

# Travel, Migration and the Redefinition of Home in Two Zimbabwean Novels

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Numerous studies have looked at the literary depiction of the crisis period of the 2000s in Zimbabwe particularly through the lens of the land redistribution programme. Nonetheless, there is little scholarship of how traveling through migration affects the definition of home and homeland. The novels of Brian Chikwava and NoViolet Bulawayo discuss the multi-layered issues that are at play in the intersection of migration, nostalgia and homemaking. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's fascinating work on nostalgia, this paper contends that "nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (2001: xiii). Of particular concern is the manner in which traveling allows for a reconceptualised definition of home, land and homeland and this certainly entails a redefinition of nationality against the contemporary "borderless global neighbourhood which keeps shrinking interminably" (Tsaaior, 2011: 101). Such a reconceptualisation of home, land and homeland will be analysed vis-à-vis current trends that "downplay the national in cultural and postcolonial studies in favour of the trans- or multinational" (Hayes, 1998: 445).

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*It is not surprising that national awareness comes from  
outside the community rather than from within.  
It is the romantic traveler who sees from a distance  
the wholeness of the vanishing world.  
The journey gives him perspective.  
Svetlana Boym*

Hammar, McGregor and Landau posit that "since early 2000, political violence and dramatic economic contraction have displaced people within and beyond Zimbabwe's borders on an extraordinary scale" (2010: 263). They go on to explain that as a result, "Zimbabwean citizens have created a new regional dynamic both through their physical movement to neighbouring states and by generating new economies and socio-political formations stretching beyond Zimbabwe's borders" (2010: 263). Although I agree with Hammar, McGregor and Landau on how the socio-political crisis of the 2000s incited displacement and how this created new regional dynamics, I hasten to add that this displacement has played an important role in defining and redefining home.

The Zimbabwean crisis has produced a rich body of literary texts that have captured the multifaceted issues that deal with the definition of homeland and citizenship. In this paper, I concentrate on the novels of Brian Chikwava and NoViolet Bulawayo. I will analyse the novels of these two writers individually and then ultimately offer a synthesis of the similarities and differ-

ences that are presented in these novels.

Globalisation has not only facilitated faster transmission of information throughout the world, but it has also made it easier for people to traverse geographical and national boundaries. In post-2000 Zimbabwe, migration has been necessitated by the search for the proverbial pastures in neighbouring countries and overseas, in a bid to escape untenable socioeconomic and political problems.

This article is informed by the neoclassical models of migration, the target income theory and the new economics of labor migration theory and by Abraham Maslow's theorisation of the hierarchy of needs. The neoclassical economic theory views migration as a purposeful endeavour aimed at maximising the economic well-being of the individual or the household after comparing opportunities for income in alternative locations (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Mincer, 1987). This form of labor migration occurs when there is an apparently large disparity in location-specific remuneration or opportunities for employment sufficient to motivate individuals to migrate in order to earn higher wages. The neoclassical approach also assumes that migration constitutes human capital investment whose benefits are achieved in the long-term (Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969).

Target income theory adapts the neoclassical focus on push-pull factors and cost-benefit analysis for the individual migrant, but places less emphasis on maximising lifetime income (Hill, 1987; Berg, 1961). It assumes that workers prefer not to migrate from their areas of origin, but are obliged to, and engage in temporary labour owing to limited domestic opportunities for income. In other words, migrants opt to live away from their places of origin in order to earn and save sufficient migrant earnings to attain a desired savings target. Such migrants would enter the foreign labour market as earners working towards a particular target. After saving or remitting money equal to their desired target, they return to their homes (Byerlee, 1974; Berg, 1961). Therefore, there is greater incentive to migrate for individuals in low-wage and low income growth areas compared to that of individuals in areas with favorable economic opportunities.

The third theoretical dimension is the new economics of labour migration theory (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1999; see also review articles by Massey et al., 1993, 1994). It borrows the basic concepts of the neoclassical model yet expanding it to include demand for credit and insurance as additional incentives for temporary labor migration. In less developed countries with poorly developed or virtually absent capital markets, temporary labor migration becomes a source of funds for large expenditures at home. Such expenditures include investments in home construction, family business ventures, fixed property, or in agriculture.

Abraham Maslow proposed in his theorisation of the hierarchy of needs that "self-actualisation", "psychological needs", "safety needs", "love/belonging" as well as "esteem" as the most basic needs necessary for human development. The situation that prevailed as from the year 2000 made it difficult if not impossible for many Zimbabweans to meet these basic needs. Moyo, Gonye and Mdlongwa explain in this respect that: "Many Zimbabweans have come to view their home as suffocating and thus leading them to lose control of actions. (...) The situation in the country had translated into imminent danger for Zimbabweans, with large numbers opting to find solutions in the Diaspora. The Diaspora seemed to offer a panacea for the ills that had befallen them" (2012: 1381).

