African Novel in the 21st Century: Afropolitan Mobility in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

The body of African novel has come of age after about seven decades. It has over time borne witness to the myriads of politico-economic and socio-cultural events in the continent. However, since the inauguration of the contemporary transnational turn in postcolonial discourses, it has spread its horizon beyond the frontiers of its continental boundaries via the route of the literary enterprises of African writers like Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Yaa Gyasi, Okey Ndibe, Chris Abani and others in the Diaspora. Applying the thesis of postcolonial studies this paper examines the phenomenological literary representation of Afropolitan mobility in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The aim is to discover the challenges of the African identities in transit across the globalized world of transmutation and flux. It concludes that the mobility of African citizens of the world is an expression of the freedom

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which postcolonial independence introduced.

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Introduction:

Mobility as subject or the subject of mobility has always been a motif in the body of African literature from the inception of that literature in the mid twentieth century. From the Francophone countries or writers we have the Senegalese novelist Cheik Hamidou Kane's *The Ambiguous Adventure* (1963) which narrates the loss of spirituality in the lives of African immigrants in France through the life of its protagonist named Samba Diallo. From the Anglophone countries or writers we have the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1970) which uses the brokenness of the protagonist Baako (after some years in the United States of America), to illustrate the alienation that accompanies the émigré who has returned. Both examples and the others like them are novels of contact which highlight how mobile Africans were in the past. The novels also describe the consequent destruction of African communal values upon their contact with the Western world.

Chinua Achebe has this to say of the consequences of the contact which Kane's protagonist Diallo has with the Western world: "the hero of the novel, the deliverer-to-be and paragon of the new generation returns from France a total spiritual wreck, his once vibrant sense of community hopelessly shattered" (52). The same analogy applies to the protagonist of Armah's novel Baako. Many of those Africans in the Diaspora in the mid twentieth century were stereotyped in literature as

lost souls or like Achebe would say 'wrecked' of all traces of their unique African humanism. For the above reason, Dia (2014, 93) studies what he calls the "cultural crisis generated through the contacts between Africa and Europe." This contact is age-long and includes all the other numerous contacts and movements through slave trade, commerce, colonialism, globalization etc. that Africa has had with the West. In his final analysis, Dia notes that those contacts leave the Africans who crossed their cultural borders in moral shambles and cultural aridity.

In the twenty-first century, on the contrary, there is an increase in the number of African immigrants in America and elsewhere, who have made astounding impacts in the fields of sciences and arts, and whose contributions cannot be easily overlooked. These new breed of Africans thus begin to recast their images in the light of their new awakenings. Many factors may have contributed to the successes these latter Africans in the Diaspora are witnessing in their new identity formation. One of such factors (arguably) is the twenty-first century acceptance of globalization and what it portends and the ability of these new Africans to accept the phenomenological shift in the conditions of mobility. This archetypal shift in the modalities of mobility in the words of Cresswell is the twenty-first century "new mobilities paradigm" (2010, 17) which is a new way of reconstructing the essence of emigration.

Globalization has weakened the hitherto stiff cultural barriers between the West and Africa. It does this by creating homogenous cosmopolitan cities in Africa (Lagos, Accra, Johannesburg, etc.) and beyond the borders of Africa (New York, Singapore, Beijing etc.) that have large African, Asian and European families and Town Unions that mobilize to its members, the local colour or aspects of their discreet

cultures and traditions. They provide the food, language, fashion, festivals, parties (or as the Yorubas call it, *Owambe*) to their members such that they will be at home, even when they are away. Globalization makes the movement (mobility) of those cultural commodities easy and accessible. As a result, the individual is not totally and culturally lost in his/her new environment. These new breed of Africans who are also nationals of other countries, came in the words of Selasi (2005), to be known as Afropolitans – a hybrid term which reminds us of the somehow dual nationalities of the individuals. Here we are concerned with the Afropolitan status as a new recognition of the émigré and not as an elitist conception of the statuses of the privileged Africans in the Diaspora. We see Afropolitan as a term for the whole Africans in the cosmopolitan and not a term for select African elites in the cosmopolitan as some critics have argued.

