



# *Irony, Names and Linguistic Resistance: NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names as a World-Making Narrative*

by Alessandra Di Pietro

**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary works of African literature often engage in the depiction of a geographical and cultural dislocation inscribed in today's pattern of global migration. NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) fits within this framework as a female coming-of-age novel that follows the story of Darling, from the character's childhood in post-2000 Zimbabwe to the alienating experience of life as a migrant in the United States of America. The peculiarity of the novel lays in Bulawayo's linguistic choices, in particular the use of irony and the practice of (re)naming, which come to represent the feelings of un-belonging and political disillusionment that define the characters' geo-cultural displacement. Using the normative theory of literature (Cheah 2016) as a theoretical framework, this paper further analyses the use of such literary devices as tools through which the narrative opens up to alternative worlds of representation. In this sense, this paper argues that Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* can be considered as a world-making narrative of cultural and linguistic resistance against the disruption of Zimbabwe's socio-political situation.

**KEY WORDS:** African literature; NoViolet Bulawayo; migration; world-making narrative



## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary works of African literature often engage in narratives of migration, representing the various ways in which a geographical and cultural dislocation can affect diasporic subjectivities. NoViolet Bulawayo's<sup>1</sup> *We Need New Names* (2013) fits within this framework as a female coming-of-age novel that follows the story of Darling. Included in the 2013 Man Booker Prize shortlist, *We Need New Names* is the debut of the Zimbabwean author, anticipated by the story titled "Hitting Budapest" (now the opening chapter of the novel), already winner of the Caine Prize in 2011.<sup>2</sup> The novel is divided in two parts: the first one recounts the characters' childhood in post-2000 Zimbabwe; the second part describes Darling's alienating experience after she moves to the United States, where she deals with feelings of un-belonging and the loss of her cultural identity, both consequences of the transnational movement she experiences.

Throughout the novel, in order to represent the characters' geographical and cultural dislocation, Bulawayo relies on peculiar linguistic choices, in particular the use of irony and the practice of (re)naming. Despite having been accused of creating an "aesthetic of suffering" (Habla)<sup>3</sup> in her representation of Africa, this paper argues that Bulawayo's narrative is one of resistance against such stereotyped images of the continent. As a matter of fact, if read in light of the normative theory of literature developed by Pheng Cheah, the practice of (re)naming and the use of irony in the novel can be considered tools through which the narrative opens up to alternative worlds of representation. This paper, therefore, analyses how *We Need New Names* actualises literature's world-making capacity as a counter-narrative of cultural and linguistic resistance against the disruption of Zimbabwe's socio-political situation. In this regard, the next section introduces the theoretical framework used to analyse the novel in question.

---

<sup>1</sup> NoViolet Bulawayo was born Elisabeth Zandile Tshele. The author changed her name to honour both her late mother, Violet (the prefix *No* means "with" in isiNdebele, the author's native language), and her hometown, Bulawayo, which is the second largest city in Zimbabwe (after Harare, the country's capital).

<sup>2</sup> "Hitting Budapest" was first published in the *Boston Review* in 2010. The original story can be retrieved at the following link: <http://bostonreview.net/bulawayo-hitting-budapest>.

<sup>3</sup> *We Need New Names* is only one of the various contemporary literary works of (Anglophone and Francophone) African literature that have been accused of perpetrating a so-called "poverty porn" image of Africa. More than on a narrative level, however, such a debate seems to include a wider discussion regarding the reception of African literature within today's global literary market. In this sense, the main accusation against émigré writers of the third generation is that they adjust their stories to the demand of European/American markets that want a sensationalised narration of Africa. If, on the one hand, this paradigm comes at an ideological cost for the authors; on the other hand, these texts also subvert stereotypical representations of Africa by unveiling the neo-colonial mechanisms of power still present on the continent, while modifying the global literary canon. For more on the argument, see A. Ede's *Narrative Moment and Self-Anthropologizing Discourse* (2015) and S. Brouillette's *On the African Literary Hustle* (2017)—Brouillette also considers the so-called "NGOization" of African literature.



## FRAMING LITERATURE'S NORMATIVITY

The normative theory of literature has been recently developed as a response to the limits of literary theories of world literature, which usually focus either on the *corpus* of texts included within the definition of “world literature” and/or on their circulation within the global literary market.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the majority of theories of world literature developed in the last two decades consider the notion of the “world” only from a geographical perspective, *de facto* limiting its potential role in relation to literature itself.

In this sense, the normative theory of literature developed by Pheng Cheah in *What Is a World?* (2016) can be considered somehow groundbreaking as it addresses the meaning of “world” in relation to literature. Through the analysis of four philosophical approaches (idealism, Marxist materialism, phenomenology, and deconstruction), Cheah shifts the attention from the traditionally debated topics of world literature. The theory focuses on “the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethico-political horizon it opens up for the existing world” (Cheah 5). Here, the concept of “normativity”<sup>5</sup> refers to the notion that norms generally have universal validity because they are immanent to the collectivity of human existence, therefore exerting an influential force that can actively bring people to worldly action. If applied to literature, such a notion can be useful to understand the capacity of literature of changing the world by opening up alternative spaces and perspectives of analysis, that is, a conceptualisation of literature as a world-making activity (Cheah 6).

