

Comparing chosen kin and extended families: a book review of *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo

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The family is a dynamic and socially-constructed institution which adapts itself “to social, economic, political and material circumstances” (Makiwane et al. 2017, 50). The word “family” is marked by polysemy, as it refers to a wide range of meanings. Indeed, if traditionally, a family is based on blood or legal ties, this concept has now widened, with a focus placed on discursive strategies, that is if the individuals define themselves as a family (Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund 2016, 18), as well as on functions, that is if they function as one (Minow 1998, 8). What is therefore a family, and what are its functions? In this review, I set out to explore answers to these questions as they are provided by the Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo through her novel *We need new names* (2013). This bildungsroman tells the story of Darling, who grows up in an African shantytown called Paradise where she belongs to a close-knit group of children that are left to their own device. Later on, she migrates to the United States where she lives with her aunt’s family while striving to maintain her ties with those that she left in Paradise. These two different contexts produce two equally different family forms: the intentional or chosen family on the one hand, and the traditional extended family on the other. I therefore aim to compare those two models, focusing on the meanings and functions of families in each context.

Many criteria could be accounted for in considering the basis of families. The most obvious one is blood or genetic ties. Legal ties formed through marriage or adoption are also often considered. However, those criteria are reductive since they leave out many other forms of family. Indeed, questioning the essentially western nuclear family model and its imposition on an African context, Russell exclaimed: “as though families were necessarily constituted in the Western mould, structured around the fragile conjugal bond, as though children had only one mother and one father” (Russell 2003, 155). In order to widen the definition, other factors such as feelings and commitment have been factored in. To account for the diversity of family forms, I have opted for the following, open, and encompassing definition: “families [are] networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who

share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family” (Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund 2016, 20). Such a definition entails a few characteristics which are displayed to a varying degree in the two family forms present in *We Need New Names*.

The first family form encountered in this novel is the intentional family or chosen kin. As its name indicates, this form is based on choice and intention. Members have chosen to be in this family, instead of being born into it. From the very beginning of the novel, such intentionality can be observed in the relationships between Darling, Chipo, Sbho, Stina, Bastard, and Godknows. They are kids of approximately 10 years old living in a ravaged shantytown and choosing to spend all their days together, as is signalled in the opening paragraph: “We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though Mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are just going” (Bulawayo 2013, 3). Those very first lines of the novel serve to establish the “internal sense of we-ness” (Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund 2016, 18) of this group, or in other words their sense of belonging with one another, hence my treating them as family. The intentionality of their bond can be observed as they choose to stick together despite a handful of impediments, be it a restriction imposed by adults or another responsibility. Apart from this choice aspect, one criterion that marks this group as a family form, according to the definition adopted above, is the fact that they are sharing their life.

Darling and her friends spend almost all their days together and do everything together. Not only do they share their life, but such a shared life also displays internal organisation, changing the status of their group from that of an impromptu gathering to that of a legitimate system. For example, the children organise themselves in order to find their own food, by stealing guavas. There is even an economic side to their unit. Indeed, chancing upon the body of a woman hanging from a tree, their first instinct is to run away, before changing their mind and deciding to sell the woman’s shoes. As Bastard, who is arguably the head of the family, puts it: “did you notice that woman’s shoes were almost new? If we can get them we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one and a half” (Bulawayo 2013, 20). The fact that the price of a loaf of bread is equivalent to that of a pair of shoes speaks volumes about the extent of poverty in Paradise, their ironically-named shantytown. Despite their dire circumstances, these children share their life and economically organise themselves in order to survive. Ensuring survival is indeed one of the main functions of this family form.

Arguably, the purpose of any human groupings, including sociological units such as the tribe or the family, is to ensure survival and protection of its members. As Makiwane et al. suggest, “the family has been an important source in the provision of care for its members, socialisation of children, support and guidance in most parts of the world” (Makiwane et al. 2017, 50). Failure of the traditional nuclear family to fulfil that function can trigger the formation of other groups more likely to help individuals to meet their basic survival needs. In *We Need New Names*, it can be contended that the family formed by the gang of children ensures the survival of its members where their respective nuclear family fails to do so. According to Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2016), “intentional families may form when the family of origin is estranged, does not share values, or does not meet needs, or when there is a death in the family that leaves a void to be filled. In this case people will create family relationships as substitute or supplemental” (23). The intentional family formed by Darling and her friends therefore fills the void in terms of survival that exists in the more traditional family unit. The falling apart of such a unit is due to a number of reasons, especially in the Zimbabwean context that arguably frames this novel, including socio-economic crises, migration, and death of parents due to HIV/AIDS which left many children fending for themselves (Gubwe, Gubwe, and Mago 2015). The intentional family’s supplemental role is most acutely brought to the fore in the novel when the female members of the group decide to “[get] rid of Chipo’s stomach once and for all” (Bulawayo 2013, 80) on their own, instead of turning to their traditional family or other adults. Chipo, one of the kids in the gang, was raped by her grandfather who impregnated her. In their naivety, the group members decide to “get rid” of the baby because “one, it makes it hard for [them] to play, and two, if [they] let her have the baby, she will just die” (Bulawayo 2013, 80). The children have therefore taken it upon themselves, albeit naively, to ensure that one of their chosen kin does not die from childbirth. Such a responsibility traditionally lies with a mother or members of the nuclear family. This therefore illustrates how the intentional family has replaced the nuclear one, at least in the children’s imagination, in fulfilling its survival function. Besides survival, another function that is met by intentional families is that of emotional closeness.

