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Race, Class, Gender, and Language in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract

This study analyses NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the framework of intersectional feminism, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw that examines how multiple identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersect to shape distinct experiences of marginalization. Bulawayo's narrative, centred on the protagonist Darling, reveals the complex social forces she encounters as she navigates cultural and geographic transitions. Through a blend of English and Shona, the text reflects cultural duality and the tensions of migration, including acculturation and displacement. The episodic structure mirrors the fragmentation inherent in Darling's African upbringing and her transcontinental journey. The analysis situates the novel alongside contemporary works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing, highlighting shared thematic concerns with identity, oppression, and the migrant experience. Ultimately, the study argues that Bulawayo's representation of intersecting identities enriches the novel's engagement with gender, race, class, and the transformative potential of language in articulating minority experiences.

Keywords: African diaspora; gender inequality; intersectional feminism; migration and displacement; cultural hybridity in African literature; race; class in literature

1. Introduction

This paper examines NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the lens of intersectional feminism, exploring how race, gender, class, and cultural identity intersect in shaping the protagonist Darling's experiences. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework, the study analyses Bulawayo's narrative techniques, including first-person narration, code-switching between English and Shona, symbolic imagery, and a fragmented episodic structure (Crenshaw 1989). These stylistic choices illuminate themes of displacement, migration, cultural hybridity, and systemic oppression. Comparative references to works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* situate the novel within a broader African diasporic feminist discourse. The analysis highlights how language, symbolism, and narrative form serve as tools of resistance, enabling marginalized voices to challenge stereotypes and articulate nuanced identities. By integrating thematic and stylistic perspectives, the paper positions Bulawayo's work as a significant contribution

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to African feminist literary criticism and the study of intersecting oppressions in postcolonial contexts. The present study analyses *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo as an object of academic inquiry through the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism, focusing on the relationships between race, class, gender, and other interconnected identity categories. The analysis centres on the protagonist Darling's search for identity, exploring how Bulawayo interrogates the hierarchical relations that constitute selfhood and belonging in postcolonial and diasporic contexts (Nasir et al. 2024). Relying on discourse analysis and spatial-emotional approaches, this research addresses a gap in previous scholarship by offering an intersectional, layered reading of the novel. As defined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectional feminism is a critical model in postmodern studies for examining how race, gender, class, and other identity markers intersect to produce complex, lived experiences of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw 1989). This theoretical lens, regarded as one of the most influential developments in feminist thought, reveals the compounding nature of social roles, where overlapping identities can simultaneously generate disadvantage and afford advantage (Gines 2011). Within literary studies, intersectionality enables an analysis of how identity is shaped and negotiated within cultural, political, and economic frameworks.

While intersectionality emerged from U.S.-based Black feminist legal thought, it has come to be applied as an increasingly conceptualized idea in postcolonial literary studies, examining it across different power structures worldwide. In African diasporic literature, intersectionality must be recontextualized to address colonialism, migration, and transnational identity formations. Rather than being used as a rigid theory, intersectionality is employed as an adaptive analytical tool that helps readers understand the intersections of race, class, gender, and displacement in Bulawayo's works on Zimbabwean and diasporic identity formations, thereby extending it beyond its original U.S.-based origins.

Bulawayo's novel provides fertile ground for such an approach. Set against the backdrop of Zimbabwe's political instability, the narrative traces Darling's transition from childhood in Zimbabwe to adolescence in the United States. Through this journey, *We Need New Names* engages deeply with themes of displacement, cultural creolization, and identity formation, showing how individuals become who they are within a community context. This study examines Darling's experiences within an intersectional feminist framework, shedding light on the interplay among race, class, and gender in the lives of the underprivileged. Prior research has examined the novel's formal features, including its first-person perspective, code-switching between English and Shona, and synecdochal imagery that recurs throughout the text. These stylistic choices reinforce Darling's lived reality under multiple forms of marginalization. For example, the first-person narrative provides intimate access to Darling's perspective while subtly confronting the challenge of representing hegemonic power structures. Through the "angelic child's" voice, Bulawayo delivers a fresh and perceptive commentary on race, migration, class divides, and the lingering effects of colonialism on children (Vaclavikova 2022). In *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo similarly traces how forces beyond their control hem in Darling and the women around her: the shame attached to female ambition, schools that fail to nurture, and immigration systems that reduce bodies to paperwork. Like the survivors in Khaleel et al.'s study, they navigate a world where justice is not absent but placed just out of reach (Khaleel et al. 2024).

