

## CHILDREN OF THE STREETS: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED AFRICAN NOVELS

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### Abstract

This paper investigated street children as presented by Amma Darko in *Faceless* and Bulawayo Noviolate in *We Need New Names*. The paper examined the nature of the environment where these children operate. It also highlighted various ways the rights of the street children have been abused, and the consequences of different bizarre experiences on their psyche. Complete experiences of the children were obtained through qualitative research method. Post-colonial theory guided the study to determine the state of African children after the colonial rule since street children were not part of the past. Psycho-analytical theory was also adopted to determine the state of the mind of street children as trauma caused by living on the streets could be very difficult to manage. At the end of the study, it was discovered that children living on the streets are not adequately protected from abuse because they lack basic needs of life like, shelter, food and clothing. To minimize the development of street children, natural strategy aimed at promoting, protecting and fulfilling their rights should be promulgated.

**Keywords:** Children of the Street, African Literature, Psychoanalytical Theory

### Introduction

Around the world, too many children are subjected to abuse. Some are forced to work under harmful conditions, while others are forced to flee their homes due to conflict or natural disaster. Millions, especially girls are subjected to sexual violence. This paper discusses the independent nature and the abuse of the children of the streets in Amma Darko's *Faceless* and Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The paper examines the children's love for family members denied to them which constitutes a major form of deprivation. From investigating the stylistic features employed by the authors such as technique of contrast, some of the contributing factors to this form of deprivation like poverty, absentee parents, and misplaced priorities on the part of government shall be discussed to determine how these situations form the character of the street children.

In 2000, World Health Organization grouped children of the street into four categories: a child “of the street”, having no home but the streets. The family may have abandoned him or her and so he or she is left alone. Such a child may struggle for survival and might move from friend to friend, or live in an abandoned building. A street child may be a child “on the streets”, visiting his or her family regularly. He or she might even return every night to sleep at home, but spends most days and some nights on the streets because of poverty, overcrowding, sexual or physical abuse at home. A street child may be “a part of a street family”. Some live on the city squares with the rest of their families displaced due to poverty, natural disasters, or war which forced them to live on the streets. A street child can also be “in an institutionalized care”, having come from a situation of homelessness and at risk of returning to a homeless existence. They are vulnerable people, and they are abused mentally, sexually, psychologically, and morally on daily basis. Many children in Africa are being abandoned by their parents and guardians due to the hard economic situation.

Psychoanalytic and post-colonial theories have been adopted to examine the rules and principles that shape how the novels are written which help to analyze the processes that contribute to children’s neglect. For Mary Kleges helps us to understand literary theory when she quotes Aristotle that:

In the world we perceive through our senses, things exist according to ordered principles which can discover Aristotle’s ‘truth’, what his philosophy seeks to understand and teach, resides in discovering the rules and principles that govern how things work and take on meaning in our material world. (15)

*Faceless* and *We Need New Names* have recorded stories that are filled with traumatic experiences of which psychoanalysis can serve as a rule guiding their reading. They also recorded events that take place after the official rule of the colonial masters and which post-colonial theory can serve as a rule guiding our understanding of the texts. Our major focus on psychoanalysis shall be on street children’s traumatic experiences and their dreams which could not materialize.

With reference to Sigmund Freud, Ann Dobie explains dreams: “Our dreams are languages of the unconscious full of unfilled desires, that the conscious mind is buried there” (55). Continuing, she said. “As a window into the unconscious, dreams become valuable tools for psychoanalysts in determining unresolved conflicts in the psyche...” (56) Sussan Nolen-Hoekeing in her book *Abnormal Psychology* summarized psychoanalysis, where she said that “extreme cases of unpalatable experiences result to traumas and victims suffer the effects sometimes for a life time” (58). For Nolen-Hoekseing, further explains that physical abuse, sexual abuse as in rape, incest and child

prostitution can contribute to long-term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Fofu, Baby T, Darling, in *Faceless*, Chipu, Bastard, Godknows, Sbro and Stina in *We Need New Names* witness the abuses.

