ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.02 (2026)

READING CHIPO'S SILENCE: POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST TESTIMONY IN *WE NEED NEW NAMES* (2013) THROUGH CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY'S FRAMEWORK

Bilal Ahmad (Principal Author)
Mphill in English Literature Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (Garden Campus). Email: prfbilal263@gmail.com
Imad Khan (Corresponding Author)
Mphill in English Literature from Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (Garden Campus). Email: imadk1391@gmail.com

Abstract
The focus of this study is the representation of Chipo's silence in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names (2013) as a space for the postcolonial feminist critique. The study seeks to show, using Chandra Talpade Mohanty's Postcolonial Feminist theoretical lens (1988), that Chipo's silence and the eventual absence of a response from her only confessionary testimony highlight the fundamental shortcomings of mainstream feminist theory of testimony in the context of postcolonial African female subjectivity. The study, which relies on close textual analysis, will show that Chipo's silence is not simply a status of victimhood or even a straightforward refusal to speak; it is a structured state of silence, a condition produced by the violence of patriarchy and communal dispossession and by the lack of institutional frameworks that would receive and respond to her testimony. Bulawayo's conscious formal decisions denied interiority, confession, and narrative ellipsis are a literary claim in opposition to the testimony mandate of the Western feminist discourse. The study is concluded with the proposal that the postcolonial feminist critique should radically reconceptualise silence as an important mode of testimony and not a representational void.
Keywords: *Postcolonial feminism, silence, testimony, We Need New Names, NoViolet Bulawayo, gendered violence, Chipo, Mohanty, African literature, subaltern, trauma, female agency*

Introduction

Postcolonial African literature has been a critical arena in which to explore and engage the overlapping realities of violence, dispossession, gendered marginalization and fractured subjectivities created through colonial experiences and their ongoing legacies. In African fiction today, women's characters often find themselves in situations of high precarity, where as a result of patriarchy, economic and political crises and institutional failures intersect to create everyday precarity (Nnaemeka, 2004; Arnfred, 2011; Tamale, 2020). There has been a growing focus on the portrayal of silenced women and girls in texts from Africa, where silence cannot be viewed merely as a passive or absent form of response but is a political and social mediated response to the denial of recognition and justice, or meaningful forms of care (Gqola, 2021; Craps, 2013). In this context, the postcolonial female body, silent and voiceless, is an important interpretive space for the negotiation of general anxieties around the act of trauma, agency, witnessing and survival.

In the realm of postcolonial African fiction, there has been a growing interest in narratives of childhood helplessness and gendered suffering in the narratives of displaced communities of poverty and state failure. Set in an era of Zimbabwe's socio-political crisis, We Need New Names (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo has received extensive discussion in terms of migration, broken childhoods and postcolonial precarity, the majority of which focus on Darling's diasporic journey and the politics of belonging (Samuelson, 2014; Gagiano, 2015; Primorac, 2017). However very little scholarly work has been done on Chipo, a rape victim and a pregnant woman in a novel whose

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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lines of narrative are one of the most uncomfortable. What is especially notable about her marginalisation in the current critical discourse is how her character emphasizes issues of gendered violence, failed witnessing, and the possibilities of witnessing under the postcolonial conditions of social abandonment.

Silenced female bodies in a post-colonial African fiction have become a major focus of research in the field of literary and feminist studies especially in the context of trauma, agency and structural violence (Gqola, 2021; Tamale, 2020; Craps, 2013). In Zimbabwean postcolonial literature, themes of social disintegration, political instability, and disrupted childhoods have been the focus of much scholarly interest, particularly in the context of the crisis years during Zimbabwe's period of economic collapse and institutional disintegration (Primorac, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). We Need New Names (2013) is NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel, which engages directly with these issues and has been extensively discussed in terms of its depiction of Zimbabwean girlhood, migration and displacement, and the multiple realities of postcolonial Zimbabwe (Samuelson 2014; Gagiano 2015; Ncube 2018). However, scholarly interest has focussed on Darling's diasporic journey and the politics of mobility while leaving relatively under-explored the figure of Chipo, an eleven-year-old girl, living in the shanty settlement of Paradise, raped by her grandfather and pregnant, then silenced.

