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New Names, New Identities: A 'Double Consciousness' Reading of Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract:

This paper explores identity crises in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, We Need New Names. The paper relies on Mimicry and Double Consciousness theory to advance its arguments. Data for the study consists of textual evidence in the book of how characters, who are African migrants in America want to, or are forced to, live a certain way of life in order to fit into the scheme of things of the European. The study approaches identity in the book from two different perspectives. It makes a distinction between the identity change that was forced on the colonised, and the one that the colonised willingly chased and run after. Data of the study is analyzed from three different perspectives. It analyses language as an agent of double consciousness for the colonized, double consciousness itself as portrayed in the novel, and finally draws on the metaphorical and connotative use of the phrase "New Names". The paper concludes that since we are living in a world of constant change, a globalized world, where the notions of multiculturalism and mobility are prevailing, postcolonial subjects will constantly find themselves unconsciously reshaping their identities to make them fit the new world order.

Keywords: Mimicry, double consciousness, the colonizer, the colonised, identity crises, home

1. Introduction

Identity crisis is the major problem of many people in the present-day world. According to Ninkovich 'an identity crisis is a period of disorientation in which values and relationships once taken for granted are thrown into question. Questions of self-adjustment that bedevil individuals caught up in an identity crisis like 'who am I?' and 'where do I belong?' (Ninkovich 2001, 16).

The 'where do I belong', as Ninkovich puts it, arises when a migrant who lives in another man's country is considered an Other, and therefore not very much comfortable in that place - his second home, and yet he left his country (his first home) in order to feel comfortable. Home (culture) - the longing for it, the distance from it, the inability to be both there and elsewhere at the same time creates a situation that I call double consciousness, or what Homi K. Bhabha calls *Ambivalence*.

Homi K. Bhabha is one of the most important contemporary figures in postcolonial studies. He argues that ambivalence existed at the site of colonial dominance. The colonizer forcefully asserts his superiority to the colonized, and the feeling of fear is created concerning identity, which is imposed on them. Franz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* agrees with Bhabha when he asserts that the colonizer, through his ongoing quest to negate the Other, forced the colonized to ask himself a very intriguing question about himself, and that question is: 'Who am I in reality?' (Fanon 2004, 182). Bulawayo stretches this argument of what is home to the migrant further when she writes, through the protagonist, Darling,

There are two homes inside my head: home before Paradise, and home in Paradise; home one and home two. Home one was the best, a real house; Father and Mother having good jobs. Plenty of food to eat... And then home two - Paradise, with its tintintin. There are three homes inside Mother's and Aunt Fostalina's heads: home before independence, before I was born, when black people and white people were fighting over the country. Home after independence, when black people won the country and then the home of things falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come here... There are four homes inside Mother of Bones's head: home before the white people came to steal the country, and a king ruled, when the white people came to steal the country and then there was war, home when black people got our stolen country back after independence; and then the home of now... When somebody talks about home, you have to listen carefully so you know exactly which one the person is referring to. (*We Need New Names*:192)

G. M. Nahidul, in his *Crisis versus Construction of Identity* (2014), believes that identity formation is the process of developing a personality that is distinct from that of other people. The process of identity defines the individuals not only to the Other, but also to themselves. It is actuated through a process of the development of uniqueness, reinforced through continuity and affiliation. It leads to the notion of personal identity to a distinct place, where identity is formed through the practice of individualism. Identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality, or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). Identity, therefore, may be defined as the distinctive characteristics belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group.

Identity crises generally results from the interaction of two or more cultures, and when one is not certain, almost confused, which culture he finds rest in. It is said that any culture is in reality multicultural and shapes its features through its relation with other cultures, and through its interaction with the world. "This contact between cultures is what forms this diversity in identities which overlaps and results in a new society holding different potentials. However, all human beings, besides bearing their individual identities, hold also an identity connected to their societies and countries" (CherietAsma, 2015, unpublished thesis).