The blending of English and Shona underscores the cultural hybridity embedded in Darling's identity. This linguistic duality mirrors her struggle to reconcile her Zimbabwean heritage with her American reality, a tension that reflects Du Bois's (1903) concept of "double consciousness." Code-switching functions not only as a linguistic strategy but also as a marker of cultural negotiation, illustrating Darling's navigation between Western and African perspectives. Bulawayo's use of symbols further illustrates socio-economic contrasts in Darling's life (Du Bois 1903). The guava tree, for instance, symbolizes scarcity

in Zimbabwe, while the abundance of American life highlights structural inequalities. These contrasts highlight the economic and cultural divides that characterize the migrant experience, underscoring the fragmented nature of Darling's identity as she navigates between disparate communities. This research situates *We Need New Names* alongside other contemporary intersectional feminist narratives, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. While these works share thematic concerns with identity, race, and class, they employ distinct stylistic strategies to articulate forms of "Othering" within specific cultural contexts (Carastathis 2014; Perez-Jordan 2025). Tan et al. (2024) demonstrate in their comparative study of Chinese Muslim women that the navigation of cultural hybridity and religious transformation across Malaysia and China echoes Darling's identity negotiations in Bulawayo's novel (Tan et al. 2024).

Intersectionality has proven invaluable across disciplines such as Cultural Studies, American Studies, and Media Studies for analysing how societal structures perpetuate discrimination and inequality based on intersecting identity markers, including race, class, gender, and disability. This framework recognizes that social categories do not exist in isolation and that processes of marginalization are interwoven (Serrant 2020). In *We Need New Names*, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism converge to shape Darling's life and evolving sense of self. The aim of this study is twofold: first, to conduct a close reading of the novel's stylistic features, including first-person narration, code-switching, symbolism, and narrative fragmentation, and second, to examine how these features align with an intersectional feminist interpretation. Bulawayo's motifs strengthen the novel's engagement with otherness and identity, as Darling's personal narrative reveals how migration, displacement, and power relations reinforce racial, gendered, and class divisions.

In this way, the analysis contributes to African post-feminist literary criticism, positioning Bulawayo's work as a pivotal text in the study of intersectionality. By combining stylistic and thematic analysis, this research highlights the literature's role as a tool for social justice, providing insight into structural inequalities and the lived experiences of marginalized identities. It affirms the continuing relevance of feminist methodologies in interpreting narratives of identity, oppression, and cultural survivance (Phipps 2020). Situating this study within debates on global feminist solidarities further highlights the importance of cross-contextual analysis. Intersectional readings of African diasporic texts not only illuminate local struggles but also expose global patterns of inequality that transcend borders. As Muszel (2025) argues, feminist scholarship must resist the universalization of women's experiences and instead engage with their diverse social, political, and historical contexts. This paper embraces that imperative by foregrounding the specificity of Zimbabwean and diasporic realities while connecting them to transnational concerns such as xenophobia, anti-Black racism, and gendered labour exploitation. Through this approach, the analysis underscores literature's role in fostering intercultural empathy and critical consciousness, positioning Bulawayo's novel as a site of local resistance and global feminist dialogue (Muszel 2025).

Drawing attention to how Bulawayo's language, imagery, and textuality enact rather than simply represent intersectional identity, this article argues that a close reading of Bulawayo's style reveals the complex daily lives of those affected by race, gender, and class in a postcolonial and diasporic world.

The existing literature on *We Need New Names* has mainly focused on themes of migration, diaspora identity, and ecologism/feminism. For instance, Vaclavikova (2022) focuses on the ecologism/feminism symbolism of the novel (Vaclavikova 2022), while Nasir et al. (2024) explore the theme of identity formation through intersectional themes (Nasir et al. 2024). Though the existing literature offers useful insights into the novel, the intersectional themes have often been explored in a fragmented manner, without attention

to the role of literature in constructing intersectional meanings. This study attempts to fill this gap by arguing that the stylistic strategies employed by Bulawayo do not merely represent intersectionality but perform intersectionality.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions, which guide the analysis:

1. How does the narrative structure of Bulawayo's text formally support the concept of intersectionality of identity in the diasporic context?
2. In what ways does linguistic code-switching between Shona and English function as a political and cultural strategy?
3. How does the novel's episodic fragmentation challenge conventional feminist literary interpretations of identity and belonging?

