

## Ecological Nightmare In Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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### Abstract

In Imbolo Mbue's "*How Beautiful We Were*" (2021), environmental damage, governmental corruption, and nonviolent versus violent direct action are focussed. Throughout the narrative, the voice of resistance and struggle can be heard. The novel speaks out against environmental injustices and the awful repercussions of oil companies. The people of Kosawa are aware that something is wrong with the soil on which they live. They are subjected to acid rain, rivers have become sickly green, and people are dizzy from sickness. They also know that Pexton, the oil firm, is responsible for their deaths and losses. The indigenous peoples resolve to fight back against an American oil company that has been destroying the area. This study looked into how ecological destruction in Kosawa has sparked eco-activism and native resistance. In the framework of postcolonialism, the study employed a qualitative technique and attentive textual reading. Imbolo Mbue employs a collective viewpoint to show the ramifications of the Western colonial extractive worldview. The novel, which centres on a small town seeking revenge for and reversal of the environmental and spiritual damage it has experienced at the hands of an American oil firm, invites readers to view this novel as a parable of our insoluble global dilemma. The study was also impacted by Lawrence Buell's (2005) second wave of eco-criticism, which demands environmental justice for those who suffer from environmental deterioration. It is also concerned about plant and animal extinction. The outcomes of this study reveal that oil spills have devastating consequences for humans, animals, and aquatic life. The findings also demonstrate that the author employs a variety of resistance strategies to combat environmental degradation, including media, education, revolution, and age mates, among others. Mbue's statement urges African nations to stand up against environmental deterioration.

**Keywords:** *Environmental degradation, environmental injustices, eco-activism*

Ecological nightmare paints a grim picture of environmental devastation, often caused by human actions, that have catastrophic consequences for ecosystems and the creatures that depend on them. Some examples of what might be considered an ecological nightmare are, mass extinctions, dead zones, deforestation, ocean acidification, pollution etc. The severity of an ecological nightmare can vary greatly depending on the specific context. These are just a few

examples of ecological nightmares, but they highlight the devastating impact human activities can have on the environment. But the common thread is a significant disruption to the natural world, impacting biodiversity, ecological functions, and ultimately, the well-being of all living things. It's crucial to remember that these scenarios are not inevitable. By raising awareness, taking action in our own lives, and supporting conservation efforts, we can all contribute to preventing and mitigating ecological nightmares. It's important to remember that even in the face of such dire scenarios, there is hope. Many individuals and organizations are working to address these challenges and find solutions. One of our era's greatest scourges is air pollution, on account not only of its impact on climate change but also its impact on public and individual health due to increasing morbidity and mortality. There are many pollutants that are major factors in disease in humans. Having dirtied the earth, air, and water for more than a century, now we depend on technology for environmental cleanup.

In Imbolo Mbue's "*How Beautiful We Were*" (2021), environmental damage, governmental corruption, and nonviolent versus violent direct action are focussed. Throughout the narrative, the voice of resistance and struggle can be heard. The novel speaks out against environmental injustices and the awful repercussions of oil companies. Through their effective campaigns against deforestation and the mining of minerals, oil, and gas from their ancestral lands, indigenous people make a positive contribution to sustainability. By using traditional knowledge and values, they promote the development of sustainable production and consumption systems while opposing the continued growth of plantations. However, the indigenous people of Kosawa continue to battle against human rights, land degradation, deforestation, and climate change—all of which are seriously harming the ecosystem and the food systems that all of us rely on. This emphasizes how urgent it is to address environmental issues. The Kosawa people know that there is a problem with the earth where they reside. People are feeling lightheaded from illness, rivers have turned sickly green, and they are exposed to acid rain. They also decide to fight back against an American oil corporation that has been ruining the area since they believe that Pexton, the oil company, is to blame for their losses and deaths.

*How Beautiful We Were* is a story spanning forty years of the subjugation of the people of Kosawa, a fictional African village that is created by Mbue to expose a global phenomenon of the brute force of the powerful over the weak. The powerful American oil company, Pexton, egged on by the federal government, engages with reckless abandon in the drilling of oil in the village. The operations lead to the despoliation and degradation of the land as well as the pollution of the waters. These result in deaths – uncountable deaths – especially of children who are obviously among the most vulnerable. Early in the novel, the reader encounters a scene where some officials of government and the oil company undertake a routine visit to Kosawa. It is learnt, through a flashback, that six men from the village had earlier gone to the capital to seek solutions to their ecological problems but 'disappeared' and never returned. It takes the courage of Konga, a mentally deranged man, to wake the people up to some resistance, albeit ill-planned and ill executed. The kidnap of officials of the company and government functionaries from Bezam, the administrative headquarters of the country, is instigated by Konga. At first the rebellion appears to be succeeding until one of the captives, an American, dies in the custody of the local chieftain, Woja Beki, who was cajoled into joining the rebellion. A massacre follows and many of the villagers die and the village knows no peace thenceforth. The central character,

