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Parental Failure and Disrupted Identity Development in Displaced and Migrant Children

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Abstract
This paper examines the theme of parental failure and its profound consequences on children within the context of migration in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names. Set against the backdrop of socio-political instability in Zimbabwe and the complexities of diasporic life in America, the novel interrogates how migration disrupts traditional parenting roles and responsibilities. It examines how the breakdown of traditional family structures, caused by migration, poverty, and political instability, affects children's sense of self and belonging. Through the experiences of Darling and other child characters, Bulawayo illustrates how children are left to navigate trauma, displacement, and moral confusion on their own. The loss of cultural anchoring, feelings of abandonment, and fractured identities reflect the long-term consequences of failed parental presence and involvement. This paper argues that We Need New Names Critiques not only systemic forces that necessitate migration but also the intimate, often invisible emotional toll borne by the children in dysfunctional family structure who are forced to grow up prematurely in the absence of parental care and accountability. The analysis reveals how parental failure-whether through physical absence, neglect, or inability to provide security-force children to seek alternative sources of identity and community, shaping their identity and self-perception in a transnational context.

Keywords: Parental failure, migration, political instability, trauma, displacement, neglect, identity.

Introduction

Migration has long been regarded as a pathway to better opportunities, often framed within narratives of sacrifice and hope. However, in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names, the migration of parents is portrayed not simply as a practical choice, but as a disruptive force that reshapes the psychological landscape of those left behind. This paper examines how the absence of parental figures affects children's emotional development and moral orientation, drawing from the experiences of Darling and her community.

In We Need New Names, NoViolet Bulawayo paints a painful picture of childhood shaped by poverty, migration, and most devastatingly - parental failure. The novel follows Darling, a young girl from Zimbabwe, who grows up in a community marked by deprivation and social disintegration. Though the narrative traces her physical journey from Zimbabwe to the United States, its true focus lies in her internal world: a landscape shaped by emotional neglect and abandonment. This paper argues that parental failure through physical absence, emotional detachment, and moral disorientation, creates deep psychological wounds in children, leaving them isolated, guilt-ridden, and unable to form stable identities as they grow up.

This study draws on key psychological and sociological theories to contextualize the impact of parental absence in We Need New Names. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development highlights the importance of trust, autonomy, and identity formation during childhood and adolescence, stages that are significantly disrupted in the absence of secure parental attachments. Darling's fragmented identity and emotional turbulence reflect what Erikson terms "identity confusion," typically resulting from inconsistent or absent caregiving during critical developmental phases. John Bowlby's Attachment Theory supports the analysis of emotional detachment in Bulawayo's child characters. Bowlby emphasizes that children require consistent emotional availability from caregivers to develop secure attachments. In the novel, the repeated emotional and physical absence of Darling's parents, both emotional and physical, contributes to an anxious and avoidant attachment style, manifesting in her inability to express vulnerability or form stable relationships.

Parental Absence

In the opening chapter "Hitting Budapest," Darling introduces the ironically named "Paradise," a setting deprived of nourishment, justice, or parental affection. Although it functions as home, Paradise offers little in terms of comfort or stability. Darling's mother is frequently absent, compelled to leave in search of income. Darling narrates, "Sometimes Mother comes back after only a few days, sometimes after a week, sometimes she comes back when I don't even know when she is coming." The emotional and physical absence of the mother disrupts any consistent sense of care, contributing to Darling's vulnerability.

Her father, long absent and forgotten, reappears unexpectedly, gravely ill with AIDS. "Father came home after many years of forgetting us," Darling observes, revealing the deep estrangement between parent and child. His failure to recognize his daughter, calling her "my son, my boy," underscores his complete disconnection from her life. Rather than providing comfort, his return intensifies the family's suffering, as Darling and her mother are now forced to conceal his illness.

This unwanted reunion compounds Darling's existing troubles. Feeling imprisoned within her home, she expresses a disturbing wish for her father's death: "Die. Die now so I can go play with my friends, die now because this is not fair." Her internal conflict reflects the severe psychological toll of parental neglect and the burden of forced caregiving at a young age. Darling's journey encapsulates the painful reality of role reversal and the burden of expectations placed upon children in both Zimbabwe and the U.S. In Paradise, Darling and her friends are prematurely forced into adult roles like stealing food, navigating trauma, and witnessing violence with little to no adult guidance. This reversal intensifies upon migration, where societal and familial expectations are projected onto Darling as the child who has "made it" to America. She is expected to succeed, to send money home, and to redeem the hopes of her community. However, her reality shatters this dream. In America, she becomes a form of child labour who is forced to take up cleaning jobs, study in silence, and suppress her emotional needs. The promise of the American Dream is quickly replaced by isolation and invisibility. As she states, "We look like the people on TV but we are not those people" exposing the gulf between imagined opportunity and lived experience. Rather than being liberated by migration, Darling is entrapped by adult responsibilities and systemic alienation, illustrating how both parental absence and structural inequalities converge to deny her a coherent or fulfilling childhood.

Nation as a Failed Mother

Bulawayo symbolically frames the nation of Zimbabwe as a maternal figure, one that, like Darling's biological mother, fails to nurture or protect its children. The homeland is depicted as abandoned, impoverished, and brutal, offering neither physical safety nor emotional sustenance. This maternal metaphor emphasizes the total collapse of structures meant to care for the young. The failure of the nation to 'mother' its youth parallels the breakdown of personal parental relationships, amplifying the trauma of exile. Not only Darling, but most of her peers live in exile, scattered across the globe: "Bastard finally went to South Africa. Godknows is in Dubai." When the motherland fails, the emotional and cultural grounding it should offer is shattered, leaving the children to construct identity without that foundational support.