In order to understand the normative theory of literature, the notion of “world” cannot be considered only in spatial terms, i.e., as a category constructed around the mapping of the world-system’s geography. In this regard, the result is the division of a Mercatorian space organised through processes of capitalist globalisation, according to which European and American countries still hold an hegemonic position within the global, geo-political order—a legacy of imperial and colonial systems of power. Furthermore, to think of the world only in spatial terms means to consider literature as nothing more than a mere variable factor within the economic system of the literary market, as it already happens in renowned literary theories based either on a world-system model or on a circulation model.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a more extensive analysis of recent theories of world literature, I suggest the following comprehensive works: *Debating World Literature* (2004), *World Literature: A Reader* (2012), the recently published *Handbook of Anglophone World Literatures* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> There has been some criticism moved against Cheah’s use of the term “normative”. In her recently published book *Postcolonialism After World Literature* (2019), Lorna Burns argues against “the use of a term with such conservative connotations”, underlining that “by characterizing literature as a normative force, Cheah grants it a coherence that troubles its disruptive capacity” (Burns 20). While maintaining the validity of Cheah’s approach, Burns offers a reading of alternative philosophical perspectives to analyse literature as a form of dissent.



On the contrary, according to Cheah's normative theory, the world is first and foremost a temporal category. Based on a phenomenological account of worldliness<sup>6</sup> as a starting point, this theory "conceives of the world not only as a spatio-geographical entity but also as an ongoing dynamic process of becoming, something that possesses a historical-temporal dimension and hence is continually being made and remade" (Cheah 42). The world is thus driven by a force rooted in temporality that constantly enables the opening of new worlds. In this sense, literature can communicate with this force that characterises the world because of its ontological status and its receptibility — defined as "the structure of opening through which one receives a world and another world can appear" (Cheah 186). Literature, therefore, plays an active role in the process of world-making by becoming "an inexhaustible resource for reworlding and remaking the degraded world given to us by commercial intercourse, monetary transactions, and the space-time compression of the global culture industry" (Cheah 186-187).

For these reasons, the normative theory of literature emerges as particularly valid if applied to literary works produced in the global, postcolonial South as they often inherently engage with socio-cultural, economic and political themes of resistance against the exclusionary hierarchies of today's globalised world. Thus, such contemporary narratives create alternative cartographies through which it is possible to concretely rewrite canonical ideas of literature (Cheah 214). In this sense, despite the representation of a poverty-stricken country, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* can be considered as an instance of literature's normativity. As the following analysis demonstrates, the novel's language becomes a site of resistance that enables a world-making narrative.

## *WE NEED NEW NAMES AS A WORLD-MAKING NARRATIVE*

As the title predicts, one of the central issues of Bulawayo's literary debut is the necessity of finding new names, an act that is symbolically related to the desire for a change in the politics of Zimbabwe.<sup>7</sup> Bulawayo has been inspired by real events that happened in the recent history of the country. In this regard, when asked for an explanation of the novel's title, the author stated:

---

<sup>6</sup> Cheah mainly builds his theoretical framework on Martin Heidegger's phenomenological account of worldliness—see, Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). The German philosopher argues that the world is inherently connected to the ontological concept of *Dasein*, which is rooted in temporality. Temporalisation is the ground of existence, the authentic reality and the source of the force of worlding.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Bulawayo's novel is placed within a specific literary tradition, featuring alongside other contemporary texts that explore the Zimbabwean crisis. Post-2000 Zimbabwean literature reflects on the socio-political and economic crisis of the country, while also maintaining a global perspective: like Bulawayo, many Zimbabwean writers are part of the diaspora. Contemporary Zimbabwean authors include, among others, Petina Gappah, Valerie Tagwira, Christopher Mlalazi, Tendai Huchu.



I wrote the novel at a specific time of my country's history. Recent history, I should say, when the country was coming undone, due to failure of leadership. And by saying "we need new names" I was speaking for the need for us as a people to sort of re-imagine, rethink ourselves, rethink our way, think about where we were going. We needed new ways of seeing things, new ways of doing things, new leadership. It was basically a call for renewal. But it should not be confined to Zimbabwe. I believe you can translate across borders. (Peschel)

The necessity to adopt new names as an opening to diverse forms of leadership underlines the important role played by (re)naming practices within the novel. In order to understand such relevance, a brief contextualisation of naming systems in Zimbabwe might be useful. As Ncube notes, the tradition of using African names changed during the colonial period when biblical names overshadowed names in local languages; in the postcolonial (and now global) period, a further shift happened and names have become a way to culturally and linguistically reappropriate an African and Zimbabwean identity (Ncube 219-220).

In the case of Bulawayo's novel, then, the author's "onomastic strategy [...] represent[s] a creative form of resistance and subversion of the portrayed world" (Ncube 230). In Bulawayo's representation of the Zimbabwean crisis<sup>8</sup> and of its consequences, such as the characters' geo-cultural displacement, the practice of (re)naming also becomes a signifier of un-belonging and political disillusionment (Moji 185). Such a condition of dislocation creates a fragmented sense of home and of the self, which the novel's protagonist tries to elaborate through the act of (re)naming countries, places, and people, in order to give them an identity that she can recognise—for Darling, to (re)name is to reclaim her identity so as to overcome her cultural, physical, and linguistic displacement. Thus, the act of (re)naming is a literary device through which the author contests the Zimbabwean crisis. If read through the lens of the normative theory of literature, such practice, alongside the use of irony, becomes a form of resistance against the worldlessness the characters live in.

