

We Need New Names Study Guide

We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo

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Plot Summary

We Need New Names was written by Noviolet Bulawayo. The story follows the lives of various people in a shanty town called Paradise in Zimbabwe. The main character in the novel is Darling.

Darling has absentee parents because her mother works down at the border to try to make money, while her father has abandoned the family for a life in South Africa. Growing up in a country with civil unrest poses its own challenges, but these are not challenges that are new to Darling. These struggles are what drives Darling to America.

As Darling reaches the point where she is going to graduate from high school, she starts to become more of an American, distancing herself from her life back in Paradise. Darling's life is so different from that of her childhood friends and even Darling's own mother, Darling keeps in contact with them less and less. When Chipo confronts Darling about abandoning her country, Darling gets angry because she realizes she has abandoned her country.

The novel reveals that even those that grow up in the same country can end up in very different lifestyles. While Darling moves on to live a version of her American dream, Chipo and Darling's mother are stuck in the same lives they have always led back in Paradise.



Hitting Budapest

Summary

Darling is a young girl living in the shanty town of Paradise in Zimbabwe. She is on the way to Budapest with her friends Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Sbho and Stina. They are heading to Budapest to steal guavas that they can sell for money.

Chipo is only eleven years old, but she is pregnant. On the way into Budapest, Bastard starts asking questions about Chipo's baby. He wants to know if it is a boy or a girl. He wants to know how it got there and who put it there. Darling answers his questions because Chipo stopped talking as her stomach started to grow.

As the children are scoping out trees to steal guavas, a blonde woman steps out onto the porch. She is eating something the children cannot identify. She has a camera in her other hand. She talks with the children and they find out she is from London, but her father is from Africa. The woman is there visiting her father.

She asks to take their picture. The children allow her to take their picture. They are surprised, however, that a grownup would ask them what they want. When the children leave the woman, they head back to Paradise.

Sbho talks about marrying a man so she can escape Paradise. Darling says she is going to live with her aunt Fostalina in America so that she can get an education and make enough money to buy a nice house. By the time they reach Paradise, the children have eaten all of the guavas. They stop to use the bathroom in the bushes.

Through the bushes, the children find a dead woman hanging from a rope. Bastard tells the children they should steal the woman's shoes. He says they can sell them so they can afford to buy a loaf of bread to eat. The other children follow Bastard back into the bushes.

Analysis

It is ironic that the name of the town where the children are from is Paradise. Paradise is a shanty town, and the children are poor and hungry. It is as far as they can get from living in paradise.

The children are stealing guavas because they are hungry. They eat the guavas that they steal. If they don't eat all of the guavas, they can sell them so they have money to buy other types of food.

When the children find the dead body, they are not even afraid of it. Unfortunately, this is because death is something that the children are accustomed to seeing. Even at their young ages from ten to fourteen years old, their minds are devoted to survival. They



think of ways that they can survive, including stealing the dead woman's shoes to sell so they have money to buy more food.

Darling talks about going to America to live with her. As the novel unfolds, Darling's whole life is going to change. She is going to have to deal with the new culture in America and living a completely different life than the one she lives in Paradise.

Discussion Question 1

Why are the children stealing guavas?

Discussion Question 2

Why does it seem normal to the children that Chipo is pregnant when she is only eleven years old?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Darling's dream of going to live in America with her aunt.

Vocabulary

guavas, glance, shacks, glimmering, suckle, trimmed, jabbing, insults, quarreling, accompany, constipated, wound



Darling on the Mountain

Summary

Darling is bathing so she can go to church. It is the day that Jesus died. She is going to church with Mother of Bones. Darling's mother is working across the border. She doesn't know when her mother is returning so she is staying with Mother of Bones for now.

Darling's father graduated from the university and then went to work in South Africa. They never hear from him anymore and he doesn't send money, but Mother of Bones still has a picture of him in his graduation gown.

Darling also says that Mother of Bones has bricks of money. She counts the money every day. Darling tries to convince Mother of Bones to throw the money away or to burn it because it is worthless now.

Darling and Mother of Bones climb up the mountain. The church is at the top of the mountain. Chipo is there at the church services as well. When the songs begin, Darling pretends as if she is singing along in case Mother of Bones looks at her. Darling looks down at Paradise. She thinks the shacks look like dirty mud puddles.

