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Environmental and Social Injustice in Imbolo Mbue's

How Beautiful We Were (2021)

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Declaration:

We, Hamenni Rahma and Kicher Nassima, hereby declare that this dissertation titled “Environmental and Social Injustice in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*” is our original work. We affirm that all sources referenced or consulted in the course of this study have been properly cited and acknowledged. This dissertation has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at any other institution. We further assert that no part of this work constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty in any form. In the process of writing this master’s dissertation, we utilized AI to enhance the stylistic aspects of some formulations, to correct errors, and assist with translations where necessary.

Hamenni Rahma and Kicher Nassima.

25/05/2025

Abstract:

This study analyzes Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through the lens of ecocriticism and its subfields to examine how contemporary African literature engages with ecological issues resulting from corporate exploitation and governmental complicity. Employing close textual analysis as a method and ecocriticism as a theory, the research highlights key themes such as ecological degradation, power asymmetries, and grassroots activism. the study draws on theoretical contributions from scholars including David Harvey, Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin and Vandana Shiva, whose work explores the intersections between literature, environmental justice, and postcolonial critique. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the role of narrative in resisting injustice, raising ecological awareness, and envisioning transformative change.

Keywords: Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, environmental justice, African literature, power dynamics, deep ecology.

Dedications:

To those around the world who are still suffering from environmental and social injustices
and to all who raise their voices to stand against corruption and unfairness.

To our families.

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List of Abbreviation or Acronyms

FEPA: Federal Environmental Protection Agency

UN: United Nations

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

WHO: World Health Organization

IMF: International Monetary Fund

WB: World Bank

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

MNC: Multinational Corporation

EJ: Environmental Justice

Eco-Criticism: Ecological Criticism

Eco-Marxism: Ecological Marxism

Eco-Feminism: Ecological Feminism

UNEP: United Nations Environmental Programme

1. Chapter One: General Introduction:

Literature plays a crucial role in reflecting and shaping human experiences, serving as a powerful tool for understanding social, political and environmental issues. Through storytelling, literature allows readers to engage with diverse perspectives and realities, often giving voice to marginalized communities and highlighting injustices that might otherwise remain invisible. It portrays empathy, critical thinking and awareness, by bringing complex issues into personal and emotional contexts, for example literary works can expose the devastating impacts of exploitation and environmental degradation on vulnerable populations, encouraging readers to question systems of power and seek for change. Literature becomes not only a mirror of society, but also a means of inspiring action and resistance.

In addition to tackling political and social themes, literature plays a significant role in addressing environmental problems. Many writers have increasingly engaged with environmental issues, particularly in response to the consequences of the post-Industrial Revolution, the global rise of ecological awareness, and the growing influence of green political movements. This new generation of committed writers, unlike their predecessors, blend social activism with politics in their writings, adopting different roles and postures toward the function of contemporary art, they do not write art for art's sake (Achebe 15).

According to a report of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2019, titled "Global Environment Outlook-Geo-6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People", who states that "Environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and resource depletion have become some of the most pressing and complex issues facing humanity in the 21st century", explaining that environmental issues have become one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century, and large corporations extract natural resources at an alarming rate, often with little regard for the damage they cause. This is especially true in countries where

environmental laws are weak or not enforced. In many cases, governments prioritize economic gain over the wellbeing of their people, allowing foreign companies to exploit resources in exchange for financial benefits. As a result, local communities suffer from pollution, loss of land and health problems, while the corporations are responsible for these damages, they do not face the consequences. This pattern of exploitation is not new, it is connected to colonialism and capitalism, where powerful countries and corporations take resources from poorer nations for profit.

One notable example of literature addressing environmental and social injustice is *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. The novel tells the tough yet inspiring story of Kosawa, a small fictional village in an unnamed African country, whose land, water, and lives are devastated by the greed activities of Pexton, a powerful American oil company. Pexton's oil drilling contaminates the environment, leading to the death of children, the loss of livelihoods, and the slow destruction of the community. Despite enduring years of suffering, illness, and betrayal by their own government, the people of Kosawa refuse to remain silent. They rise up in different ways through peaceful protests, legal battles, and acts of defiance, to demand justice and reclaim their dignity. Imbolo Mbue's novel highlights critical themes, such as corporate greed, environmental destruction, government corruption, and the resilience of oppressed communities. Through the villagers' struggle, the story depicts the human cost of ecological exploitation and gives voice and attention to those who are mainly ignored in worldwide discussions about equality and sustainability.

This research argues that the novel *How Beautiful We Were* serves as an essential critique of environmental exploitation and corporate greed, showing how capitalism leads to ecological destruction and social suffering.

This paper aims to analyze Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through the lens of ecocriticism, with a particular focus on ecomarxism. The main goal is to explore how the novel represents environmental destruction and its impact on marginalized communities, while also highlighting the themes of resistance and activism against corporate exploitation. The objectives of this study are, first, to examine the environmental issues portrayed in the novel and how they reflect real-life struggles faced by many communities in the global South. Second, the research attempts to analyze how corporate greed, government corruption, and the unequal distribution of environmental harm are exposed in the narrative. Third, it aims to show how literature can be an important means for raising awareness about environmental injustice and inspiring collective resistance.

This study is important because it highlights how literature can be used to address real environmental and social problems. Many communities in the world and other parts of the Global South (usually means countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania that have been historically poorer and more affected by colonization and exploitation. In *How Beautiful We Were*, it refers to places like the village of Kosawa, where powerful companies from richer countries take resources, pollute the land, and harm the people, often without fair compensation or justice. It's about inequality between the powerful and the powerless between those who take and those who suffer the consequences) face environmental destruction caused by corporations that prioritize profit over people. The struggles of Kosawa in our selected novel reflect the experiences of real communities that have been harmed by pollution and resource exploitation.

Reading the novel through the critical lenses of ecocriticism, ecomarxism, ecofeminism and postcolonial ecocriticism provide a deeper comprehension of its central messages. These theoretical approaches offer valuable perspectives that illuminate how the novel critiques

systems of oppression, highlights the exploitation of both people and nature and portrays the resilience of marginalized communities in their fight for justice.

In order to fulfill the aims and objectives of this dissertation, the following research questions will be addressed: first, how does Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* depict the environmental and social repercussions of corporate exploitation in the fictional village of Kosawa? Second, in what ways does the novel represent resistance and activism, and how do these thematic explorations contribute to the global discourse surrounding environmental justice?

This research paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is a general introduction which provides a general background of the study, introducing the research problems, justification and the main research questions. It also includes the thesis statement, significance of the study, the aims and objectives, and a brief overview of the structure of the research. The second chapter examines existing research and studies, scholarly discussions, and gaps in the literature that this study attempts to address. The third chapter is the theoretical perspective, which explores ecocriticism in detail, explaining its origins and the major sub-theories, including environmental justice theory, ecomarxism, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism. The fourth chapter is the analytical part, focuses on the novel itself. The fifth chapter summarizes the main findings of the study, emphasizes its significance, and suggests possible directions for future research.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction:

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) is a story of a fictional African village, called Kosawa, that fights against the destruction of its land and people by a cruel and materialistic company, Pexton. The novel explores important themes like environmental and social injustices, its lasting effects, and the courage of indigenous people standing up against the exploitative forces. This literature review examines previous and recent studies that worked on Mbue's novel as literary works, dissertations and article, as well as other works that deal with similar themes and ideas. By relating these works, the review aims to show how the novel contributes to changing the public opinion and makes the people mindful of these kinds of environmental concerns. This literature review is divided into four sections that are ordered thematically.

2.2. Existing Literature on Environmental Injustice in Literature:

This section provides an overview of previous studies that discuss environmental injustices in literature and related fields, showcasing the diverse ways in which environmental harm intersects with social justice, human rights, and colonialism. The studies reviewed provide a rich theoretical backdrop for exploring environmental injustice in literature, highlighting different perspectives, contexts, and frameworks.

The first study examined, "Environmental Injustice and Flood Risk: A Conceptual Model Case Comparison of Metropolitan Miami and Houston, USA" (2018), by Timothy W.W. Collins, Sara E. Grineski, Jayajit Chakraborty, challenges the conventional environmental justice (EJ) framework that associates social vulnerability with heightened environmental risks, especially in relation to air pollution. This study introduces a more nuanced perspective on flood risk, where wealthier populations in cities like Miami are more exposed to flood

hazards, but possess the resources to mitigate these risks. In contrast, socially vulnerable groups are marginalized to areas suffering from other environmental burdens like air pollution or inland flood risks. This study argues for an expansion of EJ frameworks that factor in both economic privilege and access to protective resources, highlighting the complexities of environmental justice beyond the traditional focus on risk exposure.

The second study is Simon Avenel's book chapter "Japanese Industrial Pollution And Environmental Injustice" from the book *Transnational Japan in The Global Environmental Movement* (2025). Avenel highlights Japan's postwar industrial pollution crisis, which ravaged communities from the 1950s to the 1970s. This chapter underscores the transformation of environmentalism in Japan from a nature-preservation movement to one centered on human rights, as individuals living in polluted areas suffer from severe health consequences. Avenel compares Japanese environmentalism to Western movements, emphasizing that while Western environmentalism often focused on preserving nature, Japan's movement was rooted in human suffering and justice. The devastation caused by industrial pollution in Japan is framed not just as an ecological disaster, but as a human rights violation, marking the shift towards an anthropocentric view of environmental justice.

Finally, Jaskiran Dhillon's "Indigenous Resurgence" a chapter in the book *Decolonization and Movements for Environmental Justice* (2022), by Jaskiran Dhillon, provides a critical analysis of how settler colonialism perpetuates environmental injustice. Dhillon argues that the violent disruption of indigenous peoples' relationships with their land through colonization results in both environmental and social violence. By highlighting the link between ecological damage and social violence, Dhillon positions colonial destruction as a key factor in the undermining of indigenous communities' resilience and self-determination. This work emphasizes that environmental violence against land is inseparable from violence

against people, underscoring the interconnectedness of environmental justice and decolonization.

These studies present a variety of approaches to understanding environmental injustice, from the local scale of cities in the U.S. and Japan to the global and historical impacts of colonialism on indigenous communities. The common thread is the recognition that environmental degradation is not only a physical issue but a profound social justice concern, where marginalized populations bear the brunt of the harm.

