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Socio-economic impacts of resource extraction on indigenous populations in Imbolo Mbue's: How beautiful we were

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Imbolo Mbue's novel "How Beautiful We Were," employing the novel as a case study to explore the interconnected phenomena of ecological and economic losses affecting the fictional African village of Kosawa. The narrative serves as a poignant lens through which the catastrophic impacts of environmental degradation by external corporate interests, specifically an American oil company, are examined. Drawing on methodologies such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and systemic-functional linguistics, the study illuminates how the novel's language actively shapes perceptions of ecological destruction and social conflict. The analysis is anchored in a detailed examination of the socio-economic repercussions of environmental exploitation on indigenous communities, reflecting broader global issues of environmental injustice where marginalized populations bear the brunt of industrial activities. By integrating narrative analysis with socio-economic and ecological impact assessments, the paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of the compound crises faced by communities on the frontlines of environmental exploitation. This approach not only highlights the devastating effects on health and local economies but also emphasizes the role of literature as a form of resistance and a vehicle for advocating ecological and social justice. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on sustainable development and advocate for more nuanced and inclusive approaches in literature and policy, reinforcing the critical role of narrative in shaping public discourse and policy on environmental justice.

Keywords: Environmental degradation; How Beautiful We Were; Environmental justice; Imbolo Mbue

1. Introduction

Imbolo Mbue's novel "How Beautiful We Were" serves as an exploration of the catastrophic impacts of environmental degradation on a small, fictional African village named Kosawa. The narrative explores the intertwined destinies of its inhabitants, who suffer under the oppressive weight of an American oil company's exploitative practices. This setting mirrors real-world scenarios faced by many communities in resource-rich developing countries, where external corporate interests and local government corruption converge to prioritize profit over environmental health and human rights (Watts, 2001; Okonta & Douglas, 2003). The novel's depiction of ecological devastation aligns with scholarly analyses of environmental injustice, where marginalized communities bear the brunt of ecological damage wrought by industrial activities, often without reaping the associated economic benefits (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Nixon, 2011; Ogungbemi, 2023; Ogungbemi 2024). These communities experience both immediate health impacts and long-term economic instability as their natural resources—once sources of livelihood—are systematically depleted or polluted (Bryant, 1995). However, while extensive literature exists on the economic and ecological fallout of such exploitation, less attention has been given to how these twin impacts interplay at the community level, particularly within the unique narrative frameworks provided by contemporary African literature. Much of the existing research tends to analyze

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economic and ecological issues separately or within policy rather than personal narratives (Roberts & Parks, 2007; Newell, 2005).

This study aims to fill the gap by using "How Beautiful We Were" as a case study to explore how ecological and economic losses are depicted as interconnected phenomena affecting every facet of life in Kosawa. By integrating narrative analysis with socio-economic and ecological impact assessments, this paper seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of the compound crises faced by communities at the frontline of environmental exploitation. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on environmental justice and sustainable development, advocating for more nuanced and inclusive approaches in literature and policy alike.

"How Beautiful We Were" unfolds in the fictional African village of Kosawa, which stands as a microcosm for numerous real-world communities affected by natural resource exploitation. The village's narrative landscape is scarred by the pervasive consequences of oil extraction conducted by Pexton, an American oil company. This setting is emblematic of a larger thematic concern in contemporary literature that grapples with the fallout of environmental mismanagement and the exploitation of vulnerable communities. In Kosawa, the lush natural environment and the subsistence lifestyle of its inhabitants are drastically altered by pollution and ecological neglect, leading to dire health outcomes and a disrupted social fabric. The scenario presented in "How Beautiful We Were" parallels historical occurrences in several oil-rich African regions, such as the Niger Delta in Nigeria, where extensive oil production has resulted in significant ecological and human health crises. Scholars like Watts (2001), Okonta and Douglas (2003) and Ogungbemi (2023) document the socio-political and economic dynamics that allow multinational corporations to exploit local resources, often in collusion with national governments, at the expense of indigenous populations.

The history of such regions is marked by cycles of resistance against multinational corporations and local governments, underscoring the struggle for autonomy and environmental justice. These communities often face a paradoxical poverty amidst plenty, where the wealth generated by oil does not translate into local development but rather into a landscape marred by environmental degradation and social inequalities. This dichotomy is a critical area of focus in environmental justice discourse, as highlighted by scholars like Martinez-Alier (2002) and Nixon (2011), who explore how ecological debt and slow violence affect marginalized communities. In Kosawa, as in many real-world settings, the historical backdrop includes not only colonial legacies that paved the way for modern forms of exploitation but also post-colonial governance challenges that perpetuate cycles of corruption and inequity. This context is crucial for understanding the narrative of "How Beautiful We Were" as it provides a lens through which the story of Kosawa is not an isolated tragedy but a representation of a widespread global issue.

Despite the significant role literature plays in environmental advocacy, there is a noticeable gap in the comprehensive understanding of how narrative strategies within African literature address and articulate the complexities of ecological and human degradation. Ogungbemi's (2023) exploration of Helon Habila's "Oil on Water" through Critical Discourse Analysis and the Appraisal Framework offers a profound insight into how literary language can be used as a tool for resistance and advocacy, particularly in contexts like Nigeria's Niger Delta where ecological destruction and social conflict are prevalent. This paper seeks to further this exploration by examining the intersection of narrative, environmental justice, and socio-political dynamics. It aims to address the need for a deeper analytical engagement with how African narratives not only depict environmental and social crises but also mobilize public opinion and policy change toward sustainable practices. The problem is compounded by the intricate interplay between indigenous communities, multinational corporations, and local governments, often leading to marginalized voices being drowned out by the more dominant narratives of exploitation and corruption. This research will contribute to filling the scholarly gap by emphasizing the capacity of literary works to reflect and influence real-world ecological and social change, underlining the urgency to integrate these narratives into broader discussions on environmental policy and ethical governance.