Given such a situation, the homeland proved to be particularly "unhomely" and compelled many Zimbabwean citizens to not only look for better opportunities elsewhere, but to also attempt to find and forge a new home away from the land of their birth and origin.

However, such migration as shown by the fictional narratives of the previously mentioned writers, relocating to the diaspora is not an easy enterprise. In fact, new challenges and problems await those who migrate to the diaspora. As mentioned before, in this paper, I concentrate on the literary works of Brain Chikwava and NoViolet, both of whom have enjoyed international acclaim for their debut novels. I analyse Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). Both writers are based and write from the diaspora. Chikwava lives in the

United Kingdom whilst Bulawayo is based in the United States of America. Chikwava became the first Zimbabwean writer to win the Caine Prize for African writing in English in 2004 for his short story “Seventh Street Alchemy”. Mary Fitzgerald offers a positive review of Chikwava’s writing, explaining that its vitality lies “in bringing to life the plight of those often marginalised by mainstream society [and thus opening] up a bleak, yet important social landscape” (2009). Born in 1981, NoViolet Bulawayo moved to the USA to study law. She however opted to pursue creative writing. She has won several awards for her literary work. In 2011, she won the 2011 Caine Prize for her short story “Hitting Budapest”, which later became the first chapter of her debut novel. She also won the Etisalat Prize for literature in 2013 and was in the same year short-listed for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. The novels of these two Zimbabwean writers grapple with the manner in which “mobility becomes relevant, mobility enables encounters whereby certain travelling positions become defined as abject” (Toivanen, 2015: 15). Their novels reveal how travelling, mobility and spatiotemporal displacement makes it possible for literary protagonists to reframe and rethink diverse ideas about home, land, homeland and how they attempt to reconstruct these concepts, in a bid to create a sense of belonging and being in a world that borders on precarity.

Brian Chikwava’s novel describes the trials of an unnamed protagonist who has moved to Bristol, in the United Kingdom. The protagonist-narrator explains that he enters the UK after having lied that he had been harassed by state agents for being a member of the opposition party: “Me I tell them I have been harass by them boys in dark glasses because I am youth member of the opposition party” (4). Although the protagonist attests to the pressing need to come up with money that would be used for his mother’s “umbiyiso” or memorial service, it is hard not to acknowledge that he had left Harare in order to escape the violence and trauma that was associated with the farm occupations that took place in the 2000s. The constant reference to “umbuyiso” establishes a spiritual attachment to the homeland. He explains as such the importance of “umbuyiso”: “I wake up in the morning thinking of Mother. You die and your spirit goes into the wilderness. One year later, your family have to do *umbuyiso* ceremony to bring your spirit back home so it can leave with other ancestor spirits. ... Me I have to go back home and organise *umbuyiso* for she” (16).

The constant fear that the place where his mother has been buried might be confiscated in the on-going land appropriations also reflects the protagonist’s attachment not just to the homeland but more importantly to land. The protagonist-narrator explains: “People in the village where Mother is buried have already been telled that they have to prepare to be resettled any time. [...] Soon Mother’s grave maybe end up being dig up by some machine, get washed by rain and she bones come out in the open and get bleached by the sun just like bones of dead bird and no one is going to care” (74).

This fear of the displacement of the mother’s bones however reveals a certain form of hypocrisy on the part of the protagonist, who himself had been involved in forcibly moving people from their land. Noxolo acknowledges this unreliability of the protagonist-narrator and finds that:

The novel is unflinching in its portrayal of the young narrator’s ambivalent agency – even though the narrator was a perpetrator of violence in Zimbabwe and continues to be manipulative and violent now that he is in London, the novel can also be read as an extended meditation on the ways in which this young man (not a child soldier formally, but certainly a young combatant) is nonetheless a victim of his insecurity as an asylum seeker in London and a victim of the violence of Zimbabwean politics. (2014: 301)

As the protagonist undertakes different menial jobs, a thought always comes to the protagonist’s mind: the need and will to return home. The title of the novel is fascinating in this respect, given that Harare North is used to refer to London. In clarifying this rechristening of London,

Patricia Noxolo elucidates:

The novel articulates the perspectives and understandings of spatially diverse audiences locating its characters and settings in a wide global landscape. Indeed, its title *Harare North* is precisely a reordering of the global landscape, repositioning London in relation to Zimbabwe and its diaspora: London is referred to in Zimbabwe as 'Harare North' and Johannesburg is 'Harare South' because of the large numbers of Zimbabweans who migrate to each city. (2014: 299)

By refusing to refer to London by its proper name, the protagonist unwittingly accomplishes two things. To begin with, the protagonist displaces home to elsewhere. Secondly, the protagonist also rejects to call the foreign land home, electing rather to transpose his ideas of home and homeland to London. This appropriation of the foreign land and inscription of African qualities is also fortified by the language that is used in this novel.