Beyond basic needs such as food and survival, families offer a framework that allows the fulfilment of emotional needs. The need to belong and be emotionally close to other human beings is typically human, and, at least from an African perspective, the most obvious space where to satisfy that need is within a family. That type of closeness is apparent in Darling’s relationships with her childhood friends even if the constant bickering, laughing at one

another, and even beating one another might indicate otherwise. Intentional kinship gives its members a “sense of belonging, a feeling of emotional closeness, protection, security” (Vivas-Romero 2020, 391), which can be observed in the bond shared by the main protagonist and her friends. The children have actually never been vocal about their attachment and closeness to one another. Their emotional ties can however be read through the unspoken as well as through symbols. For example, several years after Darling’s migration to the United States, one fellow countryman also seeks asylum there and brings her a package of guavas sent by her friends. Taking one, she has the following reflection: “I look at it like I’ve never seen a guava before, then hold it under my nose. The smell hits me where it matters, and I feel like my heart and insides are being gently pried open. I shake my head, rub the guava in both hands, take a bite, and laugh” (Bulawayo 2013, 188). Arguably, the guavas are more than just food. They symbolise the emotional closeness that the group members have acquired through shared hunger and hardships. The smell of the guava “hits [her] where it matters”, which is more likely her heart than her stomach, thus highlighting the emotional link that ties the group. Such an emotional link can also be observed in the extended family, but in a different form.

The second family form portrayed in the novel is the extended one. Once in the United States, Darling lives with her mother’s twin sister, Aunt Fostalina, and her own family. The extended family however reaches beyond the Atlantic, as it also includes relatives still living back home, including Darling’s mother. Indeed, “for African people the family has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America. In traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and other immediate relatives” (Mbiti 1969, 106). This is therefore the most widespread model for African communities, even for those that have left the continent, such as Aunt Fostalina’s household. The main function of the extended family, especially in the context of migration, and as reflected in *We Need New Names*, is to provide financial support to its members.

It must be noted that support provided by the extended family is not solely of a financial nature. Indeed, it can equally be social, psychological, religious, or educational. As Swigart (2001) contends, “families, not individuals, are the building blocks of African society ... Family members act as both an economic and emotional network” (4). The financial aspect is but one element of the relationship. Such an element is particularly highlighted in *We Need*

New Names. Family ties create rights and obligations. Members who are financially better-off than the others must help those that are less fortunate, and the latter feel entitled to that help. Darling reflects that “people ... are calling to ask for U.S dollars to buy food because things are now being paid for in U.S. dollars and South African rands ... The calls just keep coming and coming like maybe they’ve heard Aunt Fostalina is married to the Bank of America” (Bulawayo 2013, 205-206). Support that is expected from an extended family member who has migrated to a Western country is therefore both of an emotional and economic nature, with the latter being the expression of the former. Such emphasis on material and financial security is also present in Darling’s relationship with her new household. However, beyond that aspect, this new family unit provides the main protagonist with a framework, though a painful one, to understand her new identity as an illegal citizen.

Darling’s new household and, by extension, their friends who are also African immigrants, offer a relational space where she can, if not come to terms with, at least confront her new identity and status in the United States. Through her interactions with Aunt Fostalina as well as her observations of the latter, she comes to understand that African immigrants like herself have to work themselves almost to death for the “right” to be treated as second-class citizens in America, while unable to visit their home countries since that would prevent them from coming back. Fragmentation and fracture are at the core of their identity. They will never be Americans; yet, they are geographically and emotionally estranged from their home countries. Darling’s new family and social settings help her realise that “[they] were no longer people; [they] were now illegals” (Bulawayo 2013, 244), while feeling that her connection from home had long been severed as “[they] accepted many things as [their] children grew, things that baffled [them] because [they] had been raised differently. But [they] took it all and said ... this is the price of the long journey we made those many years ago” (Bulawayo 2013, 251). Her new household therefore helps her fully grasp that price which she and other fellow Africans have to pay, a price which is measured in their sense of loss and fragmentation.

