CHRONOSPATIAL CROSSINGS AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN BULAWAYO NOVIOLET'S WE NEED NEW NAMES

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ABSTRACT

Literature illuminates the complexities surrounding migration in post-independence Africa and elucidates the multifaceted experiences of migrants as displaced characters. Employing the conceptual framework of the bildungsroman alongside the theoretical lens of border theory, this paper examines chronospatial crossings and identity reconstruction in Bulawayo Noviolet's *We Need New Names*. It explores the protagonist's journey across time, from childhood innocence to adult consciousness. The study explores characters' developmental trajectories, illuminating how their spatial crossing from Zimbabwe to the West disrupts and accelerates process of maturation. The paper's engagement with border theory serves to elucidate the liminal spaces created by these spatial crossings – spaces that complicate the characters' sense of belonging and catalyze a profound need for identity reconstruction. As the protagonists grapple with the disorientation of their new environment, they struggle to navigate the complexities of forging a sense of identity amidst opposing forces. This paper contributes to the scholarly dialogue surrounding migration experiences and border studies by projecting the story in *We Need New Names* not just as a journey through space, but also as a voyage through time.

Keywords: chronospatiality, identity, We Need New Names, border crossing, reconstruction.

Introduction

The concept of Bildungsroman, originating from German literature, has evolved into a significant literary genre focusing on the psychological and moral growth of protagonists from childhood to adulthood. As Austen notes, "Bildungsroman is associated with the early modern era, extending from Enlightenment through the major parts of 19th century" ("Struggling with the African Bildungsroman" 8). While initially introduced by Karl Morgenstern in 1819, it gained prominence through Wilhelm Dilthey's 1906 work "Poetry and Experience". This literary concept particularly resonates in African texts, where colonial systems often interrupt the traditional growth narrative.

The Bildungsroman concept further provides a rich framework for exploring the human experience of growth and development, particularly focusing on the journey from youth to adulthood and the universal challenges of finding one's identity and place in the world. This growth process, as Simhachalam notes, follows a specific pattern where "the sensitive, intelligent protagonist generally leaves home and undergoes stages of conflict and growth, he or she is tested by crises"(Origin and Development of Bildungsroman Novels in English Literature 22). This observation highlights how physical movement often catalyzes personal development. The transformation central to Bildungsroman involves what Ogene and Okolo describe as a change "from a less desirable or crude state to a more desirable or refined one" particularly on intellectual and psychological levels ("African Novel and the Bildungsroman Tradition" 12). Abhishek Upadhyay deepens this understanding by presenting the Bildungsroman protagonist as actively negotiating various personal and social forces to achieve a harmonious existence ("The Name and Nature of the Bildungsroman" 197). This negotiation process becomes especially complex when physical borders are crossed.

While border studies traditionally focused on geographical demarcations, contemporary understanding has evolved to recognize borders as fluid and multifaceted entities. As Richard Pine positsthat "Borders are spatial, conceptual, spiritual and psychological and shape the dynamics of identity, community, and governance" ("Borders and Borderlands" 4). On the fluidity of border, Thomas Nail explains that "The movement of border is not a metaphor; the border is literally and actually in motion in several ways" ("Theory of the Border" 6). This fluidity manifests both in natural

phenomena and human activities. Mary Okolie's work "Historicizing Border in Nigerian Novels" particularly highlights how borders operate as a process, noting that "the endlessness of identity negotiation points to the nature of the border as a process, a continuum" (16). This perspective aligns with the contemporary understanding of borders as complex, multifaceted phenomena that shape human experience and identity formation. Similarly,David Newman's insight that "we live in a world of lines and compartments" that order our daily life practices while simultaneously creating "notions of difference and othering" ("The Lines that Continue to Separate us" 1), helps us understand how border crossings impact identity formation. This ties directly to Johan Schimasnski's concept of five border planes: textual, symbolic, topographical, epistemological, and temporal. Of particular relevance is his explanation that crossing physical (topographical) borders often signifies crossing symbolic borders, while epistemological borders represent journeys of learning and discovery ("Reading from the Border" 5).

Gloria Anzaldúa's perspective adds depth to border theory, asserting that "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them" ("Borderlands/La Frontera" 3). She emphasizes that "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (3), highlighting the psychological impact of borders on identity formation and social relationships. Sarah Green further elaborates that while borders don't exist independently as self-evident entities, they can "take on thing-like qualities, both in practice and in people's imaginations" ("A Sense of Border" 580).