She watches as a plane flies overhead. She thinks about how her aunt, Fostalina, flew on a plane to go to America. Darling plans to fly away to America to follow in her aunt's footsteps.

A scream comes from down the mountain. Then, a group of men carry a beautiful but writhing woman into the church service. Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro prays over the women. He gets on top of her and starts rubbing his thing. Chipo speaks for the first time since she got pregnant.

She tells Darling that's what her grandfather did to her. He got on top of her and clamped his hand over her mouth when her grandmother wasn't at home.

Analysis

The way Darling describes it, Mother of Bones is her father's mother. Mother of Bones seems to be hanging on to currency that was once in use in Zimbabwe. Something has caused the money to go out of circulation, which is why it is worthless. Mother of Bones, however, cannot accept this which is why she continues to keep her money in a suitcase and counts the money daily.

The fact that the church is on the top of the mountain is religious symbolism. It is similar to Simon on the mountain in the bible. Darling looking down the mountain at Paradise is



also symbolic. It is as if she is better than the town of Paradise, so she is looking down at it as if it is beneath her.

The men bring the woman into the church service to try to get the demons out of her. They think she has sinned. Chipso is telling Darling that her grandfather raped her and he is the father of her unborn child.

Discussion Question 1

Is Mother of Bones called Mother of Bones for a reason? If so, what is the reason?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the men carry the woman into the church service?

Discussion Question 3

Will Chipso's grandfather get in trouble for raping and impregnating his granddaughter? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

walloped, flocking, decaying, bouts, tattered, maize, muttering, defecate, disemboweled, dictating, heathens, sanctified, sacrificed, toiling, chided, emblazoned, timid, guttural, succumbed, pagan, writhe



Country-Game and Real Change

Summary

The children go to Shanghai. Chinese men in orange uniforms and guns are everywhere. Sbho's grandmother sent them to tell a man named Moshe to come to Paradise because she wants to talk with him. At a construction site, the children find out that they are building a mall with luxury shops inside.

When the children return to Paradise, they play country-game. It is a game of chase and war, where the country in the middle calls out a country to "fight." A chase ensues. The caller gets to count a country out so the person representing that country has to sit out for the rest of the game. The children are in the middle of the game when they see the NGO bus coming.

Sis Betty, who is from Paradise, gets off the bus with some white people. They hand out gifts to the children after Sis Betty gets the children to calm down and stand in line. Then, the NGO people hand out food to the adults that stand in line. MotherLove stands off to the side. The NGO people and Sis Betty try to give her the free food. She holds her head high and walks away.

The men and women are getting ready to vote. Everyone is talking about change. The children are putting up posters about voting in exchange for food.

Darling is at home pretending to sleep. She pretends to sleep because she is afraid if she falls asleep that the bad dream will come. She thinks about how they used to live in a real house with real belongings before the bulldozers came and knocked it all down. Now they live in a metal shack with makeshift beds.

Darling hears a knock at the door. It is a man that visits her mother during the night. Her mother and the man get on the bed, shaking it, breathing heavy and making moaning noises. The man falls asleep and snores. Then, he always sneaks out in the morning.

The adults leave town to vote. The children sit and wait for them to return. They are afraid the adults are gone and not going to come back. When the adults return, they have ink on their fingers from voting with their fingerprints. They are happy because they believe change is coming. They go to MotherLove's shack to drink the brew she makes. They dance and sing while they are drinking.

Analysis

The children go to Shanghai but it sounds as if it is a name they have given the town because of all of the Chinese that inhabit it. They mention that the Chinese are building the mall in their country, which is why it sounds as if it is not the actual city of Shanghai. It is ironic that the Chinese construction workers are building a high-end mall with luxury



shops inside because the majority of the people in the novel are poor. They cannot even afford food, let alone luxury items.

The NGO people bring goodies to the adults and children in Paradise. Ironically, the children always wish for items such as shoes and cell phones while they receive items such as toy guns and Google t-shirts. Additionally, the adults need the food they are given but always seem disappointed, as if they wish for something else.

Darling's mother is having an affair with a man in town. Since Darling's father is working in South Africa and doesn't have contact with his family, it seems as if her mother is moving on with her life. Her mother is still doing it in secret, however.