Here, the term worldlessness refers to the condition of unworlding, i.e., a disruption that happens when the worlds that exist on the outside of Eurocentric definitions of time and space are forced into the logic of the European centre (Cheah 193). In this sense, the disruption of Darling's original world finds its origin in the colonial history of the country and is further exacerbated by the consequences of the post-2000 crisis, which further deprive the characters of their world and agency. Bulawayo's narration not only unveils the dynamics of unworlding, but the author's onomastic strategy can also be considered performative, in the sense that it enables a world-making narrative that opens up new spaces of representation: for Darling, the act of (re)naming becomes a source of cultural and linguistic resistance against the

---

<sup>8</sup> Zimbabwe's economic crisis started in the 1990s. During Robert Mugabe's government (1987-2017), hyperinflation and unemployment increased. Mugabe was a controversial figure: when the country achieved independence (1980), he was praised as an anti-colonial hero because of his role in the liberation war or Second Chimurenga (1966-1979); however, once President, Mugabe established a dictatorship. Accused of human rights abuse, Mugabe's violent politics have been sanctioned by the European Union, as in the case of the violent outcomes of the 2000 Fast-Track Land Reform program, which meant to repossess and redistribute lands from the minority of white farmers to black people.





worldlessness she lives in since, as aforementioned, to (re)name is to reclaim both her original world and her identity.

The peculiarity of the names used can be grasped by the readers from the first chapter, in which the author introduces the characters (all of them kids between nine and eleven years old) and the world they inhabit<sup>9</sup>. The children live in a shantytown called Paradise, a name that is clearly ironic. As a matter of fact, irony dominates much of the narration and it usually has a double outcome: either it is used by Darling to distance herself from the worldless reality she lives in, as in the case of the ER episode mentioned later on in this paper; or it is a way through which she tries to appropriate the spaces she occupies (both in Zimbabwe and America) to overcome feelings of un-belonging and political disillusionment, as it happens with the ironic renaming of Paradise and other nearby areas.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Paradise, the name has a biblical significance since “it represents a reversal of its biblical counterpart. Its residents were cast out by a threatening God-like ruler and sent to this false Eden to rebuild with nothing but “a nation’s memories” (Fetterolf 11). Darling and her family are forced to move to Paradise because of the so-called *Operation Murambatsvina* (2005), which means “get rid of trash” in Shona, one of the official languages of Zimbabwe: carried out by Mugabe’s government as a way to “restore sanity and order in the urban areas” (Slaughter), this operation of forced evictions de facto destroyed the homes of thousands of people, condemning them to poverty, starvation, and homelessness, aggravating the country’s ongoing economic and employment crisis.

In order to escape Paradise, Darling and her friends are constantly moving to other areas—this continuous movement from one place to another is almost a reification of Darling’s future migration to the United States, as well as a projection of the children’s desire to move away from the country to live in other idealised realities. The novel’s characters mainly move to two other places, Budapest and Shanghai.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Budapest is described by Darling as the opposite of Paradise:

---

<sup>9</sup>The novel is mainly told by a first-person narrator, Darling herself.

<sup>10</sup>In her analysis of the relations between irony and meaning in African literary discourse, Onyeoziri argues that irony can have a double function: “a use of irony for the imperialist Other and a use of irony for oneself or for one’s own community”. Onyeoziri notes that irony was a way to mask criticism against imperialism in order to avoid censorship (Onyeoziri 25). As a matter of fact, censorship is still a pressing problem in post-2000 Zimbabwe as many authors who critically engaged in socio-political commentary have been silenced by Mugabe’s regime (for instance, Chenjerai Hove was forced into exile in 2001; Mlalazi’s 2008 political play *The Crocodile of Zambezi* is only one of the works banned in recent years).

<sup>11</sup>“Budapest” and “Shanghai” do not refer to the European and Asian cities but to places within Zimbabwe. As mentioned in the paper, Darling (re)names geographical areas in order to reclaim her identity and resist the disruption of her original world. The foreign names used by Bulawayo are significant because they reiterate the global nature of the novel even though the narrative is firmly rooted within the historical and literary tradition of Zimbabwe.



Budapest is big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat traveled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences, and the Durawalls and the flowers and the big trees heavy with fruit that's waiting for us since nobody around here seems to know what to do with it. It's the fruit that gives us courage, otherwise we wouldn't dare be here. I keep expecting the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from. (Bulawayo 4)

This passage reveals the irony behind the place's name, i.e., the neighbourhood is so different from Paradise that it could easily be a place in another country, hence the foreign name: "Budapest, although a neighbouring suburb, is as far removed from the reality of Paradise as the eponymous European city" (Moji 184). Such distance clearly lays in the difference in terms of social status between the people who live in Paradise and those who live in Budapest: while the children in Paradise are starving, people living in Budapest are rich enough that they do not need to eat fruits from the trees, instead letting them waste away. In this regard, there is a passage in the novel in which the children meet a woman living in Budapest: she is described by Darling as wearing a T-shirt that says "Save Darfur" and a golden chain on her neck in the shapes of the map of Africa; she tells the children that she comes from London and she is visiting her father's country for the first time.<sup>12</sup> Darling and her friends are shocked by the fact that the woman throws away some food she was eating to take a photo of them. The children end up shouting at the woman: "We shout and we shout and we shout; we want to eat the thing she was eating, we want to hear our voices soar, we want our hunger to go away" (Bulawayo 10).