2.3. Environmental and Colonial Injustice in African Literature:

Contemporary African literature often highlights the themes of environmental and social destruction, particularly focusing on the exploitation of natural resources and the long-lasting consequences of colonial and postcolonial governance. One major example of this is the depiction of Nigeria's oil conflicts in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), which parallels the fictionalized Pexton corporation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), both of which expose the environmental damage caused by multinational corporations. In *Oil on Water*, Habila writes, "The oil companies took everything and left us with nothing but the poison in our water" (92), capturing the devastation caused by foreign oil extraction in Nigeria. While both authors explore the paradox of resource-rich nations impoverished by extraction, Mbue offers a gendered lens, focusing on women's leadership in resistance movements, in contrast to Habila's male-centric narrative. This aligns with Spivak's call to "Hear the Subaltern Speak" through intersectional frameworks (287), emphasizing the importance of including marginalized voices in resistance narratives.

In a study by Solomun Adedokun Edebor, "Rape of A Nation: An Eco critical Reading Of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*" (2010), the author critiques the lack of scholarly attention to

ecological themes in Nigerian literature and positions Habila's novel as a key text in the engagement with environmental issues. Edebor's study employs sociological analysis and content analysis to explore how *Oil on Water* portrays the consequences of human exploitation of natural resources, particularly in the Niger Delta, where oil extraction has led to environmental degradation, social unrest, and economic instability. The study contributes to ongoing discussions about African literature's engagement with ecological crises, challenging the perception that African writers have not historically addressed environmental concerns. Despite institutions like "The Federal Environmental Agency" (FEAP) and The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Edebor notes that environmental laws fail due to poor enforcement and the complicity of the government in allowing multinational corporations to escape accountability.

Similarly, the theme of environmental degradation is explored in the book *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha, which draws on the Bhopal disaster as a metaphor for systemic neglect. Sinha's portrayal of the destruction in his village, "They should have put a sign over the gate saying ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE" (45), mirrors the oil-spilled land in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, where a marginalized narrator, "We", humanizes the community, reduced to mere statistics in mainstream media. Both novels highlight the devastating effects of neocolonialism, as Sinha focuses on disability as a metaphor for systemic neglect, while Mbue interrogates the ways in which colonial histories continue to destroy land and manipulate people.

In *Agaat* (2004), Marlen Van Niekerk's exploitation of environmental and social injustice in South Africa highlights the complex interplay between postcolonial and ecocritical theories. A study by Reindhart Fourie examines the farm Grootmoedersdrift as a central setting of conflict, where the relationships between characters mirror the broader socio-political dynamics tied to colonization. The novel challenges the traditional distinction between human

and nature, suggesting that postcolonial concerns are inseparable from ecological issues. The study's findings emphasize that the relationship between the characters' struggles with each other and their environment reflects themes of identity, power, and resistance. This analysis advocates for a combined postcolonial and ecocritical approach to understanding the novel's portrayal of environmental exploitation and the ongoing legacies of colonialism.

The environmental and social injustices depicted in these works resonate with broader issues of neocolonialism, capitalist exploitation, and ecological degradation. For instance, a study by Kaitlin-Reif and Steve Wing, "Urban-Rural Exploitation: An Underappreciated Dimension of Environmental Injustice" (2016), defines "environmental injustice" as the exploitation of rural populations by urban centers, where gender, race, and class dynamics create inequalities. Their analysis connects urban development to the exploitation of rural environments, showing how these issues of environmental racism intersect with broader histories of colonialism.

Further exploring ecological imperialism, Eguvwebere Adanma Anthonia's study, *Ecological Imperialism in Yvonne Owuor's Dust and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood* (1977), critiques the continuing impact of colonialism on the environment. Both texts highlight the capitalist and colonial legacies that continue to impact Kenya's land and people, exposing how colonialism disrupted traditional ecological practices and marginalized local communities. This exploitation led to the degradation of the environment, economic disparity, and the erosion of indigenous cultural practices. Both *Dust* and *Petals of Blood* seek to restore local heritage and reclaim indigenous knowledge, calling for a more sustainable relationship with the environment.

Similarly, a study by Ashenafi Belay Adunga and Tesfaye Gebremeriam Hailu, "Ecologies: A Postcolonial Ecological Reading of *Things Fall Apart* and *Petals of Blood*"

(2015), examines the role of indigenous environmental knowledge in challenging colonial depictions of Africa's wild and uncivilized lands. These novels stress the importance of environmental stewardship and the need to restore sustainable ecological practices disrupted by colonialism. The study calls for African literature to engage more with ecological issues, calling for a more just relationship between communities and their environments.

Finally, Benedicta Adeola Ehnire's book chapter, "The Weapons of Subjugation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2021), critically analyzes the novel's focus on systemic oppression and environmental justice. Ehnire draws parallels between the exploitation in Mbue's fictional Kosawa village and real struggles, such as the Ogoni people's resistance to oil exploitation in Southern Nigeria. By using Marxist, and psychoanalytic approaches, Ehnire explores how Mbue's novel connects local resistance movements to broader philosophical debates on social justice, environmental devastation, and the trauma experienced by marginalized communities.

This combined analysis of environmental and colonial injustice across African literature examines the deep connections between social, political, and ecological issues, emphasizing the critical role literature plays in raising awareness and advocating for change. Through these works, African writers not only critique the legacies of colonialism but also offer profound pathways toward healing and restoration for both people and the environment.

2.4. Existing Literature on The Selected Novel:

This section reviews key scholarly contributions that have examined *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue, situating the novel within broader ecocritical, postcolonial, and socio-political discourses. Scholars have approached the text from multiple theoretical angles, including environmental justice, postcolonial ecocriticism, and psychoanalysis, highlighting

how Mbue's narrative engages with pressing global concerns such as ecological degradation, neocolonial exploitation and collective trauma.

One of the foundational theoretical works that demonstrate this study is Amitav Ghosh's book *The Great Derangement* (2016), in which he argues that the climate crisis is not only an environmental issue but also a cultural one, linked to how we imagine and represent the world around us (09). He believes that literature hasn't done enough to talk about environmental disasters, and this is something Imbolo Mbue tries to address in her novel *How Beautiful We Were*. In the story, the environment destruction is shown as part of everyday life in the village of Kosawa. For example, the villagers mourn their polluted rivers, which reflects Ghosh's idea that we need to rethink how we see our place in the world through stories that are deeply rooted in culture (123). In doing so, Mbue doesn't treat environmental collapse as just a background issue, it becomes something emotional and real in the characters' lives.

Another crucial point comes from Sule Emmanuel Egya in his essay "Out of African Ecocriticism Justice". Egya argues that African ecocriticism has mostly focused on human struggles and activism, often ignoring the role of non-human elements like animals, plants, and even spiritual forces. While he agrees that environmental justice is important, he encourages a broader approach that includes these other forms of agency. He suggests using a posthumanist perspective that takes into account traditional knowledge and historical connections to the land. This helps readers and scholars see how African literature often shows nature as an active presence, not just a setting in the background.

In another important study, Teresia Mutholi Biama, Selline A. Oketch and Caroline Kinnu Kimathi, offers a focused analysis in their paper, "A Beautiful Voice of Resistance and Activism: A Critique of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*". The authors explore the environmental consequences of oil extraction by the fictional Pexton corporation in Kosawa

and examine the various modes of resistance employed by the villagers ranging from media activism and formal education to armed revolution and age-group alliances. Their study adopts Lawrence Buell's second-wave ecocriticism, which emphasizes environmental justice and the safeguarding of both human and non-human lives, while Lawrence Buell's first wave ecocriticism, focuses on nature as something pure, beautiful, and worth preserving. Its tone is often celebratory and idealistic, the goal of this wave is to reconnect readers with the natural world and promote environmental awareness through literature, but it sometimes overlooks issues of race, class, gender, and urban environments. Aligning their argument with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), the authors underline the necessity of global cooperation, among governments, corporations and civil society, to address ecological damage.

Biama, Oketch, and Kimathi also draw on postcolonial ecocriticism and Marxist theory, situating Mbue's critique of structural economic exploitation within the global capitalist perspective. This aligns with Fredric Jameson's analysis of late capitalism, wherein contemporary corporate power reproduces colonial dynamics. Their work underscores literature's power to expose the environmental and human costs of extractive economies and calls for both local and transnational resistance.

Additionally, a book chapter comparing *How Beautiful We Were* with Mbue's earlier novel, *Behold The Dreamers*, examines the environmental and social justice themes in relation to broader philosophical and psychological perspectives. The analysis employs a combination of Marxist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial theories, connecting the villagers' struggle to real life movements such as the resistance of the Ogoni people in Southern Nigeria. The introduction of Freudian psychoanalysis allows the authors to explore how collective trauma and fear manifest in the villagers' actions and identities. The chapter highlights the psychological toll of environmental destruction and corporate violence, providing further depth to Mbue's portrayal of community resistance.

Together, these critical sources demonstrate the richness and complexity of *How Beautiful We Were* as a literary response to environmental and social injustice. The novel emerges as a compelling example of how African fiction can articulate ecological grief, resist neocolonial violence, and advocate for justice in ways that engage both local traditions and global debates.

2.5. Chapter Summary:

This literature review highlights the devastating outcomes of neo-colonial capitalism and ecological violence in postcolonial African literature, particularly in the selected novel. It exposes how corporation, such as Pexton, exploit Africa's natural resources under the name of "development" and "advancement", continuing resource extraction practices reminiscent of colonial times. The novels and critical studies discussed the human and ecological costs of petroculture, including toxic pollution, displacement, health crises, and the erosion of indigenous sovereignty. A central theme in these works is the critique of global coloniality, as theorized Quijano and Mignolo, where Eurocentric capitalism creates racialized hierarchies of power, allowing corporations and corrupt local elites to commodify land and labor. The literature demonstrates how African and global works expose resource extraction's social and environmental injustices while offering space for resistance and activism through storytelling. However, several gaps remain, notably the limited focus on local strategies of resistance and environmental activism beyond literary representations, as well as the class struggles within communities. While victimhood is often emphasized, fewer studies explore the agency of affected communities in shaping their own future. Additionally, many analyses engage heavily with theoretical perspectives without sufficiently connecting to real-world environmental policies or contemporary activist movements. Most discussions center on oil extraction, neglecting broader environmental issues like deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity.

loss, which are also crucial to understanding ecological injustice. Finally, while the literature criticizes neo-colonialism and international corporations, it often overlooks the role of governance failures and local elites in addressing environmental and social injustices. Addressing these gaps would offer a more comprehension of environmental struggles in African literature and beyond.

3. Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology:

3.1. Introduction:

This chapter defines key concepts and provides a background for ecocriticism theory. Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary field, encompasses various sub theories that examine the intersections of ecology with gender, race, class and colonialism. It also explains the method used in the analysis and interpretation on our corpus.