Darling's reoccurring nightmare stems from a real-life event. The government took over the houses and belongings of the people. This is why bulldozers came in a knocked their houses down with all of their belongings inside.

Now that the country is voting for change, they believe they will have democracy and be able to return to living the way they once did. Mother of Bones, however, does not believe that the voting is going to change anything, which is why she refuses to allow the children to hang posters on her door.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the children have so much free time where they are unsupervised?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the political situation of Paradise from the children's point of view.

Discussion Question 3

Do you think the vote changes anything for the people of Paradise?

Vocabulary

belch, quarry, grazing, productive, defecate, ambushes, lorry, pounces, clobbered, rubbish, liberation, writhing



How They Appeared and We Need New Names and Shhhh

Summary

Hordes of people move in to Paradise. Some of them bring some of their belongings with them. Some of them come with almost nothing. They build their shacks. While at first these people look out of place, soon they blend in with those that were living in Paradise before. They talk about it being the same as when the white men drove them out of their homes. They say it is worse this time because it is their own black brothers that are driving them out of their homes.

Darling and her friends decide today is the day they are going to get rid of Chipo's stomach. The children they are playing with reenact what they saw on a TV show about an ER. One of the children shows them how to get rid of Chipo's stomach with a coat hanger. MotherLove walks up to the children to find out what they are doing. When they confess it to her, she starts to cry and starts hugging Chipo. A butterfly lands on Chipo and the children start to chase it for good luck.

Darling's father comes home from wherever he was. He is skin and bones. He is vomiting and defecating all over himself. He reaches out for Darling and keeps calling her his boy.

Mother tells Darling she cannot tell anyone that her father is back or that he is sick. Darling lies to her friends, saying she is sick, as her excuse for not being able to play with them. MotherLove brings Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro into the shack. He says that Darling's grandfather's spirit has left Darling and entered into her father's body.

He says they have to sacrifice two virgin goats and they have to pay him five hundred U.S. dollars to get rid of the spirit and make Father well again. They cannot afford it so MotherLove goes up the mountain to pray.

Darling's friends say they know the truth. They say her father has AIDS, which they call the Sickness. The children force their way into the shack to see him because they have never seen anyone with the Sickness before.

Analysis

It seems as if the vote did not go the way people expected it to go. The government continues to drive people out of their homes. This is why there is such an influx of new people in Paradise. It appears that there is a civil war occurring because it is black men against black men in Zimbabwe, rather than an outsider from another country trying to take over the country.



Dr. Cutter is teaching the children how to abort the baby with a coat hanger. MotherLove starts to cry because she realizes how innocent the children are. They are unaware of the repercussions that come along with their actions. They do not realize that they are killing the baby by using the coat hanger to get rid of Chipo's stomach.

Darling's father is sick and dying, which is why he is so thin and is vomiting and defecating. She also mentions that his voice is raspy. It's possible that he is sick from working in the diamond mines. Now, he has returned home so that his wife can take care of him in his fragile state.

Discussion Question 1

Why are so many people moving into Paradise?

Discussion Question 2

What is causing Darling's father to be sick?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss MotherLove's devotion to her religion, the church on the mountain and Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro.

Vocabulary

pondered, swarms, wretched, fatigued, partitioning, mourned, perished, paupers, baffled, potent, albino, contorted, droves, wretched, clamoring, fervently, prefects



Blak Power

Summary

It's starting to turn to guava season again. The children are in the streets of Budapest scouting for guavas when they run into a guard. The guard threatens to arrest them. A Lamborghini Reventon pulls up to the gate of the house that the guard is guarding. The guard opens the gate and the car goes in. Darling says this is the kind of car she's going to drive when she goes to America.

A gang waving weapons and waving flags storms the gates of the house. The children are up in a tree picking and eating guavas. A white man and a white woman come out of the house. The gang takes them hostage and then goes into the home and destroys the couple's belongings.

After the gang takes the couple away, the children go inside and look around. They gorge themselves on the food in the fridge. In the bathroom, they find the words Blak Power in feces on the wall.

Analysis

It seems as if the white couple is British. The British were once inhabitants in the area, which is why MotherLove's money under her bed in suitcases has the Queen of England on it. The British are no longer in power, which is why MotherLove's money is no longer any good.