2. Literature Review

Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical framework to explain how overlapping social identities such as race, gender, and class interact to produce unique experiences of oppression, particularly for marginalized women (Crenshaw 1989). This approach was later expanded by Hooks (2000) and applied in various strands of feminist research, including feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA), to examine the ways gendered language reflects and sustains power relations (Hooks 2000). In the context of African literature, intersectionality offers a valuable lens for analysing works like *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, which explores cultural dislocation, socio-economic struggle, and the negotiation of gender dynamics. The framework's relevance to this research lies in its capacity to connect race, class, and gender within a single analytical framework, aligning directly with the study's objective of uncovering how women's voices are represented, marginalized, and empowered in the novel.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008) emphasized that any analysis of oppression across multiple dimensions is incomplete without considering intersectionality, as gender cannot be understood in isolation from race or class (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008). Similarly, Carastathis (2014) reinforced the model's critical role in revealing power structures in their full complexity. These perspectives fill a significant gap in literary discourse by challenging single-axis approaches, thereby enabling a richer understanding of the layered oppressions and resistances present in Bulawayo's narrative. Collectively, the findings from these studies highlight that intersectional analysis not only uncovers the multifaceted nature of women's marginalization but also illuminates the strategies they employ to resist and redefine power within patriarchal and racially stratified societies.

Collins (2022) and Crenshaw and colleagues (Crenshaw 2013b) investigated the limitations of traditional feminist discourses, critiquing their inability to address the layered realities of non-Western women. Using an intersectional feminist framework, their works emphasize that the experiences of women in African contexts are shaped not only by gender but also by colonial histories, socio-political conditions, and culturally specific expectations. This perspective bridges the analytical gap left by Western feminist templates, which often overlook the nuanced forms of oppression faced by African women. Such a framework is relevant to this research, aligning with the objective of examining women's voices in *We Need New Names* through the interconnected lenses of race, class, and gender. African feminist perspectives, as underscored by Bell Hooks (Hooks 2000), highlight how those overlapping identities generate distinct forms of systemic domination. They argue that narratives arising from such positionalities must be analysed with approaches that respect

their complexity, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of power and resistance in postcolonial literature.

Another researcher identifies intersectionality as a neglected yet essential lens in African feminism, arguing that African literary analysis remains incomplete without addressing how intersecting identities shape women's experiences beyond the continent. Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* exemplifies this through Darling, a young Zimbabwean girl who migrates to the United States and faces heightened challenges due to her multiple marginalized identities as a Black, female African immigrant. Viewed through the lens of intersectional feminism, the novel reframes power relations and portrays women whose oppression stems from the intersection of forces of gender, race, class, and nationality (Mohammed 2023). Acheampong similarly contends that African feminist theorizing must move beyond colonial and Eurocentric frameworks, advocating epistemic freedom, the capacity to produce and validate knowledge rooted in African contexts, histories, and lived experiences (Acheampong 2025). This reflects the broader reality of African women, who are positioned between pre- and postcolonial identities, and whose struggles demand nuanced analysis (Yacob-Haliso 2025). Such intersectional portrayals resist European orientalist traditions that depict African women as passive and submissive. Instead, Bulawayo challenges these reductive images, presenting Black African women as active agents shaping their lives amid intersecting systems of power. This aligns with Al-Wazedi's critique of hegemonic narratives that silence or erase Third World women, as Bulawayo's storytelling rejects patriarchal framings that cast African women as objects of pity, foregrounding their resilience and agency (Naidoo 2018).

Dangarembga and Gyasi extend the discourse by developing the concept of the Proto-Sophisticated African Female protagonist, one who navigates the tension between her traditional African heritage and the influence of Western education. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga's protagonist, Tambu, pursues education in a colonial setting, only to discover that her voice remains constrained within a system where colonial schooling, exemplified by institutions like the Bishop's, defines the path toward women's liberation (Kayani et al. 2023). Similarly, Teju Cole's *Every Heart a Breaking Star* reflects on the impact of displacement on individuals both within Africa and in the diaspora (von Gleich and Soto 2021). Notably, Bulawayo portrays Black African women as multi-dimensional agents who employ language and discourse to contest social constructions and reshape their identities in both African and diasporic contexts (Bartels et al. 2019).

Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* employs a young, first-person narrator to foreground the layered oppression faced by women and children. Through Darling's voice, the novel exposes entrenched power imbalances and gendered expectations in both Zimbabwean and American contexts (Mavengano 2023). Salama observes that narrative perspective is crucial in revealing hidden structures of power. By centering Darling's viewpoint, Bulawayo offers an intimate account of how socio-political realities such as economic inequality and gender discrimination are internalized (Salama 2020). Language is pivotal here: Bulawayo's blend of Shona and English reflects Darling's negotiation of a dual identity shaped by African and American cultural demands. This linguistic hybridity, also evident in Adichie's Americanah, underscores the cultural dislocation and power dynamics faced by African women in the diaspora (Boyce-Davies 2002). Current research on Bulawayo's novel continues to focus on the issues of displacement, naming, and diasporic identities. For instance, Moji (2015) explores the politics of renaming and translational identities in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. According to Moji, linguistic change symbolizes the larger politics of belonging in diasporic spaces (Moji 2015). Similarly, Gutiérrez-Glik (2021) examines the communal formations of postcolonial happiness and resilience in Bulawayo's narrative, locating the text within a larger context of postcolonial affect and diasporic

solidarity (Gutiérrez-Glik 2021). Scholars argue that code-switching operates both as self-expression and as constraint, enabling navigation across cultural spaces while exposing individuals to intersecting systems of control (Yacob-Haliso 2025).

Haddad (2021) highlights how African female writers employ nature-based and domestic symbolism, such as recurring motifs of land, sustenance, and displacement, as strategies of self-assertion and resistance. These symbolic practices, she argues, counter colonial discourse by reclaiming African women's narratives from exoticized portrayals (Haddad 2021). Similarly, Munck et al. observe that fragmented narrative structures are effective in representing the psychological consequences of migration and displacement, particularly for women facing intersecting forms of oppression. Such structural approaches, according to Naylor, capture the complexities of migrant subjectivity, the negotiation of multiple identities, and the navigation of power relations embedded in cultural and socio-political contexts (Munck et al. 2022).

Sekyiamah's '*The Sex Lives of African Women*' and Emezi's '*The Death of Vivek Oji*' both explore how gender and power intersect in the lives of African women, within the continent and in the diaspora (Emezi 2020; Sekyiamah 2022). Sekyiamah focuses on African women's sexual autonomy and agency, examining how they navigate and challenge traditional gender norms. Similarly, Musingafi and Musingafi (2024) note that African women authors often employ intersectional feminism to critique gendered power relations, revealing their characters' resilience and agency amid patriarchal and racial oppression. Collectively, such works illustrate how African feminist writers reject both the limitations of Western feminist frameworks and oppressive cultural practices, positioning African women's literature as a counter-liberation discourse that engages with gender, race, and class in complex and culturally specific ways (Musingafi and Musingafi 2024).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on stylistic and intersectional feminist perspectives, to explore NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names*. A qualitative methodology enables detailed analysis of the novel's linguistic, symbolic, and structural elements. This approach prioritizes depth of interpretation rather than broad quantitative analysis (Creswell and Poth 2016). Through reading, a central method of literary stylistics, the analysis unpacks how Bulawayo's imagery, narrative voice, and symbolic motifs articulate the layered experiences of identity from gendered, racialized, and socio-economic standpoints. Close reading not only illuminates the text's stylistic texture but also situates these stylistic choices within broader socio-political realities, enabling an interpretative interaction between literary form and intersectional feminist critique. This interpretive lens foregrounds how Bulawayo's stylistic decisions enrich the discourse on intersectional feminism and amplify the voicing of multiple, minority, and marginalized subjectivities. The research is grounded in the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism, which conceptualizes social identity and inequality as mutually constitutive, overlapping systems rather than discrete categories (Carbado et al. 2013; Cho et al. 2013).

Originally articulated by Crenshaw (1989), to address the limitations of single-axis frameworks in anti-discrimination law, intersectionality has since been expanded by feminist scholars such as Collins (2000) and Hooks (1984, 2000), who emphasize that race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality interact to produce complex modes of oppression and privilege. Intersectional feminism thus challenges homogenized categories of "woman" or "Black" by revealing how systems of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and colonialism operate simultaneously and interactively. In the context of postcolonial African literature, this framework enables the reading of characters as embedded in intersecting structures that shape their identities and survival strategies (Crenshaw 2013a, 2013b).

Drawing on this framework, the study conducts a critical reading of Bulawayo's representation of multiple selves and intersecting struggles, examining aspects of power, exclusion, and subversion in the novel. This theoretical orientation is particularly effective for analysing *We Need New Names* because it illuminates how Bulawayo narrativizes "the untold," the polyphonic, fragmented, and often silenced experiences of her characters, thereby contributing to the discourse of transnational and "third world" feminisms in literary criticism (Mohanty 2005). Intersectional feminism serves here not only as a theoretical lens but also as a methodological paradigm, guiding both data collection (selection of textual excerpts) and analysis. It foregrounds the ways characters negotiate and resist intersecting oppressions of racism, patriarchy, classism, and displacement, while also capturing moments of complicity and ambivalence.

