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COLONIALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION IN IMBOLO MBUE'S HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE

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ABSTRACT

Colonization is the process by which a country establishes control over a foreign territory, often exploiting its resources and imposing its cultural, economic, and political systems. This process is a major factor contributing to ecological issues. Therefore, this research paper aims to reveal the destructive role of colonization on environmental stability and the social marginalization of locals in *How Beautiful We Were* by Mbue. As a piece of environmental fiction, *How Beautiful We Were* offers a depiction of ecological realism and explores the environmental devastation resulting from colonization. It illustrates how colonial forces, particularly oil corporations driven by development, pollute the land, exploit natural resources, harm the environment, and create economic inequalities, while marginalizing local cultures and societies. Western colonial corporations are identified as primary culprits of ecological damage and the social marginalization of the people in Africa. Employing a qualitative approach, this research paper analyzes and interprets data on the colonial impact on the environment and the social marginalization of the locals. Research findings indicate that colonial activities play a significant role in causing environmental concernsand the social marginalization of locals. This research paper is expected to be a significant addition to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Keywords: Colonization, Environment, Devastation, Social marginalization, Locals, Postcolonial ecocriticism.

INTRODUCTION

Global climate change represents one of the greatest threats to Earth, the only habitable planet, and to human civilization. The gravity of this issue and the pressing nature of the crisis have prompted scholars, theorists, and researchers across natural, social sciences, and humanities to engage with it. The relationship between empire, climate change, and the use of fossil fuels is intricate, blending the concerns of ecocriticism with postcolonial studies. This intersection has resulted in the development of postcolonial ecocriticism. While postcolonialism focuses on themes of displacement and diaspora, ecocriticism emphasizes the ethical significance of place and a deep connection to the environment (Nixon, 2005). Both theoretical frameworks established challenge binaries: postcolonial studies interrogate the West/East division, while ecocriticism scrutinizes the human/nature separation. Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes how the colonized communities often live in contaminated environments. While the effects of climate change and environmental degradation are the topic of discussion in developed nations, they frequently remain less visible and are marginalized in the discourse surrounding developing countries. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that the experiences of environmental catastrophes in peripheral regions are frequently overlooked. This neglect contributes to the complex interplay between environmental conditions, social dynamics, historical contexts, and cultural factors, all of which are deeply intertwined with the legacy of colonization. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) maintain that postcolonial ecocriticism exposes a strong link between environmental destruction and the

marginalization of local communities. The expansion of Western development ideologies, facilitated by neocolonial global corporations, often leads to the exploitation of local lands for industrial purposes, causing significant ecological and cultural damage. Mackenthun (2015) contends that placing nuclear plants or oil companies on local lands has led to the notion of ecological racism which exposes the exploitation by powerful entities and advocates for ethical efforts to improve the conditions of oppressed groups, emphasizing the conquest of nature through the appropriation of local resources.

This research paper focuses on the depiction of environmental devastation and the social marginalization of the locals in *How Beautiful We Were* through postcolonial ecocritical perspective. Imbolo Mbue is a distinguished Cameroonian-American novelist and short-story writer, with a notable emphasis on themes related to immigrant experiences and societal complexities. Through her works, Mbue offers poignant narratives that interweave subjective experiences with broader societal themes, inviting readers to engage deeply with the human condition and its multifaceted challenges. Her debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers* garnered significant acclaim, earning her the *PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction* and the *Blue Metropolis Words to Change Award*. Mbue addresses the environmental devastation and the social marginalization of the locals precipitated by corporate greed (colonial agenda)in Africa,in her latest published novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. She critiques the impact of colonialism and corporate greed on the environment and the local African communities. Set in the fictional West African village of Kosawa, the story of the novel follows the exploitation of natural resources by an American oil company, Pexton, which symbolizes European colonial agenda. Pexton's colonial activities lead to severe environmental degradation and the social marginalization of the locals. American oil company, Pexton, instigates widespread distress through an oil spill and its resultant fatal diseases in the locality. Kosawa Village stands for nature and the establishment of oil mining industry signifies the impact of colonization on the local environment of Kosawa Village. The beauty of the village is devoured by the oil mining industry, a colonial project. Dechasa and Desta(2024) remark:

> The foreign corporation, Pexton, views the land and the people as resources to be exploited for their own profit. They do not care about the impact of their actions on the environment or the local communities, and they see the people as obstacles to their business interests. (p. 220)

Mbue (2021) portrays the destructive alliance between multinational corporations and corrupt governments. Pexton's activities cause severe environmental degradation and alienation for the villagers, whose land holds significant cultural value. The company's destructive practices, including oil spills and pollution, lead to the contamination of water and soil, which, in turn, causes health issues and environmental collapse. The novelist uses the metaphor of Pexton as a gardener who values oil above all else, revealing the superficiality of their environmental claims. The devastating effects of the oil extraction on Kosawa's water supply and agricultural land are starkly depicted. Mbue (2021) highlights how the industry prioritizes oil extraction over environmental and human welfare, with figures like Woja Beki, the village leader, aligning with industrialists for personal gain and neglecting the needs of his community.