Theoretical Framework:

Afropolitanism has become a ubiquitous term that describes the "rhizomatic African identity today, where the African is both at home in the local and connected to the global" (Anasiudu 2022, 1). The critic above refers to the word 'Afropolitanism' as a neologism that describes the circumstances in contemporary Africa in which a person is African by birth but is a citizen of another continent. Thus, "as a neological formation, Afropolitanism re-envisions the African diasporic cultural identity and the possibility of more than one racial belonging, identity multiplex and cultural technicolour for the African today" (2). It highlights the cases of pluralities of identities which are at the nucleus of Achille Mbembe's notion of the postcolony.

The post-colony is a new era of freedom and individuation. Taking his/her signals from the independence of formerly colonized countries, the post-colonial individual sees him/herself as a liberated folk, boundless, with limitless opportunities and mobile. Thus there is sometimes this “idea of mobility as liberty and freedom” (Cresswell 2006, 15). This newly found freedom, for Mbembe is displayed through the “specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes” (102). This 'system of signs' in the views of Ferdinand de Saussure means language, while the 'simulacra' in the thesis of Jean Baudrillard mean symbols. Therefore taken literally, the latter excerpt by Mbembe means that the post-colony is characterized by ingenious patterns of creating new words (signs) and fabricating symbols (simulacra) which are used to reconstruct new identities (stereotypes) of the postcolonial man/woman. This new identity is one that accentuates the autonomy of the citizens of postcolonial countries.

Thus, as autonomous and liberated citizens, many of the new postcolonial Africans see themselves as being free to emigrate and take up any identity they desire without being limited by the cultural impediments that shackled their forebears; the likes of Samba Diallo and Baako in Kane's and Armah's novels above. Mbembe goes further to identify the major attributes of the postcolony. For him, “the postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation” (2001, 102). Here our concern is on the 'ways identities' are created through signs and simulacra. Identities are created through the postcolonial character recognizing his/her freedom, transcending the geographical

borders already made porous by globalization, taking up citizenship of another country and afterwards taking ownership of him/her selfhood. In the context of this research the new system of sign or simulacrum that is created is the term 'Afropolitanism' which is deployed to signify the autonomy of the postcolonial character. Toivanen has argued that "in the field of African literary studies the term 'mobility' is nowadays frequently aired with that of cosmopolitanism or, more specifically, Afropolitanism" (2021, 5). Thus when we see an Afropolitan we see a person who is mobile.

Review of Related Literature:

In a study of Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Motahane and Makombe (2020, 1) locate the spatial setting of the novel in a "shantytown in Zimbabwe, ironically named Paradise," whereas its temporal setting is "set in the context of the post-2000 economic/political crisis in Zimbabwe that saw many Zimbabweans migrating to other countries in search of greener pastures" (1). They are not alone in this discovery as Ndlovu (2015) blames the precarious economic situation of Zimbabwe as one of the factors that prompted citizens to seek greener pastures across the borders. In his words, "the novel makes us contemplate the effect of the Zimbabwean political and economic crises particularly on children, as both parents and children are increasingly compelled to negotiate precarious citizenships at home and subsequently eke out unstable livelihoods in often unwelcoming foreign lands" (Ndlovu 2020, 1). The temporal setting of the novel coincidentally is the time that Zimbabwe was facing one of its worse economic meltdown. The crises of that era affected the livelihood of her

citizens, forcing some, as Ndlovu notes above, to emigrate out of their countries to other more stable countries.

The depiction of Zimbabwe of that time does not go down well with some of Bulawayo's critics. Some perceive that novel as perpetuating the Western stereotypical narrative of Africa as a dungeon of poverty and sickness. **Sibanda (2018, 74) for instance, frowns that "**Bulawayo's depiction of 10-year old Darling's life and that of her impoverished community." The critic adds that it "makes extensive use of stereotypes of blackness that are consistent with white constructions of the black other" (74). For Sibanda, such stereotypes are not healthy as they inform the construction of Africa in global media and thought as being at the brink of catastrophe without any hint of the possibility of the existence of other fascinating views of Africa.