3.2. Ecocriticism Defined:

Ecocriticism according to Cheryll Glotfelty, 1996 is “The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”(11), in this brief definition, Glotfelty emphasized how literature reflects, interprets, and influences human interactions with nature. The term “ecocriticism” itself was popularized in the 1990s when scholars sought to bring ecological perspectives into literary studies. The field emerged as a part of a broader environment consciousness that had been developing since the 1970s, influenced by the environmental movement, deep ecology, and ecofeminism. Another scholar, Greg Garrard, 2005, defines ecocriticism as: “A study of the ways in which literature imagines, represents, and engages with the natural world and environmental crises” (05). Garrard’s definition highlights the literary and cultural dimensions of ecocriticism, showing that it is not just about nature, but also about how texts contrast narratives of ecological concern. Garrard in his book developed a crucial term in ecocriticism theory, which is “Environmental Consciousness”, claiming that it is the awareness of environmental issues and the impact of human activities on nature, influencing literature and criticism (33).

The theorist Lynn White Jr. in his essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, published in science magazine, in 1967, was the first to argue that Western thought contributed to environmental destruction. His work laid the foundation for later ecocritical

discussions on the cultural origins of ecological degradation, he argued that: “The current environmental crisis is largely a product of Western attitude towards nature, shaped by religious and cultural traditions that have historically placed humans above the natural world” (02). This suggests that Western anthropocentrism, (human centered thinking), was responsible for environmental destruction, his argument influenced many multiple early ecocritics, who sought to challenge anthropocentric narratives (which means that humans are seen as more important than nature. It’s a way of thinking that puts people first, and the environment, second or even ignores it completely. Anthropocentric is a system that sees the land, rivers, animals, even the air, only as things that exist for human benefit, not as valuable in their own right. Mbue’s story challenges this thinking by showing how that mindset leads to destruction, of both the planet and the people depending on it. The novel invites us to shift to an ecocentric view, where humans are part of nature, not above it) in literature.

By the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as William Reuckert, who introduced the term “ecocriticism” in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” 1978, where he wrote: “We must turn literary criticism into an ecological criticism in order to analyse how literature can contribute to the survival of the planet”(108), arguing that literature has a responsibility to address ecological issues and that literary scholars should engage with environmental problems. Cheryll Glotfelty who formalized ecocriticism as a discipline, and edited the book *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996, stated: “Literary studies had overlooked the environmental dimensions of literature for too long, and ecocriticism emerged as an effort to correct this omission” (58). Thus, ecocriticism developed as a reaction to the neglect of environmental issues in literary studies. This was the first major development of ecocritical essays, in which she also stated: “Just as feminist criticism examines how literature represents gender, ecocriticism examines how literature treats nature and the environment” (62). Her work helped to establish eco criticism as a field of literary studies.

The movement gained more attention in the 2000s, with Greg Garrard's book *Ecocriticism* 2004, that became a key work in the field, and provided a structured approach by organizing ecocritical thought into different thematic categories, such as wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, and animals, in which he also explained the concept of "Environmental Movement" as a "Global effort to address ecological issues, influencing literature and criticism" (25), in which he also claimed that "Ecocriticism must analyse the ways literature not only reflects, but also shapes our understanding of the environment" (07), his work helped categorize ecocriticism's major concerns, making the field more accessible.

Willaim Howarth wrote in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" in 1996, "Literature is not separate from the environment; it actively participates in shaping the way we see and engage with nature" (05), meaning that literature is both a reflection of environmental concerns and a tool for raising ecological awareness.

As many other theories, ecocriticism has different sub-theories, that help explain the complex relationship between humans and the environment. Ecocriticism, in general, is the study of how literature represents nature and environmental issues, and how these representations shape our understanding of the natural world. It looks at the ways where texts reflect concerns about pollution, climate change, land use, and the exploitation of natural resources. To better understand these issues, ecocriticism is divided several important sub-theories. Environmental justice theory focuses on how capitalism and class inequality contribute to environmental destruction. Ecofeminist explores the links between the domination of nature and the oppression of women. Postcolonial ecocriticism studies how colonial history and power continue to influence the way people and environments are treated, especially in formerly colonized countries. These sub-theories give ecocriticism give ecocriticism deeper perspectives on how literature connects with both environmental and social concerns.

First, Eco-marxism is a theoretical approach that combines Marxist analysis of capitalism with ecological concerns, arguing that the capitalist mode of production is fundamentally responsible for environmental degradation. David Harvey, who was a leading scholar in Marxist geography and environmental studies, explained in his book *Justice, Nature, and The Geography of Difference* 1996, that “The capitalist system, in its relentless pursuit of profit, commodifies nature, treating it as a fundamental part of human survival. This inherent contradiction leads to environmental crises that disproportionately affect the working class and marginalized communities” (148), in this statement Harvey highlighted a key principle of eco-marxism, which is nature is not just a passive background to human economic activity, but an active, exploited entity within capitalist production.

Eco-marxists argued that environmental destruction is not an accidental consequence of industrialisation, but a structural necessity within capitalism. The origins of eco-marxism can be traced back to Karl Marx himself, who in *Capital Volume I* 1867, wrote: “Capitalist production...disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and earth, that is, it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing, hence violating the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil” (637). Marx introduced the concept of “Metabolic Rift” to describe how capitalism disrupts the natural cycles that sustain life, leading to ecological crises such as soil depletion, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss. John Belamy Foster, in his book *Ecology: Materialism and Nature* 2000, developed Marx’s idea, and stated: “Marx’s understanding of ecological crises was rooted in a dialectical view of nature and society, where capitalist accumulation creates an unsustainable alienation between humans and their environment” (22). Foster’s argument examined the fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and environmental sustainability, because profit maximization requires constant resource extraction and expansion, the system inevitably exploits natural resources faster than they can be reproduced.

As a result, eco-marxist critiques mainstream environmental movements that promote green capitalism, which is according to Marx, the belief that market-based solutions, such as carbon trading and corporate sustainability initiatives, can resolve environmental issues, without changing the capitalist system, or market-based solutions, arguing that these do not address the root cause of environmental crises, the capitalist mode of production itself.

Closely related to eco-marxism, environmental justice theory argued that environmental degradation is not just an ecological issue, but a social and political one, impacting marginalized communities. As Robert Bullard, one of the founding scholars of environmental justice, stated in his book *Dumping In Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* 1990 that: “Environmental justice demands that all communities, regardless of race or income, have the right to a clean and healthy environment. However, the reality is that poor and minority communities bear the brunt of pollution, toxic waste, and hazardous industries” (45).

Bullard’s statement reflects the main argument of environmental justice, environmental harm is unequally distributed based on race, class, and geography. Studies have shown that low income communities and people of colour are more likely to live near hazardous waste sites, oil refineries, and industrial pollutants, for example, the flint water crisis in Michigan 2014-2019, which exposed how Black communities were forced to consume contaminated water due to government negligence, an event that was considered as a case of environmental racism. Another important study supporting environmental justice, is Morello Frosch’s research on air pollution in California, which found that: “Communities with higher levels of racial and economic segregation experience significantly higher exposure to hazardous air pollutants, resulting in greater health risks and lower life expectancy” (88), Frosch’s study reinforced the argument that environmental degradation is linked to systemic social inequalities. David Naguib Pellow in his book *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements For Environmental Justice* 2007, claimed that: “Environmental justice

movements are not just about protecting nature, they are about fighting for human dignity, health, and survival in the face of systemic environmental oppression” (56). Pellow developed the definition of environmental justice beyond just pollution and waste, showing how it is deeply connected to issues of governance, labour rights, and social justice.

While ecocriticism provides a valuable field for examining the relationship between literature and the natural environment, it focuses on the environmental concerns of human impact on the planet, sustainability and ecological balance. However, to fully comprehend how environmental issues interrelates with power dynamics, historical oppression, and cultural identity, it is essential to turn to postcolonial ecocriticism. This subfield specifically addresses the ways in which colonial and postcolonial histories of exploitation, resource extraction, and environmental degradation affect marginalized communities.

This section provides a detailed analysis of the important chapters from key ecocritical works that focus on deep ecology and postcolonial ecocriticism, and deep ecology is valuable in its own rights, independent of human utility. This perspective critiques the dominant anthropocentric worldview (a view that places human needs and interests above those of the natural world) and calls for a radical rethinking of our relationship with the environment. One particularly influential chapter in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology* is Sueellen Campbell’s “The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism”, is relevant to our study because it explains the concept of deep ecology. The researcher maintains that: “Deep ecology insists on the intrinsic value of nature, arguing that every element of the natural world possesses an inherent worth that transcends its usefulness to human society” (142). In this passage, Campbell establishes the main idea that nature should not be viewed as a resource for economic exploitation or human pleasure but as a complex, self-sustaining system with value for human security. The term “Intrinsic Value” is defined here as the inherent worth of an entity, independent on its usefulness to human needs,

and it means the inherent worth of something, its value just for being what it is, not because of what it can do for someone else. (Campbell 142). In environmental or ethical terms (like in *How Beautiful We Were*), saying that nature has intrinsic value means that the land, rivers, animals, and ecosystems are valuable in and of themselves, not just because they provide humans with resources like oil, food, or water. So, when the villagers in Kosawa fight to protect their land, they're not only defending it because it feeds them, they're also recognizing that the land has a right to exist, to thrive, and to be respected. That's a powerful rejection of the anthropocentric mindset we talked about earlier. Campbell's argument is originated in the work of Arne Naess (whose deep ecology philosophy dates back to the early 1970s), yet she adapts these ideas to a post-structural context, thus challenging the conventional dualisms that separate human culture from nature. Campbell further explained how language itself shapes our perceptions of the environment, in a passage she noted: "the metaphors and narratives embedded in our language not only reflect but also construct our ecological realities; by reconfiguring these linguistic structures, we can begin to dismantle the hierarchy that places humans over nature" (146). Here Campbell links linguistic practices with environmental ethics. The notion of linguistic structures that Campbell referred to is the way in which words and metaphors form mental maps that dictate how we see the natural world. Her analysis suggests that by transforming these narratives, society can move toward a more ecologically sustainable paradigm, because it challenges the conventional use of language that has historically justified environmental degradation. Campbell wrote this work in the mid-1990s in the United States (a period of environmental activism), and was motivated by the concern that modern literature and culture were complicit in sustaining an exploitative view of nature.

In "Wilderness", an article written by Greg Garrard who claimed that "The concept of wilderness is not merely a geography space untouched by humans, but a symbolic site where the ideas of purity and authenticity are contested by modern forms of environmental

degradation” (38). Garrard in this discussion emphasized that wilderness, defined here as an area largely undistributed by human development, becomes a symbol in literature, and literary texts romanticize untouched nature, even as they accept human domination over other landscapes, his critique calls for more understanding of nature that acknowledges human interconnectedness with ecological systems while still valuing nature for its own sake. By insisting on such complexity, he contributed to a new theoretical point of view of the environment.