This paper takes into account Bakthin's concept of the chronotope in analysing the interplay between time and space. In his work "The Dialogic Imagination", he presents the inseparable fusion of time and space in literature, where time becomes tangible and space dynamic;

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

This further posits that the literary work is not merely a sequence of event, but rather exist in a complex dimension where chronospatiality is intricately interwoven in creating literal meaning. Richard Pine similarly observes that "Movement in space is also movement in time" ("Border and Borderlands" 12), suggesting that physical

journeys parallel growth. The intersection of chronospatial crossings with identity formation creates what Mary Okolie describes as "the endlessness of identity negotiation" ("Historicizing Border in Nigerian Novels" 16), where individuals continuously reshape their identities through temporal and spatial transitions. This process can lead to what Homi Bhabha describes as the subject being "primordially fixed and yet triply split between the incongruent knowledge of body, race, ancestors" ("The Location of Culture" 80), highlighting the complex nature of identity formation in border spaces.

Through this lens, Bulawayo Noviolet's *We Need New Names* can be examined as a narrative where physical border crossings; migration and temporal progression; and growth intersect to catalyze identity transformation and reconstruction. This dual crossing of space and time creates a complex framework for understanding how identity evolves through both physical and temporal transitions.

Childhood Perspectives: Mapping the Journey to Maturity

The scope of growth associated with young characters is usually encapsulated in their advancement of thoughts and behaviour. Whereby, they come to terms with certain realities at the advancement of the text and develop in their line of thought. First, there is early innocence which is characterized by an unquestioning acceptance of the world, where relationships appear simple often involving binary terms of good and bad, right and wrong, love and hate. However, as characters encounter life's complexities, this simplicity undergoes a transformation from childhood's protected sphere into the often harsh realities of adult consciousness hence giving way to a more nuanced understanding of the world around them. Therefore, this section foregrounds the protagonist's journey from childhood innocence to adult experience throughout the narrative.

Primarily, language use in this initial stage is particularly immature as Darling's narrative voice employs a distinctive blend of childlike directness and understanding. There is a lack of concrete information or understanding in some of her statements. In Darling's interaction with Bastard in the first chapter, they discuss Chipo another friend of theirs who is pregnant. The childlike mentality begins with Darling's prediction of Chipo baby's gender, "It's a boy. The first baby is supposed to be a boy" (3). Darling however realizes that she is a girl and the first child. Delving further into her conversation with her friends, more childlike realities ensue "Where exactly does a baby come out of …First, Jesus's mother has to put it in there" (*We Need New Names* 3). This demonstrates naivety. The simplistic syntax and religious conflation ("Jesus mother") reveal how the children piece together understanding from fragments of adult

conversations and cultural beliefs. Another instance can be drawn from Sbho's statement in a bid to describe a crown, "I thought crowns were made of thorns. I saw a picture of it in the Bible, there when they were killing Jesus" (125). This linguistic pattern of direct questioning and misunderstood concepts becomes a powerful tool for showing Darling and her friend's initial worldview, where complex realities are processed through a child's limited framework.

Language use also cuts across the syntactic display of words as regards Darling's speech. In the opening scene, Darling projects,

> We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. 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. There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I'd rather die for guavas. (1)

The paratactic style in "Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and Me" uses repetitive coordination with "and" instead of commas, reflecting how children naturally list participants. Placing "me" last illustrates how children express belonging to a group. The frequent use of "even though" enhances the paratactic style, mirroring how children think and their stubbornness towards rules. This approach captures the fluidity of children's storytelling and thought processes when combined with declarative sentences and longer run-on sentences.

Building on previously established tenets, the concept of awakening reveals how characters come to understand and accept difficult realities, particularly through a child's perspective. This is evident in the conversation between Darling and her friends about leaving their "kaka country" for America. When Bastard declares, "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), it reveals his naive understanding of social mobility. To him, the white residential area in Zimbabwe, Budapest, represents an ideal home, superior to their current residence in Paradise. His plan to leave Paradise ironically reflects this childish perception. Darling shares this perspective when she states;

> Bastard says when we grow up we'll stop stealing guavas and move on to bigger things inside the houses. I'm not really worried about that because when that time comes, I'll not even be here; I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing. (10)

Darling's awakening unfolds through the lens of childhood innocence as it transitions into an awareness of harsh realities. Her response to Bastard's statement highlights the tension between present childhood activities of "stealing guavas" and future adult criminality. While Darling dismisses such a future based on her immediate environment, her phrase "eating real food and doing better things" reveals an emerging class consciousness. In this context, America represents not just a geographical destination but a symbolic escape from present circumstances. The contrast between "stealing guavas" and "real food" exemplifies what Ogaga Okuyade defines as the awakening stage "when the character becomes aware that her condition of life is a limitation to her aspiration for a better future" ("Weaving Memories of Childhood: The New Nigerian Novel and the Genre of the Bildungsroman" 145).

