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Racial-Economic Disparities and Environmental Suffering in Postcolonial Africa: A Reading of Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were*

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Abstract

This study examines racial-economic disparities and environmental suffering in postcolonial Africa through Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were*, drawing on Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's theory of Postcolonial Ecocriticism. It explores how colonial legacies and neocolonial exploitation shape Kosawa's socio-economic and ecological struggles, focusing on racial injustice, economic exclusion, and corporate greed. A qualitative analysis highlights the impact on Kosawa's residents and their resistance, reflecting wider postcolonial African issues. Findings

show that Kosawa's Black residents suffer from Pexton's oil pollution; tainted water, barren land, and illness, while being denied economic gains. Environmental racism, backed by a corrupt government and divide-and-rule tactics, weakens community unity and silences locals. Yet, Thula's rise as a revolutionary reveals resilience amid tragedy, mirroring systemic inequities across postcolonial Africa. The study is significant for amplifying marginalized voices, linking literature to real-world African struggles, and advocating for policy reform and educational integration to foster equity and sustainability. It fills a research gap by analyzing the global silence on African environmental suffering and grassroots resistance, bridging postcolonial ecocriticism with racial-economic discourse.The study concludes that *How Beautiful we Were* exposes how historical exploitation fuels modern environmental and racial-economic injustices. Recommendations include stronger environmental regulations, community empowerment via education and activism, and political reform to end corruption and exploitation. Integrating postcolonial literature into education is also advised to raise awareness, aiming for a just and sustainable postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: racial-economic disparities, environmental suffering, postcolonial Africa, ecocriticism, neocolonialism

Introduction

Racial and economic disparities, alongside environmental suffering, remain some of the most pressing issues facing postcolonial Africa today. These challenges are not new; they are the aftershocks of a colonial past that left deep scars on the continent's social, economic, and environmental fabric. "For many African communities, the end of colonial rule did not mean the end of exploitation. Instead, new systems of inequality emerged, often mirroring old ones, where race and class continue to shape who has access to resources, opportunities, and even a clean and safe environment" (Okeke 42; Nhemachena and Mlambo 15).

In many African nations, socio-economic and environmental challenges are deeply intertwined, reflecting systemic inequities that perpetuate marginalization and ecological degradation. “Economic inequality transcends mere income disparities, as it is rooted in historical processes of exclusion and uneven development that have entrenched social divides” (Akinola 88). This structural inequality often manifests in the prioritization of multinational corporations over rural communities, where the pursuit of "progress" or development frequently disregards those who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods. As a result, these communities face severe consequences, including polluted water, degraded soil, and climate change impacts they did little to cause (Onyango and Kipkoech 103). “Such environmental harm is not merely an ecological issue but a profoundly personal and political one, as it disrupts lives and underscores power imbalances that favor corporate interests over human welfare” (Chigudu 176). Together, these dynamics highlight the urgent need for policies that address both social justice and environmental sustainability in Africa’s development trajectory. These issues are "deeply ingrained into people’s identities”. How one experiences poverty, environmental loss, or even access to clean air and water is often determined by race, geography, and social class. And yet, amid these challenges, African voices; especially through literature continue to rise, resist, and reclaim. Stories told by African writers help us see these struggles not just as statistics, but as human experiences. They bring to life the pain, resilience, and hope of those living through racial and economic injustices and environmental degradation (Adesanmi and Ede 211).

The study examines the novel as a vital framework for understanding the environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by postcolonial African communities. It accentuates literature’s power to amplify marginalized voices often sidelined in global ecological justice dialogues, spotlighting the lived realities of those affected by environmental harm and economic

exploitation. The research stresses the need for education, activism, and policy reform to tackle these intertwined issues.

By blending postcolonial ecocriticism with racial and economic perspectives, the study enriches academic discourse, moving beyond conventional literary or environmental analyses to reveal how historical inequities shape Africa's ongoing ecological and social crises. Through Mbue's novel, it centers African stories and resistance, demonstrating fiction's dual role as a critique of systemic issues and a driver of global discussions on sustainability and equity. The study expands postcolonial ecocriticism's scope. It links environmental racism and economic marginalization in African narratives, bridging academic research with real-world advocacy and calling for more inclusive, justice-oriented environmental and educational policies.