Thula, eventually takes on the fight after an American-sponsored education but is herself, killed. The government burns Kosawa down, at the end of the book because it has become too poisonous and uninhabitable. The traditional pattern of the west tearing through Africa, plundering its riches, destroying its country, and killing its people is echoed in Mbue's tale. As seen in the past, avarice is the motivation behind exploitation.

UNEP defined emerging environmental issue as 'an issue with either a positive or negative global environmental impact that is recognized by the scientific community as very important to human well being, but has not yet received adequate attention from the policy community'. Anthropogenic impacts on the environment are the root source of environmental problems in Africa, which significantly affect both people and almost all endemic living forms. Among the environmental problems facing Africa include deforestation, soil erosion, oil spills, and climate change. The African continent's environment has deteriorated, according to earlier research.

Senayon (2012) also interrogates the complicity of both local and global forces in the destruction of environment in Africa and the role of African Literature in the critical examination of environmental despoliation orchestrated by human activities. It is observed that the current global trends in ecological degradation are outcrops of Euro-American modernity, leaving behind a trail of environmental problems in the global south. He further argues that the politics underlying huge capital flows from the global periphery to the centre brings upon the consequential destruction of the ecosystem by corporate powers.

A reviewer, Stuart Miller, laments the deaths of children that occur in the novel because their land and water are poisoned by an American oil company. He points out that 'when some parents protest, they vanish, presumably killed for their efforts. Others are tortured, hanged or even gunned down in front of their children'(np). The reviewer further highlights the indifference and apathy of government and the company that greet the people's protests.

Similarly, Akung and Iloeje (2018) used eco-criticism as a modern literary approach to analyze the novel *Yellow Yellow* in order to investigate the connection between ecological and literature. Akung and Iloeje went on to investigate the sociocultural ramifications of environmental deterioration on society as well as the impacts of coastal towns in Nigeria's Niger Delta that are in close proximity to the sea. The study also addressed Nigeria's political ecosystem and looked at how women fit into it. The study's main focus was on how social evils affect women, culture, and the environment.

One of the biggest issues confronting Nigeria's Niger Delta was examined by Nnaji (2012). He claims that the main factor harming the planet is environmental degradation. The detrimental effects on essential environmental services that are necessary for life on Earth, like clean air, water, and arable land. Oil exploration and associated activities are the main source of environmental contamination in the Niger Delta. One of the most notable sources of pollution of water, land, or soil in an oil-producing region is oil spills. In order to determine how the Nigerian press covered environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, the study used a content analysis method to look at the manifest content of four national dailies. An American oil corporation has also ruined the ecology in Kosawa, causing the rivers to turn green and poisonous, the land to no

longer be able to sustain the growth of medical herbs, and the rain to become acidic. As a result, children there are ill and dying. How the locals respond to this environmental deterioration is the main subject of the current investigation.

Kenya's Wangari Muta Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, environmentalist and human rights activist, was also called "the woman of trees" who founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977 to plant trees across Kenya, alleviate poverty and end conflict. Wangari believes that environmental injustice practices by colonizers' social-cultural dominance and the incapacity to manage Africa's indigenous ecologies are directly or indirectly responsible for the ongoing deforestation and frequent drought that Africa has endured (Caminero-Santangelo and Myre, 2011). According to Wangari's alternative solution, it should be the responsibility of every citizen, particularly those who are continuously harmed by the current postcolonial and global ecological disasters, to combat the alarming ecological destruction through local ecological consciousness and reforestation. The characters of Imbolo Mbue are activists. Thula is particularly dedicated to activities and movements that combat environmental brutality. However, due to gender discrimination, the fact that she is single, and the fact that she has no children, she receives very little support. The author seems to be saying that it is difficult to defeat environmental violence until we address the gender-based issues.

