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Slow Death in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names

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Abstract

Transnational traversals are by no means a phenomenon peculiar to the current context. Yet it is undeniable that such transgressions have hardly ever been so profuse or pervasive as today. The upshot is that several concerns traditionally overlooked, are presently rising to the fore and demanding critical attention. The plight of immigrants, particularly illegals, exemplifies one of the most prominent in this regard. The expressed objective of this paper is to explore this issue as depicted by the Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo in her novelistic debut We Need New Names. Accordingly, it takes as its focus the saga of illegal immigrants as exemplified in the experiences of the fiction's protagonist Darling, as she relocates from her native Zimbabwe to America with hopes of living the good life. As a conceptual paradigm for analysis the concept of slow death theorized by the American thinker Lauren Berlant in his Book Cruel Optimism is appropriated. The ultimate goal is to set forth the paradox of economic indispensability and social apathy illegal immigrants are condemned to suffer in the first world scenario.

Key Words – Slow death, immigrants, illegals, good life, cruel optimism

Introduction

How many would turn down a life of comfort and luxury? How many would deny the good life? There are indeed quite a few who regard such a life as the root of all evil. Then there are

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others who might question the very validity of characterizing such a life as good at all. Detractors bent on censuring the good life are numerous, and probably they have a valid reason for doing so. It must however be conceded that those who actually yearn for it, most certainly outnumber those who don't. In any event, there could possibly be no doubt as to which of the two sides Bulawayo's pre-teen protagonist exactly favours. Forced to live in a shanty town ironically called Paradise, Darling's dearest wish is to relocate to America and experience the good life. The probability of having such a wish fulfilled is extremely slim for anyone even under normal circumstances, let alone somebody in such a dire scenario as Darling. However, against all odds, Darling has her wish come true. She succeeds in relocating to America and settles down to a life that is relatively comfortable. It is of course no good life, but considering what she had to bear in her African homeland, certainly represents a telling improvement. This fact nevertheless far from raising Darling's spirits as it ought to, only engulfs her in an ever-increasing sense of disillusionment. How does such a situation of invasive paradox come to prevail? The answer is "Slow Death" (Berlant 104)

Slow Death

Posited by the American thinker Lauren Berlant, slow death alludes to a condition of constant deterioration ensuing from a state of being wanting in change or progress. To elaborate, certain sections of people in any society, typically marginalized, are often reduced to leading a thwarted form of existence, extremely grueling but tellingly devoid of any prospects to contend with. The upshot is that they are effectively condemned to prolong life for its own sake, a situation that renders them liable to a relentless process of attrition. To quote Berlant's own words, "The phrase slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence"(Berlant 95). It is noteworthy that slow death is not occasioned by any adverse historical or social event confined to a particular time or place. It is rather integrally bound up with the normal routine of life, and therefore reaffirms itself in ordinary daily activities. "Slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time- framed phenomena like

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military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself....” (Berlant 100). Slow death thereby does not invoke an orientation towards death, something destined to curtail life. On the contrary, it enforces an imperative to protract life, but in a paralyzed form which is for all means and purpose tantamount to death. “While death is usually deemed an event in contrast to life’s extensivity, in this domain dying and the ordinary reproduction of life are coextensive, opening to a genealogy of a contemporary way of being” (Berlant 102). Slow death thus may be said to invoke in effect a fate that is worse than death, a fact that is most succinctly yet poignantly manifested in Darling’s experiences after moving to America. However in order to obtain a composite understanding of this point, it is vital that we make sense of how she comes to develop the fantasy of the good life in the first place.

Fantasy of the Good Life

Fantasies envisioned by a person to a large extent stems from the kind of personal experiences that one undergoes. At any rate, this is very much true as far as Darling is concerned. It is however noteworthy that the experience which compels her to long for the good life is by no means personal in nature. It is a collective saga she shares with practically the whole population of her country. Formerly the British colony of Rhodesia, Zimbabwe emerged as an independent nation in 1980. This momentous occasion however far from heralding a new era of peace and prosperity, only plunged it into a state of chaos and crisis. Paradoxically the chief perpetrator in this regard was the nation’s own government. Though democratically elected, the political leadership in Zimbabwe subsequently deteriorated into an autocratic set-up that sought to perpetuate authority through a relentless campaign of terror. This inevitably resulted in a collateral loss of human lives and property, reducing the country’s citizenry to a state of abject poverty. Darling’s family are one of apparently countless victims who were condemned to suffer this plight.