The framework also makes visible the ways literary style functions as a political act in narrating intersectional oppression. Bulawayo's first-person narration, marked by heteroglossia and linguistic hybridity, embodies what Anzaldúa (2004) describes as the "borderlands," liminal spaces where identities are contested and renegotiated. Darling's voice, inflected by the linguistic cadences of Zimbabwean English and the cultural dissonance of diasporic life, becomes a site for negotiating selfhood under conditions of structural inequality. The guava tree motif, recurring throughout the text, operates as a metaphor of rootedness, resilience, and cultural inheritance, resisting complete assimilation into dominant cultures. From an intersectional feminist perspective, such stylistic and symbolic elements reveal how personal and collective identities are shaped within intersecting matrices of domination (Ojuola 2024).

Foregrounding intersectionality in the analysis of *We Need New Names* thus enables a nuanced understanding of how Darling, as a Black, working-class Zimbabwean immigrant in America, navigates the entangled forces of racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and economic marginalization. By situating Bulawayo's narrative style within this framework, the study not only attends to the thematic dimensions of identity, belonging, and displacement but also highlights the political potency of narrative form as a form of resistance. This combined methodological and theoretical approach offers a comprehensive interpretative model for engaging with contemporary African diasporic literature, where stylistic innovation and socio-political critique are inextricably linked. To further enrich the interpretive process, this study also adopts a comparative lens, examining *We Need New Names* alongside thematically related African and diasporic narratives. Such cross-textual analysis enables the identification of recurring motifs of resistance, displacement, and hybrid identity construction, as well as the tracing of divergences rooted in specific socio-political contexts. This approach enables the research to highlight Bulawayo's distinctive narrative interventions, particularly her blending of humour and tragedy to destabilize dominant narratives about African migration. Methodologically, this comparative element follows Creswell and Poth's (2016) recommendation to triangulate data sources in qualitative inquiry, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings. In doing so, it not only deepens the thematic analysis but also situates the novel within a broader cultural genealogy, linking Bulawayo's work to other African women writers whose literary strategies similarly contest reductive portrayals of marginalized identities (Creswell and Poth 2016).

Textual passages from chosen chapters, such as "Hitting Budapest", "Shhhh", and "How They Lived", were closely analysed to illustrate how Bulawayo's linguistic code-switching, symbolic imagery, and fragmented structure expose the intersection of race, class, and gender in Darling's lived experience.

4. Data Collection

This study employs both primary and secondary data sources to facilitate an empirical examination of *We Need New Names* within the framework of intersectional feminism. The novel by NoViolet Bulawayo serves as the primary data, selected for its rich narrative engagement with themes of race, gender, class, and displacement. Guided by the study's objectives, a structured, systematic textual analysis was undertaken to elucidate the manifestations of intersectional feminist concerns in the work.

4.1. Narrative Techniques

Central to the analysis is the exploration of narrative strategies, particularly the subjective insight offered through the protagonist, Darling. The rarity of this intimate, first-person perspective enables the reader to witness the protagonist's development and identity negotiation within the intersecting contexts of race, gender, and class. This approach situates Darling's experiences within presentist intersectional frameworks, allowing for nuanced interpretations of her social realities.

4.2. Linguistic Choices

Bulawayo's use of bilingualism, alternating between English and Shona, serves as a crucial site for examining cultural hybridity and the construction of identity. This linguistic code-switching serves both as a reflection of and a commentary on the protagonist's bicultural experience. The interplay of languages enables a critical analysis of how language functions not only as a marker of identity but also as a vehicle for articulating displacement and cultural negotiation.

4.3. Symbolism and Imagery

The novel employs recurring symbols and vivid imagery, most notably the guava tree and depictions of physical environments, to articulate social class distinctions and individual resilience. These symbolic elements offer a layered understanding of interconnected oppressions, inviting readers to engage intellectually with the socio-political dimensions underpinning the characters' lived experiences

4.4. Structural Elements

The episodic narrative structure of *We Need New Names* mirrors the fragmentation and upheaval that characterize the protagonist's life. This form reflects broader themes of displacement, exile, and identity fragmentation, underscoring the novel's alignment with intersectional feminist concerns. The non-linear progression further emphasizes the complexities of negotiating multiple, intersecting identities within unstable social contexts.

