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Witnessing Rupture: Childhood Trauma and Political Violence in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

Mr. S. Jayamohan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sona College of Arts and Science, Salem
Email :sjmjayan19@gmail.com
Ph.No : 9003502737

Dr. R. Vijayalakshmi
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sona College of Arts and Science,Salem
Email : vijiluxme345@gmail.com
Ph. No : 9994087088

Abstract

This paper examines childhood trauma and political violence in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, arguing that the novel functions as an act of ethical witnessing to national rupture and collective suffering in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Narrated through the perspective of a child, the text captures experiences of hunger, displacement, and state violence with unsettling immediacy. Rather than offering a detached political critique, Bulawayo filters trauma through everyday scenes of play, observation, and memory, revealing how violence is normalized and internalized by children living amid social collapse. Drawing on trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and childhood studies, the paper explores how the child narrator becomes both witness and bearer of historical trauma. The novel resists sentimentalizing childhood innocence; instead, it presents childhood as a vulnerable yet perceptive site where political violence leaves lasting psychological and emotional scars. By foregrounding fragmented memories, silences, and moments of narrative disruption, *We Need New Names* exposes the long-term impact of political instability on young minds. This study argues that Bulawayo's novel transforms the child's voice into a powerful medium of testimony, challenging readers to confront the ethical demands of witnessing trauma that is both personal and national. In doing so, the text positions literature as a crucial space for remembering, mourning, and understanding violence beyond official histories.

Keywords: NoViolet Bulawayo; *We Need New Names*; childhood trauma; political violence; ethical witnessing; postcolonial trauma; memory and rupture; narrative testimony

Introduction

Literature emerging from contexts of political crisis often assumes the role of witness, preserving experiences of violence and dispossession that are marginalized or erased in official histories. NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) belongs to this tradition, offering a powerful narrative of life in postcolonial Zimbabwe marked by economic collapse, state violence, and mass displacement. Told through the perspective of a young girl, Darling, the novel presents political rupture not through overt ideological commentary but through the textures of childhood experience—hunger, play, fear, and observation. In doing so, Bulawayo foregrounds the profound psychological impact of political violence on children, who are both vulnerable to and perceptive of the worlds they inhabit.

Childhood in *We Need New Names* is not a protected or innocent space; instead, it is shaped by deprivation, instability, and exposure to brutality. The children of Paradise witness forced evictions, hunger-induced illness, and the normalization of violence as part of everyday life. Darling's narration captures these realities with unsettling clarity, often juxtaposing moments of play with scenes of suffering. This narrative strategy underscores how trauma is absorbed gradually, becoming embedded in memory and identity. Political violence, in the novel, is not experienced as a single catastrophic event but as an ongoing condition that structures childhood itself.

This paper situates *We Need New Names* within debates on childhood trauma and ethical witnessing**,** arguing that the novel transforms the child narrator into a crucial medium of testimony. Drawing on trauma studies and postcolonial theory, the paper explores how Darling's voice bears witness to national rupture while simultaneously revealing the limits of understanding imposed by age, fear, and displacement. Bulawayo's use of fragmented narration, silence, and repetition mirrors the workings of trauma, emphasizing how violence resists coherent representation.

By reading the novel through the lens of witnessing, this study highlights how *We Need New Names* challenges readers to confront the ethical implications of observing suffering from a distance. The child's perspective implicates the reader as a secondary witness, demanding recognition of trauma that is both personal and collective. Ultimately, this paper argues that Bulawayo's novel uses childhood narration to expose the enduring psychological consequences of political violence, asserting literature's vital role in remembering, interpreting, and responding to histories of rupture.

This paper draws on **trauma studies**, **postcolonial theory**, and **childhood studies** to examine how *We Need New Names* represents political violence through the consciousness of a child narrator. These critical frameworks help illuminate how trauma is experienced, remembered, and narrated by children living amid social and national rupture, and how literature functions as a space of ethical witnessing.

