

Ecological Concerns in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were***Ms. Mudita Sahu**

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E-mail: bsarkar@rpr.amity.edu**Abstract**

This paper explores the themes of environmental crisis in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) and compares it to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984. It looks at how corporate exploitation and government negligence lead to environmental disasters that heavily impact vulnerable communities. In her fictional African village of Kosawa, Mbue captures the struggle against the harmful actions of the Pexton corporation, mirroring the real-life experiences of survivors from the Bhopal disaster, who suffered tremendously from a toxic gas leak caused by Union Carbide. By applying ecocritical and postcolonial lenses, this research highlights common themes such as resistance, survival, and ecological destruction. It raises important questions about the moral and ethical responsibilities of corporations and governments. The paper discusses how Mbue's story sheds light on the ongoing fight for justice and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, it emphasises the need to amplify the voices of marginalised communities in discussions about environmental issues, corporate responsibility, and the essential right to a safe and livable planet. By connecting fiction with reality, the study enriches the broader dialogue on ecological ethics and the human toll of industrial negligence.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Corporate Exploitation, Ecocriticism, Resistance, Bhopal Gas Tragedy

Introduction

“We should have known the end was near.” (Mbue 5)

Mbue, in her novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), expresses her fear regarding ecological collapse and the degradation of environmental factors in the twenty-first century. Human beings depend heavily on nature, and as the resources are limited, they must be safeguarded. The extensive exploitation of natural resources leads to natural calamities and disasters threatening human lives. So, environmental crises have become a defining issue of the 21st century, impacting marginalised communities worldwide. From oil spills in the Niger Delta to toxic waste dumping in rural villages, the exploitation of natural resources often exacerbates social and ecological inequalities. In this context, African literature has increasingly focused on environmental themes, criticising the intersection of corporate power, state complicity, and grassroots struggles for survival. Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* is a prime example of this literary trend, with its narrative centred on Kosawa, a small African village grappling with ecological devastation caused by the multinational oil company, Pexton Corporation. The compelling depiction of environmental destruction and resistance by the villagers in the novel reflects real-world struggles for environmental justice in resource-rich yet impoverished regions.

Companies have a duty to protect the environment and should develop plans that minimise harm to both nature and people under their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework. The stakeholders of factories and industries must be aware of climate change, as their emissions contribute to significant environmental issues, including rising sea levels, severe droughts, flooding, and biodiversity loss. In the literary world, several writers and authors are trying to portray the horrors of greater environmental degradation and show its impact on human life. Through their writings, they express their genuine concern for the planet, offering examples and explanations that inspire us to protect the beautiful environment and its diverse wildlife. In literature, ecocriticism is a critical framework that explores humanity’s relationship with the environment. Its main goal is to assess how humans interact with the natural world to enhance our treatment of it. Industrial activities have both positive and negative effects on the environment, resulting in issues such as air, water, and land pollution, thermal pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and the generation of electricity.

These pollutants, when released into our surroundings, can cause serious health problems, including asthma, cancer, and heart disease.

Greg Garraded, in his book *Ecocriticism*, says “Ecocriticism explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production” (i). Ecocriticism is also known as “green” criticism, where critics are interested in exploring and concerned about environmental issues. This movement began globally as a response to a man’s mindset of trying to control nature. As a result, literature focused on environmental themes helps readers develop an awareness of ecological issues, encouraging them to be more responsible and take better care of the planet, often referred to as Mother Nature.

Mbue offers a strong example of the fight for environmental justice through the story set in the African village of Kosawa. The villagers have been battling against the American oil company, Pexton, for many years. They discovered that their water, air, and land had been polluted due to Pexton’s drilling activities, which had serious consequences, including the tragic deaths of children. Unfortunately, their struggles remained largely ignored, as the government sided with the oil company, putting profit above the health and safety of the community. This narrative highlights how large industries can harm the environment while exploiting vulnerable populations. This paper examines the ecological issues in the novel, concentrating on three primary themes: the social and environmental consequences of corporate greed, the role of government complicity, and the cultural resilience of Indigenous resistance. By referring to the works of authors such as Rob Nixon, Ursula Heise, and Lawrence Buell, this paper situates Mbue’s story within the broader conversation about environmentalism and justice.

