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Womanhood in Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* and Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*

The women in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* are strong, central characters to both stories, though they are represented to the readers in very different manners. While women’s issues are not necessarily the greatest conflict in each of these novels, they are still important to the novels as whole and complete works, and they demand not to be ignored, given the importance of the female characters. This essay will argue that the representation of women and their roles in U.S. and non-U.S. societies, as presented in *We Need New Names*, results in a critique of the way that women are treated both in the U.S. and Zimbabwe. By contrast, in *The Heart of Redness* there are strong female characters, but they are essentially uncomplicated symbols, and their significance is defined in relation to men, which creates a damaging idea about the role women play in society. I will analyze these concepts by examining the characterization, character development, and perception of women in each novel.

To begin, the qualities that the female characters possess say a lot about the kind of statement each novel is making about womanhood. In Bulawayo’s novel, Darling is surrounded by strong female role models in Paradise. Mother of Bones is a determined, religious, self-reliant woman, who runs her own business; MotherLove is a stoic and independent woman, who does not want to simply accept charity handouts from the white people; and Darling’s own mother is a responsible, self-sufficient, essentially single mother who understands the value of taking care of her needs, sexual and otherwise. The most striking example of the kind of strong female figures that Darling has to look up to is when MotherLove refuses the gifts from the NGO. Darling describes, “…MotherLove just stands there, not waving back, not smiling, not anything…She turns and strides away, head held high, the bangles on her arms jingling, the stars on her dress shining, her scent of lemon staying in the air even after she is gone” (58). While everyone else in the village is lining up to receive gifts, food, and other supplies, and the children are performing the “sad, impoverished African child” role, MotherLove retains her dignity and holds her head high, understanding the meek and small position in which accepting the NGO’s charity will put her. In an article in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly,* Diedre L. Bádéjo writes how African femininity encompasses such power and dignity. She writes, “African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical,” (94). MotherLove is a prime example of Bádéjo’s definition of African femininity, of this intersection of power and womanliness, in her quiet dignity, grace, strength, and resulting beauty. Having such confident and dignified female characters creates a very positive idea of womanhood and femininity for Darling to grow up with and presents the readers with a healthy perception of it as well.

In contrast, in *The Heart of Redness* the female characters are strong on the surface but do not have much past that. Xoliswa Ximaya is described as wickedly intelligent, progressive, beautiful, and generally intimidating. On the opposite end, Qukezwa is straightforward, spiritual, and deeply connected to and passionate about her culture. Both seem to be, initially, very positive representations of different kinds of women; however, when one scratches past the surface, one finds that there is not much more to them. It is almost as if they are cardboard cutouts of people, standing for and representing something, but without much substance beyond that. The only other dimension to these characters is their relationship to Camagu, the once-potential lover of one and the eventual lover of the other. Much of the description we get of these two women is through the eyes of Camagu. After spending parts of an evening with each of them, the reader gets a glimpse of the way in which he thinks about them. Mda writes,

…he takes his mind off his dire situation, and sends it to dwell on Xoliswa Ximaya’s icy beauty, there might be some respite. She is so beautiful. Xoliswa Ximaya. So staid and reliable.

Qukezwa is not burdened with beauty. She is therefore able to be free-spirited. (152)

Each woman is characterized by her beauty and how that relates to her personality, so not only are these woman hollow symbols, but their importance and value are tied to their appearances. Although these characters represent strong women on a surface level, their hollow nature beyond that turns them instead into actualizations of different shades of a man’s desires.