Trauma studies, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, emphasize that trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly through memory, repetition, and narrative fragmentation. Trauma resists linear narration and often manifests indirectly, through gaps, silences, and disruptions. *We Need New Names* mirrors these characteristics through Darling's episodic storytelling, abrupt tonal shifts, and moments of narrative incomprehension. Rather than offering a coherent political account, the novel reflects how violence is registered imperfectly by a child who lacks the language to fully understand what she witnesses.

The children in Paradise encounter trauma as an everyday condition—hunger, illness, and eviction recur so frequently that they become normalized. This aligns with trauma theory's recognition of **chronic or structural trauma**, where harm is sustained over time rather than produced by a single catastrophic event. Bulawayo's narrative thus challenges traditional trauma models that focus on singular moments of shock, instead emphasizing prolonged exposure to instability and fear.

Postcolonial theory provides a crucial framework for understanding the political context of trauma in the novel. Thinkers such as Frantz Fanon have argued that colonial and postcolonial

violence shapes not only political structures but also psychological life. In *We Need New Names,* the effects of postcolonial failure—economic collapse, authoritarian governance, and mass displacement—are experienced most acutely by children, whose bodies and minds absorb the consequences of political decisions beyond their control.

Bulawayo presents the nation as fractured, with Paradise functioning as a microcosm of national breakdown. The children's exposure to state violence, particularly during forced evictions, situates personal trauma within a broader history of political rupture. The child's voice, however, reframes this violence not as ideology but as lived reality, emphasizing how national crises invade intimate spaces of play, family, and bodily survival.

Childhood studies challenge the romantic notion of childhood innocence by emphasizing children's agency, perception, and vulnerability. Scholars in this field argue that children are not passive recipients of adult realities but active interpreters of their social worlds. Darling's narration exemplifies this duality: she does not fully comprehend the political causes of violence, yet she registers its emotional and bodily effects with acute sensitivity.

By allowing a child to narrate experiences of hunger, death, and displacement, Bulawayo disrupts expectations of childhood as a protected space. Childhood becomes a site where trauma is both witnessed and internalized. This framework helps explain why the novel avoids moral exposition; instead, it relies on observation, repetition, and emotional immediacy to convey the impact of violence.

The concept of **ethical witnessing** underpins this framework. Literary trauma scholars argue that narratives of suffering position readers as secondary witnesses, responsible for acknowledging and responding to the pain represented. In *We Need New Names*, Darling's limited understanding and candid voice intensify this ethical demand. The absence of adult mediation forces readers to confront violence without explanatory distance.

Through this lens, the novel becomes an act of testimony rather than documentation. Bulawayo does not resolve trauma or offer redemption; instead, she preserves its presence. The

child narrator's voice stands as evidence of a fractured world, compelling readers to recognize the human cost of political violence.

Together, these theoretical perspectives frame *We Need New Names* as a narrative of childhood trauma that transforms witnessing into an ethical act. By combining trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and childhood studies, this paper positions the novel as a powerful literary response to national rupture and collective suffering.

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* renders political violence through the immediacy of a child's perception, revealing how trauma becomes woven into the fabric of everyday life. Darling's narration does not offer analytical distance or political explanation; instead, it presents violence as something seen, absorbed, and lived with. This section closely examines key moments in the novel to show how childhood witnessing transforms political rupture into psychological and emotional trauma.

One of the most persistent markers of trauma in the novel is hunger, which is experienced bodily and collectively. The children's lives in Paradise are defined by lack, and hunger becomes a normalized condition rather than an exceptional crisis. Darling states bluntly, "*We are hungry all the time*" (Bulawayo 42). The simplicity of the sentence underscores how deprivation has become an unquestioned part of childhood. There is no attempt to dramatize hunger; its constancy itself is traumatic.

Hunger also distorts childhood play. The children steal guavas from wealthy neighborhoods, turning survival into a game. Darling explains, "*We go to Budapest to steal guavas because our stomachs are empty*" (Bulawayo 54). The casual tone masks the severity of the act, revealing how children adapt to violence and inequality by absorbing them into play. Trauma here is not a sudden rupture but an ongoing condition that reshapes moral and emotional development.