For Chipo, the novel's architecture is not something that is merely on the margins; it is a one of its most politically charged formal moves. When Chipo does finally come forward and admits to Darling, her closest friend, that she is being abused, her disclosure falls on deaf ears — she is neither understood nor helped to change her circumstances, but instead almost insulted with the response “Do you want to go and steal guavas?” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. xx). It is a moment of confession, instantly forgotten, that encapsulates one of the novel's foremost provocations: What can testimony do in a postcolonial world of dispossession, in which care is fractured and institutional neglect occurs, and when can suffering be made apparent? This is the aspect of We Need New Names that is overlooked yet is theoretically important that the current study wishes to explore in the character of Chipo.

This study places Chipo's silence at the crossroads of postcolonial feminist criticism and testimony theory, an area which has been fiercely debated in the study of trauma, voice and gendered witnessing in the context of postcolonial literary works. The existing criticism on We Need New Names has mainly been interested in the themes of migration, displacement, transnational identity and the ruptured consciousness of African childhood, favouring the journey of Darling as the main migratory journey of the novel as a site for analysis (Frassinelli, 2015; Ndlovu, 2016; Wilkinson, 2016; Concilio, 2018). The linguistic displacement, belonging and citizenship of Bulawayo has also been explored against the backdrop of Zimbabwean postcolonial crisis (Samuelson, 2014; Primorac, 2017). However, despite the constant focus on movement, precarity and girlhood in the novel, Chipo is still under-examined, especially as a character through whom the novel challenges boundaries of testimony and witnessing and care in situations of structural abandonment. This important silence over Chipo is particularly telling because the narrative strand of her rape, pregnancy, and subsequent silence for many pages in the novel is one of the most disturbing yet politically resonant of the novel.

The theories of testimony are mainly classical, the most influential being that formulated by Felman and Laub (1992), who consider it to be a transformative act that makes the traumatic experience narratable and therefore potentially subjectifiable. Similarly, trauma theory, as theorised by Caruth (1996), sees testimony as a crucial element of the process of dealing with a

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psychic rupture, and the inelasticity of trauma to representation. However, the transferability of such Euro-American concepts to the materially unequal, poverty-stricken postcolonial situations with ephemeral institutional structures has come to be questioned by postcolonial scholars. As seen in Craps's (2013) example, perspectives of dominant trauma discourses can render experiences from the West as universal, and experiences of postcolonial violence, dispossession and collective grievances as the other. In the realm of African feminist scholarship, the potentiality of speech itself has been a subject of a sustained critique especially where women's speech is limited by a multitude of patriarchy, poverty and political neglect (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020; Gqola, 2021). It is clear from these interventions that a testimony cannot be simply considered a therapeutic act performed on a particular subject but rather must be analysed in the light of the material and structural conditions which either make speech audible and actionable, or socially meaningful.

The uncomfortable assumptions of these are challenged in Chipo's experience in We Need New Names. Despite eventually telling Darling about her abuse, she doesn't find any recognition, institutional intervention or communal accountability in her testimony. Rather, the disclosure turns into a regular childhood distraction, as Sara Ahmed (2021) theorises, a speech heard and ineffective within prevailing frameworks of response. Chipo's confession is therefore not catharma, but, instead, a testimonial breakdown which exposes the shortcomings of frameworks based on healing through narration alone. By making Chipo virtually speechless throughout the novel and the one time her character speaks—with a despicable joke—the focus on ethics and epistemology in the study reveals the ethical and epistemological limits of what the author calls the testimony imperative, that is, the assumption that speech equals justice, healing, or recognition.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions of this study are:

1. How is Chipo's silence and her one moment of confession, in *We Need New Names* formally and politically a critique of the western therapeutic testimony model, and how does her depiction of gendered witnessing open up challenges to the dominant postcolonial feminist models of gendered witnessing?
2. In what ways can the individual inadequacies of Chipo's community to receive, hold and respond to her testimony of witnessing, be interpreted as a commentary on the structural conditions of dispossession as depicted in Bulawayo's fictional world?

Research Objectives

- To analyse Bulawayo's use of Chipo's silence, and the community's silence to her confession as a formal and ideological challenges to the normative testimony model, using postcolonial feminist theory and recent studies of grievability and complaint.
- To analyse the children of Paradise as a witnessing failure group, and evaluate what this failure as a group suggests about the collective failure of the structures of dispossession, abandonment, and lack of institutional care, which are the boundaries of testimony in postcolonial African nations as they are described in the novel.