Synopsis of the Novel

How Beautiful we Were by Imbolo Mbue is a poignant and sweeping novel set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, where the lives of the villagers are irrevocably altered by the arrival of an American oil company, Pexton. The story unfolds over decades, beginning in the 1980s, and is narrated through the voices of multiple characters, including a collective of children known as "The Children" and members of the Nangi family, most notably Thula, a young girl who grows into a revolutionary figure.

The novel opens with Kosawa grappling with the devastating effects of Pexton's operations: oil spills have poisoned the water, rendered farmland infertile, and caused a wave of illnesses and deaths, particularly among the village children. Despite promises of cleanup and compensation from both the company and the country's corrupt government, led by a self-serving dictator, the villagers' pleas for justice go unheard. Frustration boils over when, during a meeting with Pexton representatives, the village madman, Konga, seizes their car keys, sparking an act of defiance that sees the company men briefly held hostage. This bold move sets off a chain of events, including the disappearance of Thula's father and

other men who sought answers in the capital, marking the beginning of Kosawa's long struggle.

As years pass, the village's fight evolves. Thula, shaped by personal loss and a growing awareness of systemic injustice, emerges as a central figure. She pursues education, first locally and later in the United States, where she studies political activism and revolutionary ideas. Armed with knowledge and a fierce determination, she returns to Kosawa to lead a movement against both Pexton and the government, employing strategies ranging from legal battles to grassroots organizing and even flirting with violent resistance. Meanwhile, the environment continues to deteriorate, and the villagers face brutal reprisals, including executions and imprisonment, as they challenge the powers exploiting their land.

The narrative weaves together the perspectives of Thula's family—her mother Sahel, grandmother Yaya, uncle Bongo, and brother Juba alongside The Children, offering a multigenerational view of resilience, sacrifice, and the toll of resistance. While the villagers achieve fleeting victories, such as media attention and a lawsuit in an American court, their broader hopes for justice and restoration are repeatedly crushed by the entrenched forces of corporate greed and governmental corruption. The novel closes on a bittersweet note, with Kosawa's spirit enduring through its people's unyielding will, even as their land and lives remain scarred.

Related Literature

Several studies have been carried out that examined the themes of racial and economic inequality, as well as environmental suffering, especially in African literary works that interrogate postcolonial realities. In particular, Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were* has received scholarly attention for its exploration of corporate

exploitation and environmental injustice in fictional African settings.

Bassey & Okonkwo (2021) explore the intersection of environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality in postcolonial Africa. Their work positions Mbue's novel within a tradition of resistance literature that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities. They argue that the novel offers a powerful critique of neocolonial structures that perpetuate poverty and environmental decay, often under the guise of development and foreign investment.

An ecofeminist reading by Nwankwo (2023) focuses on the gendered impact of environmental suffering in the novel. The study shows how women, particularly mothers and grandmothers, bear the brunt of environmental loss, not only physically but emotionally, as they watch their children suffer from illness and malnutrition. The research aligns with ecofeminist perspectives that view the oppression of women and nature as interconnected and driven by patriarchal and capitalist systems.

Gasztold (2022) investigates the nexus of environmental neocolonialism and social justice in Mbue's novel, emphasizing the human and ecological toll of Pexton's greed. Adopting a postcolonial ecocritical lens, she argues that the text "exposes how transnational corporations perpetuate colonial patterns of resource extraction, disproportionately harming economically disadvantaged and racially marginalized communities". She positions Thula's activism as a symbolic resistance against the intertwined oppression of land and people, drawing parallels to real-world environmental justice movements (Gasztold 112).

Mensah (2023) applies an ecofeminist perspective to Mbue's work, examining the gendered dimensions of environmental suffering in Kosawa. She highlights how women, such as Thula's mother

Sahel, bear the brunt of ecological collapse losing children to polluted water and livelihoods to barren fields mirroring their socio-economic subordination. This study aligns with ecofeminist theory by framing the exploitation of nature and women as interconnected, with Mbue's narrative exposing the compounded vulnerabilities in a postcolonial context (Mensah 23).

Nxumalo (2025) addresses the intergenerational trauma and resistance depicted in *How Beautiful we Were*, arguing that Mbue challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood. He posits that "the novel's multigenerational perspective; spanning Thula, her family, and The Children illustrates a complex interplay of racial-economic disenfranchisement and environmental loss, yet emphasizes collective agency as a counterforce". He identifies a gap in prior research regarding the psychological resilience of youth in such settings, suggesting an area for further exploration (Nxumalo 15-17).

