in her real life. The childhood friends are scattered now to America, to Dubai and South Africa, etc. Chipo is only one remain at home. When she talks on Skype with Chipo, she is stunned on Chipo's opinion:

“But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feel the real suffering”.

Through this line Chipo brushing the Darling's mind. Age group has clear cultural connotations about identity as with the concept of gender. That is; people socialized into normative associations between age and behavior. Each group reflects certainly cultural assumptions about how it is appropriate / inappropriate to people of a certain age to behave. In many ways, these assumptions about behavior are related lifestyle and people's behavior which based on their biological age. Every cultural group grants a title a sense of identity on people. It includes a sense of belonging to a specific grouping of its values, norms and forms of behavior. The novel explores that the children grow up in the same country in a same cultural group can end up in very different lifestyle. Darling is moves to America for fulfilling her dreams, but Chipo and her mother stuck in the same country.

The concept of ethnicity meant recognition that different people develop different forms of culture. Ethnicity now understood as cultural differences between different peoples. Ethnic group identity can base on a number of different areas, singularly or, more usually, in combination. All childrens are like; Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Sbho, Stina, and Darling live in a slum area called Paradise in South Africa. Their child-like behavior shows the sad, funny, shocking and sometimes violent nature of their existence in that city. They are away from big matters or harsh realities of that country such as elections, political violence and 'the sickness', HIV. The children are normally very adventurous and playful in normal surrounding

but in this novel their games are not innocent. It explores the harsh reality of that land. The children are going to the neighborhood place Budapest for stealing guavas. It is not fun but because they have to. Their games are always violent re-enactments of the events they have witnessed in their community.

Social class is a major thing in our society. It is related to the people's occupation in their society. Means social class is an occupational classification system in society. It is related to the people's economic status. The basic concept of culture and identity is the different social classes develop their different ways of life according to their different experiences. Values and norms are different for different social classes. It is deciding the ways of life. Means, the culture of upper-class male or female is very different from the male or female of the lower class. In this novel, children are observing many events of the harsh reality in life. They observe that because of HIV a woman committing suicide and military trying to regain their control of their country. They are experienced in the scattered homes, unhappy with the democratic process and unexpected murder of a member of their community. All it happens wrong with the African society. America has a different social class, and that is why Darling struggles there for her identity.

Gender always defined in terms of the biological sexes. Cultural characteristics of the people based on these different biological sexes. In our society, for example, we recognize only two sexes (male and female) defined by the physical differences between the two. Means in our society male or female establishing the various cultural rules and expectations that what it means to be male or female. In Zimbabwe, Darling was hated the men and also frightened. She was disgusting the men's ability to control and impregnate women. In America, Darling was changed her view. She and her new friends are watching porn and sexual torture videos. It does not change their behavior. It shows that, how the cultural identity affects people. Social status defined as the level of respect that people give to us. It is very important in relation to the development and maintenance of our social identity. Bulawayo's keen powers of observation and social commentary explores that in America, Darling finds out that all her dreams are won't necessarily come true. Her aunt Fostalina's unsuccessful marriage becomes a metaphor for the illusoriness of the American dream.

Geographic Location is another key factor in understanding the ways of constructing the sense of personal and group identity. In a particular nationality, peoples develop their personal sense of regional identity very specifically. Born and raised in a particular geographic location in a Nation-state also has some significance for our sense of identity. The variation of regional culture produces the social characteristic features, and it

develops a sense of local identity. This novel related to the Africa and the experiences of Africans. The culture of African peoples reflected in their behaviour like Americans. In America, Darling has a question that it is her home? Though she is in America, she frequently remembers her friends and misses them. She has a struggle for her cultural identity. This novel is the perfect example of those migrants who driven towards the USA for a better future. They are leaving behind their families, but their emotions still attached towards their nation. When a person immigrated to other land, all these sources of culture identity are changed. A person now identified with a new cultural identity. They must have accepted the new culture for surviving there though they do not agree.

### **Conclusion**

NoViolet Bulawayo explores Darling's voice at once childlike and wise. Through the childlike behavior of the children, she draws the harsh realities of that people. Bulawayo has a brilliant picaresque view that reflected in this novel through her characters. Cultural identity achievement characterized by a clear, confident acceptance of oneself and an internalization of one's cultural identity. In such situation, people often allow the acceptance of their cultural identity plays a role in their future choices. Like, how to raise children, how to deal with stereotypes and any discrimination, and approach negative perceptions. It is always leads to an increase in self-confidence and positive psychological adjustment. But in this novel Darling does not confident for acceptance of one cultural identity. In the novel, she repeatedly wants to go home but does not because her visitor's visa to the US has expired but she doesn't want to miss out on. She knows that once she leaves the country she'll never be able to return. She hates her American life. But whatever the reason she's clearly not going to find it in Zimbabwe, the United States, Canada, Iraq, Guam, or Mars. In the world, she has no home, no place that she can feel safe and comfortable. That is the danger exists everywhere the world over, just in a myriad of different forms.

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