

MIGRATION, GENDER, AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF IDENTITY IN NOVIOLET BULAWAYO'S *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

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Abstract

This study examines the displacement of identity among African migrant women in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. Employing postcolonial framework, this research explores how gender intersects with the legacy of colonialism and imperialism to shape migrant women's experiences of identity, adaptation, and resilience. Through a literary analysis, this research explores how gender intersects with the legacy of colonialism and imperialism to shape identity, adaptation, and resilience among migrant characters. The novel reveals how female characters navigate the complexities of cultural displacement, negotiating the tensions between traditional and Western cultures, and resisting the oppressive force of patriarchy. Findings show that female migrants experience heightened cultural dislocation, exploitative conditions, and identity fragmentation compared to their male counterparts. Resilience emerges as a vital coping mechanism as characters subvert dominant discourses and redefine their identities in response to gendered societal expectations. This study concludes that migration, when viewed through a postcolonial and gendered lens, presents unique difficulties that shape the identities and lived experiences of African women in diaspora. By foregrounding the intersection of gender, migration, and postcolonialism, this research highlights the importance of recognizing gender as a critical factor in understanding migrant experiences in African literature.

Keywords: Gender, Migration, African diaspora, Identity, Adaptation.

Introduction

The experience of migration is inherently tied to the concept of identity, as individuals navigate the complexities of leaving behind familiar cultural, social, and geographical contexts to forge new lives in unfamiliar environments. For African migrant women, this experience is further complicated by the intersection of gender, colonialism, and imperialism, which shapes their experiences of identity, belonging, and displacement. The process of migration can be seen as a form of "displacing identity," where individuals are forced to negotiate and redefine their sense of self in response to new cultural, social, and economic contexts.

The context of African migration is complex and multifaceted. According to the United Nations, there are over 30 million international migrants originating from Africa, with many more migrating within the continent (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). These migrants are driven by a range of factors, including economic instability, conflict, and environmental degradation. However, despite the diversity of their experiences, African migrants often face similar challenges, including racism, xenophobia, and cultural displacement.

The legacy of colonialism and imperialism continues to shape the experiences of African migrants. As Homi Bhabha (1994) argues, colonialism creates a state of cultural hybridity, where the colonized subject is forced to navigate multiple cultural identities. This hybridity can lead to a sense of dislocation and disorientation, as the individual struggles to reconcile their traditional culture with the dominant Western culture. In the context of African migration, this legacy of colonialism and imperialism is particularly significant. As Paul Gilroy (1993) argues, the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism have created a diasporic identity that is characterized by a sense of displacement and dislocation. This displacement is not only physical but also cultural, as African migrants are forced to navigate the complexities of Western culture.

For migrant women, gender is important in how their identities are displaced. In many cultures, women's identities are closely tied to their roles within the family and community. When women

migrate, they are often faced with new societal norms and expectations that challenge the roles they once occupied Nolin, (2017). This is especially true when they move from more traditional, patriarchal societies to more liberal or individualistic cultures, where gender roles may be less rigid. For women, migration can lead to a re-negotiation of their gendered experiences, as they adapt to new systems that may offer greater freedoms but also present new challenges and pressures.

African women writers offer nuanced explorations of the migrant experience. Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* provide a rich portrayal of African migrant women's experiences. Through a literary analysis of the novel, this article explores the concept of "displacing identity" and its intersection with gender, migration, and postcolonialism. This research examines how African migrant women navigate identity, culture, and belonging. It reveals the complex ways in which colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy shape their experiences. By analyzing the narrative of migrant women, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the migrant experience and its impact on identity formation. Ultimately, this research seeks to foreground the voices and experiences of African migrant women, highlighting their agency and resilience in the face of displacement and identity fragmentation.

Migration, Identity and Gender

Migration, identity, and gender are interrelated concepts that shape individual and collective experiences across societies. Migration, is defined as the movement of people from one place to another, which often leads to significant changes in individuals' self-perception and social identity. When people migrate, they face the challenge of adjusting to new environments while preserving their cultural heritage. This can create identity tensions, as migrants may feel caught between their native culture and the norms of their new environment Castles, (2010). For many, migration results in a redefinition of identity as they adopt new cultural practices and adapt to unfamiliar social settings Papastergiadis, (2000).