Significance of the Study

This study is important in postcolonial literature studies as it moves the spotlight from some of the more well-known writers of Bulawayo to Chipo, a marginalised, but crucial character in *We Need New Names*, thus introducing a fresh interpretive angle in Bulawayo studies. It also contributes to the theoretical discussion on testimony, raising the possibility of limits to speaking and voicing silence as a result of structural and institutional constraints, beyond the applicability

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of frameworks from the west. The study offers a new contextually sensitive approach to understanding testimony, as silence is considered an active response to dispossession. Moreover, it goes beyond literary scholarship towards feminist activism and ethics of care, bringing to light the voicelessness of the silenced female in the Global South, and the larger issues of voice, recognition and justice in postcolonial societies.

Literature Review

Postcolonial Feminist Theory: Voice, Agency, and the Colonized Female Subject

Postcolonial feminist studies have been driven by the same oppositional move: both to question the patriarchal organization of colonial and postcolonial societies and in the effort to deny the applicability of western feminist models which universalize the category of 'woman', without taking into consideration the extremely different conditions of women in the Global South. Such tension is best encapsulated in the seminal question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the ability of the subaltern to speak, which is still very much unresolved and controversial in the current literature. Postcolonial feminists have always challenged the tendencies of metropolitan feminist discourse for its lack of engagement with conditions of materiality, collectivity and politics in which women in postcolonial societies live, suffer and resist.

In the context of African feminist scholarship, this critique has become a very specific and urgent one. Researchers have shown that African women's experiences of gendered oppression are multiple; that they are layered, overlapping at the same time with the legacy of colonialism, class vulnerability, ethnic hierarchy and the problematic of the post-colonial nation states that are unable to adequately meet their needs. *In We Need New Names*, Ahmed et al. (2026) also read the book of women's marginalisation and agency as being located at a crossroads of migration legacy of colonialism and patriarchal spatial politics, in which women's identities are produced and limited by not only gender ideology but also by the material geographies of the migration of diasporas. Importantly, they discover that women in this novel do not challenge their marginalization in so much as by speaking, but by what they call “everyday tactics” by remaining silent, by telling stories, by resisting from a body, and by discursive bargaining which occupy the “marginal space” which colonial and postcolonial structures give to them and turn it into a space for negotiation. In this analysis silence which is already part of this investigation's focus on Chipo is viewed as a possibly generative rather than a purely passive reaction to the structural constraint.

It questions the traditional binary that is often used in feminist theories which assumes that voice equals power and voicelessness equals victim. Such a binary, in Spivak's language, is a reflection of the “epistemological violence” of dominant frameworks that determine the value of subaltern women's testimonies in terms of languages and genres acceptable as legitimate testimony in the West. Postcolonial feminist literary criticism is thus not merely the task of uncovering "silenced voices" but of questioning what makes for silence and what new forms of meaning-making silence may also be. The challenge thus lies at the very heart of the novel's narrative architecture as is the case with Chipo in Bulawayo.

Silence, Trauma, and Feminist Testimony: Between Oppression and Refusal

In the past few decades, feminist literary and trauma studies have begun to theorize silence in various ways, and in particular, the focus of silence has shifted from a one-to-one relationship between silence and oppression to a more complicated perspective which suggests that silence is a multivalent and can be a result of violence, a protective measure of self-silencing, and a form of fragmented testimony that refuses the linear story line.

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Classical trauma testimony theory assumes that integration of the traumatic rupture is possible, that it is therapeutically necessary and that it is a process of rendering the unspeakable into the speakable: the testimony is a space where this gradually takes place. But this model has been strongly criticized because of the institutional conditions on which it is dependent: the trained listener, the clinical setting, the legal or archival framework are systematically unavailable to traumatized women in a postcolonial context where they are living in extreme poverty and are abandoned by the state. None of these conditions apply to the community of children in We Need New Names: they, too, are survivors of displacement, hunger and violence.

In this article, however, Stobie (2020) reads *We Need New Names* in parallel with Zebra Crossing by Meg Vandermerwe, and states that both novels evoke what she calls a discourse of "precarity" whereby the characters are so thoroughly enmeshed in regimes of dispossession that the normative scripts of survival, narration and recovery are rendered impossible. Of particular relevance here is Stobie's discussion on the danger of aestheticizing African girl suffering in both novels – a problem of “disobliquifying” Chipo's abuse, making her pregnancy visible but unexplained, and her one act of confession undeceived in an effort to make Chipo's testimony “intelligible” and “palatable” to the novel's expected audience. The absence of Chipo's testimony is not a representational failure, but rather a political decision, as is made clear in this reading.