Research Gap

Research has examined issues such as corporate exploitation and environmental damage within African literature, but there has been limited detailed analysis of Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* from an ecocritical perspective. Most studies have focused on narrative and postcolonial themes, missing the book’s subtle insights into ecological issues and environmental justice. Additionally, there has been little discussion on how indigenous communities serve as a counter-narrative to the exploitation driven by global capitalism. This study aims to fill that gap by situating the novel within the frameworks of environmental

justice and ecocriticism, thereby contributing to the growing conversation on ecological themes in African literature.

Objectives:

The research paper focuses on examining the ecological issues highlighted in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were*. It will analyse the narrative techniques and symbolism used to illustrate these environmental concerns and explore how the themes of ecological destruction are intertwined with socio-political structures.

Methodology

This research work presents an exploration of ecocriticism and various ecological aspects, referencing Imbolo Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. The paper employs textual analysis to gain a deeper understanding of various perspectives on exploitation, ecological challenges, and human rights.

Textual analysis

At the core of *How Beautiful We Were* lies the Pexton Corporation's exploitation of Kosawa's natural resources. Pexton causes widespread environmental damage by polluting water sources and triggering health crises through oil extraction. Mbue's vivid descriptions of the environmental disaster evoke what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence", the gradual, often invisible harm inflicted on vulnerable populations (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 2). Mbue foregrounds ecological catastrophe from the opening line, "Children were dying because the water we drank was toxic, the air we breathed was toxic, the land we farmed was toxic" (Mbue 3). This stark repetition of the word "toxic" underscores the totality of environmental destruction, making it clear that the ecological crisis touches every facet of life. The contamination of the water supply at Kosawa is a prime example of this slow violence, with children dying from drinking poisoned water, crops failing, and livestock perishing. Mbue does not shy away from the physical and emotional toll of this devastation, portraying a community trapped in a cycle of poverty and illness. This ecological crisis is more than just a backdrop; it drives the lives and choices of Kosawa's people. Furthermore, Pexton's indifference to the suffering of the villagers highlights the extractive logic of corporate capitalism, where the company repeatedly promises environmental clean-ups and compensation but fails to deliver on these promises. These empty assurances reflect what Nixon describes as the "temporal disjunction" of environmental harm, where corporations

prioritise short-term profits, leaving affected communities to bear the long-term consequences.

Whilst Pexton is the primary perpetrator of environmental destruction in Kosawa, Mbue also criticises the role of the government in perpetuating ecological injustice. The government of Kosawa, far from protecting its citizens, aligns itself with Pexton, taking bribes and suppressing dissent. Although Pexton is the novel's primary antagonist, Mbue also critiques the complicity of Kosawa's government. Rather than protecting its people, the government colludes with the corporation, accepting bribes in exchange for silence and inaction. The villagers memorably articulate the betrayal: "Our leaders had sold us, long ago, for a few bags of rice and some jugs of oil" (Mbue 78). This metaphor of being "sold" illustrates the commodification of human lives and ecological futures. The government's betrayal mirrors historical and contemporary instances of state complicity in resource exploitation across Africa, particularly in the Niger Delta, where successive regimes have prioritized corporate partnerships over environmental justice. This complicity highlights the systemic nature of environmental exploitation, where state institutions prioritise corporate interests over the welfare of their people. David Schlosberg's theory of environmental justice provides a valuable framework for analysing this dynamic. Schlosberg argues that environmental justice is not merely about the equitable distribution of resources but also about the recognition and participation of marginalised communities in decision-making processes (Schlosberg 23). In Kosawa, the villagers are excluded from such processes, their voices silenced by both corporate power and government corruption. Mbue's portrayal of the government's betrayal resonates with real-world cases, such as the Nigerian government's complicity in the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta by oil companies. These parallel underscores the global significance of the novel's themes, highlighting how the intersection of corporate and state power frequently undermines grassroots efforts for environmental justice.

Environmental degradation in Kosawa is closely tied to wider social and economic injustices. Pexton's activities worsen existing inequalities, affecting women and children the most. Women, who traditionally gather water and tend to crops, are disproportionately impacted by the ecological crisis. The death of children from poisoned water adds to the community's suffering, symbolising the erasure of its future. Mbue portrays the intersection of environmental and social injustices through the character of Thula, a young woman who

becomes a leader in the resistance movement. Thula's journey reflects the dual struggle for ecological preservation and social empowerment, highlighting the gendered aspects of environmental activism. Her leadership challenges patriarchal norms, suggesting that the fight for environmental justice must also tackle broader systems of oppression.