This moment within the novel underlines how Bulawayo's descriptions of a poverty-stricken Zimbabwe are not merely sensationalistic images, but they are meant as a form of denunciation. The description of the woman's conduct, from the photo she takes of the children to the "thing" she is eating and throws away, even the Darfur T-shirt she is wearing—such details are significant since the passage seems to reiterate a specific type of media coverage of Africa that often features photos of starving children,<sup>13</sup> while also reprimanding actions of (white) saviorism (as the "Save Darfur" T-shirt testifies) that frequently translate into neo-colonial mechanisms of power still present on the continent. One of these is represented within the novel through the description of the presence of NGO's people on the territory, who continuously take photos of Darling and her friends, giving gifts to them and to their parents:

They just like taking pictures, these NGO people, [...] They don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take. We don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts. [...] We are careful not to touch the NGO people, though, because we can see that even though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them. (Bulawayo 52, 54)

---

<sup>12</sup> The presence of high numbers of white Zimbabweans is a legacy of colonialism and the cause of tensions between white and black people in the country. The novel touches upon this topic, also narrating the increasing episodes of violence against white people (particularly farmers), as in ch. 8 titled "Blak Power" [sic].

<sup>13</sup> On the stereotypical representations of Africa, Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina has written a satirical article titled "How to Write About Africa" (2005).



The NGO's people are described as external spectators of the children's world, even though they are physically present on the territory in order to intervene through humanitarian actions. However, the chasm between the idealised will upon which such organisations are based and the concrete modes of operation is reinforced through the fact that they do not want to touch the kids, but only take pictures of them (just like the woman in Budapest did). This distance further reiterates hierarchical relations of power that foment the neo-colonial monetisation of poverty. As Brouillette notes, in Bulawayo's narration "charities [...] just manufacture images of suffering to secure charitable contributions" (Brouillette).

In this regard, another passage that highlights the neo-colonial exploitation of African territories is the description of Shanghai, an area of construction where Chinese investors are building a mall. Through Darling's description of this neighbourhood, the act of construction becomes the personification of a destruction that seems to engulf the whole country and its people:

It's just madness inside Shanghai; machines hoist things in their terrible jaws, machines maul the earth, machines grind rocks, machines belch clouds of smoke, machines iron the ground. Everywhere machines. The Chinese men are all over the place in orange uniforms and yellow helmets; there's not that many of them but from the way they are running around, you'd think they are a field of corn. And then there are the black men, who are working in regular clothes—torn T-shirts, vests, shorts, trousers cut at the knees, overalls, flip-flops, tennis shoes. (Bulawayo 42)

Once again, Bulawayo unveils the systems of exploitation still operating in Zimbabwe, as well as in other African countries. In the passage quoted above, the children are aware of the different conditions in which people are working in Shanghai: while the Chinese have uniforms and helmets, African workers wear regular clothes. Such a difference further underlines a hierarchical structure, which remarks a division between exploiters/exploited (as if resembling the previous separation of colonisers/colonised).

These passages—the children meeting the woman in Budapest, the presence of NGOs and the description of the working conditions in Shanghai—define a situation of unworlding that deprive the characters of their agency. Such disruption of Zimbabwe's reality is caused by the unstable politics of the country, which have permitted not only the reiteration of systems of exploitation for economic reasons (the construction of the mall can only benefit a minority of wealthy people, while the rest of the population is starving, like Darling's family); such politics have also destroyed the homes of thousands of people, depriving them of their jobs and forcing them to migrate elsewhere—all of this in a country that, as mentioned above, is already torn apart by an ongoing economic crisis, unemployment, and tensions between ethnic communities.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Besides conflicts with the white minority, there are also tensions between Shona and Ndebele, two of the major ethnic groups of Zimbabwe, which date back to the country's colonial and postcolonial history. First a British colony named Rhodesia (after Cecil J. Rhodes, who founded the British South African Company), the country became an unrecognised state with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence





In the first part of the novel, therefore, Bulawayo introduces the readers to the world(lessness) inhabited by Darling, placing the story within the literary and historical tradition of Zimbabwe. At the same time, the author underlines the relevance of both irony and of the practice of (re)naming as performative literary devices that enable a world-making narrative of resistance through which Darling can reclaim her identity. In this regard, even though Bulawayo never directly mentions Zimbabwe, some of the names used still act as “geopolitical signifiers” (Frassinelli 715) that refer to the country’s (pre)colonial and postcolonial past: for instance, the woman the children meet in Budapest lives on Chimurenga Street, a reference to Zimbabwe’s wars of liberation<sup>15</sup>; the children also cross Mzilikazi Road (Mzilikazi was a Ndebele King, the founding father of Matabeleland).<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, throughout the novel, Bulawayo’s onomastic strategy places Zimbabwe in a context that is firmly rooted in the country’s socio-political history; at the same time, however, the use of foreign names such as “Budapest” and “Shanghai” reinforces the global nature of the narrative. The interrelations between global and local references also emerge from the description of a game played by the children called “country-game”, in which each child identifies with a country:

But first we have to fight over the names because everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you must have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in - who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (Bulawayo 49)<sup>17</sup>

---

(1965) under Ian Smith’s white-minority led government. Ethnic tensions particularly emerged during the liberation war or Second Chimurenga (1966-1979), when the army of Smith’s government and two black nationalist forces fought against each other—the latter were the army of Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) led by Mugabe (majorly made up of Shona) and the army of Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo (majorly made up of Ndebele). In 1987, Mugabe and Nkomo united to create the still ruling Zimbabwean African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). For an extensive analysis of Zimbabwe’s history, see Zvobgo’s *A History of Zimbabwe, 1890-2000* and *Postscript, Zimbabwe, 2001-2008* (2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Chimurenga* is a Shona word (*Umvukela* in isiNdebele) that indicates a revolutionary struggle. If the Second Chimurenga refers to the liberation war that led the country to independence in 1980 (see footnote 8), the First Chimurenga (1896-1897) saw the Shona and Ndebele (historically known as Matabele) people fight against the British South Africa Company. In recent years, Mugabe’s land reform has been defined as a Third Chimurenga for its violent outcomes.