The gang is trying to overthrow the white people that are in power and have taken over their country. The couple is wealthy and the gang tries to get the couple to give them money or their home in order to leave the couple alone. When they refuse, the gang takes the couple hostage. The gang wants the black people to regain control of their country from the white people.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the guard take so much offense at the presence of the children in Budapest?

Discussion Question 2

Does it seem as if the white people are part of the government or just wealthy citizens living in Budapest?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think happens to the white people?

Vocabulary

extricate, premises, retreat, malfunctioning, juncture, desecrate, despicable, personage, menacing, cantankerous, cease, tremor, brandishing, pummeling, gorge, rummages



For Real, How They Left and Destroyed Michigan

Summary

The children are up in a tree watching the funeral procession for Bornfree. The children watch as Bornfree's mother wails, cries, and runs because they have killed her son. As a game, the children reenact Bornfree's death. The BBC camera men see the children playing the game and ask them what kind of a game it is. The children say it isn't a game. It's for real.

People start leaving Africa in droves. They are leaving everything they know behind them to start new lives elsewhere. Many of them are leaving with sores on them because they have the sickness. Others are leaving because they cannot live any longer in a country that is being taken over by the whites.

Darling moves to America to live with her aunt, her aunt's husband, and her cousin. Her aunt's husband isn't really her husband because they aren't married. Darling says that there is snow everywhere and her aunt is always walking in place. Darling says this isn't the America she imagined; it's not her America.

Darling's cousin TK is nothing like the people she knows from her country. Uncle Kojo is not from their country. White and black people from their country come to visit Aunt Fostalina from time to time. Uncle Kojo leaves when they come because they eat foods he doesn't recognize and speak a language he doesn't understand.

Analysis

Bornfree was one of the men protesting for change in the country. A bus full of men brandishing weapons shows up in Paradise. The game the children play has the men from the bus attacking Bornfree and beating him to death. This is why they tell the camera man that it isn't a game, but what really happened and is happening in their country.

It seems as if the government in power sent the men to stop Bornfree and agents of change like him from protesting and continuing to push for change in the country. The voting that the people thought would bring change ended up changing nothing. They are still in the same situation they were in prior to voting.

Everyone leaving Africa suggests that Darling might get her wish to move to America after all. Darling's mother may agree to send Darling to America so that Darling can have a better life than the one she can offer Darling in Africa.



It seems as if Darling is living in Detroit, Michigan based on the name of the chapter and the way she describes the snow everywhere all of the time. She confirms later in the chapter that she is in Detroit.

Ironically, the whites and the blacks from Africa get along in America. They do not, however, get along in Africa, which is why the country is falling part to start. It is also ironic how much Darling wanted to come to America because she thought it was a much better place than Africa, but now that she is here, she dislikes it and longs to back to what she knows.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Bornfree's death. Why was he killed? How was he killed?

Discussion Question 2

What does the mass exodus out of Africa represent?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Darling's living situation in America.

Vocabulary

mourners, maddens, vigil, trickled, burrowing, contorted, clobber, ambitions, profanity, shrouds, coping, flailing



Wedding

Summary

Aunt Fostalina, TK, Uncle Kojo and Darling are on their way to a wedding when they hit a deer with their car. They arrive at the wedding late, so they miss the ceremony but attend the reception. It is the wedding of a man that Aunt Fostalina dated, but Uncle Kojo doesn't know it. While the groom is African, the bride is white.

In the bathroom, Darling meets a white woman who asks Darling to say something in her native language. The woman starts carrying on about all of the terrible things that are going on in the Congo. Darling pretends to know what the woman is talking about, but she doesn't.

Analysis

The wedding couple represents the diversity of cultures. The groom is African so he brings a completely different heritage to the wedding and the relationship than that of the bride. The bride is white and American. In a way, the wedding couple represents the world in black and white or the ying and yang—two worlds coming together in harmony.

Ironically, the white woman in the bathroom that Darling encounters knows more about the happenings in Darling's country than Darling knows. Back at the table in the reception hall, Darling is trying to assimilate into America culture by eating her food with a fork and knife. When the groom's stepson hits her with a toy, however, she reverts to her African ways by lashing out at the child. This reveals the fine line between what is proper in one culture but not proper in another culture.