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“Even if I want to sleep I cannot because if I sleep, the dream will come, and I don’t want it to come. I am afraid of the bulldozers and those men and the police, afraid that if I let the dream come, they will get out of it and become real. I dream about what happened back at our house before we came to Paradise. I try to push it away and push it away but the dream keeps coming and coming like bees, like rain, like the graves at Heavenway”. (Bulawayo 32) Coerced into a life of hopeless misery, Darling naturally longs for an escape, an escape to a land that is paradise not just in name but is really so. Apparently, Darling is already aware of what this supposed promised land is, and how she would make it there. She in fact is quite certain that it is only a matter of time before her anticipated wish materializes. “I’m going to America to live with my aunt Fostalina, it won’t be long, you’ll see, I say, raising my voice so they can all hear”(Bulawayo 11).What she is not aware of, indeed could not have possibly bargained for, is the growing sense of disenchantment that takes hold of her after the wish is realized.

The Disenchantment of the Fantasy

Regardless of its perceived significance, the realization of a fantasy is normally meant to bring a fulfilling sense of satisfaction and accomplishment to its subject. Contrary to this natural vein of expectation, Darling’s not only fails to do so, but in fact, instills her with an undermining sense of disillusionment which steadily escalates in the due course. The opening salvo in this regard befalls her quite immediately upon landing on American shores. “it’s not the normal cold that you could just complain about and then move on to other things. No. This cold is not like that. It’s the cold to stop life, to cut you open and blaze your bones” (Bulawayo 71).The winter is so penetratingly numbing that it makes her think of divine wrath inflicted on sinners as painful recompense for their acts of evil. “It’s like we are in a terrible story, like we’re in the crazy parts of the Bible, there where God is busy punishing people for their sins and is making them miserable with all the weather” (Bulawayo 69).Consequently, she is forced to wonder if it was the right decision to come to America, practically at the very outset. “Had it been that somebody had taken me aside and explained

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the cold and its story properly, I just don't know what I would have done, if I would really have gotten in that plane to come" (Bulawayo 71). However, notwithstanding this sentiment of being let down, Darling knows exactly why she is in America. "But then we wouldn't be having enough food, which is why I will stand being in America dealing with the snow; there is food to eat here, all types and types of food" (Bulawayo 70). Then again as she subsequently realizes, this food which is available in such plenty, is anything but food in the real sense. It is at any rate, not something she grows to relish, a sensation that accentuates the induced sense of disillusionment already festering in her. "No matter how green the maize looks in America, it is not real. They call it corn here, and it comes out all wrong, like small, sweet, too soft. I don't even bother with it anymore because eating it is really a disappointing thing, it feels like I'm just insulting my teeth" (Bulawayo 75). The weather and the quality of the food aside, it is when Darling is faced with the reality of having to earn her way in America, that the real impact of the misery she has got herself into sets in. Barely a teenager, Darling finds herself with the prospect of having to take up a job, even before she could possibly know what such a thing as working a job actually entails. "When Aunt Fostalina first talked to me about getting a job, I laughed. You think it's funny? she said. I'm not even an adult, what will I be working for? I said" (Bulawayo 114). Nonetheless she ends up taking a job, in fact more than one. All the jobs she takes up are of course menial by nature, typically low paying, disgusting, self-demeaning, and most of all, that would never allow her to make enough to lead a contented or comfortable life. "When I'm not cleaning the toilets or bagging groceries, I'm bent over a big cart like this, sorting out bottles and cans with names like Faygo, Pepsi, Dr Pepper, 7-Up, root beer, Miller, Budweiser, Heineken" (Bulawayo 112). Naturally disenchanted with her lot in America, Darling becomes nostalgic and wishes to go back to Zimbabwe for a visit, something to inject her with a much needed shot of vitality. However, as her aunt makes it absolutely clear to her, such a thing is not just impossible but inconceivable. "Child, it's not like your father is Obama and he has the Air

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Force One; home costs money. Besides, you came on a visitor's visa, and that's expired; you get out, you kiss this America bye-bye, Aunt Fostalina says" (Bulawayo 85).