<sup>16</sup> Matabeleland is a southwestern region of Zimbabwe, whose capital is the city of Bulawayo.

<sup>17</sup> It might be interesting to note that the sentence “Who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart” is an intertextual reference to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Dambudzo Marechera’s *The House of Hunger* (1978), both of which in their own way denounce the administration of African countries (in this case, Nigeria and former Rhodesia) by foreign political forces. The intertextual references to these two literary works are reiterated throughout the novel and, as Moji argues, they reinforce “the difference between the idealism of nationalist liberation and the current era of political disillusionment” (Moji 185). Furthermore, as noted by Pfalzgraf, there are other intertextual



Such a peculiar game demonstrates that, despite their young age, the children somehow understand the differences among nation-states, distinguishing between the so-called “country-countries” (powerful, rich nations that hold a relevant role in the geopolitical, global order) and the “rags of countries” (usually former colonies scarred by poverty and unstable socio-political situations). The children’s knowledge is not only based upon the nations’ names, but, as Frassinelli argues, it also derives from those “global cultural flows and geopolitical signifiers with which the children are uncannily familiar [...] This is the globalized world that enters Paradise” (Frassinelli 716). The ways in which the external, globalised world can enter the children’s reality in Paradise is, for instance, through the presence of NGOs and of European and American journalists, who visit Zimbabwe to cover the news of the forced removals perpetrated by the government; as well as through the stories of their families and friends who migrated abroad, like Darling’s father who went to South Africa to work or her Aunt Fostalina who moved to the United States.

Ultimately, the fact that the children “have to fight over the names”, on the one hand, almost reiterates the power mechanisms at play between the countries; on the other hand, the appropriation of names is a way through which the children can distance themselves from the worldlessness they live in, overcoming the consequent un-belonging and political disillusionment. In the first part of the novel, such feelings are translated into the children’s desire to escape from Paradise, which is expressed by both Darling herself—who affirms: “I’m going to marry a rich man from Budapest. He’ll take me away from Paradise, away from the shacks [...] and everything else” (Bulawayo 12)—and by one of her friends, Bastard—<sup>18</sup>“I’m blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I’ll make lots of money, come back and buy a house in this very Budapest. Or even better, many houses: one in Budapest, one in Los Angeles, one in Paris. Wherever I feel like” (Bulawayo 13). Here, the mention of foreign names testifies the influence of the aforementioned global cultural flows upon the children’s knowledge, which oftentimes leads to an idealisation of other (usually European or American) realities as opposed to the “rag of country” they inhabit.

The expression of feelings of un-belonging and political disillusionment is also strictly associated to Bulawayo’s onomastic strategy as names denounce the situation of worldlessness the characters live in. For instance, some of the characters’ names are connected to and representative of the political situation of the country, e.g., Freedom, a baby who dies during the houses’ demolition (Bulawayo 67), or Bornfree, a political activist killed by government’s supporters (Bulawayo 140-141). Such names underlines with bitter irony the failure of Mugabe’s government: the new, so-called “born free” generations—those born after the achievement of national independence (1980)—might be free from colonial rule and the horrors of the civil war, but their fate is

---

references, as well: for instance, Hove’s novel *Bones* (1988) is referred to through Bulawayo’s various mentions of bones such as “Mother of Bones”, the name of Darling’s grandmother (Pfalzgraf 71). In this sense, Bulawayo’s novel is a contemporary text about the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis that nevertheless is intertextually related to the country’s literary tradition.

<sup>18</sup> As Moji notes, “the [Southern African] tradition of protecting infants from death by giving them an ugly name could result in a name such as Bastard” (Moji 183).



nevertheless sealed by an oppressive regime that de facto perpetrates a situation of unworlding through neo-colonial exploitation. Thus, names have different functions in the novel: when they refer to events, locations or people, they place the novel in the specific historical and literary Zimbabwean tradition; however, they also enable a world-making narrative of resistance precisely because it is through the act of (re)naming that Darling can assert her identity while unveiling the mechanisms of unworlding.

In this regard, irony is a powerful tool that permeates the entire narrative and is often related to the practice of (re)naming. As a matter of fact, the descriptions provided by the 10-year-old narrator continuously blend irony and tragedy, reinforcing the way irony is used to distance the children from the worldless reality they inhabit. This is particularly evident in the representation of some of the games played by the children, such as the reenactment of the murder of Bornfree (Bulawayo 140-141) or when they try to perform ER<sup>19</sup> on Chipso (a pregnant 11-year-old girl who was raped by her grandfather) by “trying to remove [her] stomach” with a hanger (Bulawayo 87). These episodes are only two instances of how irony is employed to create a narrative of resistance: whether used to distance the characters from the disrupted world they live in (as in the aforementioned passages) or to appropriate the spaces Darling occupies (both in Zimbabwe and America) in order to overcome feelings of un-belonging and political disillusionment — the use of irony, alongside Bulawayo’s onomastic strategy, becomes a source through which the author creates a performative narrative of resistance: for Darling, irony and (re)naming are a way to reclaim her identity and overcome the cultural, geographical and linguistic displacement caused by the disruption of Zimbabwe’s socio-political situation.

