

**Living Between Two Cultures: Acculturation and Identity in Sherman
Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and NoViolet
Bulawayo's *We Need New Names***

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore the psychological changes that may occur when an individual leaves his/her culture of origin and relocates to a new 'cultural context', through the child characters of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The paper is an analysis of how child protagonists Arnold and Darling live between two cultures and deal with acculturation. The process of acculturation fabricates a sense of identity, belonging and self, as they need to maintain their heritage culture and identity. The paper examines how much stress, and anxiety is experienced by the main protagonists and how well they adapt and assimilate themselves into a new culture.

Keywords- Acculturation, transcultural identity, hybridity, assimilation. hegemony.

Immigration has become the most prominent and worldwide phenomenon today. Millions of youths and adolescents are migrating to European countries in search of a better life, better education and employment to their families and themselves. About this Schwartz says, "this means many people, whether by choice, necessity, or coercion, are born in one country and move to another during their lifetime. Even when voluntary, immigration is often a difficult process for individuals and families. The decision to leave one's country of origin and move to another often brings disconnection from familiar social institutions and cultural practices, separation from family members, and isolation from sources of support in one's new homeland." (Schwartz, ed. al 2006). Migration leads to cultural change and entails adaptation and assimilation; sometimes

this migration has both positive and negative aspects and brings acculturative stress as migrants became the participants of “cultural plural societies”. (Kymlicka, 1995)

A generally accepted definition of acculturation mentions it as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups...under this definition acculturation is to be distinguished from ...assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation" (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 149-152)

If a person leaves his/ her homeland and shifts to a new society, he/she undergoes the process of acculturation. In this process psychological changes occur, they stumble upon new languages, cultural, social and economic practices. Moving to a new cultural society or adapting to a foreign culture is a challenge in itself, having to learn new languages, new social rules, traditions, and customs and this fabricates a sense of identity, belongingness, and self. At the same time, the movement entails the need to sustain their culture of origin while moving to a new culture. There are many “psychological changes that individuals undergo in all groups and their eventual adaptation to their new situations....These changes range from simple behavioral shifts such as ways of speaking, dressing, and eating, to more problematic ones proclaiming acculturative stress as revealed by uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. Adaptation can be psychological which involves a sense of well being or self-esteem or socio-cultural which involves acquiring a new language” (Rahiminezhad, 47). When individuals experience serious challenges in their life, they will not be able to deal with these arduous situations, since “the appropriate coping strategies and social supports are lacking” (Sam et al.) and this results in despondency, stress, and anxiety as they are expected to abnegate their own cultural credence and values after obtaining/adapting to a new culture. Acculturative stress is one of the bitterest experiences an individual undergoes as they are separated from their culture, land, family, and friends. During the process of acculturation an individual, who is engaged in two cultures, the first ‘culture of origin’ and second the culture of a new society, comes across behavioral changes such as language adeptness, dressing, food predilections, etc and “in this framework two issues are raised: the degree to which people wish to maintain their heritage culture and identity; and the degree to which people seek involvement with the larger society. When these two issues are crossed, an acculturation space is created with four sectors within which individuals may express how they are seeking to acculturate. Assimilation is the way when there is little interest in maintenance combined with a preference for interacting with the larger society. Separation is the way when cultural maintenance is sought while avoiding involvement with others. Marginalization exists when neither cultural maintenance nor interaction with others is sought. Integration is present when both cultural maintenance and involvement with the larger society are sought” (Berry, et al.).

Both immigrants, as well as non-immigrants have been forced to undergo the process of acculturation. One view about non-immigrant ethnic groups considers that "Acculturation among groups such as these [non-immigrants] is quite different from acculturation among voluntary immigrant people or refugees because their status as ‘minority’ or ‘ethnic groups’ within the receiving culture is involuntary.” (Markus, Steele and Steele. 2000)

In Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the main protagonist, Arnold Spirit, a Spokane Indian adolescent who lives in Reservation (a place for Native Americans), decides to go beyond the limits of reservation life and to move outside cultural boundaries and out of poverty for a better education. Arnold opts for a better life. He wants to go "somewhere where other people have hope" (Alexie 43). He decides to attend Reardan High School, an all white school outside the reservation, as he finds, "Reardan is rich, white farm town..." (Alexie, 45-46). Acculturative stress arises in Junior before joining Reardan, he has the fear of acceptance and feeling of inferiority, "I was scared of those Reardan kids, and maybe I was scared of hope, too..." (Alexie, 51) It was not easy for Junior to leave rez and attend an all-white school. He was destitute of the convivial support of his community; his people want him to stay in rez. Arnold works through this process of creating a space that is his own by means of his journal that he keeps, the process of inscription being an outlet for his internalizing of experiences. Arnold feels caught between two cultures as he goes to school and returns to the reservation in the evening, "traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation." (118). Experiencing this feeling of alienation and of being torn between two identities, and cultures Arnold says, "I always felt like a stranger...I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other" (Alexie, 2009, 118). This accounts both for a certain alienation and the consciousness of 'othering'. However, Arnold evolves and matures. T. Sunith Kumar says, "Arnold in *The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* not only struggles a lot to reconcile the multiple layers of his identity but also eventually comes out with a unified personality amalgamating the traits of divergent worlds into a complete or harmonious identity" and refers to Arnold's leaving and coming back as the "central paradox" of the narrative whereby he evolves through two opposing worlds. (65)

In *We Need New Names*, the black female protagonist who lives in postcolonial Zimbabwe migrates to America, her dreamland, to fulfill her "American Dreams", and to find a better life. Like Arnold, Darling wants to escape from the life of poverty and starvation in Paradise, a fictitious place in Zimbabwe. This sense of extrication leads her to leave her homeland for a new land. Unlike Arnold, her move to America is a bigger and more intense thing, both physically and psychologically. She believes that America is her dreamland, a country of abundance and opportunities, where her life will be comfortable. In spite of the warnings by her friends, Darling thinks of "migrating" to America, to her aunt Fostalina, where she thinks she will be free from poverty and hunger, and will not have to steal. Darling, an undocumented illegal immigrant, finds herself unable to cope with the white culture that alters her 'Utopian image of America' and causes acculturative stress, alienation, sense of loss, and nostalgia, her cultural identity comes in question. She finds it difficult to assimilate into a new culture as the white American culture is vastly different from her own culture, and consequently results her disillusionment with America.

Suketu Mehta rejects the term 'globalized' as fitting more to the upper class, is uncomfortable with the term 'Afropolitan' as partisan, and instead, advocates the use of the term 'interlocal': meaning, a person who is able to connect with two or more places that concern him/her, who is not linked to one single nation, who is connected and interacts with the texture of his/her surrounding physical reality, and who is characterised by multiple, heterogeneous

belongings (79). Unlike Arnold, Darling's flight in search for emancipation is also away from gender violence, the novel presenting three episodes of it. She is also a traumatized, having seen the destruction of her village, forced removal and experiences recurring nightmares. Carmen Concilio calls the novel a "Bildungsroman in reverse" and asserts, "All the rites of passage, the steps into knowledge and consciousness and, ultimately adulthood are for Darling a slow and gradual descent into hell, rather than a paved way to her individual development and personal progress...." (41) The migration does not only lead to adaptation and acculturation but also to disillusionment, and fall of the ideal.

For both Arnold and Darling movement from a place of poverty to a place of hope is a "flight to emancipation" from the life of "starvation, illiteracy, unemployment, forced removal, epidemics, structural violence" (Simplegadi, 34) Arnold and Darling are also products of a new generation, on whom, because of changed times and circumstances, the weight of the glory of the past of their people is less and the pressure of the synchronic moment is more. As Kathleen Carroll says for Alexie, "By drawing the past into the present, Alexie brings the subordinate and the dominant cultures into conversation with each other and subliminally critiques the ways that being inscribed within the Eurocentric stereotype of the "white man's Indian" has usurped Native Americans' efforts to re-imagine and recreate a modern identity that insures communal survival." (75) Yet, what is ingrained inside them can not be forgotten and therefore the acculturative stress that Arnold and Darling have to go through.

Before joining Reardan, Junior's identity was social, determined by his reservation tribe as a poor and colonized Indian. He says, "It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly cycle and there is nothing you can do about it." (Alexie, 11). Junior's identity was based on these complicated and intricate beliefs that being an Indian, he was born to be poor, powerless, helpless and ugly. Of course, Arnold undergoes acculturative stress to fit into all- white culture, he has the fear of acceptance, because he was well aware with the natural propensity of society that as an Indian of reservation he was born to be poor and stupid and he does not deserve to get white education and better life, "Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit." (Alexie 56).

However, after a conversation with his geometry teacher when the teacher says, "You're a bright and shining star too. You're the smartest kid in the school. And I don't want you to fail. And I don't want you to fade away. You deserve better."(40), he acknowledges that living in a reservation means being marginalized even in education, which forestalls him to establish his own cultural as well as personal identity.