A defining moment of political violence occurs during the forced evictions, where homes are destroyed by the state. Darling describes the scene with fragmented observation rather than emotional commentary: "*The bulldozers come and knock down our houses, and the dust rises*

and covers everything" (Bulawayo 64). The focus on sensory detail—dust, movement, noise—reflects trauma's resistance to coherent narration. The child witnesses destruction without the language to fully process its meaning.

This moment marks a rupture in Darling's understanding of safety and belonging. The loss of home is not framed as a political act but as an incomprehensible violation of normal life. Trauma theorists note that such events are often remembered in images rather than explanations, a pattern Bulawayo replicates through Darling's observational voice.

Death is another recurring presence in the novel, yet it is approached with unsettling matter-of-factness. When the children encounter illness and death, Darling remarks, "*People are dying. That's just how it is*" (Bulawayo 72). The resignation in this statement signals emotional numbing, a common trauma response. Violence and loss are no longer shocking; they are expected.

This normalization of death disrupts conventional notions of childhood innocence. Darling does not fully mourn in ways readers might expect; instead, she records death as part of the landscape. Such emotional restraint does not indicate lack of feeling but rather a coping mechanism shaped by constant exposure to suffering.

Throughout the novel, Darling's narration positions her as an ethical witness—one who sees but cannot intervene or fully understand. Her voice captures the gap between experience and comprehension, which deepens the reader's responsibility. As she observes violence without explanation, readers are compelled to supply the ethical and political understanding that the child cannot articulate.

The power of *We Need New Names* lies in this imbalance. By filtering political violence through a child's voice, Bulawayo refuses to aestheticize or rationalize trauma. Instead, she preserves its rawness. Darling's witnessing becomes a form of testimony, ensuring that the suffering of children in contexts of political rupture is neither ignored nor forgotten.

Ultimately, the novel presents childhood trauma not as an isolated psychological injury but as an ongoing condition shaped by hunger, displacement, and political instability. Darling's experiences illustrate how violence becomes embedded in memory and identity long before it can be named or understood. Through close attention to bodily sensation, fragmented observation, and emotional restraint, Bulawayo exposes the deep psychological costs of growing up amid national collapse.

This close textual analysis demonstrates that *We Need New Names* transforms the child's perspective into a powerful mode of witnessing. Childhood trauma, in the novel, is not merely represented—it is structurally embedded in the narrative itself, compelling readers to confront political violence through the eyes of those most vulnerable to its effects.

Critical responses to NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* have consistently emphasized its powerful depiction of **postcolonial crisis, migration, and childhood vulnerability**, situating the novel within broader debates on trauma, witnessing, and political violence. While scholars approach the text from diverse perspectives—postcolonial studies, trauma theory, diaspora studies—there is a shared recognition that Bulawayo's use of a child narrator fundamentally reshapes how violence and suffering are represented and understood.

Several critics note that Darling's childlike voice is central to the novel's emotional impact. Scholars argue that the child narrator allows Bulawayo to represent trauma obliquely, avoiding explicit moralization while intensifying affect. As trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth suggest, trauma often resists direct representation and instead appears through repetition, fragmentation, and silence. Critics have applied this framework to *We Need New Names*, observing that Darling's episodic narration and matter-of-fact tone mirror the workings of traumatic memory, where violence is registered but not fully processed.

Literary scholars have also emphasized that Bulawayo resists sentimental portrayals of childhood innocence. Instead, childhood is presented as a space where trauma is prematurely encountered and internalized. This approach aligns with contemporary childhood studies, which reject idealized notions of childhood and stress children's exposure to—and interpretation of—

adult political realities. Darling's observations of hunger, death, and eviction thus function as both testimony and evidence of psychological injury.