In a study of the methods of communal disruptions and dislocations that characterize *We Need New Names*, Moji (2015) attempts not to relate the setting specifically to Zimbabwe, instead makes it a further stereotype of Africa. According to the critic, it is merely "a shanty-town childhood in an unnamed country resembling Zimbabwe" (2). Indeed, the narrator of the novel does not tell the reader her country of birth, but the Zimbabwe of Bulawayo is easily assumed to be the setting. If we subscribe to Moji's view, the novel becomes a recreation of the movement from the twenty-first century shanties of the global South-South and by implication Lagos, Kampala, Windhoek, Harare, etc. to the global hotbed.

Frassinelli (2015, 715) seems to support this notion of the setting being anywhere in Africa by arguing that "we *Need New Names* is a novel about migration and displacement – experiences it brings to the

fore by having the main character cross the borders that separate an unnamed place that looks very much like Zimbabwe" to America. To illustrate this border crossing, Frassinelli (2015) indicates that it is signified by the narrator's crossover from 10-year-old girl to adolescent. He later pays greater emphases on the polysemy and multiplicity of borders in the novel.

Sampson-Choma (2019) takes us further away from setting to the characterization of women as true subalterns in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. For the critic, the two novels are similar in the sense that they "use the vantage point of female protagonists to depict the unique circumstances of newly arrived African women who find themselves in the crossroads of African and American cultures" (312). The struggles of these female characters to find a balance between White American culture and American-born Black American communities are what make the novels interesting.

With regards to characterization in Bulawayo's novel under study, **Wilkinson (2016)** makes a startling revelation about the possible inexperience of the child narrator. The child-narrator probably may not have reached the right age to fully understand the socio-political and economic dispensation of her country – at least to the extent that her narration could be taken seriously. Wilkinson (2016, 123) hints that "Darling is old enough to have some understanding of the world she lives in, but is not yet a fully socialized adult, and Bulawayo makes deft use of her liminality in order to provide an innovative critique of a large number of issues facing Zimbabwe at present." It could be because she is not a fully socialized adult that her stories about the adults are misty. However, one of the advantages of the child-narrator style is that, its

"blatantly honest, straightforward and at times chillingly naive register of a child..., provides critical commentary on some of the difficult social and political issues facing contemporary Zimbabwe, such as political corruption, poverty, religious exploitation, gender inequality, and AIDS" (124). The child's assumed innocence presupposes that her stories are true and unadulterated by sympathy of piety for any person or institution.

Ngoshi in a study that is designed to "unpack how the vulgar and the grotesque were used to create carnival moments in the narrative and to examine how marginal subjects gain voice and some degree of power to live an alternative life, even if this is momentary" (2016, 53) **equally sees the underage narrator as** virtuous, blameless and credible. In addition, "the innocent voice of the child narrator questions the logic of destroying well-constructed houses, resulting in people living in make-shift accommodation" (55). What the critic refers to as the elements of the grotesque and the vulgar are the different manifestation of obscene innuendoes like the Prophet Mborro's name being a distorted word for the phallus in Shona language; and other sexual innuendoes in the porn the narrator and her friends are streaming online.

The critics have done well in their different approaches to the novel. However, there is need to further illustrate the motif of mobility which is applied as a semiotic construct that illustrates the liberty of the postcolonial characters to locate and re-locate themselves. Without mobility, there is no Afropolitanism, for one has to move, before one becomes a global citizen.

The signification of mobility in Bulawayo's We Need New Names. NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is a quintessential novel that explores the conditions that prompt the twenty-first century Africans to emigrate; to wish to face the uncertainties of the lives that await them on the other side of the world where they immigrate to. We shall recall that Toivanen (2021, 5) has proposed that "in the field of African literary studies the term 'mobility' is nowadays frequently paired with that of cosmopolitanism or, more specifically, Afropolitanism." This is so because to be an Afropolitan firstly entails the tendency to move across the borders of the African continent and secondly, to be admitted into the citizenship status that gives one that nomenclature. Thus in the context of our analysis, mobility and/or immobility are linked intricately to the term Afropolitanism.