Discussion Question 1

Is it significant that Darling is wearing makeup now?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the interaction between Darling and the wedding guest in the bathroom.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Aunt Fostalina doesn't punish Darling for lashing out at the child that hits Darling with a toy?

Vocabulary

maize, regret, jolted, muttering, throb, dreadlocks, jabbing, descended, unruly, craning, irritation



Angel and This Film Contains Some Disturbing Images

Summary

Darling tells her aunt that she wants to go home to paradise to visit. Aunt Fostalina explains that it is expensive. Darling looks at the cemetery across the street from their house in Michigan. She sees the angels on the gravestones. She wishes her father was in a cemetery with angels watching over him.

The President of Africa is giving a speech on the BBC channel. Aunt Fostalina makes the sign of a gun and points it at the President. Uncle Kojo says that the President is the only man with balls and applauds him. Darling thinks about how for her mother and Aunt Fostalina there are three homes in Africa—before the white people took over, when the black people got their independence and after the independence.

Aunt Fostalina tries to order a bra by phone but the girl on the other end cannot understand what Aunt Fostalina is saying. After spelling the name of the bra to the girl and finishing her order, Aunt Fostalina goes down to the basement. Darling knows Aunt Fostalina will look at herself in the mirror and articulately say everything she wanted to say to the girl on the phone.

Darling is watching x-rated videos online with her friends Kristal and Marina when her mother calls from Paradise. Her mother complains that Darling never calls her anymore. Darling thinks about how all of the calls from home now come with bad news or someone asking for money. Darling doesn't even pass messages along to her aunt anymore because Aunt Fostalina is working two jobs to try to pay for everyone's expenses at home.

Chipu, Bastard, Godknows and Sbho are at Mother's house in Paradise. They each get on the phone and talk with Darling. As they describe to Darling what is happening there, Darling gets an ache in the pit of her stomach.

Analysis

The insinuation is that Darling's father died from AIDS. This is why she wishes her father was in a cemetery being watched over by angels. The cemetery represents death—the end of life. This is ironic because moving to America marks the start of a new life for Darling.

Ironically, Aunt Fostalina and Uncle Kojo have differing opinions on the African president. This could be because they are from different parts of Africa. The changes that are taking place in the country can have different affects on the different areas. It can also be the Aunt Fostalina and Uncle Kojo left Africa at different times. Aunt



Fostalina saw more distress than Uncle Kojo, so her feelings about the president are more negative than his.

The ache that Darling gets in the pit of her stomach is homesickness. When she talks to her friends, she longs to be with them and do the things they used to do when she was living in Paradise. At the same time, her life is so different now that she cannot imagine living that way again.

In a way, this represents Darling's loss of innocence. She knows the torments of living in a war-torn country like Africa, but also sees the badness of America through the various porno videos she and her friends have been watching online. She also sees all of the phone calls coming from home as bad news or people asking for money while Aunt Fostalina is working herself to death to try to make money to pay for everything.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Darling's transition from Paradise to America.

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Darling is torn between her heritage and her current life? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How does Darling cope with her new life?

Vocabulary

planks, immigration, colony, sanctions, dreads, articulate, penetration, dangle, importing, dissolves, protest, exorcism, wilted, deliberate

Hitting Crossroads

Summary

Kristal, Marina and Darling steal Marina's mother's car. They are off from school because a boy brought a gun to school to shoot a list of people he didn't like. Marina's mother works nights so she sleeps during the day.

Several police cars pull up behind the girls so they think they are in trouble. They realize that the cars are not after them so they resume driving. During the drive, the girls are arguing and teasing each other about how each of them talks.

The girls play a dress-up game in the JC Penney dressing room. They call out an occasion to dress for and then they all come out of their individual dressing rooms dressed for the occasion. They pick a winner for that round and then call out another event. They race out of the mall to see who can get to the car first without running.

When they get to the parking lot, they see a woman wearing a hijab. They stare at her. They realize they wouldn't notice her at all if she were wearing jeans. Kristal mentions the boy named George who brought a gun to school. Then, she says to never mind.

Analysis

Even though Darling has different friends and is in America now, nothing has changed for her. She still teases her friends about how they talk. Her friends still tease her about how she talks. It is the same teasing that went on between Darling and her friends when she was living in Paradise.