### **The Technique of Contrast which offer Insight into the Exploitation of the Street Children**

The art, writes I.A. Richard, “is the beautiful ordering of what in most minds is disordered” and Alexander Pope once defined the subject of art as “What oft’ was thought, but ne’er so well expressed”. These definitions suggest that the artist’s distinction lies in how well he or she can artistically utilize available human experiences to offer vision to a society. Amma Darko and Noviolet Bulawayo are synoptic when the theme of their novels is concerned with children of the streets. Their novels probe the causes of reckless abandonment of street children in major African cities. In order to achieve this, they adopt the stylistic feature of contrast to compare the ideal family who cares for their children with the other family who abandons theirs to the streets. Also, they try to compare the ideal country that has good amenities set apart with other countries that desert her citizens. In Ghana, as recounted by J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, et al “there is a surge in the number of street children... and these children appear doomed without appropriate intervention” (359). It is against this that Amma Darko wrote her novel, *Faceless* and Noviolate Bulawayo recorded post-colonial disillusionment of citizens of Zimbabwe.

Contrast is the device used by Darko and Bulawayo to strike a difference between compared situations in *Faceless* and *We Need New Names*. Amma Darko employs the technique of contrast in *Faceless* with respect to the representation of two families in the story. The two families are those of Maa Tsuru and that of Kabria. Kabria’s family, as a unit, is presented as almost perfect. She is a mother of three and married to Adade. She is resourceful, diligent, and combines her role as a wife, a mother and a working class woman. Her family is intact and cohesive. The children in her family are well-cared for, educated and happy. The family of Maa Tsuru is a direct opposite of Kabria’s. Her family is scattered, and broken with no hope of redemption. Her children lack basic needs, drop out of school, and find solace in the street life. For the family of Maa Tsuru, we find child abuse, child labour, neglect and abandonment of children, rape and sexual abuse, child prostitution and other forms of exploitation. All these violate child’s rights as enshrined in *2015 Child Rights Act*. Bulawayo in *We Need New Names* employs contrast to strike a difference in a policy of discrimination or a policy of separate development by the whites in Zimbabwe. By this policy, the whites live in Budapest and the blacks live in Paradise. Paradise here is ironic. It is supposed to be a place of elected bliss which is pleasant to live in but the reverse is the case here. The white people live in the heart of the city with all the amenities

of modern life. The Zimbabwean shanty town, called Paradise, is where life is a daily struggle for sustenance as the regime destroys homes and closes down schools.

Darling, the protagonist and her friends, three boys and three girls roam the streets to look for the food they would eat. Bastard is a boy of eleven years, Chipu, a girl of eleven, Godknows, a boy of ten, Sbho, is a girl of nine, Stina, a boy who has no birth certificate and the protagonist, Darling is a ten-year old girl. These children wander from one town to the other, looking for something to steal, especially, guava in a fertile land of Budapest. They are not being fed by their parents as their parents abandon them to somewhere else. Their mothers are busy with hair and idle talks. Their fathers do not care. They go for dangerous jobs at nearby countries, especially South Africa and contracting diseases such as AIDS there. Street life becomes the order of the day for children in Paradise as they are abandoned by their parents unsupervised. They are left at the hands of their grand-parents. Chipu, is now raped by her grandfather who impregnated her.

Darling and her friends roam the streets turning their quest for food into games and making observations of their country's social ills. There are too many problems in Paradise, such as whoring spouses, poverty, joblessness, AIDS, madness and numerous other problems. Darling and her friends wander from Paradise black settlement in Zimbabwe to Budapest, a white neighborhood in Zimbabwe in search of guava. Life in Budapest is better. The white people in Budapest were controlling Paradise before her independence despite the overwhelming black population. The government was entirely in the hands of the white minority. They subjected the blacks to some of the worst forms of dehumanization, and there has been violent uprising and revolt from Paradise.

The discriminatory attitude of the white population has been so fierce and rigid on the blacks. The blacks begin to revolt against the whites which leads to their having independence but not without bruises. It results in the removal of the white dominated government and Zimbabwe attains political independence. They begin to repossess and redistribute large tracks of land from the minority whites' community. Robert Mugabe, the new president of Zimbabwe allocates the fertile lands to himself and infertile lands to his people of Paradise that lead to many of them dying of hunger. People of Paradise now revolt against themselves:

...No, those were evil people who came to steal our own land and make us paupers in our own country. What? Aren't you a pauper now? Aren't these black people evil for building your home and leaving you with nothing now? Better a white thief do that to you

than your own black brother. Better a wretched white thief (75).