Additionally, Postcolonial ecocriticism examines how colonial histories and power dynamics continue to shape environmental narratives and practices. This sub-theory interrogates the legacy of colonial exploitation and the environmental degradation it has wrought, particularly in formerly colonized regions. By linking environmental degradation to earlier histories of cultural and economic domination, postcolonial ecocriticism argued that environmental crises cannot be understood outside of their historical and political contexts. Postcolonial ecocriticism as mentioned above, examines how colonial histories and power dynamics continue to shape environmental narratives and practices. A crucial book chapter on these themes in the book *The Ecocriticism Reader* is Lesile Marmot Silko’s “Landscape, History, and The Pueblo Imagination”, published in 1996, in which she explored how indigenous narratives challenge dominant colonial discourses. She believes that: “The land is not merely a backdrop to historical events but an active participant in the unfolding story of cultural survival and resistance” (182). Silko’s analysis came from her experiences in the American Southeast, focusing on the idea that landscape, a term defined here as the physical body charged with cultural and historical significance, is highly connected with identity and resistance. Silko critiqued the colonial view that saw nature as a source to be exploited, instead she presented the environment as an essential part of indigenous heritage and as a medium through which oppressed peoples reclaim their histories. This perspective is

important in postcolonial ecocriticism because it repositions environmental destruction as not only an ecological problem, but also as a symptom of historical injustice.

Similarly, David Mazel's chapter "American Literary Environmentalism as Domestic Orientalism" from the book *The Ecocriticism Reader* 1996, further illustrated the intersections between colonial power and environmental narratives. He asserted: "The representation of the American landscape in literature often perpetuates an orientalist dichotomy, casting the 'wilderness' as a chaotic, untamed other that must be subdued and civilized" (110).

According to Mazel, literary depictions of nature are not neutral, they are full of the cultural politics of domination and control. The term "Orientalism" here, is originally defined by Edward said, as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient, illustrates how environmental discourse can mirror colonial ideologies (110). Mazel's work, which emerged during the mid-1990s in the United States, was a critical intervention that questioned the cultural and political assumptions of environmental literature. By drawing parallels between the subjugation of colonized peoples, Mazel's chapter contributes to a more integrated understanding of both environmental and cultural oppression, in the selected novel, the fictional African village of Kosawa is exploited by the American oil company Pexton, with the complicity of a corrupt local government. This reflects a neo-Orientalist logic, the West sees African land as a resource to be extracted, and its people as voiceless or incapable of managing their own environment, this is where ecocriticism and orientalism meet, the land is devalued, seen only for its oil, not its intrinsic worth. The people are silenced, their resistance is ignored or crushed, also the environment violence is racialized, it happens in the Global South, far from Western eyes. In addition to "The Making of Marginality: the Western Frontier and the African American Experience" which adds another important perspective to postcolonial ecocriticism. In this context, Koldony argues that the environment of the American frontier was not just shaped by nature, but also systems of exclusion based on race

and class. She points out that marginalized groups were the ones who suffered most from environmental neglect. As she puts: “The environmental landscape of the environmental of the American frontier is as much a product of racialized and class-based exclusion as it is of natural geography, with marginalized communities often being left to bear the brunt of ecological neglect” (134). Koldony introduced this idea back in the mid-1990s, placing her argument within the growing concern for environmental injustice at the time.

Through this observation, Huggan and Tiffin examined the role of literature in addressing ecological concerns. Rob Nixon’s concept of “Slow Violence”, in his book *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of The Poor* 2011, he offered another critical perspective within postcolonial ecocriticism. Nixon defined slow violence as “A violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space” (02). According to Nixon, this form of violence is mainly overlooked, because it lacks the immediacy of more visible forms of conflict. Nixon argued that “The environmentalism of the poor addresses this slow violence, as marginalized communities bear the brunt of environmental degradation over time” (05). Nixon in this perspective brought more attention to the temporal and spatial dimensions of environmental harm, emphasizing the need for a justice-oriented approach to solve the ecological issues.

Just as postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the impact of colonial histories on environmental exploitation and social inequality, feminist ecocriticism further enriches this discourse by examining how gender, power and ecological degradation are interrelated, particularly in the experiences of women in marginalized communities. This perspective allows us to explore how women’s roles in environmental justice and their unique connections to nature are shaped by both gendered and environmental forces, offering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between ecology, identity and oppression.

Ecofeminism emerged from the recognition that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected phenomena. A main figure in this discourse is Ariel Salleh, whose work *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and The Postmodern* 1997, offered a crucial analysis of these intersections. Salleh introduced the concept of “Embodied Materialism”, in which she challenged traditional ecofeminist perspectives by emphasizing the material realities of women’s labour and its connection to ecological matters. Salleh asserted that “Women’s work, both paid and unpaid, is central to the maintenance of life, yet it remains undervalued and invisible within capitalist economies” (12). Salleh through this perspective examined the systemic undervaluation of reproductive labour, highlighting how capitalist structures exploit both women’s bodies and natural resources. Expanding on the theme of interconnected oppressions, Maria Mies, in collaboration with Vandana Shiva, authored *Ecofeminism* 1993, a critical examination of the links between patriarchal domination, colonial exploitation, and environmental degradation. They argued that “The same patriarchal mindset which exploits women’s bodies, labour, and knowledge, exploits nature and her processes as well” (14). This argument makes a direct connection between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment, suggesting that both are created in a patriarchal logic that seeks control and domination. Mies further developed on this idea in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on A World Scale* 1986, where she stated that “Colonized peoples and their resources have been treated as mere objects for exploitation, much like women under patriarchal systems” (77). This argument emphasized the parallel mechanisms of oppression affecting both women and colonized communities, reinforcing the need for an integrated analysis of these issues.

Another influential voice in ecofeminist literary criticism is Greta Gaard, who edited *Ecofeminism Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* 1998, with Patrick D. Murphy, in which they explored how ecofeminist theory can inform literary analysis and vice

versa. Gaard asserted that “Ecofeminist literary criticism seeks to uncover the ways literature reflects and addresses the interconnected oppressions of women and nature (05). By examining literary texts through an ecofeminist perspective, scholars can reveal the narratives that contribute to the marginalization of both women and the environment. Gaard further emphasized the activist potential of this approach, stating that “Ecofeminist literary criticism is not just an academic exercise, but a tool for social change, aiming to challenge and transform oppressive structures” (12). This perspective positions ecofeminist criticism as both analytical and transformative, bridging the gap between scholarship and activism.

These sub theories provide a deep understanding of the complex relationships between social injustices and environmental degradation, through the works of scholars like Ariel Salleh, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin and Rob Nixon offered critical insights into how systems of oppression are linked to ecological exploitation.

3.3. Methodology:

This study employs textual analysis and critical reading to examine *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. The central aim of this representation of environmental and social injustices in the novel. The analysis is informed by ecocriticism, a critical theory concerned with the relationship between literature and the environment, as well as four of its key subfields environmental and social justice, marxist ecocriticism, feminist ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism.

It is important to clearly distinguish between the theoretical framework and the methodological approach adopted in this dissertation. Ecocriticism and its subfields provide the conceptual tools that shape the interpretive lens through which the novel is analyzed. These theories illuminate broader concerns such as the systemic nature of environmental injustice,

the enduring legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, and the gendered impacts of ecological degradation. However, while theory guides the reading and interpretation of the text, the methodology refers to the specific techniques used to examine the novel in a structured, systematic way.

This study relies primarily on textual analysis, which involves a detailed examination of text's format and thematic elements. Closely linked to this the method of close reading, a practice of careful, sustained interpretation that pays close attention to specific words, phrases, and literary devices in order to understand how meaning is constructed within the text.

It is also necessary to acknowledge an important gap in the field: the relative absence of African voices in the development of ecocritical theory and methodology. The majority of foundational texts and scholars referenced in this study originate from Western or American academic contexts, which often carry Eurocentric assumptions and frameworks. While these sources offer valuable insights, they do not always account for the historical and socio-cultural specificities of African postcolonial contexts. For this reason, the study emphasizes a careful and contextualized reading of Mbue's novel, one that remains attentive to the lived experiences and historical realities of African communities. This approach aims to present a more and culturally sensitive interpretation of the text.

A similar caution applies to feminist ecocriticism. While it provides useful theoretical intersections between gender and environmental concerns, it is often shaped by Western conceptions of feminism that may not fully reflect the experiences of women in postcolonial African societies. This study remains critically aware of these limitations and seeks to engage with the text in a way that respects its cultural specificity and complexity.

3.4. Chapter summary:

This chapter highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of eco criticism, emphasizing how it bridges literature, environmental studies, and cultural theory to question human interactions with nature. It also justifies the use of tools of analysis in the interpretation of our selected novel.

4. Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Introduction:

This chapter examines how *How Beautiful We Were* portrays environmental injustice and resistance by applying ecocriticism and its sub-theories to highlight the real conflicts faced by marginalized communities. It seeks to answer two central questions: How does the novel depict the relationship between capitalism and environmental destruction? And how does it represent resistance against corporate and governmental oppression?

One of the main issues explored in the novel is the contamination of Kosawa's land, water, and air due to the exploitative oil operations of the American company Pexton. The villagers, who depend on their environment for survival, face severe consequences as pollution renders their land infertile and their water unsafe for consumption. Through a close ecocritical reading of selected passages and themes, this chapter offers a detailed analysis of how the novel illustrates these environmental injustices. It also demonstrates how Pexton's actions reflect what David Harvey describes as the capitalist exploitation of nature, while drawing on Robert Bullard's concept of environmental racism to show how ecological degradation disproportionately affects the health and well-being of Kosawa's people. Furthermore, the chapter explores the colonial history of Kosawa and the villagers' ongoing resistance, linking these dynamics to the postcolonial ecocritical framework proposed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. In this context, the leadership role of Thula and the involvement of women in the struggle for justice are analyzed through Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, which emphasizes the deep connection between women and nature, especially in communities that bear the brunt of environmental destruction. Through these multiple lenses, the chapter argues that the novel offers a powerful critique of ecological injustice while celebrating collective resistance and the transformative role of women in the fight for environmental and social equity.

The novel is set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, where an American oil company called Pexton has caused severe environmental damage, polluting the land and water, and making children sick. The villagers, betrayed by their own government, begin a long struggle for justice. The heart of the story is Thula, a young girl who grows into a revolutionary leader. Through her and others' voices, the novel explores themes of environmental injustice, colonial exploitation, and resistance. It's a powerful story about a community's fight to protect their land, their dignity, and their future.