Against the backdrop of ecological disaster, Kosawa's people draw on their indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions as a means of resistance. Storytelling is crucial in preserving the community's history and expressing its grievances. The collective narration by Kosawa's children serves as both a testament to the community's resilience and a critique of the forces that threaten its survival. As Thula reminds her people: "If we do not fight, we will lose everything. If we fight, we may still lose, but at least our children will know we tried" (Mbue 201). This statement frames resistance as both a moral imperative and a legacy. Even in the face of probable defeat, the act of resistance itself becomes a form of survival and a means of maintaining dignity. Ursula Heise's concept of "eco-cosmopolitanism" is particularly relevant here. Heise argues that environmental crises necessitate both local and global perspectives, emphasising the interconnectivity of ecosystems and communities (Heise 15). Kosawa's resistance embodies this dual perspective, as the villagers fight not only to protect their immediate environment but also to challenge the global systems that enable ecological exploitation. Mbue's portrayal of indigenous resilience also challenges stereotypes of African communities as passive victims of environmental degradation. Instead, the villagers are active agents in their struggle, drawing on their cultural and spiritual heritage to resist Pexton's domination. This resistance culminates in acts of civil disobedience, legal battles, and, ultimately, a tragic but defiant assertion of agency.

Mbue's use of narrative techniques amplifies the emotional and intellectual impact of her ecological critique. The multi-voiced narration allows readers to experience the crisis from multiple viewpoints, thereby broadening their understanding of its complexities. Storytelling, too, is central to Kosawa's survival: "We told and retold the story of our dying village because if we stopped talking about it, who would remember?" (Mbue 289). Here, Mbue underscores the political and ecological power of narrative. The villagers' insistence on telling their story resists erasure, ensuring that their suffering is not forgotten. The collective voice of Kosawa's children serves as a powerful symbol of intergenerational trauma and resilience, reminding readers of the long-term consequences of environmental destruction. Symbolism also plays a vital role in the novel. The polluted river becomes a metaphor for the

corruption and moral decay of corporate and governmental institutions, while the barren fields symbolise the loss of cultural and ecological fertility. Lawrence Buell's concept of "toxic discourse" offers a lens for interpreting these symbols, highlighting the interconnectedness of ecological and human suffering (Buell 64).

Although *How Beautiful We Were* is set in the unique context of an African village, its themes have a global significance. The novel's criticism of corporate exploitation and government complicity reflects environmental issues in areas as varied as Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Arctic. By situating Kosawa's story within this global context, Mbue encourages readers to consider the shared challenges of achieving environmental justice in a world dominated by transnational corporations. Moreover, the novel poses crucial questions about the ethics of resource extraction in the Global South. It prompts readers to confront the environmental consequences of their own consumption, highlighting the interconnectedness of local and global systems. In this way, Mbue's work contributes to the expanding field of environmental humanities, which aims to bridge the gap between ecological awareness and social justice.

Imbolo Mbue's narrative reveals a similar struggle faced by villagers who have long maintained a harmonious relationship with their natural surroundings, a vital part of their culture and survival. However, this equilibrium is brutally disrupted by the activities of an oil company, which has polluted its land with toxic waste. The once pristine water bodies and agricultural lands now bear the scars of industrial pollution. As a result, the villagers face devastating health crises, experience alarming rates of childhood mortality, and endure the destruction of their livelihoods. The contamination makes farming impossible, destroying their primary means of sustenance. This industrial encroachment not only shatters their deep bond with the environment but also disorients their identity and way of life, leaving them in turmoil.

Moreover, vital drinking water sources became contaminated with carcinogenic substances, including mercury, lead, and chlorinated solvents, resulting in widespread health crises. The ecosystem's delicate balance was disrupted, leading to a substantial loss of biodiversity. Those who survived the initial disaster were left with deep psychological scars, struggling with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many families were unable to work due to ongoing health problems, resulting in extreme financial hardship and hopelessness. In India, the Bhopal tragedy serves as a stark reminder of the

devastating consequences of industrial negligence and its lasting impact on both human life and the environment.

