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Self as Religion in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

LAUREN RANDALL

English 4470: Postcolonial Texts, Summer 2017

Nominated by: Dr. Alpana Sharma

Lauren Randall is working on her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in the college of Liberal Arts at Wright State University. She hopes to graduate in 2019 and begin work on her Master's degree.

Lauren notes:

Dr. Sharma's Postcolonial Texts course gave me the opportunity to read an incredible Zimbabwean writer, NoViolet Bulawayo. Bulawayo's debut novel gave me much to consider in terms of innovative writing. Her shifting use of language and re-purposing of Western symbols really interested me, and this paper examines Bulawayo's use of these elements of style.

Dr. Sharma notes:

In this essay, Lauren shows how a breakdown in the belief in the Christian God in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* leads to the protagonist's renewal of faith in herself. As the world around her implodes and modern-day Zimbabwe collapses under the political regime of Robert Mugabe (who is never named in the novel but whose baleful influence is nevertheless assumed), "Bulawayo juxtaposes human endurance and the absence of a helpful god to achieve commentary on Darling's fortitude and resilience." The essay presents several original insights and offers a sensitive and highly nuanced picture of the divided colonial legacy of Christianity in Zimbabwe.

Self as Religion in
NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

In NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names*, Darling, the female protagonist from Zimbabwe, grapples with her belief in God, who she claims "doesn't even do anything to show that he is a god," (Bulawayo 139). Zimbabwe is in a post-colonial state of affairs in which indigenous African rituals and religious practices are denounced as pagan. Religion is mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel, and numerous references are made to Jesus Christ as well as other pillars of the Christian faith. The connotations of the Christian ideologies can be read beyond the literal associations, however, and seen as representative of Darling's own sustainability, sense of survival, and endurance. As critic Wole Soyinka mentions in his book *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the traditional epics of past African literature have mingled a protagonist's personal journey with a "cosmic context of his existence," often illustrated by a confrontation with the Gods (Soyinka 3). However, in contemporary African literature, as in *We Need New Names*, the protagonist often experiences a confrontation with the self in the absence of God or cosmic intervention. The pervasive undercurrent of divine indifference which exists for Darling amid harrowing circumstances symbolizes Darling's belief in herself and her assuredness in the continuous, if not always consistent, improvement of her own life. Direct reference is made to a passive and ignorant God during times of great psychological struggle or reflection for Darling--a fact which lends credence to the argument that Bulawayo juxtaposes human endurance and the absence of a helpful God to achieve commentary on Darling's fortitude and resilience.

We Need New Names revolves around the life of young Darling, a Zimbabwean child who is accustomed to a post-colonial climate. Darling exists within a context of western involvement and longs to travel to the United States, live with her Aunt Fostalina, and gain an education. The more nuanced underbelly of the story explores Darling's navigation through the differences of interaction between herself and others.

Darling resides in the ironically named shantytown of Paradise, to which she and others have been forced by the government to relocate. According to Darling, Paradise is a place wherein residents recite "meaningless prayers," (Bulawayo 21). Their meaninglessness is due to the fact that their speakers occupy a space in which God neither lives nor listens. Darling bristles at the thought of a god who punishes many, herself included,

for the transgressions of some, which feeling is made evident when she states that "[she herself] wasn't there when it all happened, so how can [she] be a sinner?" (21). This quote speaks to Darling's desire for agency in her life. The desire engenders Darling's mental rebellion against the vicarious punishment she receives for crimes uncommitted, and this same desire fosters her disdain for the uncontrollable surroundings in which she dwells. Darling is able to critically and consciously inquire into the validity of the realm of the divine, and in doing so, she comes to the conclusion that perhaps she is better equipped than a distant (western) deity to judge her own actions.