4.2. Historical Background:

The story of *How Beautiful We Were* takes place in Kosawa, an fictional rural village in an unnamed African country. Life in Kosawa depends heavily on nature, on the land, the water, and the air, but this connection to the environment becomes dangerous because of the harmful activities of Pexton, an American oil company. Their operations poison the soil, pollute the water, and damage the air the villagers breathe. Although Kosawa doesn't exist in real life, the events described in the novel reflect true situations in African history, especially in places like Nigeria's Niger Delta, where foreign oil companies have caused serious and long-lasting environmental damage.

4.3. Titular and Epigraphic Analysis:

The title *How Beautiful We Were* may appear simple, yet it carries deep significance. It evokes a sense of nostalgia and loss, suggesting that a group of people is looking back on something precious that has been taken from them. In the context of Mbue's novel, it reflects the story of the village of Kosawa. The title speaks not only to the physical beauty of the land but also to the spiritual and cultural richness of the community. It hints at a time when the villagers lived in harmony with nature, when their rivers were clean, the air was pure, and their land was fertile, supporting a thriving and healthy population. But now, due to the

exploitation of their resources by the Amercian oil company Pexton, that beauty has been destroyed. The land is poisoned, the water is contaminated, and the villagers' way of life has been irreparably harmed.

The title, framed in the past tense, underscores that this beauty is no longer present, leaving only memories of a time when the villagers were able to live peacefully and with control over their land. It reflects a sense of mourning, as the community grieves the loss of what was once theirs. This aligns with Bullard's assertion that environmental injustice not only harms people's health but also erodes their cultural identity and sense of belonging (10).

However, the title also serves as a form of resistance and resilience. It conveys a powerful message: "We were here, we had something beautiful, and we remember it". Even if the world has forgotten or neglected their land, the villagers have kept that memory alive. In doing so, they assert their dignity and pride in their heritage, even in the face of exploitation and devasation. The title serves as a reminder of the consequences of unchecked corporate greed and environmental destruction, calling attention to the scars left by such injustice, which continue to affect the future of the villagers.

How Beautiful We Were encapsulates the contrast between the past and the present, before and after the arrival of Pexton, which is a fictional oil company created by Imbolo Mbue in her novel *How Beautiful We Were*. It doesn't exist in the real world. In the story, Pexton represents a powerful multinational corporation that exploits the fictional African village of Kosawa. Over the years, it causes, devastating environmental damage, polluting the land and water, harming the health of villagers, and contributing to systemic injustice. Pexton's presence in the novel is a symbol of neo-colonialism, where foreign companies profit from the Global South while ignoring the human and ecological cost. So while Pexton isn't real, it's inspired by real-world oil companies and historical patterns of exploitation. Mbue uses it

to critique how corporate and governmental powers often work together at the expense of valuable communities. It highlights not just the environmental beauty of Kosawa but also the unity, cultural heritage, and moral integrity of its people, all of which have been disrupted by the exploitation of their land. The phrase also captures the deep losses the villagers have suffered, lives lost, homes destroyed, and a way of life shattered. Ultimately, the title serves as both a mournful reflection on the past and a testament to the enduring strength of the community in the face of injustice, urging the reader to understand the true cost of environmental exploitation.

The novel begins with a powerful epigraph from the book of Isaiah: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2). This Biblical verse poignantly encapsulates the central conflict of *How Beautiful We Were*, reflecting the villagers’ struggle against environmental degradation and corporate exploitation, while maintaining hope for justice and survival. The verse, originally a prophecy of deliverance, resonates deeply with the people of Kosawa, who endure overwhelming suffering due to the actions of Pexton corporation. Just as the “great light” signifies hope in the midst of despair, the villagers’ resistance, led by figures like Thula, becomes a beacon of hope for ecological and social justice. The “darkness” symbolizes the enduring legacies of colonialism and environmental exploitation, while the “light” represents the villagers’ awakening to their own power and agency, as they seek to reclaim both their land and their dignity.

The epigraph from Isaiah is rich in symbolic meaning, beginning with the phrase “people walking in darkness”, which represents the hardships, injustice, and invisible suffering endured by the villagers of Kosawa. It emphasizes the silencing of marginalized communities in the face of environmental exploitation and corporate greed. The “great light” symbolizes the hope for change, justice, and the awakening of collective consciousness among the

villagers, signifying the emergence of leadership, especially through Thula, the central female protagonist, who guides the village toward resistance and self-determination. The phrase “living in the land of the shadow of death” reflects the death and disease caused by environmental pollution, children dying from toxic water, the sickening of villagers, and the ecological degradation of their land. It also alludes to the cultural death of the village, marked by the erosion of traditions and the loss of land identity under corporate colonization. “A light has dawned” conveys the possibility of new beginnings, revolution, and the reclamation of a brighter future. It represents the hope for ecological restoration and social justice.

The epigraph encapsulates the central of the novel: the villagers’ ongoing to strive for survival, dignity, and a renewed sense of hope. The villagers’ resistance, therefore, becomes a battle against greed and corruption, illustrating the resilience of the human spirit even in the face of overwhelming adversity. The “shadow of death” mirrors the grave threat that looms over Kosawa, as the villagers’ lives are devastated by the toxic effects of Pexton’s operations, the indifference of their government, and the uncertainty of their future.

4.4. Class, Power, and Ecology in The Novel:

In *How Beautiful We Were*, the village of Kosawa suffers devastating ecological destruction due to the actions of the Pexton corporation. This destruction is not incidental, but rather the result of a capitalist system that prioritizes profit over the well being of both people and the environment. The novel powerfully demonstrates how capitalist exploitation can ravage a community’ land, health, and way of life. Harvey explains that capitalism treats nature as a commodity to be exploited for profit, a concept embodied in Pexton’s treatment of Kosawa. Before Pexton arrived, the villagers lived peacefully, relying on farming and fishing for their livelihoods. However, when Pexton began oil drilling, everything changed. The company polluted the land, poisoned the water, and caused widespread illnesses among the

villagers. As Mbue writes: “So much oil spilled into the big river that the little ones no longer called it the big river, they called it the sad water” (327). This quote vividly illustrates the environmental degradation caused by Pexton’s reckless exploitation, highlighting how the company’s sole focus on profit led to the destruction of Koawa’s ecosystem.

Harvey introduces the concept of “Metabolic Rift” between human societies and nature (159), describing how it disrupts the natural balance by extracting resources without considering the long-term consequences. In Kosawa, Pexton’s extraction of oil created this rift, taking from the land to farm, or the ability to live their traditional lives. Harvey argues that capitalism views nature as a separate entity, simply a resource to be extracted for profit (149). This attitude is clearly reflected in Pexton’s actions; they viewed Kosawa not as a home to real people, but as a space to exploit for financial gain. Even when the company saw the harm it was causing, it refused to halt its operations. Instead, they resorted to deceit and bribery to avoid accountability, as Mbue notes: “Why wouldn’t we be excited when the truth was so artfully withheld?” It was all too easy to believe the sincerity in their eyes. We began dreaming of how splendid our lives would be. Everyone did, except for my husband” (257). This passage underscores how Pexton manipulated the villagers into believing their false promises, illustrating the capitalist logic of valuing profit over human lives.

Despite their suffering, the villagers of Kosawa exhibited remarkable resilience, continuing to fight for their land and their children’s future. Mbue captures this defiance, writing: “We’d rather fight and die than live as cowards” (314). This quote exemplifies the courage and determination of the villagers, who, despite the overwhelming exploitation they faced, fought back against the destruction of their community. Harvey also discusses how oppressed people organize and resist capitalist exploitation, arguing that resistance is inherent in the struggle for justice (401). In the novel, Thula and the other villagers embody this resistance. They raise their voices, protest in the city, and even travel to America to

confront Pexton's leadership, showing that resistance to exploitation is possible, even under the harshest conditions. Mbue also highlights: "Pexton wanted more of our oil. Our government wanted more of their money. His excellency wanted more of the world's finest things. Eight years after the massacre that left Thula unable to speak for eleven days, Pexton is still on our land" (157). This quote shows how everyone in power cared only their own interests. The oil company, Pexton, wanted more oil. The government didn't protect the people, it just wanted to get rich from the company's money. Even the president, called "His Excellency", only cared about living in luxury. Meanwhile, the villagers suffered. Even after a terrible massacre happened in Thula, Pexton didn't leave. Eight years later, they were still harming the people. The fact that Thula was silent for eleven days shows how deeply the tragedy affected them. It was too painful to even speak. The massacre happened when the villagers of Thula were peacefully protesting against the damage Pexton caused to their land, water, and health. Instead of being heard, soldiers came and opened fire, killing many people. This horrible act was meant to silence them and stop them from fighting for their rights. It shows how powerful companies like Pexton use violence and fear to protect their profits. This is a clear example of corporate exploitation, when a big company takes resources from a poor community without caring about the people. Pexton used the land, destroyed the environment, made people sick, and even caused deaths, just to get oil and money. And the worst part is that the government allowed it, because they were also benefiting. The people of Thula were left to suffer alone, with no protection, no justice, and no voice.

Mbue further explores the theme of betrayal with the character of Woja Beki, a leader in the village who collaborates with Pexton. She writes: "I hope they kill Woja Beki, give him the worst possible death, for betraying his own" (65). This expression of deep anger reveals the villagers' sense of betrayal and their desire for justice. Woja Beki, who was supposed to protect his people, instead worked with the oil company, allowing it to destroy their village.

Thula's hope that Woja Beki receives the harshest punishment reflects the villagers' belief that he, as a traitor, deserves to face the consequences of his action. His betrayal is a painful reminder of the ways in which some individuals prioritize power and wealth over the safety and well being of their own community.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue poignantly portrays the emotional confusion and innocence of the children of Kosawa as they try to make sense of the devastating effects of Pexton's oil drilling. As one child reflects: "A few months later, on a day when our class was only half full because most of our friends needed to stay home due to a high fever or bad cough or an inexplicable rash a multiple of symptoms, we talked about that afternoon during recess" (84). The children wonder how Americans could be so happy while their own people are suffering and dying because of the oil company's actions. They struggle to understand why the Americans do not tell their friends at Pexton to stop causing harm to their community, and whether Pexton is lying to both the villagers and the American people. The children's questioning reveals their pain and confusion as they try to comprehend the disparity between the happiness they associate with America and the devastation they are experiencing. It also highlights their deep sense of abandonment and helplessness, as they wonder if anyone, especially the Americans, truly knows about their suffering, or if they are all being deceived. The passage underscores the innocence of the children and their desperate search for answers in the face of systemic injustice. Mbue adds: "They wanted whatever oil was below the ground on which our children played. They wanted to search for oil beneath our hats. They wanted whatever oil under the kitchen in which our wives cooked. We would die before we let them have it" (296). In this quote, Mbue portrays how strongly the people of the village felt about protecting their land, she talks about how the oil companies didn't care about their homes, families, or children, they only cared about exploiting the oil under their ground, but the villagers were ready to fight back and even die before giving up their land and

the oil before giving up their land and the oil, because to them, it meant more than just money, it was their life, their home, and their future.