While these studies have shed light on environmental and socio-economic injustices in Mbue's work, there is still room to explore how racial and class hierarchies continue to influence the response or lack thereof of global institutions to African suffering. This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature by highlighting the racialized silence of international powers and the grassroots resistance of local communities, thus bridging the gap between environmental criticism and postcolonial racial discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Eco-criticism Theory

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's Postcolonial Ecocriticism theory is a critical framework that bridges postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, offering a robust lens to examine the intertwined legacies of colonialism, environmental degradation, and social inequity. Huggan and Tiffin argue that the exploitation of natural environments and the subjugation of colonized peoples are deeply

interconnected processes rooted in imperial power structures. Their theory seeks to address the silences in traditional ecocriticism; often focused on Western, Romanticized views of nature; by centring the experiences of postcolonial societies where colonial histories have left enduring ecological and human scars.

At its core, Postcolonial Ecocriticism posits that colonialism was not only a political and economic project but also an ecological one. The extraction of resources, imposition of monoculture agriculture, and disruption of indigenous land practices fundamentally altered ecosystems, often to the detriment of local populations. Huggan and Tiffin emphasize that these environmental transformations were racialized and hierarchical, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups; indigenous peoples, enslaved populations, and the economically disenfranchised whose livelihoods depended on the land. This dual exploitation of nature and people, they argue, persists in neocolonial forms through modern global capitalism, such as multinational corporations' resource extraction in postcolonial regions.

One key aspect of their theory is the concept of "entanglement," which highlights the inseparable relationship between human communities and their environments. Unlike traditional ecocriticism's tendency to prioritize nature as a separate entity, Huggan and Tiffin insist that in postcolonial contexts, human suffering and environmental harm are co-constitutive. For example, the deforestation of a region might not only destroy biodiversity but also displace indigenous communities, erasing their cultural practices tied to the land. This entanglement is often obscured by colonial narratives that romanticize or commodify nature while ignoring the human cost.

Another critical element is their critique of Western environmentalism, which they see as sometimes perpetuating

colonial attitudes. They point to how conservation efforts in postcolonial nations such as the creation of national parks have historically evicted local populations under the guise of "protecting" nature, reinforcing racial and economic disparities. Huggan and Tiffin call for a reorientation of ecocriticism to include voices from the Global South, advocating for a "counter-discourse" that amplifies indigenous and postcolonial perspectives on land stewardship and resistance.

The theory also engages with literature as a vital site for exploring these dynamics. Huggan and Tiffin argue that postcolonial texts often serve as acts of reclamation, exposing the ecological violence of colonialism and imagining alternative relationships with the environment. They analyse how writers depict the land not just as a backdrop but as a character shaped by and shaping human struggles, from resistance against colonial settlers to battles against corporate exploitation in the present day.

In practice, Postcolonial Ecocriticism invites readings that uncover the power imbalances embedded in environmental narratives. For instance, in a text like Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were*, the theory would focus on how the oil company's destruction of Kosawa's environment mirrors colonial plunder, while the villagers' resistance reflects a postcolonial assertion of agency over both land and identity. It would also interrogate how racial-economic hierarchies such as the marginalization of Kosawa's people in favour of foreign profit echo colonial patterns, positioning the environment as both a victim and a battleground.
Huggan and Tiffin's framework is not without critique. Some scholars argue it risks overgeneralizing diverse postcolonial experiences or underplaying local agency in favor of a victimhood narrative. Nonetheless, its strength lies in its interdisciplinary reach, blending literary analysis with historical, ecological, and ethical questions.

Methods/Materials

This study uses a qualitative approach and is guided by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's Postcolonial Ecocriticism theory. The chosen text, Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were*, is deeply connected to these concerns. It tells the story of a fictional African village devastated by the reckless actions of an oil company, portraying the emotional and physical toll on its people. The novel is selected because it strongly reflects the racial and economic injustices tied to environmental suffering in Africa. Through close reading and analysis of the text, this study aims to show how literature can expose and challenge these injustices, while giving voice to communities that are often ignored in global conversations about development and justice.