4.5. Secondary Data

Secondary sources are integral to situating Bulawayo's novel within wider scholarly discourses on intersectionality and postcolonial feminist theory. Foundational theoretical works by Crenshaw (1989), Collins (2000), and Bell Hooks (Hooks 1984) provide critical frameworks that underpin the primary analysis. Comparative literary studies of contemporary texts such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing further enrich the investigation by highlighting shared thematic concerns of migration, identity, and oppression through an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw 2013a, 2013b; Zhao 2024).

5. Data Analysis

The focus of this analysis is to examine how the formal and constructive elements of Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* articulate interwoven social issues, contributing to

an overarching intersectional framework that foregrounds gendered oppression. Central to this investigation is the first-person narrative perspective, which captures Darling's subjectivity and enables an intimate engagement with her multifaceted experiences of oppression. The analysis reveals how Bulawayo intricately portrays the compounding effects of race, gender, and socio-economic marginalization through the protagonist's evolving consciousness. This study aims to illuminate how Darling's journey exemplifies the emotional and psychological dimensions of identity negotiation, displacement, and societal expectations under the weight of intersectional oppression. The deployment of the first-person narrative is particularly significant, as it offers readers a direct, immersive encounter with the protagonist's lived realities, thereby enhancing comprehension of intersectionality in context.

5.1. Linguistic Choices

Code-switching between English and Shona emerges as a critical linguistic strategy that encodes questions of cultural belonging and dislocation. While the practice of code-switching has been extensively explored in prior scholarship, this study specifically interrogates instances in which the juxtaposition of these two languages functions as a literary device that simultaneously articulates and complicates the characters' hybrid cultural identity. Bulawayo's linguistic choices enact the psychological tensions associated with migration and marginalization, revealing language as both a medium of connection and a source of division. This analysis aims to uncover the multifaceted meanings of linguistic "*in-betweenness*".

Darling and her peers, for example, chant, "*We didn't eat today! We are waiting for NGOs to come!*" (Hitting Budapest). The syntactical simplicity of the sentence 'We didn't eat today!' points to the immediacy of the children's lived experience. The declarative nature of the sentence, without descriptive embellishment, points to the urgency of hunger and the restricted linguistic form typical of child narration. At the same time, the repetitive form of the chant gives individual hunger a communal dimension, illustrating language's role as a communal expression of socio-economic marginalization.

In another instance, Shona interjections such as "Ngozi ichakutevera" (the avenging spirit will follow you) allow the narrator to insert aspects of belief that have no direct translation into Western discourse and can be untranslatable. Bulawayo's language crossings perform what Anzaldúa (2004) describes as "borderland speech." The girls use English and Shona strategically and sometimes subversively to communicate in a society in which English is the colonial language, while Shona is closer to their lived realities and can convey kinship intimacy (Anzaldúa 2004). In this way, Bulawayo treats language not simply as a mode of communication but as a potential tool of resistance, one that the characters manipulate to form a sense of belonging in the face of structures and systems of racialized and classed hierarchy.

5.2. Symbolism and Imagery

Symbolism within the novel provides a potent lens for understanding the intersectional oppression faced by the characters. The guava tree, a recurring motif, symbolizes innocence, loss, and displacement, serving as a poignant reminder of socio-economic hardship and estrangement from home. Through a detailed examination of such imagery, this study demonstrates how Bulawayo's symbolic landscape portrays both the resilience and vulnerability of Black individuals as they navigate oppressive social structures.

In "Hitting Budapest", Darling and her friend trespass into the suburb to steal guavas from "rich people's trees." Climbing the guava tree, reaching for the fruit, represents both hunger and rebellion, as well as literal and symbolic ascension.

Later, Darling recalls the guavas in America, where food is plentiful but often lacks flavour. This contrast heightens her emotional and cultural dislocation. The guava tree, once a scarce commodity, becomes a symbol of nostalgia, intertwining material and psychological longing.

Bulawayo's vivid imagery, "*the sun was cruel, the guavas bitter*," illustrates the harshness of the environment. The juxtaposition of the two sensory words "*cruel*" and "*bitter*" creates a somatic image of hardship. The word "cruel," an adjective, not only assigns agency to the natural environment but also heightens the sense of hardship. At the same time, "bitter" has a double meaning, referring to both taste and emotion. Bulawayo's use of sensory diction creates a symbolic image that embodies the somatic realities of hardship and poverty.