Mbue also emphasizes the corrosive power of greed, noting: “It was sad how the love of money was corrupting many” (46). This statement encapsulates how the pursuit of profit by Pexton and others in positions of power has led to moral decay and betrayal within the community. Instead of protecting their own people and land, some villagers and even their leaders are swayed by the financial incentives offered by the oil company. This corruption undermines the integrity of the community, turning people against each other and fostering selfishness. The villagers feel sorrow and frustration, witnessing how the love of money erodes values, breaks families, and blinds people to their responsibilities toward the collective good. The novel powerfully conveys how money, when prioritized above all else, can strip individuals of their humanity and cause them to betray their own people, leaving the community fragmented and vulnerable to exploitation.

4.5. The Connection between Environmental Destruction and Social Injustice:

In *How Beautiful We Were*, the contamination of Kosawa’s land and water results in profound injustice for the villagers. Their health deteriorates, poverty deepens, and their land is lost to pollution, all without any external assistance. However, the novel is more than just a story of environmental degradation; it is a stark portrayal of environmental inequality. The people of Kosawa are marginalized, regarded as less significant and inferior because they are poor and vulnerable, and located in a remote village far from the centers of power where critical decisions are made. Robert Bullard, often referred to as the father of environmental justice, underscores how communities of color are disproportionately affected by pollution, as governments and corporations neglect them.

From the outset of the novel, it is evident that the villagers are falling ill and dying because their land and water are poisoned. This contamination impacts every facet of their lives, the once fertile land that provided food, now threatens their survival, and the water that sustained them, now makes them sick. Bullard, in his book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* defines environmental racism as the practice of locating hazardous industries in communities with little power to resist them (20). In Kosawa, Pexton selects the village for drilling because of the villagers' poverty and lack of political influence. The government of the fictional African nation also ignores their suffering. Mbue writes: "Our leaders in Bezam city were given envelopes and forgot about us" (72). This quote highlights how the government officials are bribed by Pexton, prioritizing corporate interests over the well being of their own people. Bullard further explains that environmental injustice includes the failure of governments to protect their citizens' health and safety (23). In Kosawa, the government turns a blind eye to Pexton's destructive drilling, despite the deaths and illnesses caused by the pollution, demonstrating a clear example of environmental injustice. The villagers' suffering is disregarded simply because they are deemed insignificant.

Mbue emphasizes that the villagers are acutely aware of their exploitation. One elder states: "They have stolen our land, poisoned our children, and still they expect us to be silent" (83). This poignant quote reflects the villagers' understanding of the injustice they face. They are victims of environmental racism, where their lives are treated as less valuable due to their race, location, and poverty. Their once-thriving farming practices, fishing traditions, and connection to the land are decimated by the pollution. Bullard argues that environmental injustice also entails cultural destruction (40), and in Kosawa, the villagers lose more than their health, they lose their very identity. Mbue poignantly writes: "We no longer knew who we were without our land" (156), capturing how the contamination has stripped them of both their physical well being and their sense of self.

Imbolo Mbue's novel serves as a powerful narrative that connects environmental destruction and social injustice, underscoring the critical need for justice. As Pexton's environmental crimes ravage Kosawa's land, they also devastate the villagers' cultural and spiritual bond to their environment. Mbue captures this connection when she writes, "Our land was our mother; when they defiled it, they defiled us" (83). This metaphor powerfully conveys that the villagers' identity is inextricably linked to their land, and its destruction is not only a physical loss, but a spiritual and cultural one as well.

Kosawa's agricultural practices, which have sustained generations of villagers, become untenable as crops fail and livestock perish. Mbue illustrates this tragic change, writing, "Our yam fields withered, our goats miscarried, our fruit trees bore bitter fruit" (53). These losses signify a profound disruption to the village's traditional way of life and the natural rhythms of the harvest seasons, which were once central to the villagers' connection to their land and their identity. Mbue explains the plight of the villagers saying: "Their wives lived husbandless lives, their offspring grew up like fatherless children, their parents died without a farewell" (293). Through this passage, Mbue describes the pain and suffering caused by the Pexton, and shows how the men who stood up against the pollution and injustice were taken away or killed, leaving their families behind. The wives had to live without their husbands, the children grew up without fathers, and some parents lost their sons without even getting the chance to say goodbye. It shows how deeply the whole community was hurt, not just by pollution, but by the loss of their loved ones because they dared to speak out.

The exploitation and manipulation by Pexton exacerbates this disconnect, further distancing Kosawa from its traditions. Mbue describes the village's gradual decay, stating, "Our children left for the cities, leaving behind a village of the old and the dying" (211). As the young generation migrates away in search of safety and opportunity, Kosawa's cultural continuity begins to fracture. This exodus represents not just a loss of people, but also a break

in the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices that have been passed down for generations.

Robert Bullard highlights displacement as a key outcome of environmental racism, asserting that communities not only lose their health and land, but also their cultural future (91). In Kosawa, the environmental destruction caused by Pexton accelerates this displacement, stripping the villagers of their livelihood, their heritage, and their sense of home. As a result, the very fabric of Kosawa's cultural identity unravels, leaving behind a community struggling to preserve its past in the face of overwhelming loss.

Mbue underscores the devastating impact of environmental exploitation in Kosawa when she writes: "We saw our village gone, poisoned, slaughtered, we saw in konga our ruin" (11). Through the use of stark and violent imagery, she evokes a sense of total destruction, Kosawa is not just damaged but "poisoned" and "slaughtered", suggesting both ecological ruin and human suffering. The oil company's activities have not only degraded the land but also inflicted irreversible harm on the villagers. This theme of despair continues as Mbue writes: "Our sad sounds lost in the chaos that had become our lives. Some of us cried for fear that death would arrive the next day, others for the illness that might lead to death the next month. We all knew the death was at hand" (28). Here, she conveys the psychological toll of the crisis: the villagers live in a state of constant fear, overwhelmed by illness, uncertainty, and abandonment. Their grief is drowned out by the surrounding "chaos", pointing to a profound sense of helplessness. In addition, Mbue assures to depict the unequal social dynamics between the miserable condition of the villagers, and fortunate condition of the Pexton laborers saying: "Not to drink the same water, or eat the same food, or breath the same air, they had enough money to buy all of their food from the big market, and Pexton made sure that their water came in through pipes, not from a well, which was why their children weren't dying like us. When their children fell sick, there was a doctor to heal them" (87). This shows

the deep unfairness between the rich and the poor in the story. The people from Pexton and the powerful families didn't suffer like the villagers because they didn't have to live in the same conditions. They didn't drink the polluted water from the wells like the villagers did, they had clean water through pipes. They didn't eat the local food that might be poisoned, they could afford food from big markets. And when their children got sick, they had doctors to treat them, while the poor children had no help and often died. It shows how unfair the system is, the rich are protected and comfortable, while the poor are left to suffer and die. This is a clear illustration of unequal social dynamics, where the rich live well and safe, and the poor pay the price. It also shows how companies like Pexton only care about protecting those with money and power, and ignore the basic needs of the local people whose land they are destroying.

Yet amidst this suffering, Mbue illustrates the villagers' growing determination for justice. One character, Lusaka, expresses a desire to confront those responsible: "I'll show them the graves of my sons, who died from their poison. I'll show them the grave of every child we've buried, and they'll count the graves so that they'll know the number and never forget it. Then we'll keep them prisoner, and I'll guard them until their employer stops killing us" (Mbue 28). This passage reflects both the depth of personal loss and the shift from passive endurance to active resistance. By forcing the perpetrators to confront the deaths they have caused, the villagers attempt to reclaim agency and seek accountability.

Mbue raised a critical question about normalized suffering in Kosawa when she wrote: "The sporadic smokiness that enveloped the village and left our eyes watery, and our noses runny, wasn't an ordinary occurrence in the lives of other children our age?"(34). This reflection reveals how deeply the pollution caused by the oil company had been internalized by the villagers, especially the children, who assumed such harmful conditions were a natural part of life. The "sporadic smokiness" from oil drilling operations created constant health

issues, watery eyes, runny noses, yet it had become so common that the children did not realize others lived differently. Mbue thus highlights a painful awakening: the realization that their suffering is not universal, but the direct result of environmental injustice and corporate exploitation.

Mbue emphasized the worsening environmental degradation in Kosawa by noting that: “the air and water of Kosawa progressed from dirty to deadly” (39). She further depicts how the village’s natural life was devastated, fish vanished from the rivers, former fishermen dismantled their canoes, and children grew unfamiliar with the taste of fish. The pervasive smell of crude oil replaced the village’s natural scents, while the incessant noise of oil operations invaded every space, from homes to classrooms. The air itself became oppressive, symbolizing the physical and emotional toll of environmental abuse.

Mbue also highlights the severe health consequences of environmental contamination through the villagers’ experiences: “They started to have fevers, urinating blood and vomiting blood, coughing, because of the poisoned water; despite all of these deadly symptoms, the villagers have never thought that it was the cause of Pexton’s arrival” (46). This passage reveals the extent of the suffering caused by Pexton’s toxic practices. The contamination of drinking water led to alarming symptoms such as fever, hematuria, hematemesis, and respiratory issues, clear indicators of exposure to hazardous substances. Yet, despite the gravity of these symptoms, the villagers did not immediately connect their illnesses to Pexton’s operations. This disconnect underscores both the invisibility of environmental violence and the effectiveness of corporate and governmental misinformation. It also reflects the villagers’ initial trust in institutional authority and their limited access to the knowledge needed to understand and challenge the sources of their suffering.

Mbue illustrates the devastating consequences of environmental degradation on the people of Kosawa, writing: “Dry season, pipeline burst, oil flooded the farm, families barely had any harvest that year” (39). This passage underscores the compounded vulnerability of the villagers, who not only endure the natural hardships of the dry season but also face man-made disasters caused by the oil company’s negligence. The pipeline burst contaminates the farmland rendering the soil infertile and destroying crops.