Bill Ashcroft et al states in *The Empire Writes Back(2002:1)* that " more than three- quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism", and so such people are in focus when discussions around post-colonial subjects arise. Having liberated themselves from the chains of colonialism, many African nations, even though have 'independence', but that 'independence' is culturally and economically tied to apron strings of the West-their colonial masters. This has brought about the dilemma and crises of identity this paper seeks to interrogate.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the paper is to explore double consciousness, as the results of mimicry by the colonized, in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The African, during colonization, lost thier cultural identity, and tries to acquire new identity with new European names inthis post-colonial days. This is to make him fit well into the coloniser's scheme of things in the latter's homeland, and also to feel unique among his own people with their names acquired from the colonizer-the remnants of colonization.

We Need New Names, is a story of a young girl named Darling. It begins in a shanty-town called 'Paradise', a fictionalized (unnamed) version of Zimbabwe. Uprooted from their homes, Darling, Chipo, Bastard, God knows and other friends find ways to amuse themselves, making up games and heading to the nearby rich part of the town, named Budapest, to steal guavas. The children have constantly dreamt of travelling abroad for greener pastures. Then, in a sudden shift, Darling is whisked away to America by her Aunt Fostalina, and the second half of the book follows her life there, as she grapples with an America that is much more complex and less inviting than she had imagined. The paper therefore explores the situation of the Africanin his own country after colonisation, as well as how he attempts to fit in to the coloniser's country as a migrant

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the idea of identity crises in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*
- To highlight the subtle call by Bulawayo towards a change of mind set by Africans

2. Methodology

The paper explores (new) identities and (new) names in the novel. It approaches identity in the book from two different perspectives.It makes a distinction between the identity change that was forced on the colonised, and the one that the colonised willing chased and run after. The study calls the former Unconscious identity, and the later, conscious identify.

The study has identified the unconscious identity as the traditions, beliefs and cultural standards of the imperial canon which were forced upon all of their subjects who find no choice but to accept these new ways of life. The paper identifies language as a key tool employed by the colonizer for the displacement of the traditional and cultural heritage of the colonised. As a beginning, language was used to create a channel of communication between the colonizer and the colonized.

The colonized subjects learn how to speak the settlers" language, and bit by bit, they find themselves mixing their native language with that of the colonizer because of the brutal encounter with the colonizer who introduces his language either through education or through subverting the colonized and forcing him to learn his language in order to communicate with him. CherietAsma (ibid) argues that after a very long time of experiencing suffering and a brutal contact with the colonizer, the colonized find themselves unconsciously incorporating aspects of the colonial ways in their original identity.

For the conscious identity, the paper argues along the lines of the colonised's attempt to appear like the colonizer in the latter's home land by trying to speak like him and by acquiring new names, and therefore new identities .One of the ways which the colonised consciously takes new identities is through education in the coloniser's homeland. They (the coloniser) control the thoughts and ideas held by the younger generation through implanting colonial ideologies in their minds. As a matter of fact, the original culture and identity for the coming generation are lost in the new world order.

The arguments of this paper of the two distinctions of identity ties in with the beliefs of some post colonial theorist. According to Hawley (2001:240), there are two antithetical sorts of identity. The type of identity as viewed by essentialists and that as viewed by constructionists. Essentialists bear the view of nationalists who go for the establishment of a pre-colonial identity on a specific racial basis that is harmless to individual differences; whereas constructionists think that identity is shaped by external forces such as society, and this fact causes a 'split' in the identity.

3. Data Analysis Procedure

The data for this study is basically a textual evidence. The paper first looks at language as an agent of double consciousness for the colonised. It will explore language of the colonised in his home as well the coloniser's home. The paper will again establish double consciousness as portrayed in the novel with aim of highlighting the level of identity crises the colonised has reached in the coloniser's home land.

What the paper refers to as 'new identities; new names' is both metaphorical and literal. Literal in the sense that the colonised has to assumed new names and hence new identities in the coloniser's home land in order to fit into their cultural schema. Again, as a way of demonstrating the remnants of colonialism on them, the colonised, even in their own homeland, pick and use European names in order to sound like their colonial masters. Metaphorical in the sense that there is a connotative meaning of this new identities the paper refers to. The paper argues that Bulawayo has called for a new way of life different from the colonial mentality—a change of mindset to be true Africans, and to do the things that will make us so. The paper will explore how Bulawayo has called for a change of mindset in her novel.