Additionally, the crime and atrocities that took place in Paradise still take place in America. While Darling thought she was escaping this type of life, she realizes that there are bad things happening in America too. It might be slightly different from what is happening in Paradise, but America is not the promised land Darling once thought it was.

Darling plays games with her friends in America just like she did with her friends in Paradise. The games the girls play are different games, but games all the same. It is possible that the woman wearing the hijab is somehow related to the boy that brought the gun to school.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the crime and atrocities in Paradise as opposed to those taking place in Michigan.



Discussion Question 2

Has Darling really left Paradise behind to find a better life in America or has she just transitioned from one country to another?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the boy, George, taking the gun to school?

Vocabulary

collision, corridors, stampedes, humanitarian, thundered, reluctantly, Ebonics, graffiti, meandering, lame, contorting, basking, wilted, exaggerate, summoned, pacify, suppress



How They Lived, My America and Writing on the Wall

Summary

It seems as if the author is speaking directly to the reader at this point in the novel. She describes how people from various countries come to America in search of a better life. When they arrive, she talks about the backbreaking work they do so they can money home to their families each week.

The author also describes how the culture changes from generation to generation. While the first generation that comes to America remains in close contact with their relatives back home, eventually this connection fades. As they have children, the children become more American and retain less of the culture of their parents. Eventually, it is as if the original culture never existed.

Darling is working two jobs now. She works at a grocery store and she works cleaning the house of a rich family. Darling scoffs at the college-age daughter of the rich man, Eliot, because she starves herself and tried to commit suicide when her boyfriend broke up with her.

Darling is supposed to be in her room studying biology when Marina texts her about having sex with her boyfriend. Darling admits to making out with Tony a few nights before as well. While the girls are texting, Darling writes on her wall with magic marker.

After they finish sending text messages, Darling tries to get the marker off the wall; but, it just smears. She gets some decorations from home out of the basement to hang over the mess to cover it up. Later, when Darling calls her mother on Skype, Chipo answers.

Darling says something about Paradise being her country. This sets Chipo off. Chipo calls Darling out on it, saying that if this was her country then Darling would have never abandoned it. Darling gets angry and throws her computer at the wall, causing the decorations cover the marker to fall down.

Analysis

The author is illustrating that no matter what country someone is from, they share more similarities in America than they do differences. They all have a common goal of making money to help their families survive.

Ironically, while America is supposed to be a melting pot of cultures, groups tend to stick to their own kind. This is because they understand one another better than anyone else. They also feel as if they are illegal in America, even though they are working hard and



trying to do the right thing. This shame causes them to shy away from mingling with Americans.

In the end, the people that come from other countries do not end up enjoying what America has to offer. Instead, they end up working hard just to send money back home to their families.

Darling and the people she knows have seen real problems, such as poverty, starvation and AIDS. This is why she scoffs at the problems Eliot's daughter, Kate has.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Darling work two jobs?

Discussion Question 2

Does Darling believe that her efforts are worth paying for a college education?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think happens to Darling?

Vocabulary

famished, expectancy, dissidents, massacred, rigged, tortured, wretched, morsel, devoured, guzzled, mauled, dignitaries, groveled, perpetually



Characters

Darling

Darling is the main character and narrator of the novel. She is ten years old when the novel opens. By the time the novel ends, she is about to graduate from high school.

Darling lives in Paradise, which is in Africa. She is the only child of her parents. Darling has dreams of going to live with Aunt Fostalina in America one day.

The day comes when Darling is a teenager. She ends up moving to Detroit to live with her Aunt Fostalina, Uncle Kojo, and cousin TK. America doesn't turn out to be quite what Darling had expected. In the end, Darling is working two jobs in order to have the money to pay for her first semester of community college.

Aunt Fostalina

Aunt Fostalina is the twin sister of Darling's mother. Aunt Fostalina lives in Michigan with her husband and their son. When Darling is a teenager, she goes to live with Aunt Fostalina.

Aunt Fostalina is obsessed with her looks. She is always exercising to try to lose weight. She is always ordering the latest exercise equipment, push-up bra, or other item to help her look younger, skinnier, and more beautiful. Aunt Fostalina also works two jobs.

She is working to pay for a house she bought for Darling's mother and for MotherLove in Paradise. When her husband falls apart after their son goes off to war, Aunt Fostalina ends up having an affair with Eliot. Darling works for Eliot as his house cleaner.