The Saga of Illegal Immigrants

Darling's disillusionment as an immigrant to America is however not peculiar to her, but a fate she shares with thousands perhaps millions. To begin with, her reason for wanting to relocate to America is emblematic of the hopes and dreams of so many others who also had a similar vision of America as a land where all their longings would be fulfilled. It is precisely why they put themselves through such troubles and sacrifice to get there. "How hard it was to get to America—harder than crawling through the anus of a needle. For the visas and passports, we begged, despaired, lied, groveled, promised, charmed, bribed—anything to get us out of the country" (Bulawayo 107). But once there, like her, they are confronted with the reality that America is anything but a land where they could realize their dreams. Worse still, they come to realize it is a land where they would have to bury their dreams for good. "And when we got to America we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away; we would not be pursuing them" (Bulawayo 107). Like Darling, they are pressed into performing menial and degrading jobs, with no chance of ever going back, but at the same time with no real prospect of ever making it big either. They are steadily stripped of their dignity, incessantly ground down by a life of attrition and despair, with no hope of redemption. "Instead of going to school, we worked. Our Social Security cards said Valid for work only with INS authorization, but we gritted our teeth and broke the law and worked.... And because we were breaking the law, we dropped our heads in shame; we had never broken any laws before. We dropped our heads because we were no longer people; we were now illegals" (Bulawayo 108). Illegal immigrants epitomize a curiously in-between category in the demography of a nation in that they are never formally recognized as official beings, but at the same time constitute an integral means for ensuring the smooth functioning of the national apparatus. It is this situation that makes them a ready and easy

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target for being ground down by a process of slow death, a fact that becomes evident when we consider the notion of “debility” conceptualized by the queer theorist Jasbir Puar.

Debility and Slow Death

Puar’s expressed view is simply that over and beyond the twin categories of ability and disability, there is a third phenomenon that is ignored or unaccounted for, which she terms debility. The underlying logic of her argument is that just because someone is able-bodied, it does not mean that the individual in question is abled by default. Her contention is that many subjects in spite of being not disabled in a strictly physical or physiological sense, are forced to lead such lives that for all intent and purpose could be regarded as effectively disabling. This of course is chiefly owing to the fact that such individuals are not formally recognized by official state discourses, and therefore are not eligible to claim the full range of rights opportunities and special sanctions that such discourses are empowered to dispense. To quote Puar’s own words,

“I mobilize the term “debility” as a needed disruption (but also expose it as a collaborator) of the category of disability and as a triangulation of the ability/disability binary, noting that while some bodies may not be recognized as or identify as disabled, they may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled” (Puar XV).

People with debility are thus pressed into leading woefully pathetic lives, lives characterized by menial jobs, long work hours, low pay, fatal working conditions, with no recourse to legal redressal or the option of simply walking away. The cumulative effect is that they are slowly worn down with impunity by others, but without ever being completely obliterated because of their social and economic indispensability. It is as if nobody wants them killed but then nobody wants them fully alive either. They are in short subjectivities forced to exist in a perennial state of being maimed, perpetuated in a limbo wedged between life and death. This is exactly what being an illegal immigrant is all about, what people like Darling are coerced to go through, the agony of slow death.

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Conclusion

For most economic immigrants across the world, it is America that still represents by far the ideal country of choice to relocate. The fact is "... the American dream, the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" (Adams 404), though admittedly has lost some of its luster over time, still remains a remarkably powerful allure. However, it is also equally true that its propensity to fail, to let down its seekers by not living up to its billing, is also as lively as ever. There is nevertheless a telling disparity with regard to the latter point that ought to be noted. Earlier the failure of the American dream entailed death as the ultimate catastrophe that befell its futile seeker, as evidenced by such proverbial characters as Miller's Billy Loman or Steinbeck's Lennie Small. As dreadful as it is, this actually epitomizes a lot far humane to what apparently it entails currently, as Bulawayo's Darling epitomizes in the saga of slow death she is compelled to cope with. In actual death which is the antithesis of life, there is at least empirical relief from the material pain that one has to undergo. In slow death however the agony is very much felt by the subject in question, for life still goes on rendering every day a living hell.

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