5.3. Structural Elements

The novel's fragmented and episodic structure mirrors the disjointed experiences of displacement and exile that the characters endure. This narrative fragmentation reflects the fractured identities of gendered minorities, underscoring the ongoing, unfinished nature of their search for selfhood. By employing an episodic form, Bulawayo refuses a singular narrative of progress, presenting

The novel is split into two disparate sections. The first, before Darling's move to the US, documents her childhood in Zimbabwe; the second, her adolescence in America. This is a kind of fracture that severs her identity along national lines and, as the two parts are mismatched in length, also temporally. Chapters within each section, such as "Hitting Budapest," "*We Need New Names*," and "How They Lived," are short, self-contained snapshots of Darling's life in a migrant diaspora. They resist the standard linear transition from chapter to chapter, mimicking the rhythms of migrancy. Darling's developing narrative voice, which progresses from a kind of innocent playfulness to a world-wary estrangement, is marked by the various systems of oppression in which she finds herself. The breaks in structure also mirror this fragmentation, illustrating Crenshaw's (1989) idea of "*interlocking systems*" (Ampeire 2023).

5.4. Application of Intersectional Feminism in Analysis

Throughout the analysis, intersectional feminism serves as the guiding theoretical framework, facilitating a nuanced critique of how race, gender, class, and other identity markers shape the lived experiences of Bulawayo's characters.

Darling's mother and Aunt Fostalina are such intersectional, living, breathing enactments. Her mother's quietude over her father's disappearance signifies patriarchal oppression within economic marginalization, and her Aunt Fostalina's fatigue from caretaking in the U.S. encapsulates the gendered weight of race as a migratory labor force. In one passage, Fostalina voices her fatigue, stating, "*My feet are swollen from standing all day*." Fostalina's tiredness, not only in her bones but also in her position as an "outsider-within." (Collins 2000), is marked, both literally and figuratively, by how her body cannot be unseen but is often invisible to the structural mechanisms of power. In another vignette, Darling is jeered by another girl at school with racialized and gendered slurs. Darling describes how she is made to read and reread her body and her innocence in shifting and violent stereotypes as the simultaneity of oppressions is multiplied, contextualized, and embodied.

By engaging with existing scholarship on Bulawayo and comparable African women writers, this study positions *We Need New Names* within the broader discourse of postcolonial and intersectional feminist literature. Through these textual instances, Bulawayo transforms theoretical intersectionality into narrative experience, giving emotional texture to structural critique. Comparative analyses with works such as Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* further enrich this examination, highlighting thematic and stylistic convergences while showcasing Bulawayo's distinctive contributions to feminist literary expression.

6. Discussion

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is examined through a feminist critique that foregrounds intersecting dimensions of race, gender, class, and displacement as experienced by the protagonist, Darling. Employing narrative realism and postmodern elements, Bulawayo utilizes language, symbolism, and a fragmented narrative structure to portray identity as both constructed and continually contested within complex hierarchies. The novel's first-person narration provides an intimate account of Darling's journey from politically unstable Zimbabwe to the racially charged United States. This transition highlights the intersectionality of oppression, underscoring that identity is dynamic and shaped by overlapping forces. Darling's experiences reveal systemic challenges such as racial discrimination, economic hardship, and gender inequality that resonate globally among marginalized communities. These insights align with (Yacob-Haliso 2025), who highlights how young, first-person narratives illustrate the relationship between identity and systemic oppression. Similarly, Murry et al. (2023) stress how African diaspora literature depicts Black women's negotiation of power on both micro and macro levels, reflecting Bulawayo's nuanced portrayal of Darling's resilience against stereotypes (Murry et al. 2023).

Language is a crucial medium through which intersectional experiences are articulated, particularly through Darling's code-switching between Shona and English. This linguistic duality reflects her negotiation between African heritage and American societal expectations. Ojuola (2024) argues that language in African literature serves as a tool of resistance, while Mohammed views code-switching as a postcolonial strategy for reclaiming identity. Darling's bilingualism thus symbolizes her complex identity as both African and American, as she navigates conflicting cultural demands. Symbolism, such as the recurring guava tree, further enriches this discourse (Mohammed 2023). In Gebreyohannes and Ambachew's (2022) study of botanical imagery in African feminist writings, the guava tree encapsulates themes of suffering, displacement, and resilience. For Darling, it signifies both the pain of her Zimbabwean past and hope for a better future, reinforcing the novel's themes of resistance and identity affirmation amid adversity (Gebreyohannes and Ambachew 2022).