Furthermore, the way these characters develop—or do not develop—over the course of the story contributes to the ideas being put forth by the novels. In *We Need New Names* the characters are dynamic and evolving, and there is a rather distinct difference from the beginning to the end of the novel in their nature and demeanor. To illustrate, Darling begins as a very young, child, narrator and ends up not only older and noticeably more mature, but also seemingly more cold and calloused as well. In the beginning, when she and her friends are stealing guavas and they encounter the woman in Budapest, she says, “She runs a hand through her hair, which is matted and looks like a mess; if I lived in Budapest I would wash my whole body every day and comb my hair nicely to show I was a real person living in a real place,” (10). The way she dreams about living in Budapest where the pretty houses and rich people are is very sweet and innocent, very distinctly childlike. The juvenile quality of her narration is even more apparent with the phrase “a real person living in a real place.” This idea of a “real person” implies a strict dichotomy: real and not real. Such black and white matters are rare occurrences in the actual adult world, further characterizing Darling’s early narration style as young and, at times, naïve. In stark contrast, toward the end of the novel, her narration is significantly more cynical. One day while at her job, she says, “The beer bottles are the worst. They will come with all sorts of nasty things. Bloodstains. Pieces of trash. Cigarette stubs drowning in stale beer the color of urine, and one time, a used condom. When I started working here, back in tenth, I used to vomit on every shift,” (255). This grotesque image is very different from the rosy musings of beautiful houses in well-manicured neighborhoods. Darling’s worldview has grown sour because of reality. The trash and beer bottles could be interpreted as the worst parts of the adult reality of the world, and in this way, it is that dark reality that once caused Darling to wretch, but now she is numb to—now she is calloused to the harshness of adult life in America as an African woman.

An almost more striking character evolution is that of Chipo. In the beginning, Chipo is introduced to the reader as “the pregnant child.” She instantly draws sympathy and shock from the reader, due to her present condition, her violation, and the fact that it all has caused her to stop speaking. Chipo is the epitome of helplessness. By the end of the novel, however, she has transformed into a strong, fierce woman and cultural protector of Zimbabwe and its people. During a phone between Darling and Chipo, Darling remarks about all the atrocities and suffering occurring over in Zimbabwe, to which Chipo replies, “But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don’t, my friend, it’s the wound that knows the texture of pain; it’s us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything and anybody,” (287). In trying to still claim the country she left, Darling—being away and detached for so long—has fallen prey to pitying them. Meanwhile, Chipo sees this pity and the abandonment, and she will not stand for it. As someone who stayed, lived through, and grew up in all the “suffering,” listening to her expatriate friend try to diminish Zimbabweans to their pain and then identify with that pain that she is no longer enduring is a difficult task. The fact that Chipo transforms from a helpless, mute child to a confident, strong, and fierce protector of her people and culture, demonstrates a great amount of growth and sets an example of resilience for women readers everywhere.

Meanwhile, in *The Heart of Redness*, instead of drastically changing and evolving, the characters are largely stagnant. Each character remains in their own narrow plotline, not really showing much growth or change. Xoliswa remains on the single track of wanting to find a government job in the city—something she first mentions on page 11. She finally ends up finding and taking such job towards the very end of the novel. Mda writes, “Xoliswa Ximaya packs up and leaves Qolorha-by-the-Sea. She has lost the battle for the soul of the village and for the love of Camagu. She has got a new job with the Department of Education in Pretoria. She is going off to more civilized place,” (262). In this passage, it becomes evident that while Xoliswa Ximaya had other aspects and other things going on in her life, her education job in the city was the most important. The lack of character transformation, especially in characters that already seem too symbolic, makes them seem even more one-dimensional and lacking in depth.

Another important aspect when looking womanhood in these novels is how women are perceived. In *We Need New Names*, Darling’s perception of other women shifts. In the beginning of the novel, she is perplexed by beauty standards and the idea of dieting. When Darling and her friends encounter the woman in Budapest, this lack of knowledge is evident. Bulawayo writes,

But you look only fifteen, like a child, Godknows says, looking at the woman now. I am expecting her to reach out and slap him on the mouth but she merely smiles like she has not just been insulted.

Thank you, I just came off the Jesus diet, she says, sounding very pleased. I look at her like *What is there to thank?* I’m also thinking, *What is a Jesus diet, and do you mean the real Jesus, like God’s child?* (10)