African literary writings are positioned by Caminero Santangelo as contributors in the discourses he examines. He makes the argument that literature can help us think about environmental issues, which is a topic that has to be investigated. Because environmental degradation and environmental justice are social and political issues, Caminero Santangelo's observations are pertinent to this study. Through the use of various resisting techniques, the author of the novel chosen for this study has been discovered to be active in exposing different types of ecological degradation and fighting and altering the situation against it. By contributing to the different resistant methods, this study advances our understanding of environmental restoration.

Finally in this segment, Sudhirendar Sharma writes on 'the powerful polemic and nuanced exploration of human nature' (np.) He hinges his argument on the Kosawa people's reaction when their 'way of life, lived in close proximity to nature, is being systematically destroyed by the demands of development' (np.). The reviewer points out that the presumption of the end at the opening of the novel foreshadows the defeat that the village eventually suffers at the hands of a corporate giant.

These reviews provide greater insight to the novel's subject matters. But as it appears that only a few critical articles have come up on this novel. It is expected that this article will open the floodgate of critical viewpoints and evaluations with regard, especially to the subject of ecological devastations and the fight of the villagers of Kosawa against the mighty oil companies.

In the framework of ecocriticism, the study employed a qualitative technique and attentive textual reading for gathering evidence from the selected text. An planned and methodical approach of examining a text and extracting relevant information from its whole is called close reading. Mbue employs a collective viewpoint to show the ramifications of the

Western colonial extractive worldview. The novel, which centres on a small town seeking revenge for and reversal of the environmental and spiritual damage it has experienced at the hands of an American oil firm, invites readers to view this novel as a parable of our insoluble global dilemma. The study was also impacted by Lawrence Buell's (2005) second wave of eco-criticism, which demands environmental justice for those who suffer from environmental deterioration. It is also concerned about plant and animal extinction. The outcomes of this study reveal that oil spills have devastating consequences on humans, animals, and aquatic life. The findings also demonstrate that Mbue employs a variety of resistance strategies to combat environmental degradation, including media, education, and peers, among others. Mbue's statement urges African nations to stand up against environmental deterioration.

In addition to urging the villagers to fight against injustice, Mbue's literature concentrates on the struggle against oil firms that pollute the land and water and negatively impact the people's quality of life. The book's opening passage, which alludes to the mortality and ecological disaster that have befallen Kosawa, declares that the end is close. Resistance against ecological harm is urged in the first chapter. The child narrator says,

We should have known the end was near when the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green. We should have known our land would soon be dead....We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting – liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil. We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers flung pejoratives upon their fathers and prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them and we hated their meetings but we attended all of them. We were dying. We were helpless, we were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation. (*HBWW* 3)

This study illustrates how the government must work with the local population to find solutions to environmental injustice and degradation. The government ought to start taking an active role in issues pertaining to the environment and resource exploitation. In addition to other legal procedures that they can comprehend and value, people should have access to pertinent environmental information via various mass media.

Mbue presents a female lead who opposes the environmental harm inflicted by the oil corporation. Thula is the one who is coordinating her peers' resistance and protests against the oil business and the government. She is also shown purchasing firearms for them and providing funds for their operations. Thula exemplifies the power of feminine devotion as a free professional woman. She participates fully in the revolutionary operations; in fact, the men counsel her. In doing so, Mbue is attempting to change the status of women from object to subject. She is literally the model of women in Kosawa. Austin also tells us that she is a role model for women in Kosawa and America, "Thula wasn't eating well, she wasn't sleeping well, she was spending too much time helping organize fights against governments and corporations, and not enough time thinking about her own well-being" (*HBWW* 242-43). In a letter to the sweet and cute one, Austin expressed his concern about Thula, who had recently travelled to another part of the country with some friends to participate in a human wall project that aims to stop government employees from evicting impoverished people from their homes and stealing their land. This study acknowledges Mbue's acknowledgement of the feminine role in the

liberation of the environmental crisis in Africa. The issue of insensitivity is highlighted when one of the American overseers visits Kosawa and smiles cheerfully among the villagers when his company's actions violate the basic environmental rule of freedom to enjoy 'safe and healthy environment, free from pollution'

The company's driver says to Woja Beki, Bongo, and Lusaka, elders of the village, "No one in Bezam cares about villagers like you, okay? Absolutely no one in the government. No one at Pexton. No one whatsoever". (*HBWW* 94). This reflects the true situation: neither Pexton nor the government are worried about the effects of the pollution of the village's environment and water. All they care about is the profit that accrues to them from the oil exploration. Their action negates the principle of environmental justice because the environment represents 'the places where people live, work and play' (*HBWW* 96).