4. Theoretical Framework

In his *The Location of Culture* (1994:85), Homi K. Bhabha quotes Jacques Lacan, as having argued that mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.

K. Bhabha himself writes that the discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false. If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce. For Bhabha, therefore, mimicry is comic, and it is exercised by the post colonial characters of Africans, both home and in the Diaspora. Mimicry, to him, is close mockery, in the sense that the colonised attempt to mimic the coloniser's way of life is in effect making mockery of his own culture. The figure of mimicry is locatable within what Anderson describes as 'the inner compatibility of empire and nation'. It problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the 'national' is no longer naturalizable. What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is writing a mode of representation that marginalizes the monumentality of history (*The Location of Culture*:85)

The effect of mimicry on colonial discourse is very disturbing. For in 'normalizing' the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its own norms. The ambivalence which thus informs this strategy is discernible. This paper relies on mimicry as the worse form of Double Consciousness to analyse the book. Mimicry manifests as nations try to imitate the colonialist as much as possible in dress, speech behavior and lifestyle with the hope of being accepted by the colonialists. Through mimicry, the colonised sees the world divided between two antagonistic cultures, and this is the stage of unstable self identity

At the double consciousness stage, the colonizer is seen living in-between two worlds, struggling hard to stick to their cultures and traditions, but at the same time they cannot escape the new elements that the modern world imposes on them. Therefore, the best way to define who they really are and to reconcile between the two worlds, is through accepting the fact that they are hybrid people-Double consciousness

5. Data Analysis

5.1.1. Language as Part of the Double Consciousness Game

The colonizer employs many different ways of language in colonizing the African, key among which is the (re/dis) placement of the language of the African in his own land. The whole process of 'knowing' also depends on language; thus, it is through language that one may recognize the world, describe and communicate it, and it is through language that one may convey thoughts and ideas.

Language is more complex and problematic in *We Need New Names* where English comes less easily to Darling and the other characters in the book. It is interesting to note that the first part of the book appears as if it were in translation – the understanding is that the characters are speaking Ndebele, and when someone speaks or says something in English it is pointed out.

In *We Need New Names*, Darling, Aunt Fostalina, and Uncle Kojo struggle with some English expressions. In one scene, Aunt Fostalina wants to buy a pushup bra from a Victoria's Secret catalogue and calls the helpline number to place the order, but she is unable to do so because the woman on the other end cannot understand what she is saying; Bulawayo captures it, in the words of Darlin, as

When Aunt Fostalina gets off the phone with the Victoria's Secret lady, she dials a number that must be busy because she quickly hangs up. She immediately dials another, and she has to hold for a little while before I hear her leave a message, in our language, for the other person to call her back. I know the reason Aunt Fostalina is calling is that she needs to tell the Victoria's Secret story to someone in our language, because this is what you must do in America whenever something like this happens. You have to tell it to someone who knows what you mean, who will understand exactly what you say, and that it is not your fault but the other person's, someone who knows that English is like a huge iron door and you are always losing the keys. (*We Need New Names*:197)

For Aunt Fostalina, speaking in her own language functions as a refuge, a way to temporarily take herself out of the situation she is in, and expresses herself in the best way she knows. For her, as for Darling, English remains an inadequate outlet. This inadequacy of language is stated more clearly in one of the interludes in the book, which talks about the inability for those struggling with language to say what they really mean:

Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages, and so when we spoke our voices came out bruised. When we talked, our tongues thrashed madly in our mouths, staggered like drunken men. Because we were not using our languages, we said things we did not mean; what we really

wanted to say remained folded inside, trapped. In America we did not always have the words. It was only when we were by ourselves that we spoke in our real voices. When we were alone, we summoned the horses of our languages and mounted their backs and galloped past skyscrapers. (*We Need New Names*:110).

Language remains a bottleneck for the migrants' smooth conversation. Even though Darling, like Ifemelu, eventually masters English and the American accent by adopting phrases from film and television, her mother, back home, makes fun of her American accent on the phone, telling her that she (Darling) is 'trying to sound white' (104). Darling's friend, Chip, also abhors her friend's accent, and refers to it as 'the stupid accent that you were not even born with, which doesn't even suit you' (126).