One of the functions of the family is to provide safety and comfort to its members. In terms of material safety and comfort, Darling’s aunt’s family unit can be construed as faring better than her chosen kin. Indeed, food is a cornerstone of material security; and whereas hunger is the daily reality in Paradise and even functions as a glue that keeps the group of children together, there is an abundance of food in Aunt Fostalina’s household in particular, and in the United States in general. Once in the United States, Darling observes that “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 can see us in America, see us eat like kings in a land that was not ours” (Bulawayo 2013, 241). That passage highlights the contrast between the two contexts: whereas Paradise only has “hungry faces and chapped lips”, America can satiate past and present hungers. It also offers a reflection on the two family models: one shares hunger whereas the other indulges in consumption. In terms of food security, the second model is therefore more fulfilling than the first one. However, in terms of identity and overall sense of belonging, the intentional family provides a more fulfilling environment.

It can be argued that despite hunger and poverty, Darling was more fulfilled and had a better sense of her own identity while still sharing the life of her chosen kin compared to when she moved to the United States. In a telling passage, the heroine ponders that “there is food to eat here, all types and types of food. There are times, though, that no matter how much food I eat, I find the food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that (Bulawayo 2013, 155). All the material comfort and food that her new family unit provides cannot make up for a lost sense of belonging. Such contrast in terms of belonging and identity can of course be attributed to the relative insouciance of childhood compared to early womanhood, which corresponds to a painful transitional period due to the fact of growing up, all the more so in a foreign country. The difference could therefore be explained, at least partly, by geography and time period. It is not solely family relationships that play a role in the feeling of belonging and being fulfilled, but the spacio-temporal context need also be factored in. Nevertheless, the above quotation, as well as the whole novel in general, show that Darling’s chosen kin provides her with a space where she is more comfortable about who she is compared to her extended family. Indeed, a family is “a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity” (Wamboldt and Reiss 1989, 728), and for Darling, that is more the case inside her group of friends than within her extended family. Besides this issue of identity and belonging, the chosen kin format is contributing to the well-being of the main character in a more significant way as it is based on intentionality.

Unlike the extended family which operates on a duty basis, the intentional family presupposes its members' free will to join or leave the group, hence being more conducive to their well-being. Indeed, in the context of migration, extended family members face the moral responsibility of sending remittances to those that stay in their country of origin. They do not have the choice to opt out of those family ties. And the relationships between the members boil down to the financial maintenance of those that are less fortunate. As shown in the following passage, money has become the be-all and end-all of the interactions between Darling's mother and her sister, Aunt Fostalina. This is set in the context of a telephone conversation between Darling and her mother, in which the latter reminds her daughter about her money request: "I chose not to tell Aunt Fostalina that Mother had said to see about sending money to buy a satellite dish from her neighbor's son who was importing the dishes from China ... I had meant to give Aunt Fostalina the message, but then when she came in from her second job later that night, her body looking like a sack [...] I just didn't have the courage" (Bulawayo 2013, 207). Darling's mother afterwards reiterates her request, saying "we need the dish, why do you want to enjoy the fine things all by yourselves in that America?" (Bulawayo 2013, 207). This excerpt displays a contrasting portrait of Darling's mother who feels entitled to receive money from her better-off relatives and Aunt Fostalina who has to work until exhaustion in order to meet those demands. It casts light on the nature of the relationship, which has basically become a financial or monetary one, where one party is entitled to financial rights and the other has financial obligations.

In contrast, the intentional family formed by Darling and her childhood friends does not give rise to such obligations since the relationship per se is not obligatory. As such, it is more efficient in securing the well-being of its members since it is a social contract entered freely by all the parties. Despite the extreme poverty in which they find themselves, as well as their interactions that are not always easy, this form of family is far more fulfilling than the extended one, at least in the context of this novel. That is corroborated by Darling's daydream while speaking on the phone to her childhood friends: "I've never left, and I'm ten again [...] We're teasing Godknows for his peeking buttocks, we're watching a fight, we're imitating the church people, we're watching somebody get buried. We're hungry but we're together and we're at home and everything is sweeter than dessert" (Bulawayo 2013, 208-209). Dire realities in Paradise are highlighted in that passage: violence, poverty, and death. Despite that, due to the solace offered by the close-knit group, the members of this form of family achieve a degree of well-being as alluded to in the expression "sweeter than dessert".

All in all, through her main protagonist, NoViolet Bulawayo questions the ability of the traditional extended family and the less conventional chosen kin to provide a fulfilling space for their members. The first model is based on blood relations whereas the second one relies on intentionality. Despite differences, both family forms display, to a varying degree and each in its own way, similar concerns: protection and survival, support, be it financial or emotional, and identity and belonging. Nevertheless, despite material security associated to Darling's extended family, her voice is the strongest and her sense of self the firmest within the intentional family she makes up with her group of childhood friends.

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