MotherLove

MotherLove is Darling's grandmother. MotherLove is very religious so she is always going to church up on the mountain. MotherLove is a very strong woman. She doesn't allow anyone else's opinion to sway her own opinion. MotherLove is one of the only characters in the book that doesn't buy into the belief that voting in a new president is going to change anything in their country.

Chipo

When the novel first opens, Chipo is about eleven years old. She is one of Darling's friends and Chipo is pregnant. The father of the baby is Chipo's own grandfather. When Chipo becomes pregnant, she stops talking. She admits to Darling one day, though, that her grandfather raped her.



When Chipo has the baby, she names her Darling. When Chipo is older, she is talking on the phone with Darling, who lives in America. Chipo basically tells Darling that she is no longer a part of their country because Darling abandoned her country to go live in America.

Godknows

Godknows is one of Darling's friends. He is the same age as Darling. By the end of the novel, Godknows goes to live in Dubai with his uncle.

Sbho

Sbho is very pretty. She is one of Darling's friends in Paradise. By the end of the novel, she joins a theater group that is going to be traveling around.

Stina

Stina is one of Darling's childhood friends in Paradise. When the children go into the house of the white couple, Darling wants Stina to get on top of her when they pretend to do adult things in the couple's bed. At the end of the novel, Chipo says that Stina is still around but that he comes and goes. He also has a tendency to disappear for long spells.

Mother

Mother is Darling's mother. She goes away from time to time to sell things at the border. Mother also seems to be having an affair while Darling's father is away in South Africa. Fostalina is Mother's twin sister. When Darling's father returns, however, Mother is concerned with keeping his illness a secret. Mother requires Darling to keep her father's illness a secret from Darling's friends and other townspeople.

Father

Father is Darling's father. He leaves Darling and her mother behind to go work in South Africa. At first, he stays in contact and sends money and items to the family. Later, however, the contact stops. When Father returns to Paradise, he is sick. The insinuation is that he has AIDS. When Darling is living in America, she thinks about her father being buried in a nicer cemetery than where he is buried, so it implies that he passed away.

Uncle Kojo

Uncle Kojo is Aunt Fostalina's husband. He is originally from Ghana. When TK joins the Army and goes to Afghanistan, Uncle Kojo changes. He starts to drink heavily. He also starts to drive around in his car, so Darling and Aunt Fostalina start calling him Vasca de Gama. At the end of the novel, Uncle Kojo is thrilled that the military captures and kills Bin Laden.



Symbols and Symbolism

Paradise

Paradise is the town in Africa where Darling and her friends grow up. Because of the civil unrest in the country, Darling's mother ends up sending Darling to Michigan to live with Mother's twin sister, Fostalina.

Michigan

Michigan is where Aunt Fostalina lives. It is where Darling moves to when she comes from Paradise. At first, they live in Detroit, but then they move to Kalamazoo.

Budapest

Budapest is where Darling and her friends go to hunt for guavas. It is where they meet the photographer lady that is from England.

Cemetery

There is a cemetery across the street from Darling's house in Michigan. Darling stares at all of the ornate gravestones. She wishes that her own father could be buried in such a nice cemetery.

Fambeki

Fambeki is a mountain in Paradise. MotherLove attends a church on Fambeki. Darling goes up Fambeki to go to church with MotherLove at the beginning of the novel.

Picture of Father

MotherLove has a picture of Darling's father. In the picture, he is graduating from college. Darling often stares at the picture since it is the only way she sees her father once he goes away to South Africa to work.

Marker

When Darling is a teenager living in Michigan, she uses a magic marker to write on her bedroom wall. Darling tries, but she cannot remove the marker from her walls. She ends up hanging art pieces over the black smudge marks on the wall.



Makeup

Darling starts wearing makeup because she says it is what teenagers do in America. The makeup symbolizes Darling's mask. She is hiding who she once was and where she came from so that she can blend in with the girls she meets in America.

Skype

Skype is the program that Darling uses to call her mother in Paradise. Darling is talking to Chipo via Skype when Chipo laughs at Darling for calling Paradise her home. Darling ends up throwing her computer in anger.

Art Pieces

Darling finds a box of art pieces from Paradise in the basement of Aunt Fostalina's home. Darling uses a combination of the art pieces to cover up the marks on her bedroom wall.