The land which Kosawa was losing was believed to be given by their ancestors. The lack of fairness that Pexton Oil exhibits is worse because the people whose land is exploited and vandalized by the company's operations are cut off completely from the wealth created by the operation. Instead, they suffer the woes of ill-health and deaths. The act of favouring the Kosawa neighbours is targeted at ensuring that none of the them will join them to oppose the company because they have been compensated adequately.

The narrator says, "what I can attest to is that the day he descended to the top in Bezam, this country became his property. From it, he harvests whatever pleases him and destroys whoever displeases him with our sweat and blood paid as taxes, he has more than we can fathom. They say his shoes alone cost more money than a hundred men make in a year" (*HBWW* 226). The Kosawa people are resolved to defend themselves. They contend that no one has the authority to imprison them on their territory. The text chosen for the study's research demonstrates how violent ecological nightmares can disenfranchise and deny populations access to natural resources. The project aims to address this issue by using education to advance environmental justice.

A strong-willed woman, Thula takes the lead in the effort to free Kosawa. She is inspired to study in America, where she gains knowledge from others in protest areas and gains a broader perspective on Kosawa's predicament. Her struggle to release Kosawa gives her a sense of purpose. Thula has an escape route through education. Despite being geographically separated, her spirit never leaves her native land, and she finally returns to spearhead a revolutionary movement that Mbue vividly and extensively captures. Thula says, 'I promised myself after the massacre that I would acquire knowledge and turn it into a machete that would destroy all those who treat us like vermin. I badly wanted to grow up so that I could protect Kosawa and ensure that children of the future never suffer as we did. The knowledge I believed, would give Kosawa power' (*HBWW* 209). Thula's ability to launch a revolution as a woman was largely attributed to her education. People thought she had learnt something in America that may help them, so they paid attention to her and joined the movement. After the Pexton agents refused to assist them, Bongo, Lusaka, and Tunis travelled to Bezam in search of a newspaperman to write about the events at Kosawa. Austin after listening to Bongo and verifying physically, writes about the meagre harvest, the thinness of the river under layers of toxic waste and the graves of the dead children. The actions of the American Oil Company in Kosawa became apparent after Austin's

article in an American newspaper. As a result of learning about the firm's evils, a large number of individuals worldwide protested against the oil company. It doesn't take long for Thula to develop into a furious campaigner after Austin takes her to meet other activists who support different human rights causes. Thula's peers choose a different strategy. They purchase firearms with money from Thula and use them to kill several Pexton workers. Additionally, they engage in sabotage activities by burning down Pexton establishments in the hopes that they will eventually depart after realizing how unwanted they are. Eventually, Thula returns to Africa to teach in schools and leads large-scale demonstrations against the corrupt regime. She spends her entire adult life attempting to use nonviolent protest to bring about change, but ultimately, she is mostly unsuccessful. The people were saved by the Restoration Movement, which chose to sue the oil firm to make it clean up Kosawa's water and land.

The study has examined the ecological violence imposed in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and the struggle of the characters and against the ecological woes. Resistance and action against the damaging activities of the oil corporation are motivated by the need to stop the company's ecological disaster in order to protect the environment. Amidst the failure of actions to checkmate the environmental pollution and degradation in the fictional African society of Kosawa, Mbue paints a picture of the hopelessness of the people who are victims of the insensitivity of imperialists and their own (villagers') federal government. She mirrors also the high level of intimidation of the people who are timid and disunited to act decisively against their subjugation because of the divide and rule technique adopted by the executives of the oil company and their collaborators. These weapons of insensitivity, intimidation and divide and rule are skillfully yet ruthlessly deployed against the villagers.

Africa's environmental protection is a topic that requires closer examination and integration into a comprehensive plan for sustainable economic growth. In order to restore the endangered environment, awareness and eco-activism are crucial, according to the study's main premise. The nature of using natural resources to increase profits without taking into account the damage of the environment is linked to ecological destruction in the novel. The study demonstrates that there is no one correct approach to solving this massive issue. We may decide to adopt a hybrid strategy. The study also suggests that ecological environmental consciousness is urgently needed. The lack of access to legal justice for indigenous people has also been identified by the study. Justice is not administered by the courts in a fair, prompt, and discrimination-free manner.

The scope of this study was limited to ecological destruction and its impact on environment. Therefore, the study suggests further research on the impact of ecological violence on the family relationship. Additionally, the experts suggest that more research be done to examine the government's response to these environmental problems.

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