Every bildungsroman character goes through the phase of loss. John Frow et al present that loss functions as a "tragic variant" that shapes character development through profound change ("The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations" 1906). A prominent portrayal of this can be deduced from the demolition of Darling's initial home.

> The men knock down our house and Ncane's house and Josephat's house and Bongi's house and Sbho's house and many houses. Knockiyaniknockiyaniknockiyani: men driving metal, metal slamming brick, brick crumbling...When the bulldozers finally leave, everything is broken, everything is smashed, everything is wrecked. It is sad faces everywhere, choking dust everywhere, broken walls and bricks everywhere, tears on people's faces everywhere. (66)

The rhythmic enumeration of destroyed homes "Ncane's house…Josephat's house…Bongi's house", and the onomatopoeic "Knockiyani" drums the reality of displacement into the narrator's consciousness. The physical anchors of Darling's childhood security are reduced to "broken walls and bricks everywhere". Loss creates a long-lasting impact on her psyche. She acknowledges the effect of this loss in her terms:

> I sleep, the dream will come, and I don't want it to come. I am afraid of the bulldozers and those men and the police, afraid that if I let the dream come, they will get out of it and become real. I dream about what happened back at our house before we came to Paradise. I try to push it away and push it away but the dream keeps coming and coming like bees, like rain, like the graves at Heavenway". (64-65)

This aligns with John Frow et al's work which identifies loss as becoming "as formative

as development" ("The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations" 1906), where regression and trauma become integral to character formation. Similarly, Chipo's experience represents another dimension of transformative loss in *We Need New Names*. As a victim of sexual abuse, she confronts devastating trauma that shatters the normal progression of her childhood. "Chipo, who used to outrun everybody in all of Paradise but not anymore because somebody made her pregnant" (2). Her response to trauma manifests through silence:

> …I say, speaking for Chipo because she doesn't talk anymore. She is not mute; it's just that when her stomach started showing, she stopped talking. But she still plays with us and does everything else, and if she really, really needs to say something she'll use her hand. (2)

This theme of loss as a transformative force reinforces how loss can reshape developmental trajectories, leading characters to seek alternative forms of comfort, whether through Darling's stealing guavas, or Chipo's new communication methods.

In most bildungsroman, maturation cannot fully be actualized in the absence of a journey. Stemming from loss experiences, journey crystallizes growth and self-discovery in the text. For characters like Darling, journeying represents a promised gateway to enhanced possibilities and a better adulthood experience. However, this prompts a critical examination: does the reality of their journey actually deliver the transformation they hoped for? The dream of growing up elsewhere often differs sharply from what these characters actually find in the long run.

Beyond Boundaries: Zimbabwe to Western Shores

In Noviolet's *We Need New Names*, the exploration of liminal spaces begins well before Darling's eventual migration to America. It starts much earlier with her regular trips with her friends to Budapest a wealthy neighborhood in Zimbabwe. It is worthy of note that Budapest in the text is different from the capital of Hungary, with the presence of a Zimbabwean street in this Budapest "We are passing Chimurenga Street, where we've already harvested every guava tree, maybe like two-three weeks ago"(5). Rather it represents a privileged suburban area that stands in stark contrast to Paradise otherwise known as "the shanty" where Darling and her friends reside.

The text's portrayal of multiple layers of border crossing, beginning with these local movements between Paradise and Budapest establishes a foundational understanding of how physical borders operate within micro-geographical contexts. Border can further be narrowed down to two categories; border as demarcations which echoes Gloria Anzaldúa "Borders are set up…to distinguish us from them" ("Borderlands/La

Frontera: The New Mestiza" 3) and border as means of survival. Bulawayo meticulously constructs Paradise as a space of deprivation, "Paradise is all tin and stretches out in the sun like a wet sheepskin nailed on the ground to dry; the shacks are the muddy color of dirty puddles after the rains. The shacks themselves are terrible…" (34), while Budapest, on the other hand, emerges as a space of privilege "Budapest is big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat gravelled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences and the Durawalls and the flowers and the big trees heavy with fruit…"(4) creating physical barriers which Darling and her friends seek to scale through.