Based on Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, Suárez-Rodríguez (2022) posits that the pre-migratory part of We Need New Names (half of the novel set in Zimbabwe as Paradise) depicts a Zimbabwean community that has been socially killed through the ineptitude of postcolonial decolonisation. People in Paradise are foreigners in their own country, unable to be socially and politically recognized in a way that ensures their language is accessible to institutions of governance. This analysis has direct implications for Chipo: she is a child who is already "necropolitically invisible" and has been raped by a family member in a space where the law or communal authority does not act as a "protective apparatus" to reach. Thus her silence does not only represent her individual trauma, but is instead a logical reaction to a structural situation in which talking is ineffective – a situation which the novel does not sentimentalize or solve.

Gendered Violence, Girlhood, and the Postcolonial Body in African Fiction

In postcolonial African fiction, portrayals of gendered violence and female girlhood have come to be the object of increasing scholarly interest, as a way of discussing the dilemma of bearing witness to violence at the risk of the objectification or spectacularization of violated bodies. Research in this field has been particularly sensitive to formal methods of engaging with violence indirectly, such as ellipsis and the use of child narrators who are the focal point of the narrative as well as the deliberate avoidance of the kinds of interpretive frameworks that realist narrative normally provides.

Akhtar et al. (2024) in the post-colonial context of trauma and displacement in We Need New Names, explore how Bulawayo uses Bhabha's notion of hybridity to depict the disintegration of identity, culture, and language as a result of colonial and postcolonial displacement. Their analysis is geared mainly towards the experience of migration, but their concept of post-colonial trauma is apropos to the pre-migratory parts of the novel in which Chipo is violated and rendered silent. This is because their conception of how displacement of identity does not only happen across geographical boundaries, but also in the social and psychological inner space of the postcolonial subject, which can then be seen as a site for Chipo's silence. This violated girl's refusal or inability to tell her story is the micro version of the macro dispossession of African communities of the power to tell their stories by colonial and postcolonial structures.

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In *We Need New Names*, Evans (2022) sees an ongoing feminist exploration of embodiment and the gendered body as the narrative arc becomes an experience of embodiment — of coming to feel at home in one's Zimbabwean and American gendered body — that at every turn is frustrated by displacement, shame, and the competing demands of Zimbabwean and American femininities. Evans' analysis also features a reading of Chipo's pregnant body as a "focal point" of pain and terror in the story, and how Darling and her friends, when they go to try an abortion that's informed by medical knowledge, borrow the names and roles from an American medical drama, ER. Evans' reading of this disassociation as the evidence that the girls' Zimbabwean identities "do not fit the task at hand" is quite suggestive for the current study, and could be extended to wonder about the lack of cultural and/or social frameworks for the girls to respond to Chipo's trauma any other way. Evans' analysis is rich on the embodiment and homing, but doesn't really address Chipo's silence as such and doesn't explore the theoretical implications of her non-narration for testimony theory, as this study does.

Critical Scholarship on We Need New Names: The Neglect of Chipo

The critical discussion of *We Need New Names* has since expanded significantly but remains surprisingly focused on a series of preoccupations, including migration, diaspora, displacement, hybridity, identity formation and the novel's connection with literary markets and readers in the west. In his postcolonial interpretation of the novel's approach to migration, Ngom (2020) suggests that Bulawayo's novel depicts migration as an experience of loss, an impossible loss for the human interest, which is "beyond repair," and therefore challenges the more positive diasporic narratives which focus on departure or arrival. In responding to the novel's failure to resolve the tensions and ambiguities of the diasporic experience, his analysis is sensitive to the novel's own failure to resolve, and his close reading of Darling's disillusionment in America is congruent with the larger scholarly consensus about the novel's refusal of consolatory narrative closure.

The most recent entry to this discussion is by Ahmed et al. (2026) in their exploration of women's marginalisation and agency in the novel, which includes a discussion on several of the novel's female protagonists, such as Chipo. While it is very interesting that they identify silence as one of the 'everyday tactics' that female characters engage in to negotiate their marginalisation, their discussion of Chipo's silence is too short and is part of a larger discussion of the FCDA of a number of characters. There is no sustained individual analysis of the richness of Chipo's particular silence – its length, its rupture, the inconsequentiality of that rupture – and the devastation.