4.6. Environmental Degradation a Colonial Legacy:

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Imbolo Mbue illustrates how the village of Kosawa continues to suffer under the enduring shadows of colonialism. Although formal colonial rule has ended, Kosawa remains subject to neo-colonial exploitation, this time through the actions of a foreign corporation and a complicit national government. The American oil company Pexton invades their land, extracts valuable resources, and leaves behind environmental devastation, disease, and death. Kosawa’s story is not only one of ecological ruin, but also of postcolonial injustice, of how colonial structures persist in new forms. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue in: *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), many former colonies continue to experience “Ecological Imperialism”, whereby powerful nations or corporations exploit the lands and resources of marginalized regions under the guise of progress (04).

Kosawa’s history is deeply marked by extraction and domination, beginning with European colonizers and continuing through modern corporate imperialism. As Thula observes: “Our grandfathers watched the colonizers take our land and tell us it was theirs. Then they watched them leave and hand it to others who looked like us but did the same things” (Mbue 45). This haunting statement captures the painful continuity of oppression: independence brought no real sovereignty, and the same patterns of resource theft and

environmental harm persisted. Huggan and Tiffin describe this process as “The continuation of colonial exploitation under the cover of development” (21), a concept that clearly applies to the case of Kosawa. The national leaders, instead of protecting their people, accept bribes and allow Pexton to ravage the land in pursuit of profit, thereby reinforcing the cycle of environmental and social injustice.

The villagers of Kosawa become increasingly aware of the injustice inflicted upon them and choose to resist. Thula emerges as the leader of this resistance, committed to seeking justice for her people. Mbue emphasizes the villagers’ courage and resolve: “We were not afraid anymore. We had nothing left to lose” (157). This line underscores the desperation and determination that drive the villagers to stand up against both Pexton and their corrupt government. As Huggan and Tiffin argue, resistance to environmental exploitation in postcolonial contexts is often part of a broader struggle to reclaim land, identity, and autonomy (33). Thula’s movement is not merely a political fight, it is a deeply personal mission. The people of Kosawa have suffered profound losses: their children have died from pollution-related illnesses, their land has become barren, and their way of life has been dismantled.

Mbue challenges the reader to consider the depth of the villagers’ suffering: “Every season we planted seeds that refused to grow, we were still slaves on our land” (118). This metaphor of continued enslavement despite formal independence highlights how neo-colonial forces like Pexton maintain control through economic and environmental domination. Huggan and Tiffin note that environmental destruction in postcolonial societies is often linked to colonial systems of domination, in which land is taken and exploited for profit, with little regard for local communities (47). She also adds: “Nowadays young people talk about the oil as if it’s our first misfortune; they forget that, long before the oil, the parents of our parents suffered for the sake of rubber”. Mbue in this statement reminds us that the suffering of the people didn’t start with oil. The speaker is saying that today’s young people think oil is the beginning

of their problems, but that's not true. Long before oil was discovered, their ancestors were already suffering because of rubber. It shows that the exploitation of their land and people has been happening for generations. First it was rubber, now it's oil, the story keeps repeating. It's a way of saying that foreign companies and greedy governments have always taken from them, leaving behind pain, poverty, and loss.

Under Thula's leadership, resistance grows and takes on a more organized, global dimension. She travels abroad, learns from other activist movements, and returns to Kosawa with renewed vision. She inspires her community to take action, reminding them that justice is not given but seized: "Thula taught us that justice was not something to beg for, but something to take" (Mbue 203). This statement encapsulates the form of postcolonial resistance Huggan and Tiffin describe, in which reclaiming land, voice, and dignity becomes a vital step toward forging a future beyond colonial legacies (62).

The exploitation of Kosawa is deeply rooted in its colonial history. Although formal colonialism has ended, foreign companies like Pexton continue to extract resources and displace communities, perpetuating a cycle of environmental and social injustice. Mbue's novel not only highlights the resilience and agency of the villagers, but also invites readers to reflect on the long-term consequences of colonialism. Huggan and Tiffin's framework of postcolonial ecocriticism helps us to better understand how these dynamics operate and why they persist.

The motivations of European colonial powers were largely driven by the desire to extract valuable resources, which disrupted traditional ways of life and led to the subjugation of indigenous populations. Colonizers imposed foreign governance structures, disregarding local rights and eroding indigenous political and social systems. This imposition resulted in widespread disempowerment and dependency. Colonial forces also replaced indigenous

cultural practices with European norms and values, leading to cultural loss and identity fragmentation.

The novel draws a powerful parallel between these historical realities and the actions of Pexton. The company's extractive practices mirror those of colonial regimes, reducing the villagers' ability to manage their own resources and violating their sovereignty. Both the European colonizers and Pexton marginalize the community of Kosawa, treating the villagers as primitive and disregarding their voices in the name of progress and profit. The environmental destruction caused by Pexton disrupts farming and fishing, creating food insecurity, economic hardship, and health crises due to toxic exposure.

This devastation eventually forces many villagers to abandon their homes in search of safer living conditions, leading to displacement and the erosion of cultural heritage. However, *How Beautiful We Were* also tells a story of collective resistance. The villagers organize protests, demand accountability, and draw upon their historical memory of resisting colonial rule to confront Pexton's abuses. This continuity of resistance underscores the strength and perseverance of the Kosawan people in reclaiming their land and defending their rights.

Mbue explicitly critiques the dishonesty of corporate imperialism. "The representatives told them that drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilisation' to our village, and Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity'" (85). This passage exposes how Pexton manipulates the rhetoric of development and modernization to mask its true aim and profit, instead of delivering prosperity, the company brings destruction.

Mbue reflects on earlier forms of colonial deception through the voice of Yaya, Thula's grandmother: "I still remember, when I was a little girl, a day when two Europeans and their interpreter came to Kosawa. They came to tell us about their spirit. They said their spirit would bring us out of the darkness, we didn't know we were living in it. We would see the

light” (219). This memory illustrates how colonizers justified their presence by claiming moral and cultural superiority, promoting their religion worldview as enlightenment while erasing the value of indigenous knowledge and experience.

By paralleling past and present, Mbue shows that the same patterns of domination and deception continue to shape the lives of formerly colonized people. *How Beautiful We Were* thus stands as a powerful critique of both colonial and neo-colonial environmental exploitation and a testament to the enduring will of communities to resist and reclaim their future.

4.7. The Role of Women in Fighting Environmental Injustice:

Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* presents the significant role of women in the struggle for justice amidst environmental destruction and social oppression in the fictional African village of Kosawa. Through a rich portrayal of female characters, particularly Thula and her mother Sahel, Mbue explores themes of leadership, empowerment, caregiving, and spiritual connection to the land. The novel aligns closely with ecofeminist principles, especially those articulated by Vandana Shiva, who asserts in *Ecofeminist* (1993) that “Women have been the leaders in the ecological movements to protect the earth and the lives dependent on it precisely because they have been responsible for sustaining life” (Shiva 39).

Thula, the central female protagonist in the novel, perfectly represents the spirit of ecofeminism. After witnessing the pain and destruction caused by the American oil company Pexton since she was a child, she grows into a strong and determined woman. Instead of staying silent, Thula decides to fight back. She leaves Kosawa to study abroad, hoping to gain the tools and knowledge that will help her stand up to the systems harming her people. When she returns home, she leads a movement against Pexton, becoming a symbol of hope, strength, and change. Her story shows how deeply connected women’s personal experiences

are to environmental activism. Mbue also gives attention to other women in Kosawa, like Thula's mother, Sahel. Sahel shows quiet strength, supporting her family emotionally through all their struggles. Even though she suffers, she remains steady, offering comfort and holding the family together. Her role reminds us of the emotional work that women often do, especially during times of crisis. In fact, the women of Kosawa are shown as brave and united in their fight for justice. They don't stay silent, they protest, speak out against the government and Pexton, and try to raise awareness about how their environment is being destroyed. One unforgettable moment is when Mbue writes, "The mothers stood at the front of the crowd, shielding the children from the soldiers' batons with their own bodies" (158). This moment shows how powerful and protective these women are, not just as mothers, but as leaders in the struggle for justice? but also as protectors and activists, core tenets of ecofeminist thought. As Shiva notes: "Women's ecological activism often emerges from their life experiences of caring for their families and communities in the face of environmental harm" (Shiva 39).

Mbue emphasizes the spiritual and cultural significance of the land to the women of Kosawa. The land is not merely a source of sustenance but a sacred space intertwined with the community's identity. Women actively participate in rituals that honor nature, and they are seen as custodians of traditional ecological knowledge. Their participation in cultural preservation and ecological defense demonstrates a profound spiritual bond with the environment that fuels their resistance to exploitation.

Thula's deep sense of justice is poignantly expressed in her now: "I promised myself that afternoon that someday I will make Woja Beki and his friends in Bezam pay for what they have done to my family. I know nothing about how a girl makes men pay for their crimes, but I have the rest of my life to figure it out" (Mbue 57). This moment encapsulates her moral clarity and growing political consciousness. It marks the beginning of her transformation into a leader who will channel her pain into organized action and collective resistance.

Beyond individual characters, Mbue portrays the collective efforts of Kosawa's women as central to the village's survival. They refuse to be silenced, endure imprisonment, and continue to fight despite despair and loss. Their resilience, solidarity, and insistence on justice demonstrate that real social change often originates at the grassroots level, driven by those most affected. Their caregiving roles extend beyond their families to encompass the entire community, fetching water, collecting firewood, and ensuring survival, thereby underscoring their intimate relationship with the land and the urgent need to protect it.

In conclusion, the women of Kosawa embody ecofeminist resistance in *How Beautiful We Were*. Through their leadership, spiritual connection to the land, and unwavering activism, they challenge corporate exploitation, patriarchal structures, and neocolonial injustice. Mbue's portrayal of these women is a call to recognize and value the often invisible labor, wisdom, and courage of women in environmental justice movements. Their fight is not only for their village but for the future of all communities threatened by environmental and social degradation.

4.8. Chapter Summary:

This chapter analyzed *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue using ecocriticism, focusing on the intersection of environmental and social injustice in the fictional African village of Kosawa, devastated by pollution caused by the American oil company Pexton. Drawing on Environmental Justice Theory, the chapter showed how marginalized communities suffer the most from ecological harm, as the villager's health, land and water are destroyed while their voices are ignored by both government and corporate powers. Through Ecocriticism, the novel was interpreted as a critique of global capitalism, exposing how powerful nations and corporations extract resources for profit while deepening the poverty of local communities. Ecofeminist analysis highlighted the central role of women such as Thula

and Sahel, whose deep connection to the land and leadership in the resistance movement reflect the parallel exploitation of women and nature and their vital role in healing and defiance. Postcolonial Ecocriticism revealed how the narrative ties environmental destruction to colonial legacies, showing how Kosawa's ongoing exploitation mirrors historical domination and how the villagers' fight to reclaim their land is also a fight for identity and liberation. The novel emerged as a powerful portrayal of resistance and hope, using the voices of ordinary people to expose the structural forces behind ecological devastation and to envision the possibility of justice and renewal.