The novel explores the clash between the developmentalists' [colonialists'] pursuit of economic growth and the natives' desire to protect the environment, emphasizing the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on the natural world and local communities. Mbue critiques the exploitative practices of multinational corporations and governments, highlighting the concept of state vampirism, where governments prioritize economic gain over the wellbeing of their people and the environment. (Dechasa& Desta, 2024,p. 233)

Mbue (2021) not only depicts the dystopian present of Kosawa but also celebrates the intrinsic beauty and wisdom of African local cultures. She challenges Eurocentric and exploitative views by highlighting the rich environmental and cultural values of the Kosawa people. The novelist contrasts the destructive impact of Pexton's oil extraction with the original, vibrant life of Kosawa, emphasizing its deep connection with nature and communal life. The depiction of Kosawa's past beauty, as recollected by Thula's friend, Sonni, highlights the the locals' profound connection with their environment. This connection is reflected in

the villagers' nostalgic memories of a lush, harmonious land, despite the current devastation caused by oil spills and gas flares. The story, especially through the experiences of the protagonist Thula Nangi, illustrates the nostalgia for the village's past beauty before the onset of colonial corporate exploitation. The villagers initiate resistance and protests against both Pexton's colonial activities and their own government. Against a backdrop of environmental devastation, the novel offers a realistic portrayal of societal resistance against coloniality. Thula Nangi is the leading person of this resistance. Guided by the village madman Kanga's conviction, Thula assembles a bold movement to confront the oppressive forces that threaten their community and environment. As tensions escalate, the story navigates themes of power, corruption, and the intricate dynamics between capitalism, colonialism, and self-interest. Mbue (2021) deftly explores the complexities of human nature, infusing the narrative with layers of moral ambiguity, resilience, and the pursuit of justice.

Research Questions:

1. How does colonization contribute to environmental devastation and the social marginalization of the locals in *How Beautiful We Were*?
2. In what ways does this research paper critique colonization's destructive impact on environment, providing insights into the broader themes of environmentalism and social resistance of the locals as depicted in the text?

Research Objectives:

1. To evaluate how colonization contributes to environmental devastation and the social marginalization of the locals in *How Beautiful We Were*.
2. To critique the destructive impact of colonization on the environment by providing insights into the broader themes of environmentalism and social resistance of the locals as depicted in the text.

Review of Literature

The connection of colonialism and environmental exploitation has been a significant area of scholarly investigation for many years. Historically, the colonial powers sought resources and exerted control by exploiting the environments of colonized regions, "leading to significant ecological changes and displacement of both human and non-human entities" (Akram et al., 2023, p. 646). The exploitation of natural resources and local inhabitants is not merely a relic of colonization era but continues to resonate in contemporary post-colonial societies.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a relatively recent critical theory that is used for the study of ecosystems and climate change resulting from colonization. Climate as well as land are some of the areas that are affected through human activity. It is imperial colonization that has led to most of the ecological and human vices. Postcolonial critique engages with the human condition, as well as the ways in which people are destructive of the environment. Hence, it is important to incorporate an ecological perspective for a holistic postcolonial analysis (De Loughrey et al., 2015). "Postcolonial ecocriticism is a re-imagining of Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism and demands urgent attention in establishing how racism and colonialism affect both humans and the environment" (Isiguzo, 2017, p. 50). Huggan and Tiffin argue that "effects of colonialism on the environment is mostly detrimental, and it can result in displacement of not only humans, but other living beings as well" (Zandi & Barekat, 2022, p. 99).

A postcolonial ecocritical approach considers the environment as an interconnected whole, encompassing humans, animals, and the land, and examines its relationship with the exploitative practices of imperialism and colonialism (Syed et al., 2023) Imperialism and colonization have historically impacted people and nations, with postcolonialism focusing primarily on human experiences, whereas ecocriticism takes an ecocentric perspective. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) discuss how Western powers have exploited the land in Asia and Africa. Environmental devastation refers to the degradation of the ecosystem due to the overuse of natural resources like soil, water, and air, leading to the damage of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife.Adeniyi, and Ngozika (2023) contend that corporate activities perpetuate the notion of postcolonial societies as global peripheries suited for primitive accumulation, often prioritizing profit over environmental preservation and indigenous rights.