It is for this reason that Ngugi (1986:77-78) considers writing in the colonizer's language (English) as 'a mental colonization' that overwhelms the original culture and as a political tool to maintain mental control over (former) colonies to ensure that they are always under the wings of the coloniser. He makes this fact obvious in his *Devil on the Cross* (1982) when the old man from Nakuru told Mwaura that:

Literature is the honey of a nation's soul, preserved for her children to taste forever, a little at a time! Gikuyu said that he who has put something aside never goes hungry. Do you think Gikuyu was a fool when he said that? A nation that has cast away its literature is a nation that has sold its soul and has been left a mere shell. (p. 59).

5.1.2. Double Consciousness in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

The paper has already established the concept of ambivalence or double consciousness—the 'whom am I or where do I belong' idea—among migrants in general, and the characters in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* to be specific. To exemplify this idea, Darling, the protagonist of the novel, tells us about Uncle Kojo. She bemoans,

He is not from our country, that's why we don't understand his language or he ours; he is from Ghana. TK doesn't understand his father's language either because he is not from Ghana, his mother is American and he was born here. (page 91).

Uncle Kojo is married to Darling's aunt Fostalina, but their marriage doesn't even seem a real marriage when Darling herself will constantly lament their relationship in the manner as she says, "Uncle Kojo, TK's father, who is like Aunt Fostalina's husband but not really her husband because I don't think they are married, but they live together like husband and wife anyway" (p.88).

But the fact of the matter is that Uncle Kojo is a Ghanaian who has a son, TK, and TK's mother is an American. Kojo divorces the American woman and gets married to Fostalina, a Zimbabwean, with whom TK lives. This is why TK doesn't know who he is or where he belongs, what I call double consciousness or ambivalence. What is more, they (Kojo, TK, Fostalina) don't even speak each other's language.

There is another level of double consciousness where the migrants only know that they are Africans and come from Africa, but has never stepped foot there. They long for the country they have never been to, and so will make a point to pay constant visits to people who have immediately returned from, or came from those countries as immigrants. On one of such visits to Aunt Fostalina, Darling calls the visitor's uncles and aunts, but they are not really her uncles and aunts. She says:

I call them uncles and aunts but we are not related by blood, like me and Aunt Fostalina are; I never knew them back home, and Uncle Charley is white, for instance. I think the reason they are my relatives now is they are from my country too—it's like the country has become a real family since we are in America, which is not our country (page 94).

Such gatherings offer the migrants the opportunity to speak their native language and vent out their long preserved longing for home—their real home. Any time the visitors come, Darling tells us,

Uncle Kojo leaves the house for most of the time because everybody will be speaking our real language, laughing and talking loudly about back home, how it was like when they were growing up before things turned bad, then ugly. They always forget Uncle Kojo cannot understand them and he sits there looking lost, like he just illegally entered a strange country in his own house. (pages 93-94)

But this 33-year-old woman was lucky. She had the opportunity to visit her country, or her father's country, for the first time. In her interaction with Chip and Darlin, they ask who she was, probably because she claims to be a Zimbabwean but can't speak their language, she just said:

Me? Well, I'm thirty-three, and I'm from London. This is my first time visiting my dad's country, she says, and twists the chain on her neck. The golden head on the chain is the map of Africa.

5.1.3. New Names, New Identities: Still the Double Consciousness Game

Darling tells us why one must acquire new names and new identify in a polarized environment such as America. She pours out her frustrations thus:

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, the way I dressed, the way I laughed. When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even the things I couldn't change, and it kept going and going so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything (page 96).