The novel's depiction of socio-economic disparities between Zimbabwe and the United States amplifies its critique of intersectional oppression (Collins 2022) highlights how migratory experiences intensify class and gender injustices for marginalized groups, a reality reflected in Darling's encounters with racism and cultural prejudice in America. Bulawayo's fragmented, episodic narrative structure further mirrors the fractured subjectivity of migrants and marginalized individuals. Vaclavikova (2022) notes that such narrative fragmentation effectively conveys the psychological dislocation and ongoing identity negotiations characteristic of those living at multiple axes of oppression. Through these narrative techniques, *We Need New Names* makes a significant contribution to intersectional feminist literature (Vaclavikova 2022).

Salama (2020) asserts that narrative perspectives are particularly effective at exposing the embedded power relations involving race, gender, and class. Bulawayo's work not only illuminates global injustices but also amplifies the voices of those who resist systemic oppression. By centering Darling's lived experience, the novel offers a powerful lens through which to understand the complexities of identity, power, and resilience in contemporary marginalized communities (Salama 2020). Beyond individual experience, Bulawayo's narrative also interrogates the socio-political structures that maintain systemic inequities. The portrayal of immigration bureaucracy, racialized policing, and labour

exploitation resonates with broader patterns documented in African diaspora studies, where migrants often occupy precarious socio-economic positions despite transnational mobility. This dimension aligns with Collins' (2022) assertion that intersectionality is not merely descriptive but fundamentally political; it calls attention to structures that must be transformed. In Bulawayo's work, these structures are embodied not only in institutions but also in interpersonal relationships, where internalized prejudice and gendered expectations perpetuate oppression within marginalized communities themselves. The novel thus complicates simplistic victim–oppressor binaries, showing that power circulates in diffuse and sometimes contradictory ways. Furthermore, Darling's shifting self-perception throughout the narrative illustrates the dynamic interplay between agency and structural constraints. While she resists certain stereotypes, she also navigates moments of complicity, reflecting the messy realities of survival within intersecting systems of domination. This nuanced portrayal challenges readers to consider how identity negotiation is an ongoing process shaped by changing contexts and power relations, reinforcing the need for flexible, context-specific feminist methodologies.

7. Finding

From the analysis, it is evident that the narrative strategies in Bulawayo's work can be seen as a form of stylistic enactment of intersectionality rather than thematic representation. By using the first-person narrative through the character of Darling, the novel highlights the intersection of race, gender, class, and displacement in the formation of identity in both Zimbabwean and diasporic contexts. The narrative form offers the reader a proximity to the intersections of these experiences of marginalization.

Linguistic choices further reinforce this engagement. Bulawayo's code-switching between Shona and English reflects Darling's cultural negotiation and dual belonging. This bilingualism becomes both a symbol and a tool for articulating and contesting identity in the face of postcolonial legacies and diasporic challenges. Such practices resonate with African feminist discourses, where language serves as a means of resistance and reclamation. Complementing this, symbolism, most notably the recurring guava tree, deepens the novel's intersectional critique. The guava tree symbolizes both the pain of displacement and enduring ties to the homeland, offering a metaphor for social and emotional struggles. Through such imagery, Bulawayo highlights how race, class, and nationality converge in shaping lived experience.

Structurally, the novel's episodic, fragmented form mirrors the fractured realities of those subject to intersecting oppressions such as war, displacement, and identity loss. Its non-linear style conveys the discontinuities and transformations within Darling's life. The fragmented structure highlights identity as a dynamic entity, shaped by both external pressures and internal transformations. By dividing the plot into discrete episodes, Bulawayo captures the tension between past and present, illustrating the persistent, nonlinear nature of intersectional oppression. The mosaic-like assembly of diverse voices foregrounds marginalized experiences often excluded from dominant narratives. This narrative strategy challenges reductive understandings of intersectionality, highlighting its complexity beyond the confines of fixed categories of identity. Bulawayo's structural innovations thus contribute a distinctive approach to representing intersectional feminist concerns, emphasizing the plurality and fluidity of oppressed identities.

In conclusion, *We Need New Names* employs narrative, linguistic, symbolic, and structural strategies to articulate the complexities of intersectional feminism. Integrating themes of race, gender, class, and displacement into a multifaceted literary form, the novel presents a nuanced portrayal of survival and resistance among marginalized individuals confronting compounded forms of oppression. These findings not only confirm the relevance of inter-

sectional feminist theory in literary analysis but also position Bulawayo's work as a vital contribution to scholarly conversations on identity, power, and social justice in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

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