Syed et al., (2023) point out that *Gun Island* by Ghosh explores the devastating impact of climate change across different geographies, particularly the Sundarbans and Venice. The novel examines themes of environmental destruction, socio-political upheaval, and forced migration. Ghosh uses characters such as Nilima and Horen to explain the losses that are occasioned by cyclones, including loss of habitat and physical displacement. He links local disasters to global concerns, pointing out that climate change and environmental degradation that are often tied to colonialism are still affecting the world and people and nonhuman animals, resulting in structural alterations and immense suffering. Thus, analyzing myths, Ghosh erases the representation of environmental degradation as a punitive action of Manasa Devi and points to global warming as the cause. He also depicts the oppression of vulnerable groups, especially in the Sundarbans, where poverty and trafficking dominate after the destruction of nature.

El Mitry (2024) studies Morrison's novel *Sula* in order to explore how the characters reterritorialize their body, community and psyche after colonialism. The novel shows how capitalist colonial agenda creates structures that oppress people and nature. It invites readers to challenge the conventional ways in which they understand the connection between people and the environment and how these dynamics are shaped by dynamics of colonial oppression. It focuses on important topics as postcolonial studies and eco-justice. El Mitry (2024) pinpoints that "the encroachment of industrialization and the influence of dominant, colonizing cultures disrupt this harmony with nature, leadingto aloss of traditionalpractices and a degradation of the environment" (p. 239).

Abbas et al. (2023), pinpoint that Gurnah's *Afterlives* shows the environmental and social impact of imperialism and colonialism.Ideals with the destruction of human lives, the resource extraction, and the interrelatedness of colonialism, marginalization, and environmental destruction. It portrays post-colonialism and shows how imperialism, resource extraction, and the disruptions caused by war are connected. It combines individual narratives with the general environmental issues, which makes the readers to think about the environmental impacts of colonialism. The novel, thus, plays an important role in the development of the postcolonial ecocritical discourse and calls for a deeper understanding of the impact of colonialism on environments and people.

Despite the attention that *How Beautiful We Were* has received for its postcolonial critique and depiction of the challenges that postcolonial societies face in the face of neocolonialism and environmental depredation, there is still a dearth of literature that addresses the ways in which coloniality is responsible for ecological destruction and the social marginalization of the locals in the novel. Previous scholarship mainly addresses the socio-economic and political aspects of postcolonial analysis, while the environmental and social aspects of colonial continuities are underexplored. Current studies have not adequately explored how Mbue's representation of ecological disaster and local people's oppression is connected to colonialism's past and present. This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing the novel using postcolonial ecocritical lens with a view to understanding how coloniality underpins environmental degradation and the social exclusion of the locals.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this research paper is a qualitative approach, engaging in close textual analysis of the novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. Using the theoretical perspective of Huggan and Tiffin, this research paper examines the role of colonization in environmental devastation and critiques the destructive impact of colonization on the environment by providing insights into the broader themes of environmentalism and the social marginalization of the locals as depicted in the selected text. Scholarly insights and interpretive frameworks guide the comprehensive analysis of impact of colonization on the environment, and the social marginalization of the locals within the narrative of the text.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial studies have increasingly recognized that environmental issues are not just peripheral concerns but are integral to the European projects of conquest and global domination. These environmental concerns are deeply embedded in

the ideologies of imperialism and racism that have historically—and continue to—underpin these projects. In many instances, other peoples were "regarded as part of nature" and, as a result, were treated instrumentally, much like animals. Over time, they were often forced or co-opted into adopting Western perspectives on the environment, making "cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 6).A key objective of postcolonial ecocriticism has been to challenge and offer viable alternatives to Western development ideologies. These challenges have largely aligned with radical Third-World critiques, which often view development as "little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism", functioning as a vast technocratic system primarily serving the economic and political interests of the West (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 6).

Huggan and Tiffin (2015) describe how Western colonial practices exploited the land (natural resources) of African and Asian regions. They highlight disturbing accounts of environmental destruction and displacement of local inhabitants caused by the activities of American oil companies. Through cultural and land hegemony, "the landscape is frequently rendered empty or silent" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p. 114) by the colonial agenda. The forced displacement of indigenous communities, deforestation, and damage to biodiversity have rendered landsilent and empty from perspective of natural resources. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) describe how these oil company's operations have devastated the flora, fauna, and cultural heritageof the Niger Delta. Once the land is cleared, it is, then, polluted, but this process is only carried out by exploiting the labor of those who, once, connected with the landscape. The barren land becomes contaminated with chemicals, all at the expense of its natural diversity. De Loughrey (2015) suggests that land is marked by the remnants of its former grandeur, now decayed and deteriorated. This cycle involves the systematic removal of existing vegetation and land features, subsequently followed by the introduction of alien and synthetic components.