The consequences of such condition of worldlessness are further represented in three specific chapters (ch. 5, ch. 10, ch. 16), which describe the path of forced migration endured by the characters. Here, the subjects are identified through the pronouns “they” and “we” in order to underline what Moji defines a “collective displacement and a communal sense of (dis)location” (Moji 186). The three chapters show a crescendo of feelings of political disillusionment, powerlessness, and un-belonging. In ch. 5, “How They Appeared”, Bulawayo describes how people first arrived in Paradise, focusing the narrative on the complete absence of choice in their forced relocation:

They did not come to Paradise. Coming would mean that they were choosers. That they first looked at the sun, sat down with crossed legs, picked their teeth, and pondered the decision. That they had the time to gaze at their reflections in long mirrors, perhaps pat their hair, tighten their belts, check the watches on their wrists before looking at the red road and finally announcing: Now we are ready for this. They did not come, no. They just appeared (Bulawayo 73).

As mentioned above, there is biblical symbolism in this chapter that emerges both from Paradise’s name and from the metaphor of “Solid, Jericho walls of men” (Bulawayo

---

<sup>19</sup> The children reenact the famous American medical TV series, ER (1994-2009). As Moji notes, in line with Frassinelli’s analysis, the episode further “illustrates the permeability of the local space to global influences” (Moji 183).



76), used to refer to the men's attempts to resist the destruction of their homes and lives. Such situation of unworlding, which results in the deprivation of the people's world and agency, is connected by Bulawayo to Zimbabwe's (neo-)colonial history—the "black people evil for bulldozing" the population's homes are compared to the "white people who came to steal our land and make us paupers in our country" (Bulawayo 75). The consequent feelings of political disillusionment are expressed both by the children who dream of one day moving away from Paradise and by the people's powerlessness against the violent politics of the government, as Darling's father manifests: "Look at how things are falling apart [...] We should have left. We should have left this wretched country when all this started [...] You all don't get it, do you? Is this what I went to university for? Is this what we got independence for?" (Bulawayo 91-92).

The post-independence government has deprived the population of their agency, de facto assuming the shape of a neo-colonial regime, reiterating the worldlessness first created by colonisation. The conditions of poverty and the political disillusionment have forced people to move elsewhere, starting a series of infinite movements of mass migrations,<sup>20</sup> which are the core of ch. 10, "How They Left":

Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. [...] 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. When things fall apart, the children of the earth scurry and scatter like birds escaping a burning sky. [...] Leaving their mothers and fathers and children behind, [...] leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you just cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same. (Bulawayo 145)

Here, Bulawayo further highlights the political disillusionment through specific linguistic choices, e.g., the use of various verbs of movement, as well as the repetition of certain words and phrases such as "leaving" and "cannot/never be the same again". In these chapters, the language used reiterates the idea of a forced, never-ending relocation that is extended to the geo-cultural displacement of migrating abroad. In this sense, the initial feelings of political disillusionment and un-belonging are exacerbated by the characters' lack of agency, which forces them to "leave in droves". Ultimately, in ch. 16, "How They Lived", Bulawayo gives voice to the alienation of those who were forced to move to a foreign land: "Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages, and so when we spoke our voices came out bruised" (Bulawayo 240). If language remains the medium through which one can express one's own agency, then Bulawayo's linguistic choices, particularly the use of irony and the act of (re)naming, can be read as a source of resistance against the disruption and deprivation of the characters' original world, which is described as a communal dislocation.

---

<sup>20</sup> For a more extensive analysis of the representation of different forms of mobility in contemporary Zimbabwean literature and the relations with the socio-political situation of the country, see M. Pfalzgraf's study "Mobility" in *Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature in English: Crossing Borders, Transcending Boundaries* (2021).





In the second part of the novel, the author describes Darling's own alienating experience once she moves to the United States to live with her Aunt Fostalina. This second forced relocation not only reiterates the character's initial powerlessness, but it also causes a loss of cultural identity that emerges on a narrative level through the language used. For instance, Bulawayo deliberately misspells (*de facto* re-names) the title of ch. 11, "Destroyedmichygen", in order to highlight Darling's dislocation and the failure of her idealised image of America (Detroit is presented as a dangerous and economically fragile city). In this case, the ironic (re)naming is used by Darling to appropriate a place that she does not and cannot recognise. As Fetterolf notes, Darling's migration to America shows similar characteristics with the forced relocation described in "How They Appeared"—in Darling's eyes, just like Paradise, America is also characterised by loss and absence (Fetterolf 31):

You will not see any men seated under a blooming jacaranda playing draughts. Bastard and Stina and Godknows and Chipo and Sbho will not be calling me off to Budapest. You will not hear a vendor singing her wares, and you will not see anyone playing the country-game or chasing after flying ants. Some things only happen in my country, and this here is not my country. (Bulawayo 147)

Darling's identity fragmentation, caused by the loss of a place she can call home for the second time, is also intensified by the difficult relationships with American teenagers: the "kids teased me about everything, even the things I couldn't change, and it kept going and going so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything" (Bulawayo 165). The more Darling is exposed to social life in the United States, the more her subjectivity changes in order to fit within certain systems of relations. In an interview, Bulawayo notes that "Part of [Darling's] identity is tied to space. So without her language and without the specific group of people she interacts with, she has to become a different person" (Peschel). Darling's behavioural alteration is connected to the situation of unworlding that she still experiences and which, after moving to the United States, ensnares her in a stereotyped image of Africa and its peoples.