Set in the heart-wrenching narrative of *How Beautiful We Were*, the villagers of Kosawa find themselves trapped in a tragic fight against the unrelenting forces of corporate greed and government exploitation. The villagers are painfully aware of their vulnerability in the face of corporate might: “Pexton was mighty, and who were we to think we could stand up to them?” (Mbue 45). This rhetorical question highlights the power imbalance between multinational corporations and impoverished rural communities. The company’s “might” lies not only in its economic dominance but also in its ability to manipulate legal systems, suppress dissent, and evade accountability. This story highlights the devastating environmental crises and the deep-seated social injustices caused by the unchecked greed of powerful entities. It shows the unbreakable spirit of the people, displaying their unwavering determination to stand up for their rights and regain their dignity. Kosawa, a picturesque village in Africa, once flourished on the wealth of its land, which provided nutritious food, fresh water, and a thriving environment. However, the arrival of Pexton, a powerful oil company, marked a dramatic turning point. As drilling began, the idyllic landscape started to crumble; pollution seeped into the soil and water, leading to failing crops and the severe illness of the village’s children. Despite the growing chaos, the villagers bravely confronted Pexton, pleading with them to take responsibility for the devastation they caused. However, Pexton turned a deaf ear, refusing both accountability and compensation, while the corrupt government of Kosawa sided with the corporation, leaving the villagers feeling completely abandoned. Faced with this betrayal, the people realised they bore the burden of protecting their community and existence.

Local villagers struggled with the devastating effects of environmental disaster, facing a barrage of physical and emotional hardship. Contaminated water sources, barren land unsuitable for farming, and toxic air filled with noxious fumes created an atmosphere of despondency and despair. Families grieved for loved ones lost to illness, while the younger generation faced an uncertain future. In their fight against Pexton, the villagers demonstrated remarkable resilience, organising protests, rejecting bribes, and taking legal action. However, their efforts were often met with brutality, disillusionment, and betrayal from those in power. As the years passed, the relentless struggle began to take its toll; families were torn apart, hope faded, and many lives were tragically lost.

Before Pexton's arrival, the river ran clean and was teeming with life, but the once-pristine waters had been tainted with chemical pollution. The villagers had no choice but to use this contaminated water for their daily needs, leading to a rise in illness and death. The underground oil seeped into the soil, rendering it barren and unfarmable, and pushed those who relied on agriculture further into poverty and hunger. The very air of Kosawa had become a source of despair. Pollution from the oil wells choked the villagers, especially the children, who suffered from respiratory problems and various health issues. The once-thriving environment had transformed into a bleak landscape of loss and struggle, robbing the villagers of their independence and dignity. Amidst this chaos stands Thula, a young woman whose life has been deeply intertwined with the village's struggles since childhood. Having seen firsthand the devastation caused by Pexton and the empty promises of the government, she became a symbol of hope for her people. Leaving her village to pursue her studies in America, Thula carried with her the fervent hope of gaining the knowledge needed to challenge the oppressive forces ravaging her home. Thula embodies the resilience and spirit of the villagers. She tirelessly works to amplify their struggles on the international stage, striving to shed light on the desperate situation in Kosawa. However, her journey is fraught with obstacles, personal sacrifices, and the painful realisation that meaningful change is often agonisingly slow. Despite these challenges, Thula remains steadfast, driven by her love for her village and a commitment to protect its future.

Conclusion

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is a potent examination of environmental concerns. It offers a scathing critique of corporate greed, government complicity, and the systemic inequalities that fuel environmental exploitation. Through its vivid depiction of Kosawa's struggles, the novel highlights the interconnectedness of ecological and social justice, underscoring the need for a fairer, more sustainable approach to environmental governance. At the same time, the novel celebrates the resilience and agency of marginalised communities, showing how indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions can serve as powerful tools of resistance. By situating Kosawa's story within the broader context of global environmental struggles, Mbue prompts readers to confront the moral and ecological consequences of their actions. In a world grappling with escalating environmental crises, *How Beautiful We Were* serves as both a warning and a call to action, reminding us that the fight for ecological justice is inseparable from human dignity and fairness.

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