A key focus of postcolonial ecocriticism is, according to Huggan and Tiffin (2015) to challenge "western ideologies of development" (p. 19). By challenging the Western concept of developmentality as a significant colonial myth, postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes the importance of local solutions to local issues rather than relying on external ones. It argues that developmentality is a Western colonial ideology imposed on Eastern countries under the guise of urban expansion and globalization.Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that the concept of development is predominantly shaped by economic narratives of progress, characterized by terms: 'amenity', 'benefit', 'improvement'" (p. 73). Huggan and Tiffin (2015) assert that the marginalization of local peoples and ecological exploitation are often justified under the guise of developmentality. This process has impoverished millions in the agricultural area by rapidly depleting plant resources, water, and soil. Meanwhile, the over-emphasis on Western, resource-driven corporations has severely damaged the connection between nature and the local communities. Development primarily caters to the economicand political interests of the colonialists. The western colonial practices have exacerbated the divide between the wealthy and the impoverished. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that development and environmental sustainability are incompatible, as the Western world prioritizes capital over nature. In contrast, postcolonial ecocriticism rejects Western development models and advocates for indigenous and ecological approaches to development

Textual Analysis

How Beautiful We Were is an environmentally-themed novel, attributing colonization as a force behind environmental devastation. It describes colonization as a force behind the social marginalization of the locals and destruction of ecological world of the locals. Instead of setting her novel in real oil-producing countries like Cameroon, Angola, the Niger Delta or the Republic of Congo, Mbue (2021) creates an imaginary nation, Bézam. Through Bézam and Kosawa, she illustrates the grotesque social ills, marginalization, dysfunction, and environmental degradation that occur in post-colonial African nations rich in natural resources.Set in the fictional West African village of Kosawa, Mbue's (2021) novel primarily unfolds environmental devastation and the social marginalization of the locals through the perspectives of the village's children. The American oil company called Pexton signifies

European colonial agenda, colonizing Kosawa people and exploiting their region's natural resources.Starks (2021) describes the novel as an exemplary climate novel, highlighting Mbue's portrayal of collective experiences and various stand points. These elements reveal the repercussions of the Westernized"colonial extractive mindset," which, in this context, refers to global coloniality characterized by the extraction, exploitation, and plundering of natural resources and colonized people in the African societies(p. 54).

Mbue's novel is also a story of corporate greed and inequality: it reveals the colonial origins of ecological devastation and its dramatic consequences for the Global South, foregrounding the entanglement between colonialism and environmental exploitation. (Xausa, 2023, p. 199)

Mbue (2021) portrays the disruption of societal structure in the rural African communities near resource extraction sites, highlighting the collusion between multinational corporations and the elites of dysfunctional postcolonial states. She reveals how these alliances lead to environmental damage, and destabilize the local communities. The corporations and concessionary firms engage in violent conflicts and cause fatalities to protect their financial interests, resulting in severe ecological destruction in Kosawa and jeopardizing the community's health and safety. Under His Excellency's regime, the government enforces extreme violence and repression against the local people of Kosawa and neighboring villages, suppressing any opposition to the ruling elite's control and facilitating colonial corporate exploitation. El-Akkad (2021) notes that the novel's beginning evokes a sense of 'moral claustrophobia'.Early on, the frequent use of "we" to represent the young people of Kosawa, a fictional village in West Africa, emphasizes the enduring ecological and societal impacts of colonial exploitation."We should have known the end was near. how could we not have known" (Mbue, 2021, p. 3)? Dechasa and Desta (2024) state:

Pexton extracts resources from Kosawa without consulting or compensating the local people, leading to environmental destruction and health problems. The company is only interested in maximizing its profits, and it does not care about the impact of its actions on people or the environment. This is reminiscent of the colonial powers that exploited the resources of colonized countries without regard for the well-being of the local people. (p. 222)

The story of the novel is primarily told from the viewpoint of Thula Nangi, a young girl who grows up in the village of Kosawa before pursuing higher education in America. Thula, along with other villagers, suffers from the severe impacts of Pexton's colonial exploitation, while the ruthless ideology of His Excellency accelerates the systemic destruction of the local community through polluted farmlands,petroleum toxins, tribal politics, nepotism, and terror. Thula's mourning and longing for what has been lost are contrasted with Pexton's ideology of developmentality through plundering natural resources. This disregard is apparent in the company's refusal to consider investing in better pipelines to avoid pollution.Thula recounts how, when oil spills ravage local greenery, the local inhabitants are dismissively told that they simply need to "remove the [polluted] topsoil and toss it aside" (p. 67) to reclaim their land. Thula recalls that the initial victims of Pexton industrialeffluents were young children and infants, who were exposed to contaminated water and the relentless gas flares from deep underground oil wells.