Analysis / Discussions

How Beautiful we Were by Imbolo Mbue

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we Were* is a devastating account of the various ways the residents of the African community of Kosawa attempt to understand, raise awareness of, and resist the exploitative practices of the American oil company Pexton, which is backed by the state government and the village's elites. The majority of the action in the novel occurs between the 1980s and the 2000s, but it spans four generations. The story is portrayed from the viewpoints of Thula Nangi, her mother, Sahel, her brother Juba, her grandmother Yaya, her uncle Bongo, and other family members. A chapter from "The Children," which is about Thula and her friends and covers the years as they mature, is integrated into each of these chapters.

The persistence of racial injustice in the process of deciding on environmental policy and the unequal application of environmental legislation is the foundation of environmental racism. Communities of black people are routinely subjected to the state sanctioned practice of establishing toxic waste facilities, which leaves these regions contaminated and dangerous for the residents.

Devaluing Blacks and other non-White people have always been essential to the operation of global capitalism and discriminatory environmental policies have been vital in reinforcing culturally and socially constructed differences. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" describes this process as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). In Kosawa, the slow violence of oil spills and polluted air, dismissed by Pexton as harmless (Mbue 33), exemplifies how environmental racism operates through gradual, systemic harm to marginalized communities.

Environmental racism and environmental injustices are comparable in that they demonstrate how differences in political and economic processes endure even in meta-economic neoliberal capitalism times when every structure and practise is not overtly racist. Therefore, the African elites who reside in urban areas like Bezam are not as directly affected by the brutalities of natural disasters as the impoverished people in Kosawa. The average person of Kosawa is seen as little more than disposable parts, the surplus in state systems, whose lives are meaningless in the vast web of productivity and profit. Cajetan Iheka notes that African ecocritical literature challenges such exploitation by foregrounding "the agency of Indigenous communities in resisting ecological violence" (Iheka 12), as seen in Kosawa's attempts to confront Pexton's negligence.

Therefore, the social disparity resulting from the state's exploitation or segregation of these impoverished individuals and their forced living near sources of pollution does not worry either of the dominant power groups or the state. This harsh reality serves as evidence of the persistent presence of environmental racism, which is a critically important component of the broader system of oppression. The common Kosawa people are denied distributive, procedural, recognition, and restorative justice—all of which align

with the notion of environmental justice—due to this deeply ingrained, oppressive model of racial capitalism. The impoverished Kosawa people are denied a substantial role in either voicing their sufferings or exploring potential remedies, and they are subjected to severe distributive and procedural inequities that drive them to fall prey to the dangerous traps of hyper-extractivism. When asked for replacement or repair, the Pexton company conveniently responds with the argument that "why should Pexton replace it when the cost of its negligence is not to be borne" by the unfortunate people of Kosawa, despite the company's disregard for the frequent oil explosions, waste, and breakages (Mbue 28). Xausa argues that Mbue's narrative "reflects and critiques environmental injustices while advocating for collective resistance" through characters like Thula, who challenge this systemic neglect (Xausa 197).

After receiving numerous complaints, the Pexton supervisors tested the river water for pollution on another occasion. A few weeks later, they confirmed that "the water was fine, but for the sake of caution, it would be best if they boiled it for thirty minutes before giving it to their children" (Mbue 35). In stark contrast, though, the village chiefs who represent Pexton are given water purifiers and occasionally even bottled water. When their children are sick, they receive quality medical care from qualified physicians and are properly covered. The Pexton overseers and the village chiefs take advantage of Kosawa's natural resources and use their power to control the impoverished masses, depriving them of their basic rights to air to breathe and pure water to drink. This demonstrates how "any policy, practise, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages individuals, groups, or communities based on race or colour constitutes environmental racism" (Mbue). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe this as "ecological imperialism," where colonial powers exploit both human and environmental resources to maintain dominance (Huggan and Tiffin 5). The fact that the Pexton corporate agents