The novel *We Need New Name* begins with a typical movement or a motion that signifies what is to be expected throughout the plot. The first sentence of the novel reads: "we are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me" (Bulawayo 2013, 6) which is an obvious illustration of and a hint to how mobile the characters are, especially the protagonist. From this first sentence to the end of the novel, the protagonist never stops moving. She is constantly on the road, on her way or in the street moving, walking and running – ambulant and roving. In spite of the obvious risks associated with the movement, the huddles, the throes, the angst of moving, they still move, "we are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though Mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are just going" (Bulawayo 2013, 6). Their

insistence and resolve to move are informed by their optimistic belief that their lives depend on their mobility – their wellbeing or their good fortune awaits them at the other side of the border.

The above is sufficiently illustrated by the excessive abundance of the guavas they steal, eat and waste when they make it finally to their destination which in the first part of the novel is called Budapest. Budapest as it is used in the novel, as a Utopia world, is symbolic and means different things to different characters. For the narrator and her cohorts it is a place where their hunger is temporarily assuaged but for some other adult characters there are many other *Budapests*. Stina's uncle's Budapest of abundance is Britain; Aunt Fostalina's own is America; Uncle Vusa's own is London; Darling's father's own is South Africa; Makosi's and Moshe's own are in South Africa, even the teachers have their own places of abundance where they have migrated to.

Their will and resolve to move are fuelled by the perpetual hunger which gnaws their stomach, which also indicates the lack, dearth or the paucity of nourishment in their homes. Their type of cross-border movement is a dangerous one, yet they do it. There is the case of NaSandi's son called Tsepang who is "eaten by a crocodile as he tried to cross the Limpopo River to South Africa" (Bulawayo 2013, 125). There are other reports of people who had gone; lost and never came back. They migrate because, contrasted with the dangers of "just going" that of not going is more hazardous and precarious for which reason they keep going. The dangers of not going, of immobility is embedded in the description of two phenomena. The first is embedded in the representation of the squalor where they live, while the second is demonstrated by the incestuous pregnancy of Chipo. In the first instance

the narrator presents immobility in these words: “the mothers are busy with hair and talk, which is the only thing they ever do” (6), while the men are continually glued to the draughts they play under the jacaranda tree. As a result of their immobility they are continually in lack. In the second instance, it is because Chipo's grandfather does nothing that he finds time enough to rape her. Those are the consequences of immobility, whereas mobility is beneficial.

Across the border, in Budapest, “you don't see anything to show there are real people living here; even the air is empty: no delicious food cooking, no odors, no sounds” (Bulawayo 2013, 8). This is because the inhabitants are also locomotive; they go to work, travel, move and develop their home, hence the first time they see a woman, she is eating something which indicates abundance, lushness and bounteousness. It is this Budapest, contrasted against their immediate Paradise that lures them, initially, to think of emigration “one day I will live here, in a house just like that, Sbho says” (12). “I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing” (11) the narrator informs us. Similarly, Bastard adds, “well, I don't care, I'm blazing out of this kaka country myself... then I'll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest” (13). The three characters above, in their preteen understanding of the world, hint on the different kinds of migration in modern history: rural to urban migration within the same country; Africa to America emigration and American non-immigration all of them geared towards finding a better place to live, to thrive, to overcome poverty and hardship at home. Thus when they all eventually relocate it does not come to the reader as a surprise.