The people of Kosawa maintain a deep connection with nature—important to their spiritual and communal existence. After the advent of colonial industries in Kosawa, the Kosawan land is deeply impacted, and the villagers experience alienation from land that holds significant cultural and personal meaning.The locals perceive land as a sacred entity, deeply interconnected with their cultural and spiritual identities.Their view of the land emphasizes the importance of sustainability and harmony with nature. Pexton, granted vast areas of land by local political figures like Woja Beki and His Excellency—who benefit from state capture—receives concessions including forests and rivers. The colonialist setup,*The Gardens*,an oilfield that ironically contrasts with the environmental devastation caused by oil pipelines in what was once a thriving ecosystem. *The Gardens*stands for stark contradictions in the African oil states, where immense natural wealth benefits only a privileged few, while the majority remain dis-enfranchised. Pexton's choice to name their headquarters *The Gardens* reflects an attempt

to superficially 'green' their presence in Kosawa, using the imagery of gardens to falsely depict social responsibility. The pretense of environmental responsibility is further revealed through the metaphor of Pexton as a gardener who treasures "oil [as] their flower" (p. 27). This ironic portrayal of oil as the "flower" of *The Gardens* underscores Pexton's commercial interests. In a conversation with Lusaka, a father who lost his child in Pexton's polluted water, Thula reflects on the ongoing destruction: "Children die on, the gas flares rage on, the pipelines spill on, [they are] in danger of annihilation and [they are] fully capable of freeing themselves" (p. 89). The stark contrast between the image of a "garden" and the reality of a death zone unveils Pexton's duplicity. The overwhelming images of dying children, flaring gas, and oil spills discredit Pexton's extractive operations. These experiences are deeply felt by the villagers and are expressed in ways that reveal their resentment towards exploitation. When Lusaka suggests that the villagers share their story with the American public, Thula responds, "They [have] come from America and [have] destroyed us, and now you want to go to them and beg them to save us" (p. 89)? This motif of destruction, tied to capitalism's geopolitical implications, aligns Pexton's actions in Kosawa with a historical legacy of international domination and exploitation associated with Americanism.

Pextons is the neo colonial organ that damages the land, cuts the forests, poisons the water, disturbs the social fabric, and above all kills the people for the sake of their greed. *How Beautiful We Were* is an account of how a corporation does all these things under the guise of development and sustainability and still goes unpunished. (Junejo & Shaikh, 2022, p. 82)

"Pexton's activities result in severe environmental degradation, polluting the village's water, air, and food, leading to the loss of fertile farmland, and jeopardising the survival of the community" (Xausa, 2023, p.202). Pexton's destruction of Kosawa, deeply felt by the displaced population, carries symbolic undertones of the destructive nature of American extractivism in oil-rich regions like Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This form of coloniality is a malignant force, eroding every aspect of life in Kosawa from cultural to ecological. Through Thula, the novelist recounts how Pexton's drilling practices at *The Gardens* escalated into an ecological catastrophe that evoked a sense of apocalypse.At this point, as more waste is dumped into the big river, any remaining life within it vanishes. Within a year, fishermen dismantle their canoes and repurpose the wood. Children start to forget the taste of fish."The smell of Kosawa [becomes] the smell of crude" (Mbue, 2021, p. 30). The noise from the oil field grows louder, filling the locals' bedrooms, classrooms, and the forest, day and night. The air around the locals becomes thick and oppressive. The drilling represents a double assault on both the environment and local livelihoods, evident in the extinction of the once-abundant aquatic life in the river and the consequent loss of employment for the local fishermen. Dechasa and Desta (2024) elaborate:

The pollution of the water not only affects the villagers' ability to fish but also has severe consequences for their health. The contaminated water leads to the outbreak of various diseases among the villagers, causing illness and even death. Additionally, the pollution has a detrimental impact on the ecosystem, as many aquatic species die due to the toxic water. (p. 228)

The inhabitants of Kosawa grapple with the environmental repercussions stemming from the colonial activities undertaken by the Pexton Company. Notably, a poignant instance emerges where an infant's health deteriorates due to the contamination of the village's well water, a direct outcome of the pollutants, emanating from said company's operations. The novelist weaves the pains of the villages who face the issue of water contamination and fall an easy prey to different ailments:

Please, you must do something, one of our aunts cried to the Leader, her baby limp in her arms. It was the poison—the baby was too pure for the filth in the village well's water, the toxins that had seeped into it from Pexton's field. (p. 6)

The above text highlights the issue of diminishing natural resources, particularly water, as a result of colonial activities like industrial pollution. This is evident in the instance where one of the villagers requests clean water from the leader, indicating that Kosawa is facing a shortage of clean water. Since water is a limited resource and oil extraction has been contaminating the water supply, reducing the availability of potable water in Kosawa Village, this depletion has significant implications for the

health and well-being of Kosawa's residents and the surrounding ecosystems.