Postcolonial critics frequently situate *We Need New Names* within the context of Zimbabwe's socio-political collapse in the early twenty-first century. Scholars argue that the novel depicts the failure of the postcolonial state through everyday experiences rather than overt political discourse. Paradise, the shantytown where Darling grows up, has been read as a symbolic microcosm of national rupture, embodying the consequences of authoritarian governance, economic mismanagement, and social disintegration.

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insights into the psychological effects of political violence, critics suggest that Bulawayo's novel demonstrates how national trauma is transmitted to the most vulnerable members of society—children. Political violence in the novel is not limited to spectacular acts of brutality but appears in structural forms such as hunger, displacement, and lack of healthcare. This focus aligns with trauma scholars' emphasis on chronic and structural violence rather than singular traumatic events.

Another significant strand of criticism focuses on the novel's ethical demands on the reader. Scholars argue that *We Need New Names* positions readers as secondary witnesses to trauma, compelling them to engage emotionally and ethically with the suffering depicted. The absence of adult explanation or narrative closure intensifies this responsibility. Critics note that Bulawayo's refusal to offer solutions or redemption prevents the reader from achieving emotional distance or comfort.

This approach resonates with theories of ethical witnessing, which hold that narratives of trauma do not merely represent suffering but also demand acknowledgment and response. Darling's limited understanding heightens the ethical force of the narrative, as readers must confront violence without the mediating comfort of political analysis or moral resolution.

While existing scholarship has explored *We Need New Names* through lenses of migration, diaspora, and globalization, this paper builds on and extends these discussions by foregrounding childhood trauma and witnessing political violence as its central focus. By

synthesizing trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and childhood studies, the present study highlights how Bulawayo's novel transforms the child's voice into a powerful form of testimony.

In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing critical conversations by emphasizing the psychological and ethical dimensions of political violence as experienced by children. It underscores the importance of reading *We Need New Names* not only as a postcolonial or diasporic narrative, but as a profound meditation on how trauma is lived, remembered, and witnessed at the most vulnerable stages of human life.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* powerfully represents childhood trauma as a form of ethical witnessing to political violence and national rupture**.** By narrating experiences of hunger, displacement, and state brutality through the voice of a child, Bulawayo exposes the deep psychological consequences of political instability on those least equipped to understand or resist it. Darling's perspective does not offer political analysis or historical explanation; instead, it records violence as lived experience, revealing how trauma becomes embedded in the everyday realities of childhood.

Through close textual analysis, this study has shown that trauma in the novel is chronic rather than event-based. Hunger, eviction, and death recur with such frequency that they become normalized, reshaping emotional responses and moral frameworks. The child narrator's matter-of-fact tone, fragmented observation, and emotional restraint mirror the workings of traumatic memory, where suffering is registered but not fully articulated. In this way, *We Need New Names* resists sentimental narratives of childhood innocence and instead presents childhood as a site of acute vulnerability and premature exposure to violence.

The theoretical lenses of trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and childhood studies have helped situate Darling's experiences within broader structures of political power and historical rupture. Bulawayo demonstrates that political violence is not confined to moments of spectacle or overt brutality but is sustained through structural conditions such as poverty, displacement,

and the erosion of care. These conditions produce lasting psychological harm that extends beyond national borders, shaping identities even in contexts of migration and exile.

Crucially, the novel also implicates the reader in the act of witnessing. By filtering violence through a child's limited understanding, Bulawayo intensifies the ethical demand placed on the reader to acknowledge and respond to suffering that cannot be neatly explained or resolved. The absence of narrative closure reinforces the persistence of trauma and resists the comfort of redemption or recovery.

Ultimately, *We Need New Names* affirms literature's vital role in bearing witness to histories of violence that remain marginalized or silenced. By centering childhood trauma, Bulawayo transforms personal memory into collective testimony, ensuring that the psychological costs of political rupture are neither forgotten nor abstracted. The novel thus stands as a compelling reminder that to witness is not merely to observe, but to accept ethical responsibility for recognizing and remembering the human consequences of political violence.

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