Although there are many challenges facing the émigré, like

Bastard insinuates, the problem of being disillusioned in America and being stuck due to an inability to re-locate; or like Godknows interjects, the probability of being a victim of violent events like terrorism or other shades of violence, in the Diaspora. A typical example is the incident of the boy that comes to school with a loaded gun and a list of the people he plans to shoot (Bulawayo 2013, 134). The hardship at home, when placed side by side with the dangers abroad, surpasses all; all the hurdles and hazards of the Western world – "my America" (14) as the narrator calls it. To demonstrate the precariousness of life in their home country, the novelist introduces the scene of suicide. A suicide worse than life in the Diaspora, a testimony to the obvious hazardous life they live and its attendant poverty and uncertainties. The uncertainty which cannot be equated to the trials of Aunt Fostalina working in old people's home in America, as Bastard submits.

At home, the country is in shambles, the wades of notes that Mother of Bones saves in her box are worthless, the country is transitioning from the use of their local currency to the American dollar. Their currency has no use other than being used as fuel "to make fire like everybody else" (Bulawayo 2013, 20). The box of money in Mother of Bones' closet cannot take care of her, rebuild their shack nor get her new pairs of slippers. The effect of economic melt-down is illustrated with the panoramic view of their neighbourhood as the narrator and Mother of Bones once again begin to move: "we pass tiny shack after tiny shack crammed together like hot loaves of bread... a broken bottle here, a pile of junk over there, a brownish puddle of something here, a disemboweled watermelon there" (21). The image evoked by the excerpt is against the flamboyance and splendour of Budapest, the

district of the Whites and mighty. Theirs is a country which is stratified in line with economic considerations. At the upper echelon are the rich and mighty, mostly Whites and Asians, who they claim stole their country, while at the periphery of the country are the poor natives who must make a move or be destroyed by their inactivity. They survive by the magnanimity of NGOs who intermittently bring relief items to them.

Those who are determined to make a difference, to close the gap between their status and those of their rich neighbours, Bornfree and Messenger must make a "walk for change!" (Bulawayo 2013, 22) Without which, they will be perpetually bound in poverty, while the "fatness" (31) of the bourgeois and the Chinese investors double. At this point, mobility is linked to the imbalance in their society. Bromley (2021, 19) points out that "inequality, the asymmetries of globalisation and the crisis of global capitalism are at the root of the displacement and movement of people from the Global South throughout this century, particularly in the last decade." The inequalities in *We Need New Names* are glaringly displayed by the interests of the capitalists who construct shopping malls for a people who cannot afford three-square meals per day. The exploitation is clear and to overcome it, the ordinary citizens must relocate to new environments that will guarantee them access to the basic things of life.

From the memory of the narrator, things were not that bad for them. They had a brick-wall-house and furniture, which although were not like the ones in Budapest, but definitely were better than the shacks in Paradise. Then their callous government came and cleared that settlement forcing them to relocate to Paradise. It is important we emphasize here, the labyrinthine, knotty and inseparable

interconnectedness of literature and politics. For Cresswell (2010), any attempt to apply theories of mobility in postcolonial discourse must recognise what he calls the 'politics of mobility' and the methodological application of the rhetoric of power in the production of mobilities. In the above circumstance, their forced mobility is induced via the pursuance of political power.

Having salvaged all they could, they headed to the squalor that is now Paradise. Thus, when it is time for election, they troop out to vote, having the high hope that things will change for good and "get ready for a new country, no more of this Paradise anymore, they say" (Bulawayo 2013, 47). Paradise an antithesis of what it looks like is ironically a real paradise to the extent that it accommodates the lowly and the poor; those Frantz Fanon has called *The Wretched of the Earth* or the "broken shards of glass people" (Bulawayo 2013, 48). It is a paradise in its ever constant capacity to absorb, to shelter, to admit newcomers from all tribes, race or ethnicity like Forgiveness and her family who came from nowhere and still secure a space to live.

From the above, it becomes clear that it is partly the ugly financial, social, political and academic conditions that push the people to cross the borders. At the height of his frustration and despair, the narrator's father Felistus, becomes disillusioned with their independence, unimpressed by the government and exclaims with rage: "is this what I went to University for? Is this what we got independence for? Does it make sense that we are living like this?" (Bulawayo 2013, 59) The only answer he gives to those questions is migration: "we should have left. We should have left this wretched country when all this started, when Mgcini offered to take us across" (58). Afterwards, he leaves the

country to South Africa. After several years of sojourn, he returns, terminally sick. Regardless of the potential dangers that await the émigré, after the revolution some of the inhabitants of Paradise leave the country in search of new meanings to their lives.