The local community's search for uncontaminated water sources has driven them to appeal to their leader for help. The fields are also suffering due to the toxic waste discharged by the oil industry, rendering the once-fertile land barren and unproductive. The narrative poignantly captures a father's urgent plea to the leader as a clear indication of the diminishing availability of pure water in Kosawa. The finite nature of water resources, compounded by the detrimental effects of oil extraction on water quality, leads to a progressive loss of uncontaminated water. This depletion not only affects the health and well-being of Kosawa's residents but also disrupts the ecological balance that supports local ecosystems. Pexton's drilling operations serve as a pivotal moment in the novel, initiating a chain of environmental destruction and its devastating impact on human health and vitality. The novelist illustrates the profound impact of environmental exploitation on the community by reflecting on those who succumb to unnamed and incurable diseases, falling victim to the poisoned water, the contaminated air, and the tainted food from the land that"lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling" (Mbue, 2021, p. 10).

Mbue (2021) critiques the oil mining industry for its extensive destruction of both the villagers' lives and the natural environment. She emphasizes how colonial industry prioritizes oil extraction over the well-being of the marginalized local inhabitants and the preservation of nature. The industry's owners are indifferent to environmental damage, which erodes the natural beauty of the colonized region.Dechasa and Desta (2024) argue that the government's motivation is rooted "by a desire to maintain their power and control over the people, which is a legacy of colonialism, where the colonizers often used violence and intimidation to maintain their control over the colonized people" (p. 222).Woja Beki, the village leader, aligns with the colonial industrialists purely for personal gain, ignoring the necessity of safeguarding the village's natural resources and dismissing the pleas of the impoverished villagers despite their protests. He is connected with the colonial agenda. Even though he is their leader and shares their ancestry, it has been apparent for years that the local inhabitants no longer hold any significance for him. "Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them" (p. 5).

Mbue (2021) reveals that Pexton represents an illegitimate authority "committed to destroying human life" while exploiting Kosawa's natural resources and wealth. She points out that although Mr. Fish, a public relations officer at Pexton, "truly wanted Kosawa and Pexton to reconcile," the villagers "all wished he could do more than say that the decision about the cleanup of [their] land and waters rested with headquarters in New York" (p. 294). The location of Pexton's headquarters in New York underscores the presence of coloniality in local contexts like Kosawa, highlighting the unequal power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South, where the former exploits the latter for economic gain. Mr. Fish exemplifies how the environmental destruction in Kosawa is a consequence of global coloniality, operating through neoliberal mechanisms, including the collusion between corporate power and local state authorities within capitalist accumulation structures. Mbue (2021) emphasizes how coloniality sustains the rhetoric of modernity and developmentality, which promises future economic prosperity and social utopias while obscuring the violence that accompanies it.Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that development and environmental sustainability are incompatible, as the Western world prioritizes capital over nature. In contrast, postcolonial ecocriticism rejects Western development models and advocates for indigenous and ecological approaches to development. Dechasa and Desta (2024)pinpoint:

The pollution of the land, water, and air is a major source of environmental degradation in the novel [*How Beautiful We Were*]. The multinational corporation Pexton dumps toxic waste into rivers and the ocean, causing the death of fish and other marine life. They also emit harmful gases into the air, leading to respiratory problems and other health issues for the local communities. They further dump industrial waste and chemicals, rendering the land infertile and unfit for agriculture. The government officials are complicit in this pollution, as they allow the corporation to operate without proper regulations or oversight. (p. 228)

In addition to degrading air, soil, and water resources, Pexton's extraction activities contribute to the establishment of corrupt systems that

undermine the well-being and quality of life of Kosawa's residents. By exploiting its financial power, the colonial Pexton company aggravates local political conflicts through divide-and-rule tactics to secure access to oil resources. Kosawa is plagued by persistent political unrest, class struggles, deception, bribery, and violence. The government remains indifferent to the needs and concerns of the people, with no mechanisms in place to hold officials accountable for their harmful actions. This lack of accountability allows local authorities to act with impunity, using violence to maintain power. Consequently, the people of Kosawa are left feeling powerless and voiceless, trapped in an unending cycle of persecution.This strengthens their resolve to fight for justice, even if it means endangering their lives. The local government's lack of response only strengthens their resolve, as they refuse to be silenced and continue to defy the colonial powers seeking to exploit their natural resources and persecute them.

Whenever I saw one of his soldiers walking around Lokunja, ready to shoot, I was reminded of his iron fist around our necks. With the power vested upon them by His Excellency, the soldiers needed permission from no one to mete out punishment. Laws were for us to obey, not to question. I have relatives in the sibling villages who had to give up lands so offices could be built and roads that connected our district to the rest of the country could be widened. One of my cousins, they took his hut and left him with nothing. The soldiers said that if the government wanted someone's land, the government had the right to the land. My cousin went to the district office and cried, but all he was told was that nothing could be done: the orders came from Bézam, from His Excellency (Mbue, 2021, p. 214).