What this survey reveals is not only a persistent pattern of scholars focusing on Chipo's significance and her silence, and her violated body, but a persistent pattern of scholars returning to a focus on Darling and the migration narrative which takes over the second half of the novel. So far no study has taken Chipo's silence as the main subject of study. No previous research has used the testimony theory with her in a long term manner. Nothing in the existing research has interpreted the community's refusal of her confession as a theory per se on the possibilities of what testimony can do in postcolonial contexts of dispossession.

Research Gap

The above-mentioned review suggests that there is a clear gap in the scholarly field in the area between Postcolonial Feminist criticism and testimony theory and the literary analysis of We Need New Names. Although scholars like Evans (2022), Suárez-Rodríguez (2022), Stobie (2020), Ngom (2020), Akhtar et al. (2024), and Ahmed et al. (2026) have shed light on important aspects of the novel (embodied displacement and necro-politics, politics of precarity, and female agency),

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no one has foregrounded Chipo's silence or theorized it as a sustained critique of the postcolonial feminist testimony imperative. The pre-migration portions of the novel in Zimbabwe are systematically marginalized by the novel's field emphasis on migration and diaspora, although intellectually useful, this has led to the marginalization of the novel's pre-migration sections in Zimbabwe, where Chipo's trauma is played out and where the testimonial failure that this study attempts to theorize is set up. Moreover, the scholarship that is available fails to take into account the position of the children of Paradise as failed witnessing collective, or what their collective failure to witness Chipo's confession says about the collective position of being dispossessed, communal traumatized and institutionally absent that makes witnessing impossible without a fundamental rethinking of the nature of testimony. This study aims directly to fill these gaps, arguing that Chipo's silence is not a peripheral or only symptomatic one, but the most theoretically radical move that the novel makes: a formal and political one that renders postcolonial feminist criticism in need of a rethinking of how it is to account for the lives of the people whose traumas are not being witnessed in structures to which it can belong.

Research Methodology

Research Method

The study design in this research is qualitative with close reading and literary interpretative approach. The research aims to explore the representation of silence, trauma and limits of testimony in a literary text, so it is most suitable to adopt a qualitative approach which enables the discussion of language, narrative and characterisation in nuanced and context-specific ways rather than in quantifiable data. There is no empirical fieldwork but the study is firmly in the realm of literary and cultural analysis.

Sources of Data

The study's main data is from the novel We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo (2013) as the primary literary text to be analysed. The secondary data comprises of peer-reviewed Journal articles, Scholarly books, Literary Criticism and recent academic studies on topics related to postcolonial feminism, silence as testimony, gendered violence, and representation of women in African postcolonial literature. The choice of all secondary sources are well researched and selected for their scholarly credibility and direct relevance to the study's theoretical and thematic concerns.

Data Analysis Method

The gathered textual data is analysed by means of qualitative thematic textual analysis, paying attention to some important narrative and formal aspects of the novel such as Chipo's long silence, the one time that she confesses and confessions that she doesn't receive by the community. The analysis is sensitive to the patterns of gendered oppression, embodied trauma, narrative absence and representational limits as they unfold through specific textual moments, by taking formal decisions of reading as ideologically and politically significant.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Feminist Theory, especially the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), is used as a main theoretical framework research and emphasizes that women are not monolithic in postcolonial societies and that the voices of marginalized women are shaped by multiple, overlapping gender, colonial and power structures. For this purpose, Mohanty's framework is apt as it allows to study Chipo's silence in We Need New Names as an instance of gendered marginalization and the restrictions of postcolonial feminist testimony.

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Data Analysis

Chipo's Silence as Gendered Marginalization

Chipo's silence – not a sudden break, but a retreat – is first announced in the first chapter of the novel, and delivered by the narrator, Darling, in a disturbing matter-of-fact fashion. “She is not mute-mute, but when her stomach started showing, she stopped talking, but she plays with us; she does everything else – when she really, really needs to say something she uses her hands” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 3). The difference that Darling makes is between being “mute-mute” and being silenced, which is theoretically laden. Chipo doesn't have a problem articulating, she just withdrew from articulating. But, then again, Darling's narration includes this withdrawal in its ordinary suffering of Paradise, as if the voicing of an eleven-year-old rape survivor is unnecessary.