The word 'movement' has binary meanings for each Darling and Arnold. For Arnold movement means an opportunity to form his personal identity; on the other hand, for Darling movement means losing control over the space where her identity is formed and therefore, a loss of cultural identity. Arnold realizes that it's not belongingness but rather the external factors that decide one's identity. He discovers that only his personal identity can enable him to emerge from this

postcolonial cultural identity. As Schwartz et al. say, “social and cultural identities underlie acculturation and personal identity can help to ‘anchor’ the immigrant person during cultural transition and adaptation” (Schwartz, Montgomery, and Briones 02). on the other hand, Darling’s ‘American Dreams’ which assure better life, recognition and ‘upward social mobility’ are elusive and leave her disillusioned. Truslow Adams describes “American Dreams” as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (34). Darling’s image of ‘My America’ fades away and she realizes that “this place doesn’t look like my America, doesn’t even look real” (150).

The journey, both literal and psychic, is not easy for either Arnold or Darling. The process of acculturation starts when they enter the white culture; they are not welcomed and feel like outsiders. As Arnold tells the reaction of white kids once he enters to Reardan for the first time: “Those white kids could not believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only other Indian in town?” (Alexie, 54). This, of course, is not without an inner conflict between the more dynamic personal identity and cultural identity. When Arnold gets transferred to Reardan, he was being laughed at because of his name ‘Junior’ and he thought that “Junior was a weird name”(Alexie 60) and he reintroduces himself as Arnold to assimilate into a new society. In fact, labels/naming are very much related to identity creation as it is the perception of one by others that may lead to self-perception, for example the process of stereotyping is one of erasure of the identity, the signifier of it being the name, and creating another name or label coming out of this stereotyping. Arnold sees himself as having two completely different selves: Junior, as the outcast from the reservation and Arnold from the white high school at Reardan. He asserts, “My name is Arnold. It’s Junior and Arnold. I’m both.” (Alexie 60). In case of Darling, paradoxically, since her name 'Darling' which means ‘a very much loved person’, she is not loved and liked in America. Neither Arnold nor Darling can slip out of their names and don new names which can become the signs for their identities because they will remain signifiers only. Like Arnold, Darling on the first day in America, feels rejected when she looks out of the window and finds that snow has covered everything, “it has swallowed everything” (148). Here the whiteness and coldness of the snow symbolize the dullness and colorlessness of life in America. She feels as if the snow is telling her that this is the country of white people, you are a stranger here and “you should go back to where you come from” (148). She remains as an ‘Other’ in a very foreign land. Even the atmospheric condition of America is not favorable for her, “No this cold is not like that. It’s the cold to stop life, to cut o open and blaze your bones” (154). Although she has a hope that after the snow melts she will be able to see her ‘My America’, “maybe I will finally see things that I know, and maybe this place will look ordinary at last. I will go out there and smell the air, maybe catch some grasshoppers and find out what kind of strange fruits grow on all these big trees” (159). She experiences a number of diasporic dilemmas such as “a feeling of non-acceptance, alienation or insulation” in America and as an immigrant she has “a strong feeling that their ancestral homeland is their true ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would or should eventually return” (Shukla, et al. 02)

Cultural and language barriers put Darling in the peril of being a victim of bullying. She is being bullied because of cultural/ethnic identity, differing appearance, poor language skills, and racial differences in comparison to American mainstream that casts negative effects on self-esteem, self-efficiency and arises suicidal thoughts, unhappiness, depression, anxiety, and isolation in her: “When I first arrived at Washington I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I talked or said things, the way I dressed, the way I laughed. When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop but then those crazy 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” (165). Similarly, Arnold was bullied for his name and physical appearance. Physical disability is one of the stressors among adolescents, in his childhood, Arnold suffered from serious brain damage that leads him to undergo various seizures that result in many physical problems such as speaking disorder (he stutters and lisps), having forty-two teeth, poor eyesight and a big skull. These physical incapacitations create negative self-perception in Arnold as physical appearance is the most salient issue for young adults. Arnold wants to befriend Penelope, a white girl; he also thinks that everybody would pay more attention and notice him if he changes his outlook. His friend Rowdy advises him, “the first thing you have to do is change the way you look, the way you talk, and the way you walk, and then she’ll think you’re her fricking prince charming” (Alexie, 80), these behavioral changes, “such as ways of speaking, dressing, and eating, to more problematic ones, producing acculturative stress as revealed by uncertainty, anxiety, and depression.” (Rahiminezhad ed. al 2018) but nothing has changed for Arnold; being ignored by white kids he feels lonely, rejected, and alienated and feels, “it was the loneliest time of my life.....Those white kids did not talk to me. They barely looked at me...I just walked from class to class alone; I sat at lunch alone.” (Alexie, 83).