Settings

Paradise

The novel takes place in Paradise in Africa and then in Michigan during the 21st century. The main characters are involved in the daily life of living and growing up with the governmental problems in their country that adversely effects their quality of life.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware the direction that the lives of the characters take. However, as events unfold, the new life that lies ahead is a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters and even the outcome of the novel.

Michigan

Since the civil unrest is so prevalent in Paradise, Darling is sent to live with her aunt in Michigan. Before she arrives in Michigan, Darling pictures a certain way that American life will be. After arriving, she learns that America is quite different than that picture.

Themes and Motifs

Relationships

Relationships between friends and between family members drive the story in *We Need New Names*. Darling and Chipo seem to struggle with their friendship because Chipo remains in Paradise raising her daughter while Darling lives in America as a normal American teenager. Chipo and Darling are living different lives. Even though they are best friends, they don't confide their secrets or fears to each other. Their lack of sharing makes their friendship seem superficial friendship.

The novel also touches upon family relationships. Just as every family has trials and tribulations, Darling's family has its own family dynamics. In the end, they are a family and they will get through it together, one way or the other.

By the end of the novel, it also becomes about the family of those that have come together in life. While the different characters in the novel may not get along when they are living in Paradise, they flock together when they are in America because they want to be surrounded by the people and culture that they know and understand.

Coming of Age

Another primary theme in *We Need New Names* is the process of growing up and coming of age in the face of adversity, such as living in poverty or losing a father to AIDS.. Darling struggles with the aftermath of the problems in her country, which leaves her constantly questioning what direction she wants her life to take and which direction her life is actually going. Because of her losses, Darling has a hard time forming bonds and relationships with people. Instead, Darling's coming of age forces her to keep her true feelings inside.

Darling's coming of age also causes her to face an identity crisis. Darling's search for the person she truly is even propels her to move to a different country in hopes of finding a better life. Darling ends up finding that things in America are not what she expected and that there is evil there in different forms than what she encountered in her own country.

Culture

One of the sub-plots throughout the entire novel is about the cultural differences between the residents in Paradise and those in America. Emphasis is placed on the color of each person's skin, their native country, and their traditions.

The plot revolves around how these various cultures and people with different backgrounds come together. They all have to learn how to live, work and play in



harmony. For some, this seems to be easy, while others seem to struggle with the fact that people from various countries are now numerous in America. While the cultures of this area have numerous differences, they also have similarities because all of the people are human beings.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written using first person point of view from the perspective of Darling, the main character Darling. The novel gives a very personal account of Darling's life. The reader is able to get inside Darling's head to experience her struggles. The point of view also allows the author to inject her own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the characters and the occurrences.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is relatively simple and easy to read. The novel is set in the 21st century, and the language reflects the that time period. The words are descriptive enough to explain the situations and detailed enough for the reader to truly understand. Since the novel is based in Paradise, there are some terms and words that are African.

Structure

The novel is divided into chapters that describe a specific event in Darling's life. Each chapter ranges from five to twenty-five pages in length. The chapters tell the story primarily in exposition and with some dialogue. The author injects her own voice and thoughts throughout the book, providing her opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel. The narrator switches back and forth between the past and the present.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot focuses on human relationships that include those regarding family and friends. One subplot is the coming of age of the characters. Another subplot is culture.



Quotes

I'm going to America to live with my aunt Fostalina, it won't be long, you'll see.

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.

China is a red devil looking for people to eat so it can grow big and strong.

Get ready, get ready for a new country, no more of this Paradise anymore.

Better a white thief do that to you than your own black brother.

Well, you need a clothes hanger to get rid of a stomach.

Shhhh—you must not tell anyone, and I mean an-y-one, you hear me? That your father is back and that he is sick.

The queen was under your grandmothers' bed?

Can't you see this is for real?

Look at them leaving in droves, children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves.

Don't do it again, I always tell you, you're in America now.

Out of sight out of mind.

Maybe an angel did because otherwise you'd know you actually have a mother and you'd maybe call her every once in a while to see how she's doing." This Film Contains Some Disturbing Images, p. 206

You know George, right?

How America surprised us at first.

You know what, Darling? You're a great kid. You're not like the rest of them.