Darling has a clear lack of understanding of European beauty standards and thinness as attractive at this point in the novel. She is confused why the woman is not insulted by being called youthful-looking and slim. This confusion is very different from when is older and living in America. In this particular instance, when Darling goes to a wedding and sees the bride, who is a larger woman, she unabashedly express her distaste for the bride’s size. She says, “I look at his [the groom’s] carved smile and ask myself what he’s smiling for because I don’t see why anyone would be smiling with a bride like that because it’s not like other women are busy envying her and wanting to kill her for her beauty or hating her for it,” (173). In a way that she had not before, Darling clearly understands and has internalized Western feminine beauty ideals, to the point of fat shaming the bride in her mind. I draw a connection from this scene to the scene a little later in the novel when Aunt Fostalina in sitting on the couch looking through a Victoria’s Secret catalogue, surrounded by stacks and stacks of more Victoria’s Secret catalogue’s. This set up demonstrates the influences that Darling has had since arriving in America. If she is constantly consuming a preoccupation with thinness through her aunt, then her extreme reaction to the heavier bride makes sense. In an article entitled, "Black in a blonde world: Race and girls' interpretations of the feminine ideal in teen magazines,” Lisa Duke references research done by British cultural studies researcher Angela McRobbie. Duke writes,

She [McRobbie] argued that ‘codes of femininity’ were incorporated into the text [British girl teen magazine *Jackie!*] to ‘shape the consent of the readers to a set of particular values’; among these were codes of romance, personal and domestic life, and fashion and beauty…The false norms created by such limited scripts were presumed to have a devastating effect on girls, encouraging competition for boys and isolation from other girls. (369)

Exposure to this sort of narrow-minded “script” that is then fed into the consciousness of a teenage girl, even if without realizing, would certainly alter the way that she looked at bodies—her own and that of others. Being taught that a body should look a specific way, for if it does not, it is ugly and unappealing, is damaging to the way in women treat themselves and other women, which is apparent in Darling’s transformation.

Similarly, in *The Heart of Redness*, the women are often perceived harshly as well. Both Xoliswa Ximaya and Qukezwa receive overly harsh criticism. Xoliswa Ximaya is known as a sort of “ice queen” while Qukezwa is perceived to be a “whore” after her incident with Camagu. Just before she leaves, and once Xoliswa Ximaya receives her family’s characteristic scars that the men usually bear, people say, “‘She is a man in a woman’s body. That is why no man can tame her. That is why even a doctor like Camagu was afraid to marry her. He knew that she was her own boss, and that she would not be controlled by any man” (262). More than just a beautiful ice queen, Xoliswa Ximaya is perceived as overly controlling and dominating, to the point that men are afraid of her. For Qukezwa, when people spy her with Camagu, they immediately begin to hurl insults at her and blame her for such “despicable” behavior. They say,

‘So this is what you are up to, Qukezwa! Sneaking around with other women’s men?’ cries one of the girls.

‘Does Xoliswa Ximaya know that you sleep with her man?’ asks another.

‘You have taken after your mother! What she did to our friend is terrible!’ yells another.

‘You are all a family of whores and perverts!’ (173)

Already, without knowing the whole truth of the story, these other girls jump to conclusions about Qukezwa. They then proceed to harshly insult her and her family, demonstrating the cruel nature between these women. Between both people’s perceptions of Xoliswa Ximaya and Qukezwa, one can see the rigidly specific role women in their society must fulfill—passive, submissive, and beautiful. While both women are one of these, they are berated and torn down by their own people for not being the other, for the stronger, sharper sides of their personalities.

Both *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo and *The Heart of Redness* by Zakes Mda show headstrong and confident female characters. They are, however, contextualized and represented very differently by the rest of the novels. I think one factor in what makes this difference so drastic could be the narration. *We Need New Names* is narrated by Darling, at first as a young girl and later as a young woman. Though her narration is later clouded by beauty ideals and expectations that make her more prone to be unnecessarily harsh on other women, she is still more disposed to looking up to other women, to other people who look like her, and this admiration shows through. Meanwhile, *The Heart of Redness* is narrated in third person. The narrator is both at times an omniscient narrator and a close third person narrator. The distance that this creates between the character and the narrator, can lend itself to being more descriptive and focusing on physicality. So, when in a close third person narrator following Camagu, who is already characteristically sex-driven, the emphasis on the physical appearance of women seems like a realistic and accurate way to tell the story. However, in an age where representation is a key issue, there is a great need for holistic female characters with real depth and complexity. I find writing confident but flat female characters to be something that we, as a storytelling society, need to move past.

Works Cited

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