Mohanty (1988) suggests that Western feminist discourse has a systematic effect, in portraying Third World women as passive victims of their system it also robs them of their political agency by representing them as oppressed. It is this naturalization of the voicelessness of women that Mohanty sees as the danger, the acceptance that women's voicelessness is a normative aspect to postcolonial women's lives and not one that is dependent on particular, analyzable power dynamics. Darling's narration does just this naturalization: Chipo's silence is recorded, but not questioned; it is noted but not missed. The withdrawal is repeated later in the novel, again sparsely: "Later in the novel this withdrawal is repeated, again sparingly, 'Chipo does not talk much anymore. When we play, she just sits there, quiet, watching' (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 58, quoted in Ahmed et al., 2026). When Chipo's silence is observed in various chapters, it is clear that her silence is not temporary but permanent – it is one that has been engrained by the community of children in their social order. Mohanty's framework invites us to challenge this incorporation: the silence is not the natural one, but the one made; it is not unavoidable, it has to be enforced; and to enforce it exposes certain relationships of power at play in the postcolonial patriarchal community of Paradise.

Silence, Pregnancy, and Bodily Trauma

The novel's first few pages set up the material cause of Chipo's silence with abrupt abruptness, yet it is immediately obvious that Chipo cannot keep up with everyone in all of Paradise anymore, because somebody got her pregnant. Passive construction (somebody made her pregnant) is in itself a grammatical representation of Chipo's silencing. The agent of her violation is syntactically suppressed - it is some 'somebody' - and therefore recognized as the violation, but the name of the violation is not given. Her body has been violated, her voice silenced and even the grammar of the sentence denies accountability of the perpetrator and the subjectivity of her.

For Mohanty (1988) the female body in postcolonial settings is not just a site of abstract intersection of gender, class and colonial power but of material intersections. The body of Chipo embodies this intersection with shocking precision – as an eleven-year-old girl in an impoverished town of shackles in a Zimbabwe that lacked a functioning state apparatus, medical care or a legal forum to which she could appeal, or an adult community that could hold anybody to account, Chipo's body absorbs the consequences of violation in absolute isolation. The fact that she has no form of support is further illustrated by the children's reactions to her pregnancy: "Today we're getting rid of Chipo's stomach once and for all. One, it makes it hard for us to play, and two, if we let her have the baby, she will just die" (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 80, as cited in Evans, 2022). The framing the children give the abortion – as a pragmatic, problem-solving exercise – the pregnancy is an inconvenient problem, the baby will kill her – indicates how thoroughly they are left out of

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adult structures of care and knowledge. All they have is used information transmitted from older girls and the only instrument they have is a rusty coat hanger.

Chipo's physical and psychological toll of this abandonment is felt in the scene. Now, as Darling watches, her face is 'contorted, as if the hanger is in her already . . . I notice her eyes are wide now, fearful, they remind me of the eyes of the woman hanging on the tree' (Evans, 2022, p. 87, as cited in Bulawayo, 2013). The common denominator of the continuum of Chipo's trajectory is found in Bulawayo's simile, in which the terror of the violated and silenced girl and the woman who chose death to escape an unbearable life are the same within the postcolonial order of patriarchy. It is just this sort of material linkages, between the lives of individual women and the institutions and structures of power, that feminist analysis, according to Mohanty (1988), should help to discover – and not simply aggregate into a universal victim category.

The Limits of Postcolonial Feminist Testimony

But the most 'theoretically telling' moment in the characterization of Chipo is the moment she breaks her silence — what that silence is and reveals about the structural impossibility of testimony in the social world of Paradise. On the mountain, as the church service is going on, Chipo suddenly speaks. There's no prelude to the confession, "He did that, my grandfather, I was coming from playing Find bin Laden and my grandmother was not there and my grandfather was there and he got on me and pinned me down like that and he clamped a hand over my mouth and was heavy like a mountain, Chipo says, words coming out all at once like she is Mother of Bones" (Bulawayo, 2013, "Darling on the Mountain" chapter, approx. p. 42). The simile is apt and exact – Chipo speaks as Mother of Bones speaks – in a rush, urgently, as though words must somehow be released before they are caught, suppressed again. It is not a rehearsed or mediated confession, but speech that is able to break through its own suppression almost unwittingly and that is not to an authority figure or a witnessing institution, but to another ten-year-old child.