Christianity had been introduced to indigenous people by the missionary presence of colonialism, and as noted by Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi in his book *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature*, the religious influence has subsequently spread into many aspects of native life. The missionary enterprise which presented itself in the African context did much to divide those who embraced such indoctrination and those who resisted it or wholly refused to participate in it. In *We Need New Names*, Mother of Bones is a member of the camp who chooses to abide by the "norms of conduct set for them by the missionaries who introduced Christianity," (Mugambi 1). Mother of Bones and the other attendees of the mountaintop church find themselves immersed in the ideology, while the children instead find solace in their pseudo-political games. When Darling notes that Mother of Bones speaks as if she knows God, it is clear that Darling does not share in this sentiment. She likens God to a child, as when Bulawayo writes "Mother of Bones said God like she knew God personally, like God was not even something bigger than the sky," but as if he were a boy that Darling herself may have encountered at any point in Paradise, a boy who "spoke with a stammer and played Find bin Laden with us," (94). Darling describes knowing God as being comparable to knowing a child in her own group of friends. Darling creating a version of God who is reflective of Zimbabwean children like herself accentuates two points of interest: first, the fact that the children have the least agency or autonomy of anyone in the novel and second, the difference in experience of the post-colonial climate among adults and children in the novel, even as they exist in the same setting. The use of comparison in this instance further illustrates how Darling and her friends are navigating the circumstances under which they live. While the adults do their best to change what they can politically, as well as consciously or subconsciously Africanizing the Christianity that has been imposed on the area, the children in Paradise instead choose to play games such as Find bin Laden, in which they are the powerful and conquering heroes. The children

see themselves in a position that God has hitherto abandoned: the savior. Darling displays no enthusiasm toward a cosmic connection. Instead, she exchanges the vast, "infinite grandeur" of the conventional God for "the tangible, the immediate," image of someone she might know, someone like herself, whom she could conceivably relate to, collude and dream with, in order to reach the goal of circumstantial improvement (Soyinka 4).

The conflation of Darling and other Zimbabwean children with God occurs explicitly in numerous instances in the novel. Darling thinks of Jesus being photographed in the same way she thinks of herself being photographed in that "[Jesus] really wanted to look nice in the picture," smiling shyly as Darling herself has been taught to do in front of the NGO people's cameras (Bulawayo 25). Darling goes on to reveal that she has painted Jesus's eyes "brown like [hers] and everybody's, to make him normal," further associating herself with God in a physical capacity. Finally, Darling asserts that "When [she is] on Fambeki like this [she] feels like [she is] God, who sees everything," (36). Darling is looking down at Paradise and suddenly everything down below seems beautiful to her. This is due in no part to her feeling closer to God, but rather due to her own vantage point, through both literal and psychological lenses. While atop the mountain, Darling is no longer among the ramshackle shelters below but is instead seeing them from a distance, enabling her to temporarily see the landscape as the background of a painting instead of the foreground of her own life. The setting of this chapter, one of religious practice, illustrates the parallel Bulawayo presents throughout the novel; that is, Darling experiencing a transformative and revelatory moment as she occupies the position of her own version of God.

Darling's perception of God remains relatively consistent until the final of three prose-poetry chapters which are narrated in the first person plural, containing no explicit statement about who is delivering the information. Regardless of whether or not one assumes Darling to be the narrator in this chapter, entitled "The Way They Lived," the mention of God is significant in what it reveals about the immigrant experience that Darling, among others, navigates throughout the novel. The narrator of the chapter is speaking on behalf of all who have endured the plight of displacement, voluntary or involuntary, and in doing so illuminates a final example of the contention between Darling and the God she feels has been indifferent. The chapter depicts the psychological turmoil that exists for those who have left their homes, struggled to assimilate, and resigned themselves to certain

Americanized beliefs and experiences; this all within the context of God being either present or absent under the circumstances. In Paradise and innumerable other similar shantytowns, as conditions worsened, inhabitants thought it better to be under their own governance, if not politically then at least spiritually, as opposed to being indebted to a pitiless, deaf God. However, upon arrival in America, the material abundance was proof to immigrants of a divine existence, one who represented prosperity in the country to which they had travelled. Bulawayo writes a passage which makes unmistakable the conflation of God and money, when the narrator states that "In God We Trust too now, In God We Trust for real," (241). The association made between religion and sustainability for the immigrants is demonstrative of a sort of inverse of the theme that exists throughout the rest of the novel; that is, one of personal progression which coincides with a lack of cosmic intervention. In this instance, God must exist because things have improved, when in reality, what Darling maintains from the start of the novel remains true: she and others like her were able to assess, survive, and extricate themselves from the situations they were in for one reason or another. The successes to this end are due to a thriving belief in the abilities of the immigrants to persevere, as Darling has done throughout. Bulawayo achieves this commentary through her use of juxtaposition of religion and endurance on the part of Darling and others in the African diaspora observed in the novel.

Works Cited

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