All these compound the troubles in Paradise and lead to hunger, diseases, poverty, and abandonment of children to wander from one place to the other in search of food to eat. They now stop going to school. They suffer deprivation, neglect, sexual abuse and they are exposed to the dangers of street life. Their love for family members is denied to them.

### **The Nature of the Environment Children of the Streets Operate**

According to *Britannica: Ghana*, about 50,000 low income inhabitants have settled into “Sodom and Gomorrah” from across Ghana. Many of the villagers find themselves trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, where the old and the young toil side by side. Many of the untold stories happen in “Sodom and Gomorrah”. It is a home for armed robbers, prostitutes, drug dealers in their market called Agbogbloshie which is nicknamed ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’, the two condemned biblical cities.

Post-colonial disillusionment and feeling of disappointment are experienced in the country. It is not what the people expected from the African leaders that are happening. As a result of that, people desert their homes in the villages to the urban areas for means of livelihood. “Sodom and Gomorrah”, a section of Accra, Ghana is still being populated by criminals even after Ghana’s independence. There is still Agbogbloshie market, a biblical “Sodom and Gomorrah” neighborhood where atrocities are committed by adults against children. Fofu, the protagonist watches adult films, drinks local gin and she is nearly raped by Poison, a street lord. It is here that Baby T, Fofu’s sister is killed and Fofu herself steals there to survive. Most people in “Sodom and Gomorrah” are stricken with poverty. The poverty in the land compels Maa Tsuru to drive away her children into the street so that they can fend for themselves.

Poverty, in line with negligence and irresponsibility of parents, ruin the lives of children. Men who find themselves incapable of sustaining a family run away from home, leaving the wives to take care of the children. When the burden becomes too much for the women, they relieve themselves by pushing the children into the streets to suffer. This is the case of Kwei, Maa Tsuru’s husband by whom she has four children, two sons and two daughters. Kpakpo deceives Maa Tsuru by sending Baby T. into prostitution. Unknown to the wife, he manipulates Baby T. into co-habitation with them under one roof. He sexually manipulates Baby T. In Kpakpo, we see an example of child abuse. The post-colonial disillusionment in *We Need New Names* begins with Paradise voting in their new president to have “a real change” in the country. Robert Mugabe has once explained on BBC news how their country has been

a black man's home and never a colony. People are happy that they are voting in a new president. They are disappointed to have voted in a very old president that has nothing new to offer just like other African presidents, Stina observes:

I saw a picture of a president in a magazine. He was also with the president of Zambia and Malawi and South Africa and Nigeria and other presidents. They were all old. You have to be like a grandfather first to become a president (16).

After “the real change”, the black brothers destroyed all the shacks in Paradise. People lost so many things. Many people had no place to live again. Many died of hunger because of change. This is a terrible period in Zimbabwe under their sit-tight leader, Robert Mugabe. If you are working against the president and clamor for change, you will be killed. Many people died young because of bad leadership. People flee Paradise in droves. They “move”, “run”, “migrate”, “go”, “desert”, “quit”, “fly”, and “flee” across borders. The only people remaining were very old people. The people of Paradise deserted their own land with bleeding wounds on their bodies and shock on their faces, and hunger in their stomachs and footsteps. They were traumatized. They left because it is no longer possible to stay. Darling and her friends now wandered from place to place searching for something to eat and steal. They are deserted by their parents. Darling's mother now found another lover with whom she sleeps at night as the husband has left her to South Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Fofu and Baby T. in *Faceless*, Darling and her friends in *We Need New Names* ended up in the streets because they were products of homes where either of the parents, is quite irresponsible. The effects of parental deprivation are extremely adverse on the children and the society at large. The children experience exploitation and abuse in different ways: sexual, economic, social and physical. They also go through emotional and psychological turmoil. Baby T. in *Faceless* has her right of life violated. Darling and her friend's dream of becoming doctors and nurses did not materialize. Fofu's dream of sleeping in a comfortable house is aborted. The trauma faced by Chipu lingers through her life. The incest committed by Chipu's grandfather has started the cycle that denies her the most basic rights to learn, develop and be a child. These children of the streets in *Faceless* and *We Need New Names* lack basic needs of life. Their rights to safe accommodation and alternative care were violated. This paper advocates the protection of all street children in Africa.

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