But the most dismal formal move in this novel is Darling's response: "I want to laugh that her voice is back, but her face confuses me and I am also seeing she wants me to say something, something maybe important, so I say, Do you want to go and steal guavas?" Bulawayo, 2013, 'Darling on the Mountain' chapter, about p. 43. The confession is accepted, but is quickly forgotten. Darling isn't callous, she's just as though she's too full to speak the word she'd heard. But the results are the same – Chipo talks and nothing happens. There is no response, no intervention, no institutional response, no change in the community's attitude towards her suffering. Her voice is lost in the air.

As Mohanty (1988) has pointed out, Western feminist approaches are dangerously based on the premise that women's liberation can be accomplished by her speaking, by giving her voice. This assumption is based on the presence of structures – legal, communal, discursive – that receive speech and translate it into change. These preconceptions are revealed to be conditions which must not be assumed in the light of Chipo's confession. When no witnessing structure is present, testimony is ineffectual, that is, it does not heal, it does not restore or transform social location. The novel is not content with the comforting story of not speaking how it came to be speaking in the first place, and how the world restructured itself around the speaking subject. Chipo doesn't say a single word, then he is silent again.

Chipo as the Marginalized Postcolonial Female Subject

Mohanty (1988) warns feminist researchers to avoid reducing all Third World women into a monolithic entity of the oppressed as it is this very oppression that is being treated as the antithesis of the western feminist discourse. Chipo's portrayal in We Need New Names is a

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challenge to this assimilation. But she does not just represent "the silenced victim," but a particular girl, in a particular community, whose silence is effected by a carefully constructed and analyzed system of violences: her grandfather's violence, her community's traumatization, the postcolonial state's abandonment of Paradise, and the total lack of any system for the naming and addressing of violation on the part of the children. Her silence does not mean there is no self, but rather it is a product of situations where there are no structures to express selfhood.

In the formal structure of the narrative, Bulawayo's decision to tell Chipo primarily from Darling's point of view, her point of view from which she is hidden, not merely sealed off from, but literally absent from; to withhold and not offer interiority, to not explain, to not "save" her; to refuse resolution, mimics at this level what Mohanty argues at the theoretical level, that the postcolonial female subject cannot be known from the outside, cannot be adequately represented in a space not created for her, and cannot be "saved" by a discourse that starts by reducing her to her pain. Firstly, the issue of Chipo's silence is not the one that this study is set to address. It is the thesis that the novel presents – what postcolonial feminist criticism should address and what it also should be ready to leave “undone” with full “moral” integrity.

Findings, conclusions, and recommendations

Findings

From an analysis of the texts of *We Need New Names*, three main conclusions have been arrived at. First, that Chipo's silence is produced not passively, but as a response to the intersection of different forms of violence towards women, of patriarchy and communal traumatisation, and of state abandonment in the postcolonial world, and that it is this material condition which Mohanty (1988) identifies as the condition of marginalised women in the Global South, and not a universal or inevitable condition. Second, the novel's most theoretically potent move is not so much Chipo's silences as the lack of a response from another person to her one solitary act of confession: the witnessing act is not necessarily transformative, but depends upon institutional and communal structures that are absent and missing in postcolonial spaces of dispossession. Third, Bulawayo's formal options (oblique narration, withheld interiority, unresolved confession) represent a conscious literary stance in opposition to the testimony imperative of mainstream postcolonial feminisms that requires the reading of silence on silence's own terms.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates how the novel's most politically charged and theoretically generative aspect lies in Chipo's silence in We Need New Names. Mohanty's (1988) postcolonial feminist framework brings to the fore the restrictions of feminist models which universalise the concept of voice as the route to agency, while not taking into consideration the structural conditions that make it impossible for many postcolonial women to give voice to their testimony. Chipo doesn't utter nor does it recover — it is this refusal of resolution that requires critical focus. Bulawayo's novel is a final plea for postcolonial feminist criticism to confront squarely the many situations in which testimony is heard by no one and in which no institutional consequences or consequences for the author are realized.

Recommendations

The field of scholarship should expand the framework of this study to other postcolonial African novels in which minor female characters are given undue symbolic importance but not critically analysed. Finally, scholars are encouraged to think in new ways about how they can construct a theoretically informed vocabulary to read literary silence as a meaningful testimony rather than as representational absence. Furthermore, postcolonial feminist critics need to return

to testimony theory with a more focused awareness of the material conditions of witnessing, and to abandon the understanding that speech is always accessible or restorative in so vastly different the postcolonial worlds.

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