Leaving Zimbabwe for America symbolizes a painful separation from the mother figure. Darling's nostalgia and inner yearning reflect the deep psychological attachment to the nation as a mother and she feels, "I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that." Nation serves as a metaphor that carries profound implications, especially in the context of displacement, abandonment, and identity formation. Her nostalgia is complex, though Paradise was marked by poverty, hunger, and trauma, it was also the site of shared laughter, friendship, and cultural familiarity. In America, her silence becomes a form of mourning: "When things fall apart, the children of the land scurry and scatter like birds escaping a burning sky".

Moral Disorientation

One of the most horrid consequences of parental absence in We Need New Names is the children's moral disorientation. Without adults to provide consistent ethical guidance, children like Darling and her friends grow up in an environment where survival outweighs conscience. The children routinely steal guavas from wealthy neighbourhoods, justifying their actions through necessity. The character Bastard reduces theft to a practical solution for hunger, revealing how deeply the lines between right and wrong have been blurred in the absence of moral teaching. With no one to correct or even question this behaviour, Darling and her peers begin to see theft and corruption not as immoral but as natural. They openly discuss robbing a bank in the future, suggesting how normalized criminality has become within their worldview.

Chipo's tragic experience further reveals the moral erosion of the community. At eleven, she is impregnated by her grandfather, a grotesque violation that is met not with outrage but with silence. The adults in Paradise neither protest nor seek justice. This silence not only denies Chipo justice but teaches the other children that abuse is to be endured rather than confronted. Chipo herself lacks the emotional or moral vocabulary to comprehend the gravity of her situation or her future as a mother, thus continuing the cycle of broken generational ethics. In Erik Erikson's terms, the failure to develop a stable identity during childhood, caused by unreliable caregivers, results in confusion and emotional detachment. Similarly, Bowlby's attachment theory would interpret the children's emotional numbness and self-reliance as symptoms of disrupted or absent attachment bonds, leaving them vulnerable to ethical ambiguity.

Later in the novel, Darling's experience in America reflects a continued lack of moral guidance. She and her peers consume explicit sexual content unsupervised, and no adult intervenes to mediate their understanding of these experiences. Though Darling left Zimbabwe with the hope of achieving a better life, the absence of mentors or emotional support in her new environment leads to further alienation. Her moral compass, never securely formed, remains unstable. Thus, Bulawayo portrays a generation of children suspended between abandonment and survival, whose ethical frameworks have been shaped more by necessity than by nurture.

Emotional Withdrawal, Conflicted Self and Identity Development

Darling's emotional detachment and growing silence reflect the deeper psychological trauma of abandonment and dislocation. Though still a child, she begins to adopt a neutral, almost indifferent adult lens to interpret life around her, an emotional strategy born out of survival. In America, she

withdraws further, constructing an inner fortress she does not allow others to access. Her silence is not apathy, but a defence: "There are times I want to say things, to scream, but I stop, because I don't know if anyone will listen."

This self-confinement suggests a learned invisibility, where Darling internalizes the belief that her emotions are either too heavy to share or not worthy of being heard. Her alienation is intensified by the absence of her parents, her aunt, and her community. As Erikson would argue, her stunted psychosocial development results in identity confusion and an inability to form intimate connections. She becomes increasingly estranged, not only from others but from her own feelings, forgetting even "how to be seen" or how to express her needs. Her detachment, then, is a form of solitary confinement, a silent protest against a world that has refused her care, comprehension, and connection. However, Darling's experience in America is haunted by a sense of guilt and shame at the same time, rooted in the disparity between her present physical comfort and the suffering of those she left behind. While she now has access to food, shelter, and relative safety, these privileges do not bring her peace.

Darling struggles in silence in between her new and lost identity. In Paradise, her identity is rooted in community, even if that community is fractured by poverty and silence. Without stable parental figures to provide affirmation, Darling's sense of self is already unstable. This fragility is further enhanced by her migration to America, where she realises that she belongs fully neither to her homeland nor her new country. In Erik Erikson's terms, Darling's adolescence, a critical period for identity formation is disrupted by dislocation and trauma, preventing her from achieving a coherent sense of self. Furthermore, Bowlby's attachment theory explains how her emotional detachment and sense of homelessness stem from disrupted caregiving bonds. In America, she lives under the care of her aunt, but even this arrangement lacks warmth and guidance, leaving Darling directionless. Her fragmented identity, neither entirely Zimbabwean nor American, neither child nor adult, embodies the emotional cost of abandonment and uprootedness.

Conclusion

In We Need New Names, NoViolet Bulawayo exposes the silent suffering of children who are left to navigate a chaotic world in the absence of parental figures. The novel demonstrates how parental failure through physical absence, emotional neglect, or moral collapse, deeply scars the psyche of the child. Deprived of stable attachment figures, they become emotionally withdrawn, unable to express their needs or trust others with their pain. This psychological isolation is further intensified by displacement and societal breakdown, reinforcing their solitude as they move into adulthood. The children in Bulawayo's narrative do not simply endure hunger or poverty, they forget human connection, they endure the loss of intimacy, belonging, and care, which shapes them into emotionally distant survivors. As theorists like John Bowlby and Erik Erikson suggest, such ruptures in early relational bonds leave lasting developmental wounds, inhibiting the child's ability to form secure identities or meaningful relationships. Ultimately, the novel reminds us that the consequences of parental neglect are not momentary but echo across a lifetime, as children grow up carrying the burden of unspoken grief, fractured identity, and profound emotional loneliness.

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