don't place much value on the lives and deaths of the common Kosawa people shows how their oppressive attitude. The concerns and viewpoints of the common Kosawa people are not taken into consideration, despite their best efforts to express their terrifying experiences and fear of an ecocatastrophe brought on by the massive pollution generated by ongoing oil extraction. Along with a few other Kosawa elders, Malabo, Thula's father, tries to convince Woja Beki, the local chief, of the need of addressing the environment's deterioration in order to avoid horrifying repercussions for Kosawa. But instead of taking concrete action to address the complaints, the corporation files the complaints, arranges a fictitious inspection, and then claims that "the spills were of no harm, the air was fine, and Pexton was abiding by the law" (Mbue 33). Even while some people suffer from unknown diseases and others die from births, these are not considered tragedies or indicators of an imminent ecological threat. Thula's uncle Bongo is confused by the fact that the children of Kosawa have the same fundamental right to clean water and air as children of any other place on earth, and that their requests for these resources can be met with such reluctance. Sule Emmanuel Egya argues that such narratives advocate for a "mutualistic relationship between humans and nature" to counter the anthropocentric exploitation seen in Kosawa (Egya 2020).

The unfortunate experiences of the impoverished Kosawa people resulted in their exposure to environmental toxins and denial of their freedom to advocate for a healthy lifestyle. For the Pexton firm, Kosawa consists only of its mineral-rich needs; it feels superior since it is a specialised organisation recognised by the state government, which is its nominal holders of sovereignty. Therefore, the Pexton firm or its representatives find no harm in committing recognition injustice by labelling the common Kosawa people as having the inability to understand information properly, an unjust and harmful action. As a result, the concerns, knowledge, and worries of the Kosawa people are purposefully removed from

the discursive realm. This serves as an example of how environmental racism and environmental injustices combine to exacerbate the plight of the oppressed. In addition to being denied their right to voice concerns about the wellbeing of their village, the common Kosawa people have also been deprived of their fair share of the natural resources on their property. During Thula's early years, her father teases her about Pexton being a "different sort of gardener; the oil is their flower" (Mbue 29). They insistently ship the oil to America, saying the Kosawa people have no control over the extraction methods or the terrible outcomes. Iheka notes that this devaluation of Indigenous knowledge reflects a colonial legacy that marginalizes African communities in environmental decision-making (Iheka 18).

Pexton Oil's unfair practices are made worse by the fact that the people whose property is used for commercial purposes and defaced by the company's activities are not given any share in the profits made from these activities. Rather, they endure the miseries of illness and death. By giving the Kosawa neighbours preferential treatment, the corporation hopes to ensure that none of the other neighbours will side with them in their opposition to the business because they have received fair compensation. Pexton Oil perfects the divide and rule strategy when, years later, in response to protests by the Kosawa villagers, it decides to further push the elders against the populace by providing them with indulgences. As quoted from the text: "We lifted our glasses high, to imitate the American, grinning like giddy goats. Mr Fish clinked his glass against Sonni's, and we began clinking our glasses against each other's (Mbue 261). We walked out of the house that evening with three bottles of the drink, his gift to us. That night we shared it with all the men of Kosawa as we recounted the story of the meeting, enjoying this moment of unity that had long eluded us. We told ourselves not to celebrate quite yet" (Mbue 265). In this passage, the Pexton executives start engaging some of the village elders in an attempt to appease the minority and win them around

to their cause while the rest suffer. They reward them with gifts of exotic drinks and, in certain situations, even get them intoxicated. They started acting "giddy like goats," according to the narrator. They quickly understand that it is only a hollow victory. All this while, the effects of the oil spill and pollution do not abate: "That all happened about six years before Thula returned home. In that time, we did nothing to hurt Pexton. Oil spilled on our land and we did nothing. Our children coughed and we did nothing.

We sat on the bus to Lokunja with the labourers and we did nothing to them. We'd given Pexton our word. We kept it" (Mbue 265). The divide and conquer strategy used by the employees of the oil firm has won handily. They make sure to win over the few men who are prone to disobedience. In this manner, the men remain silent, effectively putting away their swords, as the company continues to destroy their surroundings and inflict suffering and even murder upon the populace. Because the oppressors have bought their consciences and used them to further their own agendas, they are powerless to stop them. Jennifer Wenzel's concept of "the disposition of nature" critiques this capitalist prioritization of profit over ecological and cultural sustainability, evident in Pexton's exploitation of Kosawa's resources (Wenzel 2019).