Although both Arnold and Darling face racial discrimination, it is more intensely felt by Darling. Here, her condition of being a female and moving in a transnational space intensifies the impact; these are things Arnold is spared of. Further, both the protagonists battle the pressure to adapt. Acculturation works through hegemony and both of them are affected by it. Not being adults, they are not very discriminating and are not in a position to perceive what sacrifices hegemony demands of their identity and their ingrained cultural values.

With a sense of lost identity, displacement, alienation, and being caught between two cultures, Darling has, in her mind, two homes or no home, the first home supposedly in America where she is living as a visitor, as she came to America on a visitor’s visa and the second home is Paradise, her home town, where she could not go back to visit her family and friends as her visa has expired and returning home means exclusion from America. “You get out, you kiss this America bye-bye” (191). She is in ‘neither here nor there’ situation, “in Darling’s daily interactions with Americans she is reminded of her place as both a visitor as an exotic other despite her acceptance of life in America, her distancing from Zimbabwe, and her attempts at assimilation all of which are a result of barriers to movement between the host land and homeland” (Nosalek, 2015). Despite all her attempts to assimilate into white culture, she remains

a stranger in America “her long absence, sun as abandonment, has made her stranger. She has become Darrida’s uninvited guest with two hostile hosts” (Nosalek, 2015). Helplessness, want, and desperation make the migrants lie too, which becomes a way for survival. In the novel, Darling says:

For the visas and passports, we begged, despaired, lied [...] we applied for school visas because that was the only way out. Instead of going to school, we worked. [...] Security cards said 'Valid for work only with INS authorization', but we gritted our teeth and broke the law and worked; [...] And because we were breaking the law, we dropped our heads in shame; [...] we were now illegals. [...] And because we were illegal and afraid to be discovered we mostly kept to ourselves. [...] We hid our names, gave false ones when asked. [...] And when at work they asked for our papers, we scurried like hens and flocked to unwanted jobs (Bulawayo 240-243).

In Alexie's novel, towards the end, the novel gives a sense of peace and acceptance which Arnold finds. Unlike the protagonist of Alexie's other novel, *Flight*, Arnold is more cosmopolitan and less torn between. The stereotyped image of the First Nations is broken by this identity of Arnold. Although at the start Arnold experiences acculturative stress but his personal identity helps him to integrate successfully with a white culture, an act of ‘transculturation’. Acculturation and assimilation gradually change into ‘transculturation’ that refers to “a sharing of cultural knowledge or experience.” (Connette, 60) and this proves that acculturation does not often, “involve conflict and results in negative outcomes for both groups involved.” (Berry, 700) Darling is a traumatized child whose migration is also caused by the threat of gender violence which Arnold does not have to face. Although Darling constantly tries to fit into the socio-cultural space of the host land as she encounters a new culture in America, her image of the past interrupts all the efforts that make her remain in a peripheral state. Her physical displacement from her native culture produces a sense of loss and belonging that have a significant impact on her cultural identity. Being uprooted from her cultural origin she struggles between her cultural roots and the new culture of the host land. Her exile from her homeland is what Said calls an “unhealable rift forced...between the self and its true home” (173), being torn between homeland and host land she experiences “unhomeliness” (a concept created by Homi Bhabha) when she moves to America. She is living in the liminal space between cultures and languages or what Achebe refers to as “the crossroads of cultures” (67) that leads her to navigate the challenges and difficulties of migration, and makes hers an ambivalent personality with hybrid identity. As Nwanyawn says, “migration brings with it loss of identity, depersonalization, the need self-protectively to submerge oneself in inauthenticity” (398)

This also shows that females are more acutely afflicted by stasis and constraints in case of a character like Darling, the marginalization is deeper and more comprehensive than that of Arnold. While Arnold's resolve to take future as it comes is with the understanding that he can go back to his roots, in case of Darling there is a tragic awareness not only that she is an uprooted person but also that she is in some way complicit in the damage brought upon to her culture by running away from it.

It is certain that the problematic places Arnold and Darling in a precarious condition of indeterminacy and their childhood becomes a battleground where competing voices of identity, belongingness, territory and memory are at war for dominance and control. Both Arnold and Darling struggle to negotiate their identities in the face of acculturation, in spaces where they are not identified as individuals. The search for identity is a search for new names too which can lead to acceptance and self-acceptance both, a hybridized condition. However, this acceptance is not without compromises. Both Arnold and Darling mature to this awakening that there are things that must be endured and that like the circumstances that can never be ideal, their identities will also never be ideal, will be subject to challenges.

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