5. General Conclusion:

This paper has shown the deep connections between environmental destruction, capitalist exploitation, colonial legacies, hope and solidarity. It investigated how the greed of Pexton corporation led to the ecological and social damage, and how the government's failure to protect its people resulted in environmental inequality, as well as how the villagers, especially women, played a powerful role in resisting the company's injustices and oppression. By using the perspectives of theorists such as David Harvey, Robert Bullard, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin and Vandana Shiva, thus research revealed that the novel is not only a fictional story, however it reminds us that these kind of issues already exist and happen often all around the world, like the way big companies manipulate poorer and vulnerable populations for their own personal interests.

This final chapter summarizes the main findings, and highlights how they answer the research questions. It also discusses the contributions this research has made to the field, especially in connecting literature with environmental and social issues through ecocritical theory. In addition, this chapter explores the implications of the study, showing how its insights can help future scholars, and readers think more critically about literature and the environment. It also acknowledges the limitations of the research, such as the focus of texts analyzed or the focus on certain sub-theories, and explains how these limitations of the research, such as the focus of texts analyzed or the focus on certain sub-theories, and explains how these limitations may have affected the results. Finally, it offers practical suggestions and directions for future research, encouraging further exploration of ecocriticism and its sub-theories in different literary and cultural contexts.

The findings of this research paper exposes the environmental and social injustices depicted in the novel *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue, focusing on how capitalist

exploitation, colonial ideologies are the main reason behind the suffering of the communities. The research studies the ecological destruction of Kosawa village caused by Pexton company, highlighting the environmental and health crises it caused, also showing how the lack of governmental protection adds to the villagers' oppression. In addition, it discusses the importance of collective resilience in the fight against environmental injustice. The theoretical framework is based on key ecocritical perspectives, including David Harvey's critique of capitalism and nature. Robert Bullard's concept of environmental racism, and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's ideas on postcolonial ecocriticism. Vandana Shiva's work on ecofeminism which offered more understanding of the crucial role of women in preserving their land from harm. The study shows that the selected novel criticizes neocolonialism and corporate exploitation, mirroring actual cases of environmental justice.

By showing the ability of a small village to combat such a big company, which is inspiring and painful at the same time. This novel makes the reader have a mix of feelings, anger at the injustice and oppression, appreciation for the villagers' courage and unity, grief for their deprivation and downfall. This work shows how the characters such as the children, and the protagonist Thula are very determined and hopeful, refusing to give up, even among their despair and everything being against them.

Our research contributes in exposing the harmful practices of the capitalist companies, and their seductive actions towards the governments to make them turn a blind eye on their corruption over the communities. Through this research we can make the future generations aware of these overlooked issues and the importance of not remaining silent, by standing up for their rights. Even though the threat of displacement, mental health problems, resource extraction, the environmental and social costs they endured, traditional and cultural heritage disruption, the villagers stay optimistic about challenging the big companies and changing their conditions to the better, and make them accountable.

By studying the ideas of David Harvey, Robert Bullard, graham Huggan, Helen tiffin and Vandana Shiva, the study highlights how literature can reveal the deep connection between economic systems, historical power structures, and environmental harm. These thinkers show how capitalism often leads to the over use of natural resources and the unequal distribution of environmental risks, especially for poor and marginalized communities. At the same time, the effects of colonialism still shape how land, people, and resources are treated in many parts of the world. Through the perspective of these scholars, the research demonstrates that literature is not just a form of art, but also a powerful tool that can uncover hidden truths about environmental injustice and give voice to those who are silenced. In this way, literary texts become important tools for resisting systems that continue to harm people and the planet.

The focus of this study is on the role corporate exploitation in worsening environmental and social damage. By examining Pexton corporation as a symbol of capitalist greed, the study provides insights into how multinational companies, often corrupt governments, extract resources while disregarding human and ecological wellbeing. This research also examines the importance of storytelling as a means of resistance, particularly through the voices of Kosawa's villagers, who represent the collective struggles of many communities facing environmental injustice.

Furthermore, this study adds to discussions on ecofeminism by highlighting the leadership of women in environmental activism. Through the character of thula and other female figures in the novel, this research demonstrates how women, despite being oppressed in many ways, emerge as strong leaders in the fight for justice. By linking the novel's themes to real-life environmental movements, the study shows how literature can inspire activism and raise awareness about the urgent need for environmental justice. It especially draws on Vandana Shiva's ideas about the important role women play in leading protests and protecting their communities and natural surroundings. Our work highlights how literature can help future

generations understand the value of activism, solidarity, unity and equality. The findings of this research are significant for the fields of literature, environmental justice, social and political activism. First, they show that fiction can be a powerful tool for exposing real-world injustices. *How Beautiful We Were* offers a clear example of how storytelling can give voice to marginalized communities and challenge dominant capitalist and neocolonial systems. By analyzing the novel from an ecocritical point of view, this research argues that literature is not only a form of creative expression, but also a way of resisting injustice and taking action. Second, the study calls for stricter laws and regulations to make corporations accountable for the damage they cause, and to push governments to protect vulnerable populations from environmental destruction. It also underlines how deeply connected environmental harm is with larger systems of oppression and racism, and continue to increase these injustices by supporting the arguments of scholar like David Harvey and Robert Bullard.

There are several recommendations that can be made for future research in literary analysis. First, future research could explore how other recent African novels focus on environmental degradation and corporate exploitation. While *How Beautiful We Were* provides a portrayal of these issues, examining the same stories from different areas in the world by other authors would provide a deeper comprehension of how literature relates to ecological, social crises and resistance. Future researchers can focus on analyzing the novel from other perspectives as postcolonialism, feminism and psychoanalysis. They can study the novel from postcolonial angle because the novel discussed the historical context and the long term impacts of European colonialism on the villagers, which left a lasting harm of economic exploitation and suppression of the indigenous cultures, by the extraction of their resources and imposing their colonial rules, leading to their disempowerment and creating unequal power dynamics. Future researchers can also analyze the novel from a feminist point of view by focusing on how women like Thula and her mother Sahel resist the exploitation of their

land by showing their prominent role within the community, and highlighting their endurance of the responsibility of leading movements and even making critical decisions to protect the safety of their environment and society.

While this research offers a well detailed analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* through an ecocritical angle, it is important to emphasize its limitations. The first main limitation of the study is the focus on the ecocritical theory, even it helps us understand and know the environmental themes of the novel. However the study also needs to be focused on more other perspectives as feminism and postcolonialism, and psychoanalysis theories. Another imitation is the negligence of the characters' emotions, since ecocriticism focuses on just the relationship between people and nature, and it overlooks the psychology of the characters and their real inner emotions, since we might not realize their personal conflicts, fears and dreams. In addition to the lack of political and historical context, ecocriticism theory assists us to comprehend and address the ecological issues, but at the same time it ignores the economic, historical and political aspects. Our study focused on the issue of injustice itself without acknowledging the very long period of time it takes harming both the society and environment, also how long it takes to be noticed and seen by the rest of the world.

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Resume en Français :

Ce memoire analyse *How Beautiful We Were* D'imbolo Mbue a travers le prisme de l' et de ses sous-domaines afin d'examiner comment la littérature Africaine contemporaine aborde les quetions ecologiques resultant de l'exploitation des entreprises et de la complicité des gouvernements. En utilisant l'analyse textuelle rapprochee comme methode et l'ecocritique comme theorie, la recherche met en lumiere des themes cles tles que la degradation ecologique, les asymetries de pouvoir et l'activisme de la base. L'etude s'appuie sur les contributions theoriques d'universitaires tels que David Harvey, Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin et Vandana Shiva, dont les travaux explorent les intersections entre la littérature, la justice environnementale et la critique postcoloniale. Et fin de compte, l'analyse souligne le role de la narration dans la resistance a l'injustice, la sensibilisation a l'ecologie et la vision d'un changement transformateur.

Mots-cles : Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, ecocritique, postcolonialisme, justice environnementale, litterature Africaine, dynamique du pouvoir.

ملخص

”How Beautiful We Were“ تحلل هذه الدراسة رواية امبولو مبوي من عدسة النقد البيئي ومجالاته الفرعية لدراسة كيفية تعامل الادب الافريقي المعاصر مع القضايا البيئية الناتجة عن استغلال الشركات والتواطؤ الحكومي. باستخدام التحليل النصي الوثيق كمنهج والنقد البيئي كنظرية، يسلط البحث الضوء على موضوعات رئيسية مثل التدهور البيئي وعدم تناسق السلطة مع النشاط الشعبي. تعتمد الدراسة على مساهمات نظرية من باحثين من بينهم ديفيد هارفي، روب نيكسون، غراهام هيوغان، هيلين تيفين، فاندانا شيفا، الذين تستكشف أعمالهم التقاطعات بين الادب والعدالة البيئية مع النقد ما بعد الاستعمار. في نهاية المطاف،

يؤكد التحليل على دور السرد في مقاومة الظلم، وزيادة الوعي البيئي، متصور التيار التحويلي.

كلمات مفتاحية: إيمبولو مبويه، كم كنا جميلين، النقد البيئي، ما بعد الاستعمار، العدالة البيئية، الادب الافريقي، ديناميات السلطة.

Agzul

Anadi-ya d tasleđt n wungal *How Beautiful We Were* n Imbolo Mbue s usemres n tezyenwennađt d tayulin i d-yefrurin seg-s akken ad nezrew amek i d-tettmeslay tsekla tafriqit tamirant yef temsal n twennađt i d-yennulfan deffir yirmad n tkebbaniyin d yidabuyen yefkan afus. S usemres n tarrayt n tesleđt tađrisant d tezri n tezyenwennađt, anadi-ya yesken-d isental s wazal-n sen am uhtuti n twennađt akked tihawt n umtawi gar udabu d urmud n uyref. Tazrawt-a tebna yef yimahilen izrayanenn yisdawanen am David Harvey, Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin akked Vandana Shiva i yettnadin yef wassayen yettilin gar tsekla, taydemt tamwennađt akked uzyan n deffir temhersa. Yer taggara, tasleđt teskent akken iwata tamlilt n tsiwelt deg uzbu deg wudem n tarydemt, deg usnerti n takit yef temsalt n twennađt akked tmuyli deg wayen ara d-yeglun s ubeddel yer wayen yelhan.

Awalen-isura : Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, tezyenwennađt, deffir temhersa, taydemt tamwennađt, tasekla tafriqit, tadinamit n udabu.