This excerpt from the novel shows how the state suppresses any resistance from its own people. The tormentors mentioned in the passage represent the oppressive state that thrives on controlling its citizens. The novelist suggests that no matter how well-behaved and non-violent the people are, the state still fails to recognize their humanity and grant them the basic rights to live their lives freely. This highlights the inherent power imbalance and the state's ability to suppress any form of dissent, perpetuating a system of state vampirism where the state feeds on the lives and rights of its own people. Despite the obvious negative repercussions, the government leaders ignore the suffering of their own people, focusing on personal wealth and maintaining their affiliation with colonial powers. This power dynamic demonstrates colonialism's destructive impact on the lives of the oppressed, as well as the extent that those in power would go to defend their economic interests. The author, Mbue (2021), points out:

The judge who made the final verdict did not deny that Pexton had ruined our land, Thula told us when we gathered in the square to hear the news. The judge said it was likely Pexton and our government had colluded to commit countless crimes (p. 305).

Pexton takes resources from Kosawa without consulting or paying the locals, resulting in environmental damage and health issues. The company is just concerned with making profits and has no regard for the consequences of its activities on local people or the environment. This is reminiscent of colonial powers, exploiting the riches of conquered countries with little consideration for the well-being of the local population.

Politicalleaders like His Excellency not only force their citizens to endure the violence of Pexton's colonial impact but also hinder the balanced human-nature relationships and development of sustainable futures. The agreement between the political leaders of Kosawa and the colonialists reflects the ethical decay of "neocolonialism," where the postcolonial state is ensnared in global financial networks. The leaders, His Excellency and Chief Bekimaintain Pexton's dominance over the natural resources of Kosawa by accepting bribes and using violence to secure oil extraction rights for the colonialists. They hold meetings with the colonialists in this respect. The local inhabitants show complete detachment from their leader[Chief Beki], who, despite his shared ancestry and position of authority, has betrayed their trust and sold their future to the colonial forces. Dechasa and Desta (2024) remark:

The politics of colonial power are depicted in *How Beautiful We Were* through the actions of the oil company, Pexton, and the complicity of government officials. This oil company exploits the natural resources of the village, causing severe environmental degradation and health issues for the residents. Despite the clear negative consequences, government officials turn a blind

eye to the suffering of their own people, prioritizing their personal gain and maintaining their alliance with the colonial powers. This power dynamic highlights the devastating impact of colonialism on the lives of the oppressed and the lengths to which those in power will go to protect their interests. (p. 221)

The rationality of the local inhabitants' demands is rooted in their shared experience, consistently expressed through the use of the possessive pronouns "we" and "our". The local inhabitants show unity in their sense of loss of the natural treasures and they turn against their Chief Beki. for having joined hands with the colonialists. Thula refers to Chief Beki as a corrupt person symbolized by the fact that his wives are 'fattened' by the colonialists. They hateChief Beki for his collusion with Pexton, the colonial agenda. Likewise, His Excellency is also their political figure whonotorious for his corruption, indulgence and excess. His character exemplifies what Fanon (1963) describes as the "psychology of a businessman (p. 98)" prevalent among the ruling elite in postcolonial settings. His Excellency and his close associates loot and "[destroy] whatever pleases [them] and [destroy] whoever displeases [them]. With [the local inhabitants'] sweat and blood paid as taxes, [His Excellency]has built houses in Europe" (p. 191). Pexton pressures the local workers to extract every last bit of oil or face dismissal; the local inhabitants stand before them, displaying their open contempt; and toxins poison their bodies, preparing them for a death, they hope will not come soon. Meanwhile, their families are far away, 'waiting for money' to survive, praying to their ancestors for prosperity like those who once "worked at the oil field" and returned to build homes. Until then, their wives live without their husbands, their children grow up "like fatherless children", and their parents pass away "without a [final] farewell" (Mbue, 2021, p. 220).