Identity is complex, it is a concept that includes personal, social, and cultural aspects. Personal identity refers to self-concept and individual characteristics, while social identity is rooted in group memberships such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion. Migration often brings these identity aspects into conflict, particularly as migrants negotiate their sense of belonging in different societies Schiller et al., (1995). The relationship between migration and identity is further complicated by cultural expectations, as migrants often experience a blend of acceptance and alienation in their host communities Hall, (1996). This duality can lead to identity fragmentation, where individuals must reconcile multiple identities to achieve a sense of self-cohesion.

Gender significantly influences how individuals experience migration and adapt to new identities. While men and women migrate for similar reasons, such as economic opportunity and safety, their experiences differ due to gender-specific expectations and roles. Women, in particular, face unique challenges that stem from both cultural norms and the demands of the host society Anthias, (2008). For instance, female migrants may encounter additional responsibilities related to family care or may face discrimination based on both gender and ethnicity Pessar & Mahler, (2003). These experiences influence how migrant women reconstruct their identities, as they often need to navigate traditional gender roles in the context of new societal expectations.

The relationship between migration, identity, and gender also reveals the shifting nature of gender roles in migrant communities. Migration can challenge and transform traditional gender roles, which leads to new social and economic opportunities, especially for women Parreñas, (2001). In some cases, migrant women may take on new roles as primary earners, which can empower them but also create conflicts with pre-existing cultural expectations Hondagneu-Sotelo, (1994).

Displacing Identities in *We Need New Names*

In Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, migration plays a central role in shaping the protagonist Darling's experience. Darling's migration from Zimbabwe to the United States marks a significant turning point in her life, embodying both the hopes and disillusionments that often accompany the immigrant experience. At the heart of this journey is a profound sense of loss the loss of her home, her

community, and a life she once knew. For Darling, this geographical displacement is not just about crossing borders physically; it is an emotional and psychological journey into a foreign land, where she faces the challenge of reconciling her past with her present.

When Darling leaves Zimbabwe, she is a young girl from the poor, chaotic neighborhood of Paradise, a place riddled with poverty, political instability, and the remnants of colonial legacies. Despite the many hardships she faces, there is an attachment to her home. Home, for Darling, is not just a physical space; it is also a collection of memories, relationships, and identities. Leaving Zimbabwe, therefore, represents not only a physical uprooting but also a loss of the intimate ties that constitute her sense of self. The novel portrays her migration as a forced transition, a movement away from a place where she had her family and friends, a place where her sense of belonging was, however limited, still intact.

As Darling moves to the United States, she finds herself confronted with the complexities of home and belonging in a Western context. The physical space she occupies is unfamiliar, filled with different people, languages, and cultural practices. There is an immediate tension between the life she left behind in Zimbabwe and the life she must now adapt to in America. The stark contrast between the poverty and chaos of Zimbabwe and the consumer-driven, often isolating society of the United States creates a dissonance that echoes throughout Darling's narrative.

Darling's experience is emblematic of a broader migration narrative, one in which many African immigrants and refugees find themselves navigating the complex terrain of identity and belonging in the West. She is forced to reconcile her past the memories of her childhood in Zimbabwe, the trauma of political violence, and her connection to her family with the new reality of her life in America. This struggle to preserve her identity while adapting to new norms reflects the universal challenge of migration: how to hold onto one's cultural roots while attempting to integrate into a new society. Scholars agree that migration often leads to identity displacement, as characters try to reconcile their cultural past with their present circumstances in a foreign land Chikanda et al. (2021). In Darling's case, the struggle between her Zimbabwean heritage and her American life demonstrates the challenges of preserving one's identity while adapting to a new culture. This conflict is common in migrant narratives, where identity becomes an unstable concept subject to constant redefinition Adebayo, (2020).

The novel skillfully depicts the tension between Darling's past in Zimbabwe and her present in the United States. Bulawayo portrays this conflict as a constant undercurrent in Darling's consciousness. While she physically inhabits the United States, her mind and memories often revert to Zimbabwe, where her life before migration was defined by a strong sense of community, familial bonds, and cultural identity. The contrast between these two realities her life in the United States and her memories of Zimbabwe creates a persistent tension that complicates her sense of self. Darling's thoughts frequently return to her family and friends in Zimbabwe, whom she left behind in search of a better life. For example, she thinks of her grandmother, her best friend Chipso, and her childhood experiences in Paradise. Despite the difficult circumstances in Zimbabwe marked by poverty, political corruption, and violence there is an emotional connection to the land and people that persists even in the face of overwhelming challenges. The world of her youth, though far from ideal, represented a form of stability, and leaving it behind is a psychological challenge for Darling.