For instance, when Darling attends a wedding with Aunt Fostalina, she has a conversation with a white woman who asks her: "Africa is beautiful, [...] But isn't it terrible what's happening in the Congo? Just awful" (Bulawayo 175), and she then tells Darling how her niece is in the Peace Corps to help orphans in South Africa. The conversation makes Darling remember the unbalanced relations of power created by the presence of NGOs in Zimbabwe, which she experienced as a child; it also underlines how, oftentimes, Europeans or Americans talk about Africa as if it were a country without considering the great number of socio-political and ethno-religious differences among African people. In this sense, Moji notes that "Through the homogenizing connotation of the name 'Africa' Darling finds her subjectivity entangled in the history of the continent" (Moji 188), which contributes to annihilate her individuality.

In this sense, the disruption of Darling's original world is recreated in America, where the character is further deprived of her identity through increased feelings of unbelonging caused by the experience of geo-cultural displacement. If, in the first part of





the novel, the use of irony and the practice of (re) naming people and places are employed to distance the children from the worldless reality they inhabit; in the second part, these literary devices are used by Darling to appropriate the new spaces she inhabits in an attempt to overcome her cultural, geographical and linguistic dislocation.

In particular, the last chapter of the novel describes the manifestations of Darling's fragmented identity: the narration breaks down in a series of micro-scenes intersected with the character's memories about her life back in Zimbabwe. The chapter opens with Darling losing her patience while studying Biology and writing on the wall of her room with a red marker "iBioiyirabishi"—"Biology is rubbish" (Bulawayo 275); in the meantime, she exchanges texts over the phone with her friend Marina, talking about school and boys (Bulawayo 276-279); Darling's attention focuses then on her Uncle Kojo's behaviour (Bulawayo 280).<sup>21</sup> The description of these scenes is fast paced to represent Darling's mental breakdown, until the narration seems to suddenly slow down when she finds in the basement some objects in a box labelled "homeland decorations, etc.": "a medium-sized copper clock in the shape of the map of our country", a "weird mask" and a batik<sup>22</sup> that is a painting of a market scene (Bulawayo 282-283). These objects function as a sort of temporal bridge between past and present, transporting Darling back home in Zimbabwe—she is suddenly able to hear the market's noises, people laughing and children singing. As Moji notes:

[Darling's] thoughts and actions oscillate wildly between here and there, and then and now, foregrounding how the present gives new meaning to the past and vice versa. [...] In this final chapter, time and space are compressed to reveal a cyclical re-configuration of meaning or subjectivities. (Moji 189)

In this regard, the objects appear to have a poietic force that is inscribed in the narrative as an opening to another world: the description of Darling's original world, before the disruption caused by the failure of the post-independence government's politics. Darling's decision of positioning the African objects in her room means she is trying to appropriate that space as her own—a sort of reification of her attempts to linguistically claim the foreign space she is in through the practice of (re) naming ("Destroyedmichygen"). For Darling, to claim these African objects as her properties is another way to assert her African identity, reinforcing her relation to Zimbabwe. In this sense, the objects are a material manifestation of Darling's cultural and linguistic resistance against the displacement caused by the worldless reality she is inhabiting.

The final part of the novel presents yet another memory from Darling's past: right after the relocation in Paradise, "America put up the big reward for bin Laden" and the children "went hunting for him" as a game; they climbed Fambeki (a mountain in the

---

<sup>21</sup> Uncle Kojo lives with Darling's Aunt Fostalina in the United States. He spirals in an alcohol addiction induced by a condition of depression, which is caused by the loss of his son to America's war on terror. Darling re-names Uncle Kojo "Vasco De Gama" because he drives aimlessly in order to cope with his loss. "Vasco De Gama" is also the name of a song that Darling used to sing as a child in Paradise.

<sup>22</sup> Batik is a technique of hand-dyeing clothes by using wax. Of Javanese origins, it is a tradition that can be found in many cultures of the global South.



city of Bulawayo) and they “looked down. At the shanty. At the red earth. At Mzilikazi. At the Budapest houses in the distance” (Bulawayo 288-289). Here, Bulawayo creates a sort of circular narrative by choosing to set the novel’s ending right where it started, in Zimbabwe. In this sense, the repetition of names that act as geopolitical signifiers reaffirms the positioning of the novel in the country’s specific historical and literary tradition. As Ncube argues, Bulawayo’s onomastic strategy “ha[s] to be viewed in the greater picture of the internal structure and functioning of the novel in its attempt to deconstruct the tumultuous post-independence condition, not just in Zimbabwe but in other African countries as well” (Ncube 226).

Thus, the practice of ironically (re)naming people and places becomes a mode of linguistic and cultural resistance against Zimbabwe’s situation of worldlessness because, for Darling, to (re)name is to reclaim her African identity.