Borders as a means of survival posit that those crossing the border do not necessarily do it willingly but as a necessity. Bulawayo fully buttresses this when illustrating "how they left",

> 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. Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing – to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves. (145)

The use of multiple verbs such as "moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, and fleeing" creates a sense of desperate urgency. This suggests that these crossings are motivated by necessity rather than choice. The phrase "to countries whose names they cannot pronounce" further emphasizes that people are willing to venture into completely unknown territories to escape their current situations. Furthermore, this section will examine the border from the perspective of Mary Okolie's three-stage model as presented in "Transnational Border and the Prospects for Identity Reformation". First, Okolie presents the idea of "Becoming multiple" which is actualized by adopting a foreign culture (7). Language adaptation in America becomes a pivotal part of Darling's westernization. Her initial difficulties with American English are evident when she says,

> 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. (240)

The inability of Darling to speak her native language typifies linguistic displacement. The use of metaphors like "bruised" voices, "thrashed" tongues that "stagger like drunken men" further illustrate how speaking in a non-native language creates a kind of trauma. Also, the migrant's inability to fully express themselves the way they want to, which breeds the need to conceal certain thoughts portrays a sense of limitation.

However, Darling gradually adopts American slang and expressions, particularly through her friendships with Marina and Kristal. For instance, in a chat with Marina a Nigerian, there is constant use of shortcodes, as the conversation is filled with abbreviated forms like "wt" (what), "nuthin" (nothing), "lykit" (like it), and "dunno" (don't know) (275). It shows how Darling has absorbed contemporary American teenage communication styles. This transformation in language use marks a significant shift from her earlier struggles with English in Zimbabwe, revealing how border crossing has led her to not only master Basic English but also adapt to modern American digital communication patterns. As a result of being in a multicultural American environment, Darling is also able to engage in basic Spanish conversation at the mall, "when we pass, he says, Buenos días, señorita, and I smile even more and say, Buenos días" (227). Therefore, portraying a broader form of Western linguistic adaptation beyond just mastering English. Hence portraying also maturity in language use.

Technology and media consumption also reflect the characters' deep engagement with Western culture in *We Need New Names*, shaping characters' perceptions, experiences, and modes of communication. Engagements with social media portray Western influence in the text. "Later, when I got onto Facebook, he had told the story there and there were so many likes and LOLs on his wall" (193).Bulawayo illustrates how Facebook becomes a platform for sharing experiences and seeking validation through "likes" and "LOLs". Technology also poses as a tool for assimilating Western culture through television shows that become informal language teachers, Darling actively learns to navigate American culture. Her systematic approach to learning American accents by watching popular shows like "Dora the explorer", and "Golden Girls" (194) reveals how media shapes her growth as well. Thus, Bulawayo poignantly captures how technology and media function as powerful agents of assimilation and transformation, as it facilitates characters' integration into American society.

Okolie further presents "Becoming the Counterstance", which encapsulates migrants' resistance to the conformity of the newly found culture ("Transnational Border and the Prospects for Identity Reformation" 7). Bulawayo portrays resistance through

community building, "And when they came to join us in America, hungry and hollow and hopeful, we held them tight and welcomed them to a home that was not ours. We smelled their hair and clothes, we begged them for news of our land—big news, small news, any news" (246). Hence, these migrants build up community and resistance in America through collective action and mutual aid. This resistance further embodies the display of Zimbabwean culture in America.

> The uncles and aunts bring goat insides and cook ezangaphakathi and sadza and mbhida and occasionally they will bring amacimbi, which is my number one favorite relish, umfushwa, and other foods from home, and people descend on the food like they haven't eaten all their lives…When they cook home food, even Aunt Fostalina will forget she is on a fruit diet. (161)

The presence of these local dishes in their gathering portrays their efforts to maintain their connection to their Zimbabwean roots and preserve their cultural heritage. The shared meals also serve as a way for them to unite and find comfort in the familiar taste of home. This is evident in Aunt Fostalina who forgets her restrictions when in contact with the dishes.