Mbue (2021) not only highlights the dystopian realities of the present but also symbolically celebrates the richness of African local societies and their knowledge systems. By presenting African perspectives on nature and its 'uses' as something beautiful, the title '*How Beautiful We Were*' directly challenges outdated Eurocentric views that have long regarded Africa and its people through an exploitative lens. This portrayal of beauty serves to recognize and affirm the value of the African environmental practices, countering stereotypes that depict Africans as ecologically ignorant and Africa as merely a resource pool for Western colonial exploitation. The narrative opposes Eurocentric and capitalist ideas of'trade,''economy,' and 'resource'. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) assert that the marginalization of local peoples and ecological exploitation are justified under the guise of developmentality. Due to the colonial powers' exploitation of natural resources, various colonial development strategies have failed to prioritize the environment. It caused disastrous environmental problems in a vastly colonized world (Maryon-Davis, 2019). The local government officials use terms like 'civilization' and 'prosperity' to convey the idea that drilling for oil will bring advancements and a better life for the people. However, the officials also acknowledge that these concepts may be difficult for the villagers to comprehend, as they have never experienced or even imagined such possibilities. Mbue (2021) expounds:

This government man had told the Pexton people that they needed to do whatever they could so we would rejoice at their arrival. In our joy, the man had said, we would call upon our Spirit to bless Pexton and prosper them in order that we would, in turn, flourish through them (p. 217).

Toward the novel's conclusion, Sonni, a friend of Thula, who is part of the resistance against Pexton colonial practices, reflects on Kosawa's cultural legacy before Pexton's arrival, stating that the local inhabitants can "never forget it, the splendid piece of the earth it was…can never forget it, for there our spirits were whole" (p. 305). The memory of the "place where caterpillars took twice as long to renovate into heavy butterflies" (p. 305) lingers. The village endured severe rains that threatened to wash away their possessions, and scorching days that cracked the hillsides, even as the palm trees thrived. Despite these challenges, Kosawa held a unique charm—whether for its scenic beauty or the vibrant community that resided there. How could the people not long for those meetings under the mango tree, talking and laughing as if the future was always bright and assured. Their hope and belief remained steadfast that they would die in the land where they were born.

Despite the devastation wrought by Pexton's extraction, Kosawa is portrayed as a resilient place where the land's beauty, its people, and their

traditions continue to evolve and manifest in new forms. This resilience, evident in the villagers' methods of coping with loss—such as finding happiness in jumping over oil pipelines—highlights their enduring spirit. In the face of Pexton's disruptions, the villagers seek solace in their past to devise new ways of navigating their apocalyptic reality. Kosawa is depicted as a place where their spirits "become whole." This sense of wholeness, linked to the land, portrays humans and nature sustainable relationship, revealing how they mutually reinforce each other. This sustainable relationship of land, and wholeness contrasts with Western notions of economy, profit, and tradism, which often separate humanity from nature.By challenging the Western concept of developmentality as a significant colonial myth, Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes the importance of local solutions to local issues rather than relying on external ones. It argues that developmentality is a Western colonial ideology imposed on Eastern countries under the guise of urban expansion and globalization.

The novel underscores the importance of reevaluating development paradigms to prioritize environmental protection, social justice, and sustainable practices in the postcolonial world. By examining the complexities of power dynamics, land ownership, and environmental degradation, the narrative prompts readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment, advocating for equitable and sustainable development practices that honor the well-being of both present and future generations. (Dechasa&Desta, 2024, p. 233)

Conclusion

The findings of this research paper manifest that Mbue (2021) presents a deep analysis of the colonial effects on the environment and the local inhabitants of a fictional West African village, Kosawa. Focusing on the American oil corporation Pexton, she describes the colonial history and its effects on the environment and the social marginalization of the locals. The theme of destruction of the environment and the social marginalization of the locals underlines the colonial domination in the novel. The extraction of natural resources in Kosawa by Pexton is used symbolically to represent wider coloniality of extraction and environmental violence. The depiction of Pexton's environmental destruction – water, air, and soil pollution and subsequent health effects, shows the readers the difference between the company's lip service to the environment and the actual negative effects of the company's actions. Mbue (2021) paints a picture of Kosawa being turned into a desert-like environment through the negative impact of Pexton's oil drilling. The constant pollution of water sources in the village, the extermination of fish and other water animals, the contamination of air and soil all speak of the environmental abuse of the local inhabitants of the village. Mbue (2021) also highlights the socio-political dynamics that exacerbate both the environmental catastrophe and the social marginalization of the locals. The complicity of local leaders like Chief Beki and His Excellency in facilitating Pexton's exploitation reflects a broader critique of neocolonialism, where postcolonial states are ensnared in global financial networks that perpetuate inequality and corruption. This collusion not only perpetuates environmental harm but also undermines the potential for sustainable development and social harmony within the localcommunity. The villagers' desire to return to the state before colonization and their ability to endure the apocalyptic conditions show their respect for nature that is in contrast with the colonialist approach to the local population. The beauty of Kosawa and the villagers' resilience is a way of subverting the Eurocentric and capitalist narrative of Africa and Africans as mere objects to be consumed. In this regard, Mbue's (2021) work raises awareness of how coloniality affects human and ecological systems in the local context and how colonial injustices negatively affect the environment and the local people. By situating the environmental and social degradation in the context of colonialism, Mbue's (2021) work is a valuable addition to the literature on postcolonial ecocriticism.

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