As a result, the harassment Darling went through, and the likes of it, the older generation of migrants have to change and acquire new names. They will not give their children native names any longer, neither will they name them after their ancestor. They must give them new names, and this new name lead to new (lost of) identities. Bulawayo puts it more succinctly as:

And then our own children were born. We held their American birth certificates tight. We did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names, that their friends and teachers would not know how to call them. We gave them names that would make them belong in America, names that did not mean anything to us: Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack, Kathleen. When our children were born, we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours. We did not hold their heads over smoking herbs to make them strong, did not tie fetishes around their waists to protect them from evil spirits, did not brew beer and spill tobacco on the earth to announce their arrivals to the ancestors. Instead, we smiled

It is doing everything like the colonizer, and not behaving like Africans, that mimicry finds its voice, and once a group of people don't behave as their original self, we will have to agree that, that is a new form of identity. Bulawayo laments over the situation where children born to African parents did no longer receive the African anointing, as it were, but had to receive the same initiation the White man's child will receive because he, the African parent, has given up his Africaness.

. . . . we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours. We did not hold their heads over smoking herbs to make them strong, did not tie fetishes around their waists to protect them from evil spirits

Furthermore, in Darling's new home, new identity, she now mingles with children who bring loaded guns to school and watch pornography in the privacy of their spacious bedrooms, instead of doing "home work". They will lie that they are going to study while they go partying . . . (p 143).

The new identities acquired by the migrants has, at this time, reached its peak. They will not even go home (Africa) despite numerous calls from their parents to come. Bulawayo illustrates this in a rather long narration, but the totality of the passage encapsulates the extent of their new identity. She writes

And when our parents reminded us over the phone that it had been a long, long time, and that they were getting old and needed to see us, needed to meet their grandchildren, we said, We are coming, Mama, Siyabuya Baba; we are coming, Gogo, Tirikuuya Sekuru. We did not want to tell them we still had no papers. And when they grew restless and cursed America for being the greedy monster that swallowed their children, swallowed the sons and daughters of other lands and refused to spit them out, we said, we are coming very soon, we are coming next year. And next year came and we said, Next year. . . .

They died waiting, clutching in their dried hands pictures of us leaning against the Lady Liberty, graves of lost sons and daughters in their hearts, old eyes glued to the sky for fulfilment to bring forth lost sons and daughters. We could not attend their funerals because we still had no papers, and so we mourned from afar. We shut ourselves up and turned on the music so we did not raise alarm, writhed on the floor and wailed and wailed and wailed. And with our parents gone, we told ourselves, We have no home anymore, who would we go to see in that land we left behind? We convinced ourselves that we now belonged only with our children. And those children—they grew and we had to squint to see ourselves in them. They did not speak our language; they did not sound like us. When they misbehaved, we said only, No, Don't do that, Stop, Time-out. But that is not what we wanted to do. . . .

When our children were old enough and we told them about our country, they did not beg us for stories of the land we had left behind. They went to their computers and Googled and Googled and Googled. When they got off, they looked at us with something between pity and horror and said, Jeez, you really come from there? (*We Need New Names*: 1420-143)

6. Conclusion

The paper has examined the question of identity in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, *We need New Names*. Textual evidence in the book pitched against the world's reality would compel me to argue that maintaining a pure identity in 'another man's homeland' is difficult. We are living in a world of constant change, a globalized world where the notions of multiculturalism and mobility are prevailing. Naturally, migrants will find themselves unconsciously reshaping their identities to make them fit the new world order.

This dilemma of finding a place in the new world order contributes, together with the bitter experience of colonialism, to creating a crisis of identity in the postcolonial world. This crisis of identity is what constitutes a fertile ground for postcolonial literatures.

Ngugi is among the people who believes that people need to restore or form an identity first then talk about independence, he said in *Homecoming: essays on African and Caribbean literature, culture and politics*: —But this is also a statement of what is needed before the restoration of order: an identity that holds things and society together. (Ngugi 1973:93). Contrary to the believe of Ngugi, this study has found that it is virtually impossible to stay in the coloniser's homeland as a colonised subject and still maintain your natural identity

This identity has been affected by the imperial reality that these people went through. The postcolonial societies lived in harmony without bothering themselves about striving to find an individual or a collective identity. They had their lands to identify with, they had their traditions and beliefs; they knew exactly who they are. But with the coming of the colonizer, everything fell apart. The paper has argued that education and language of the colonizer helped in importing the

colonial ways to the colonised. All these processes together contributed in alienating the postcolonial subjects from their own people and from the world.

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