The definition of home in *Harare North* is intricately linked to the physical land. However, what is fascinating is the manner in which the protagonist-narrator is caught in a fault line between the cherished homeland where he cannot return without having earned enough money in an inauspicious foreign land. This leads the protagonist-narrator, as well as other migrants, to become insecure bodies that survive in an elusive third space which is neither homely nor unhomely, an ambivalent third space in which the characters live virtually from hand to mouth and hope for better paying jobs. The nameless protagonist-narrator explains the manner in which he is stuck in this third space, unable to go back home and unable to fit into Harare North: "You tell the right foot to go in one direction and he is being traitor shoe-doctor and tell left foot to go in another direction. You stand there in them mental backstreets and one big battle rage even if you have no more ginger for it" (230).

The novel *Harare North* thus articulates the multifaceted emotions and issues that play out when migrants find existence in the places of their origin and birth untenable and find existence in the diaspora equally ruthless and difficult. Stagnation, despair and hopelessness come to characterise the lives of migrants such as those portrayed in Chikwava's novel.

NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel *We Need New Names* received interesting media attention when it was published in 2013. The novel offers a story told by a young narrator called Darling Nonkululeko Nkalawho who grows up in an unnamed African country which resembles, in more ways than one, Zimbabwe during the crisis period. The story is divided into two parts based on the geographical location of the narrator. In the first part, the narrator is based in the ironically named shanty town called Paradise in Zimbabwe and in the second she has relocated to "Destroyedmichygen" (Detroit, Michigan) in the USA. These two parts offer interesting insights and perspectives not just of the narrator's relationship to and perception of homeland, but also of how migration and spatiotemporal displacement affects her identity and how she relates to herself and others.

In the first part, Darling recounts growing up in a tumultuous shanty town in which she and other children are reduced to scavengers as they move around looking for food. In naming Paradise the shanty town in which Darling and her friends live after their homes are destroyed, Bulawayo beckons the reader to perceive of this space as a utopic home in spite of all the horrors and sadness that abound there. Darling describes in such a manner this Paradise that she calls home: "Paradise is all tin and stretches out in the sun like a wet sheepskin nailed on the ground to dry; (...). The shacks themselves are terrible but from up here, they seem much better, almost beautiful even, it's like I'm looking at a painting" (36).

Darling sees beyond the tin and the sheepskin that makes up the shanty town of Paradise. In fact, her description gives Paradise an idyllic sense of home, in spite of the harshness and crudeness of quotidian life there. By comparing Paradise to a painting, Darling shows her attachment to her home and how it is not only dear to her, but also how she finds it beautiful despite its imperfections.

In their infantile discussion, Darling and her friends are cognisant of the misery they have to contend with in their homeland. Darling recounts, for example, the trauma she and others experience when their homes are destroyed during Operation Murambatsvina. She remembers through the unfocused and candid vision of a child: “Then the lorries come carrying the police... and we run and hide inside the houses, but it’s no use hiding because the bulldozers start bulldozing and bulldozing and we are screaming and screaming” (67).

In spite of the nonchalant peace that the children exhibit in the first half of the novel, it is worth noting that this semblance of peace does not suffice to take away from the children the desire to want more than their squalid existences. In the games that they play, the children all dream and long to leave the shanty town of Paradise and find better lives in other countries: “Well, I don’t care, I’m blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I’ll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest. Or even better, many houses: one in Budapest, one in Los Angeles, one in Paris. Wherever I feel like” (14).

Although the children cherish their home, in their own childish ways, they are aware that numerous possibilities and hopes can certainly be found outside the familiar surroundings of home.

However, when Darling moves to Michigan to live with her aunt Fostalina, she comes to experience other forms of harshness. To begin with, she has to contend with stereotypes that Americans have of Africans:

And when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with the shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it the part where vultures wait for famished children to die? We smiled. Where the life expectancy is thirty-five years? We smiled. Is it there where dissidents shove AK-47s between women’s legs? We smiled. Where people run about naked? We smiled. That part where they massacred each other? We smiled. (151)

Although exaggerated and orientalist, such a description of her homeland makes Darling realise the bleakness of the reality that she had experienced. She explains: “And when these words tumbled from their lips like crushed bricks, we exchanged glances again and the water in our eyes broke. Our smiles melted like dying shadows and we wept, wept for our blessed, wretched country” (151).