Finally, "Recrossing the border in a new consciousness" as portrayed by Okolie in "Transnational Border and the Prospects for Identity Reformation" (7) encapsulates the emergence of the hybrid character. At this point, the migrant character exists in a third space or consciousness that is neither fully American nor Zimbabwean. This is symbolized by Darling's relationship with the ivory slab shaped like Africa:

> When I saw the slab at Eliot's, sitting there with the other artefacts he'd bought on his world trips, it felt like the eye was looking at me so the right thing to do was to steal the ivory map. I hang it right above my bed and look around my room; it looks complete, but I feel like I'm not because I'm busy thinking about home and l feel like I can't breathe from missing it. (284)

The ivory slab serves as a symbol of the protagonist's attempt to bridge the gap between her life inZimbabwe and in America, as she steals it from Eliot's collection and hangs it above her bed. Her act of theft reveals a yearning for a physical connection to her homeland, even though "home" is now a complex and shifting concept.

Identity in Transit: Reconstruction of Selfhood

Bulawayo powerfully illustrates how spatial crossing initiates an irreversible psychological transformation, where attempts to reclaim one's former identity become

increasingly futile. This inability to return to one's original self-manifests in several ways throughout the novel.Social relationships especially with those left behind, become impossible to fully reclaim. The growing distance between Darling and her childhood friends as a result of physical separation symbolizes the impossibility of maintaining her former social identity. Chipo presents this reality in a conversation with Darling,

> What are you doing not in your country right now? Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? Why did you just leave? If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it. You have to fight for it no matter what, to make it right. (286)

The question "What are you doing outside your country right now?" highlights how migration creates fractures in social relationships. The confrontational tone in "Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala?" suggests intimacy mingled with reproach, showing how once-close bonds can become sources of tension. Statements like "You have to love it to live in it" imply that those left behind may view a migrant's absence as a social betrayal, complicating Darling's ability to maintain her former identity. However, this perspective that physical presence is necessary for belonging overlooks the reality that migration forces individuals into a liminal space where their relationships and identities are irrevocably altered. Hence, considering Leaving as abandonment makes it difficult to retain one's previous social self.

Cultural practices and values also undergo this transformation. It occurs when individuals become disconnected from their cultural practices and ways of life. Bulawayo depicts this using first generation immigrant's experience, as their children adopt the customs of their new homeland.

> When our children became young adults they did not ask for our approval to marry. We did not get bride prices... At their weddings, we did not spill beer and tobacco on the earth, did not beat drums to thank our ancestors...Our children raised their families and we did not tell them what to do, or how to bring up their children. When we grew old, they did not beg us to stay with them. When we grew very old, they put us here in these nursing homes where we are taken care of by strangers…. (249)

The neglect of ancestral traditions like bride prices and ceremonial offerings to ancestors depicts a profound disconnection from culture, where parents find themselves becoming strangers to their own cultural expectations while watching their children embrace entirely different social norms and values. The image of being cared for by strangers instead of family members also serves as a powerful symbol of alienation.

The migrant character in *We Need New Names*, finally takes on an unsettled identity which struggles to capture the fragmented sense of self, experienced by those who have been uprooted from their cultural origins. "And with our parents gone, we told ourselves, we have no home anymore" Bulawayo expresses that since the families left behind are no more, they lose their sense of belonging and find themselves detached from the land they once called home. The tragic death of Ncuncu (Bornfree's dog) captured at the end of the novel serves as a powerful metaphor for migrants' fate. Just as Ncuncu's life was reducedto "crushed meat", the migrants' dream and individual story lie buried with their history reduced to bare statistics.

Conclusion

Migration engenders a profound reconfiguration of self, revealing the liminal spaces where cultural identities are negotiated, fragmented, and reconstructed. This study opens broader horizons for understanding migration literature beyond *We Need New Names* as it foregrounds the nuanced processes of adaptation and displacement. Demonstrating that contemporary migrant experiences are fundamentally characterized by a perpetual state of in-betweenness that challenges their notion of belonging. The study suggests that contemporary literature increasingly represents migration not as a linear narrative of assimilation, but as a complex, non-linear process of continuous negotiation and reinvention.

The integrationof the bildungsroman concept with border theory offers a promising framework for analysing transnational narratives, potentially providing deeper insights into the psychological and sociological dimensions of global mobility. By highlighting the fluidity of identity and the transformative power of spatial and temporal crossings, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of human adaptability, cultural hybridity, and the ongoing dialogue between individual experience and global interconnectedness.

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