In contrast, her new life in the United States presents a different set of challenges, especially in terms of cultural assimilation. Darling struggles with the Americanization of her identity. The language, the values, and even the way people perceive her as an African immigrant alienate her. As she confronts this new world, Darling's identity is fractured. The sense of belonging she once had in Zimbabwe is replaced by an overwhelming feeling of isolation and invisibility in America. The complexities of navigating a new culture while still holding onto her past are explored in the novel through Darling's ongoing internal dialogue, where she continuously shifts between memories of her homeland and the demands of her new life.

This tension between the past and present is not only emotional but also intellectual. Darling must confront questions of identity that are central to the immigrant experience. Who is she in this new world? What parts of her old self can she carry forward, and what must she leave behind? The emotional

weight of these questions is compounded by the social and political realities of being an African immigrant in a predominantly white society. Darling is acutely aware of how she is perceived often as an outsider or “other” and this perception reinforces her feelings of alienation. The emotional and psychological toll of losing a sense of home is a central theme in *We Need New Names*, and it is one that deeply affects Darling throughout the novel. As she navigates her new life in America, Darling experiences a profound sense of dislocation. She is unable to fully belong in either her homeland or her new home. In Zimbabwe, she was part of a community that was defined by shared struggles and experiences, but in the United States, she faces the challenge of recreating that sense of connection, often in isolation.

One of the novel’s most poignant depictions of this displacement occurs in Darling’s relationship with her family. Though she tries to maintain contact with her mother and grandmother back in Zimbabwe, their lives seem to grow further and further apart with each passing year. The emotional distance between Darling and her family members symbolizes the deeper disconnection she feels from her past. Despite the constant communication via phone calls and letters, the emotional intimacy that once existed is strained. Darling finds it difficult to explain her experiences in America to her family, and they, in turn, struggle to understand the life she now leads.

Psychologically, this displacement takes a heavy toll on Darling. She often feels like she is neither fully at home in Zimbabwe nor fully at home in the United States. The psychological stress of living in a liminal space, where she does not entirely belong to either place, manifests in Darling’s self-perception. The deeper she becomes immersed in American life, the more disconnected she feels from her childhood and the identity she once held. She begins to see herself as caught between two worlds, neither of which she can truly inhabit. The trauma of migration is also evident in Darling’s sense of nostalgia for Zimbabwe. While nostalgia is often seen as a longing for the past, in Darling’s case, it is intertwined with loss. She is nostalgic for a home that no longer exists in the same form, both because of the political changes in Zimbabwe and because of her personal transformation. The emotional toll of this nostalgia is compounded by her feelings of inadequacy in the face of the American ideal of success and belonging. She finds it difficult to navigate this tension between her memories of Zimbabwe and her present reality in the United States.

Darling’s story mirrors a common experience among African immigrants, who often face the challenges of migration that involve not just physical relocation but also deep emotional and psychological dislocation. African migration to the West is often motivated by the desire for economic opportunity, political stability, or the pursuit of a better life. However, the reality of migration is rarely as straightforward as the idealized notion of the “American Dream.” For many African immigrants, migration involves a painful negotiation between the past and the present. Just as Darling experiences emotional dislocation, African immigrants in general must contend with the complexities of belonging in their new homes while trying to maintain ties to their roots. The process of adapting to a new environment, often one that is indifferent or even hostile to their presence, can cause a profound identity crisis. This crisis is compounded by the migrant’s desire to succeed and integrate, which can lead to internal conflicts about cultural preservation versus assimilation.

The novel does not shy away from presenting this complexity, and Darling’s journey can be seen as a microcosm of the broader African immigrant experience. She must negotiate her identity in a new world while holding onto the memories of her old world, even as they begin to fade. This constant negotiation between different identities both imposed and self-constructed is a key element of the African immigrant experience, and Bulawayo captures it powerfully through Darling’s emotional and psychological struggles.

Conclusion

Darling’s migration in *We Need New Names* is not just a physical journey from Zimbabwe to the United States but also an emotional and psychological journey of displacement. The novel vividly portrays the emotional toll of leaving one’s homeland, navigating the tensions between past and present, and the challenges of finding a new sense of belonging in a foreign world. Darling’s story is deeply resonant

for anyone who has experienced migration, particularly African immigrants who must contend with the complexities of identity, belonging, and the loss of home. Through Darling's eyes, we see the profound impact of migration, a theme that is central not just to the novel, but to the lives of millions of African migrants in the global diaspora.

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