The text draws attention to every environmental issue, such as fires, deforestation, oil spills, sea incursion, and soil infertility. Furthermore, by dividing the Kosawa into classes of haves and have-nots and fostering inequity, the oil business upended the entire social structure. In addition, the Kosawa family's next generation was separated from their heritage and lost contact with their native tongue and customs. These issues span across oppression and environmental racism by Pexton towards Kosawa, and from His Excellency's government to Kosawa as well. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley argue that postcolonial ecologies in African literature challenge Western

narratives of progress by centering marginalized voices and their environmental relationships, a dynamic Mbue's multi-generational narrative exemplifies through its preservation of Kosawa's cultural memory (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011).

Discussion of Findings

How Beautiful we Were by Imbolo Mbue examines racism and oppression in the environment through the perspective of the made-up African hamlet of Kosawa. The novel describes how the introduction of Pexton, an American oil firm, wreaks havoc on Kosawa by poisoning the water and land, killing and infecting locals. Pexton also undermines the village's natural environment and way of life. The novel emphasises how environmental injustices, such as pollution, frequently have a disproportionately negative impact on marginalised populations. For instance, the Kosawa villagers are compelled to reside close to Pexton's oil wells, putting them in danger of exposure to dangerous contaminants. Additionally, because Pexton's operations have contaminated the groundwater source, the locals do not have access to clean water. The novel also looks at the connections between environmental racism and other types of oppression including economic exploitation and colonialism. Pexton's damaging activities are unstoppable for the Kosawa locals since the corrupt government supports the oil firm. Due to their forced land sales to Pexton in order to exist, the villagers are also financially dependent on the firm.

Another oppressive issue is the His Excellency's government's tyrannical attitude. In order to undermine the oppressed, His Excellency uses fear as a weapon to dominate the entire country. Anybody who opposes him is publicly executed by him. The death of suspects who could have attempted to depose him or launch a coup against him is a defining characteristic of his way of life. Furthermore, he has little regard for the Kosawa people. Without getting their permission, he sells Pexton their land, and he doesn't

pay them for the contaminated soil or the poison that kills their kids because they can't get clean water or air. In addition, because of the kidnapping of four Pexton officials, His Excellency orders soldiers to murder civilians in Kosawa in order to obtain information about whom to contact in order to resolve their crisis. His Excellency sent soldiers to Kosawa once more towards the novel's conclusion with the intention of displacing the characters and killing Thula and the other children. His Excellency holds an election later in the novel when the pressure from abroad increases. He organises an election in which he runs for office but ultimately rigs the results to his advantage. This demonstrates how Imbolo Mbue's fictitious African community reveals the tyrannical and authoritarian nature of Africans. Mbue's novel offers a potent critique of the manner in which governments and large companies frequently oppress and take advantage of marginalised communities through the narrative of Kosawa. The story also emphasises the significance of environmental justice and the necessity of shielding underprivileged populations from the damaging impacts of pollution in the environment.

In postcolonial Africa, environmental degradation is deeply linked to histories of colonial exploitation. European imperialism not only seized land and resources but also established extractive economies that prioritized foreign interests over indigenous well-being. Postcolonial states inherited these structures, often maintaining exploitative relationships with multinational corporations. In *How Beautiful we Were*, Pexton represents the persistence of this extractive model, where a Western corporation ravages Kosawa's land while the government symbolic of neo-colonial complicity fails to protect its citizens. The Kosawa people are left to bear the consequences: poisoned water, deforested land, infertile soil, and widespread disease. Their suffering reflects a broader pattern in which African communities remain at the mercy of global economic systems designed to benefit foreign investors rather than indigenous populations.

Postcolonial Eco-criticism also foregrounds the issue of environmental racism, which manifests when communities of color are disproportionately burdened with ecological harm while being denied the power to resist. In Kosawa, Pexton and the government dismiss the villagers' concerns, treating them as intellectually incapable of comprehending the dangers of oil pollution. This mirrors real-world scenarios in which corporate entities and state officials in postcolonial nations silence local resistance through coercion, bribery, or outright violence. The divide-and-rule strategy employed by Pexton favouring some elders while suppressing broader dissent—further exacerbates internal divisions and weakens collective resistance.