The narrator articulates the pattern of that movement in these words: "look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hopes are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Those in pain are crossing borders" (Bulawayo 2013, 90). This movement from their country of birth to foreign countries illustrate the motif of mobility, movement, running, emigration, going, desertion, walking, quitting, fleeing that suffuse Afropolitan novels of the twenty-first century.

Darling the narrator and Messenger are two of the people who eventually leave their country of birth to USA. Chipo who is left behind to nurse her daughter who is also named Darling adds that "Bastard finally went to South Africa. Godknows is in Dubai. Sbho joined this theater group and I hear they'll be travelling and performing all over the world soon" (Bulawayo 2013, 174). In the United States, the first thing Darling the narrator does is to contrast her neighbourhood in Paradise with that of America. Quite unlike in Paradise, the first thing she observes is that her new street has no men idling under a tree. More so, Aunt Fostalina is not engaging in idle gossip but as she puts it, Aunt Fostalina is "busy walking and walking and walking" (92).

There are equally movements in America but the American mobility is different from that of Paradise. For instance in America Aunt

Fostalina and her family relocated from Detroit to Kalamazoo. They are also said to have driven about a corn field after they lost their way to Dumi's wedding. There is another movement that Darling makes with Kristal (the African-American) and Marina (the Nigerian immigrant) to Crossroads Mall. There is the drive with Aunt Fostalina to Shadybrook as well as the two occasions of the drive with Uncle Kojo. However, the American mobility is not borne out of the hunger that gnaws the stomach nor the forceful displacement of people by government, but by excess.

Darling the narrator and Uncle Kojo are Afropolitans to the extent that they moved from Africa to America where they live, undocumented, as illegal immigrants, but not because they are citizens of America. It is their undocumented statuses that make them citizens of nowhere and at the same time citizens of everywhere. Ironically, their moments of admittance into the statuses of undeclared global citizenship, becomes their moment of incapacitation. They become unable to physically cross borders even though they want to cross once more, even though they are nostalgic. Suddenly they lose their physical mobility. Toivanen (2021, 3) agrees that "far from idealising or romanticising movement or privileging a 'mobile subjectivity', mobilities research is interested in the contexts in which mobility takes place and also in the mechanisms that produce not only mobility but also stasis/immobility." In the context of the novel understudy, the mechanism that occasions immobility is the characters' new Afropolitan statuses. What that implies is that Afropolitanism is both an instrument of mobility and immobility, it depends on the context. Handicapped by

her citizenship status, Darling the narrator relies on another form of technologically enhanced virtual system of mobility, the mobile phone call or Skype to reach and participate in her custom, while Uncle Kojo's mind transports, although not efficiently, virtually through his television to the middle east where his son is. When physical mobility is not possible, other forms of ICT generated e-mobility is adopted.

By way conclusion, the study has examined the conception of Afropolitan mobility from a literary representation and not its factual existence. It pays attention to the woeful politics that induce the economic calamities that engender mobility in the fictional country which is a prototype of most of Sub-Sahara African countries. Our approach is informed by the postulations of literary thinkers like (Toivanen 2021, 18) who hold that "when adopting mobility studies theories in the analysis of literary texts, it is not sufficient to pay attention simply to the texts' articulations of the politics of mobility but also to the literary means that the texts use in order to convey the mobility theme." The literary means of *We Need New Names* is the exploration of the freedom of movement which the characters apply so as to overcome the harsh economic and political realities of their country. *We Need New Names* as the title implies solicits for a new nomenclature for those who fall under its novelistic theme. The theme seems to suggest that most of the Africans in the Diaspora were charged by a particular lacuna in their native countries which prompts them to take a walk.

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