When she initially arrives in the USA, Darling is excited at the many things that she is able to easily find, such as food:

We ate like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries, we ate like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters; we ate like kings. We ate for all our past hunger, for our parents and brothers and sisters and relatives and friends who were still back there. We uttered their names between mouthfuls, conjured up their hungry faces and chapped lips – eating for those who could not be with us to eat for themselves. And when we were full we carried our dense bodies with the dignity of elephants – if only our country could see us in America, see us eat like kings in a land that was not ours. (152)

Darling is initially astounded by what she views to be good living that is found in America. She compares this with the squalid conditions that she has experienced in her native county. However, this honeymoon stage is followed by the crude reality of being an illegal migrant in the USA. This is also followed by the degrading jobs that they have to take/accept in order to earn a living and make ends meet:

And the jobs we worked, Jesus – Jesus – Jesus, the jobs we worked. Low-paying jobs. Backbreaking jobs. Jobs that gnawed at the bones of our dignity, devoured the meat, tongued the marrow. We took scalding irons and ironed our pride flat.

We cleaned toilets. We picked tobacco and fruit under the boiling sun until we hung our tongues and panted like lost hounds. (...) We swallowed every pain like a bitter pill, drank every fear like a love portion, and we worked and worked. (155)

The initial euphoria subsides and leaves behind the ungarnished reality of the migrant's existence in the diaspora. In spite of the difficulties she faces in the USA, Darling is aware that she cannot return to her homeland because she is not a documented migrant. Once she visits her homeland, even for a short time, she is assured that returning will be a daunting task if not an impossible one.

The main difference between *Harare North* and *We Need New Names* is the nature of the protagonist-narrators that the writers employ. Chikwava's nameless protagonist-narrator is caught up in his own imaginations to such an extent that he does not recognise the wrongs he did before fleeing Zimbabwe. Quite uncharacteristic of main characters, Chikwava's protagonist remains by and large unchanged right through the action of the novel. The move to the UK does not necessarily alter the way in which he views the world. Although there are fleeting moments in which he shows some sort of humanity, especially in his relationship with a Zimbabwean migrant called Vimbai and her infant child, Chikwava's narrator does not change. He continues to see the UK as a place where he has to make money and thereafter return to his native land to conduct his mother's memorial service. For him, home is where his mother is buried.

On the other hand, for Bulawayo's Darling, we notice the way in which the journey to the diaspora transforms the manner in which the protagonist-narrator views the world and especially the way she perceives and defines home. Darling, unlike Chikwava's protagonist, makes friends in America and soon begins to feel at home in Michigan. Although she constantly thinks of her childhood in Paradise, Darling is not pressed to return to her homeland. Given her youth, it seems as though what is important to her at that moment is to know herself and to make the most of what life has to offer her.

The two novelists effectively handle irony in their novels in depicting the role of migration in subjectification of their protagonist-narrators. For Chikwava, the irony resides in the blindness of the protagonist in the face of his past actions and how they lead him to flee his home country. For Bulawayo, irony is found in the candid and often naïve descriptions of the narrator who dreams of a better life away from squalid conditions of her country of origin. As pointed out by Polo Moji: "The novel's use of satirical irony is used as a narrative mode that frames Darling's subjectification in terms of the psychic and social (dis)location brought about by these displacements. This reflects the semantic and cognitive dissonance created by shifts in ways of experiencing and naming the world" (2015: 182).

An analysis of Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* has shown that migration allows for a reconceptualised definition of home, land and homeland. Such an undertaking has entailed a redefinition of nationality against the contemporary "borderless global neighbourhood which keeps shrinking interminably" (Tsaaior, 2011: 101). I have argued, in line with Homi Bhabha, that homelands that we have come to call as "nations" ought to be viewed as "narrative" constructions, which are products of multifaceted interfaces of often opposing cultural and national constituencies and contestations. According to Bhabha, "it is in the emergence of the interstice – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (1994: 2). Ultimately, such reconceptualisation of home, land and homeland destabilises long-held beliefs of what these notions are or ought to be.

I have contended, as argued by Brubaker, that spatiotemporal travelling and movement allows for a rethinking of beliefs that "often informed by a strikingly idealist, teleological understanding of the nation-state, which is seen as the unfolding of an idea, the idea of nationalising and homogenising the population. The conceptual antithesis between nation-state and diaspora obscures more than it reveals, occluding the persisting significance (and great empirical variety) of nation-

states” (2005: 10). The novels that I have analysed essentially reveal that home is not a fixed phenomenon but one that is perpetually reconstructed through interactions with different spaces, cultures and times.

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