Another crucial aspect of Postcolonial Eco-criticism is its recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and their marginalization. The Kosawa people have an intrinsic relationship with their land, understanding its rhythms and the impact of industrial activities. However, their traditional knowledge is disregarded in favour of Western scientific discourse, which is manipulated to justify ongoing exploitation. This epistemic injustice is a hallmark of colonial and neo-colonial environmental practices, where local voices are silenced, and corporate narratives dominate. The novel challenges this imbalance by portraying the villagers' resilience and their attempts to reclaim agency through storytelling, activism, and legal battles.

Economic disparity further compounds environmental suffering in postcolonial contexts. Kosawa's impoverished state contrasts starkly with the wealth generated from its oil reserves. This reflects a recurring theme in African environmental struggles, where resource-rich regions remain underdeveloped while elites and foreign corporations amass profits. The complicity of "His Excellency's" government in the novel underscores how postcolonial African leaders often prioritize personal and political gains over environmental justice for their people. The

government's authoritarianism, suppression of protests, and orchestration of sham elections reveal the systemic corruption that sustains ecological and economic oppression.

Through the lens of Postcolonial Eco-criticism, *How Beautiful we Were* serves as a powerful critique of environmental neo-colonialism and the enduring racial-economic disparities that define postcolonial Africa. It exposes the devastating effects of corporate greed, state corruption, and environmental injustice while highlighting the resilience of marginalized communities. The novel calls for a re-evaluation of development paradigms that prioritize profit over people, advocating for ecological sustainability, indigenous rights, and genuine political accountability. Ultimately, Mbue's narrative challenges readers to reconsider how historical injustices continue to shape contemporary environmental crises, urging a movement toward justice and equity in postcolonial environmental discourse.

Conclusion

In *How Beautiful we Were*, Imbolo Mbue masterfully exposes the intersection of environmental injustice, corporate exploitation, and political oppression through the struggles of the Kosawa people. The novel paints a harrowing picture of how multinational corporations like Pexton, backed by corrupt governments, devastate marginalized communities while silencing their voices and stripping them of their resources.

Beyond its critique of environmental racism, the novel also underscores the broader consequences of systemic oppression; the erosion of cultural heritage, social division, and the deep psychological toll of living under an unjust system. The Kosawa people, despite their resilience, find themselves trapped in a cycle of suffering, forced to choose between survival and resistance.

Yet, Mbue does not merely tell a story of despair. Through characters like Thula, the novel also highlights the power of collective resistance, the importance of storytelling in preserving

history, and the unwavering human spirit in the face of injustice. In the end, *How Beautiful we Were* is a call to action, reminding us that environmental justice is not just about nature; it is about people, their dignity, and their right to exist in a world that values their lives as much as it does its profits.

Recommendations

To address the issues highlighted in *How Beautiful we Were*, it is crucial to advocate for stronger environmental regulations that hold corporations accountable for the damage they cause. Governments must enforce policies that ensure fair compensation for affected communities and strict penalties for companies that engage in environmental degradation. Additionally, independent environmental watchdogs should be empowered to monitor corporate activities and provide transparent reports on their impact on local populations. Without such measures, marginalized communities like Kosawa will continue to suffer at the hands of powerful entities that prioritize profit over human lives.

Equally, important is the role of education and awareness in empowering local communities. People must be informed about their rights, the environmental impact of industrial activities, and the legal avenues available for seeking justice. Grassroots organizations, NGOs, and activists should work closely with affected communities to amplify their voices and push for sustainable development practices. By fostering a culture of awareness and resistance, communities can challenge exploitative systems and demand their rightful place in decision-making processes that affect their land and livelihoods.

Furthermore, corporate responsibility should go beyond token gestures of compensation and include long-term investments in the well-being of affected communities. Companies like Pexton should be required to invest in infrastructure, healthcare, and education in the regions they exploit. More importantly, they should operate with ethical and sustainable practices that prioritize the health of

both the environment and the people who depend on it. When corporations are made to recognize their social responsibility, economic development can coexist with environmental protection and community welfare.

Lastly, political reforms are essential to dismantling the structures that enable environmental racism and corporate exploitation. Corrupt governments that collude with corporations at the expense of their citizens must be held accountable. This requires stronger democratic institutions, free and fair elections, and an active civil society that can challenge authoritarian rule. When leaders are chosen by the people and act in their best interests, the kind of injustices suffered by the Kosawa people can be prevented. True justice comes not only from compensating victims but from ensuring that such exploitation is never allowed to happen again.

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