## CONCLUSION

*We Need New Names* engages in a depiction of the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis and of the characters’ consequent geo-cultural dislocation. Placing her novel in the country’s specific literary and historical tradition, Bulawayo unveils the mechanisms of unworlding perpetrated by the failure of the post-independence government’s politics, which contribute to the disruption of the characters’ original world. In the first part of the novel, the author explores the dynamics of neo-colonial systems of exploitation (e.g., the economic interests of foreign forces; the dehumanising and homogenising media representation done by NGOs and European/American journalists alike; the destruction of people’s homes and their forced relocations). In the second part, Bulawayo describes the alienation experienced by Darling once she moves to America.

This paper focused on some of the author’s peculiar linguistic choices, in particular the use of irony and the practice of (re)naming. These literary devices act as geopolitical signifiers that Bulawayo uses to place the novel in a Zimbabwean context, as well as signifiers of the characters’ un-belonging and political disillusionment. Using Cheah’s normative theory of literature as a theoretical framework, this paper argues that the tool of irony and the practice of (re)naming also enable a performative narrative of resistance: they permit Darling to both distance herself from the worldless reality she inhabits and to appropriate the spaces she occupies in order to give them an identity that she can recognise. Ultimately, it is through the use of irony and through the practice of (re)naming that Darling can assert her African identity and overcome the geo-cultural displacement caused by the unworlding of her original world. In this regard, Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* can be considered a world-making narrative of cultural and linguistic resistance against the disruption of Zimbabwe’s socio-political situation.

## WORKS CITED

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Books Limited, 2013.



- Baya, Raisedon, and Christopher Mlalazi. *The Crocodile of Zambezi*, 2008.
- Bulawayo, NoViolet. *We Need New Names*. Vintage, 2013.
- . "Hitting Budapest." *Boston Review*, 2010. <https://bostonreview.net/bulawayo-hitting-budapest/>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2021.
- Brouillette, Sarah. "On the African Literary Hustle." *Blind Field Journal*, 2017. <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2017/08/14/on-the-african-literary-hustle/>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2021.
- Burns, Lorna. *Postcolonialism After World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent*. Bloomsbury Academy, 2019.
- Cheah, Pheng. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Duke UP, 2016.
- D'haen, Theo, et al., editors. *World Literature: A Reader*. Routledge, 2012.
- Ede, Amatoritsero. "Narrative Moment and Self-Anthropologizing Discourse." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, pp. 112-129.
- Fetterolf, Elizabeth. "Lost in Transnation: Reconciling Geographical, Linguistic and Cultural Distance in NoViolet Bulawayo's 'We Need New Names'." *Senior Capstone Projects*. 659, 2017.
- Frassinelli, Pier Paolo. "Living in Translation: Borders, Language and Community in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2015, pp. 711-722.
- Habila, Helon. "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo—Review." *The Guardian*, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review/>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2021.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York UP, 1996.
- Helgesson, Stefan, et al. *Handbook of Anglophone World Literatures*. De Gruyter, 2020.
- Hove, Chenjerai. *Bones*. Baobab Books, 1988.
- Marechera, Dambudzo. *The House of Hunger*. Pearson Education Limited, 2013.
- Moji, Polo Belina. "New Names, Translation Subjectivities: (Dis)location and (Re)naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's 'We Need New Names'." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2015, pp. 181-190.
- Ncube, Gibson. "Mapping the Poetics of Names in the Novels of John Eppel, Petina Gappah and NoViolet Bulawayo." *The Postcolonial Condition of Names and Naming Practices in Southern Africa*, edited by Oliver Nyambi et al., Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2016, pp. 217-236.
- Onyeoziri, Gloria Nne. *Shaken Wisdom: Irony and Meaning in Postcolonial African Fiction*. Virginia UP, 2011.
- Peschel, Sabine. "Zimbabwean Author NoViolet Bulawayo: 'I Like to Write from the Bone'." *Deutsche Welle*, 2015. <https://www.dw.com/en/zimbabwean-author-noviolet-bulawayo-i-like-to-write-from-the-bone/a-18572543/>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2021.
- Pfalzgraf, Magdalena. *Mobility in Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature in English: Crossing Borders, Transcending Boundaries*. Routledge, 2021.
- Prendergast, Christopher, editor. *Debating World Literature*. Verso, 2004.



Slaughter, Barbara. "Zimbabwe: Mugabe's Operation Murambatsvina." *World Socialist Website: International Committee of the Fourth National (ICFI)*, 2005. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/07/zimb-j16.html>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2021.

Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write About Africa." *Granta 92: The View from Africa*, 2005. <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2021.

Zvobgo, Chengetai J. M. *A History of Zimbabwe, 1890-2000 and Postscript, Zimbabwe, 2001-2008*. Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2009.

---

**Alessandra Di Pietro** earned a Master of Arts in Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures from the "G. d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy. Since August 2019 she is a PhD student at the University of Bern, Switzerland, in the Department of English. She is working on her PhD project *Opening Up Worlds: Rethinking Anglophone World Literatures and Female Authorship Within The Global Literary Market* (working title). As a PhD student, she attended various international conferences. She also published reviews in *RSV. Rivista Studi Vittoriani* and in *The Gissing Journal*. Research interests: Anglophone literatures of the 20th and 21th centuries; Postcolonial theory; Gender studies; World literature; (Sub-saharan) African literature.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6216-3110>

[alessandra.dipietro@students.unibe.ch](mailto:alessandra.dipietro@students.unibe.ch)