2. Material and methods

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), grounded in systemic-functional linguistics, is a practice-oriented approach aimed at addressing social issues with semiotic dimensions. The importance of closely examining texts lies in the necessity to demonstrate how discursive elements occur and interconnect within texts, grounding the analysis empirically and providing a solid foundation for devising strategies that promote social change. Specifically, CDA enables the exploration of how semiotic elements interact with social realities, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of these dynamics (Fairclough 2003, Ogungbemi 2018, Ogungbemi 2016a).

In the realm of environmental discourse, there have been efforts to apply CDA within the context of Ecolinguistics, particularly under the branch sometimes referred to as "Eco-Critical Discourse Analysis." However, the application of

CDA proposed here avoids these labels due to the often ambiguous and incoherent definitions of their respective fields and the complex ethical assumptions underlying ecolinguistic approaches (O'Neill et al. 2008, Ogungbemi 2016b). Fairclough's interpretation of CDA is particularly relevant to environmental issues because of its critical realist stance, which distinguishes between ontology and epistemology. This stance asserts that reality cannot be reduced solely to discourse, nor can various interpretations of reality be considered equally valid. Instead, discourse is one of many elements of social life, which includes material objects, human interactions, and social structures. From this perspective, some accounts of reality are deemed more comprehensive and accurate than others, suggesting that interpretations can progressively improve and more closely approximate actual realities (Fairclough 2003). Furthermore, CDA aims to not only analyze but also intervene by providing emancipatory knowledge that fosters progressive social change. It begins by identifying a social problem that includes semiotic elements, then delineates the barriers and potential solutions (Ogungbemi and Okusanya 2016).

According to Halliday (1994), language functions in three metafunctional ways: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function allows language to express experiences of both the internal and external worlds. This function is divided into two categories: experiential and logical. The experiential category is manifested through transitivity, which includes six processes along with their respective participants and circumstances. These processes are: material, relational, verbal, behavioral, mental, and existential. The material process involves physical actions with an actor and a goal. The mental process includes cognitive activities such as thinking, imagining, and feeling, involving a senser and a phenomenon. The relational process describes relationships between entities, characterized by an attribute and a carrier. The verbal process pertains to acts of saying, involving a sayer and a receiver. The behavioral process includes physiological actions like crying and listening, involving a behavior. Finally, the existential process relates to the state of existing, typically featuring an existent and an existential verb. Circumstances such as time, space, manner, content, comparison, and identity may accompany these processes but are not always present.

Ogungbemi (2023) explores the linguistic representation of environmental and human degradation in Helon Habila's novel "Oil on Water". Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis and the Appraisal Framework, the study examines how the novel's language reflects and actively shapes perceptions of ecological destruction and social conflict within Nigeria's Niger Delta. By dissecting the interactions between indigenous communities, the Nigerian government, and multinational oil corporations, Ogungbemi (2023) illustrates a landscape marred by exploitation and marginalization. His analysis emphasizes the power of literary narrative as a form of resistance and advocacy for ecological and social justice. This work not only underscores the significant role of literature in environmental advocacy but also promotes a deeper understanding of the socio-political dynamics influencing environmental discourse and policy.

Ogungbemi's analysis is particularly noteworthy for its exploration of the novel's language as a tool for resistance and a medium for advocating ecological and social justice. By highlighting the ways in which the narrative counters the often-destructive impacts of oil exploration, the paper posits literature as a potent force capable of challenging entrenched power dynamics and mobilizing public opinion for policy change. The depth of analysis provided in the study not only enhances our understanding of the socio-political underpinnings that influence environmental discourse but also underscores the critical role literature plays in environmental advocacy. Furthermore, Ogungbemi's research serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of environmental mismanagement and the power of literary works to echo these issues into the spheres of public and political discourse. By aligning the narrative strategies of the novel with broader environmental and social justice movements, the paper invites readers to reconsider the potential of literary expression as a catalyst for social change and policy reform. This work is an essential contribution to the fields of literary studies and environmental advocacy, illustrating the transformative potential of narrative to not only reflect reality but to also inspire action and influence global conversations about sustainability and ethical governance.

Ohagwam (2018) provides an insightful analysis, using ecocriticism to bridge the gap between literature and environmental issues, demonstrating how Agary's narrative reflects the socio-economic repercussions of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region. Ohagwam articulates how "Yellow-Yellow" not only underscores the environmental devastation brought about by oil exploration but also explores its broader social impacts, such as youth restiveness, betrayal, and infrastructural neglect. By focusing on these elements, the paper highlights the depth of ecological and social crises that literature from this region frequently addresses, positing that the environmental degradation narrative is central to Niger Delta literature. The paper is methodologically sound, adopting a qualitative approach to dissect the crises represented in Agary's work, illustrating the ecological and human damages as interlinked issues that literature powerfully conveys. This analysis serves to underline literature's role as a form of activism and advocacy, providing a voice to marginalized communities and pressing environmental issues.

Davies (2023) offers a comprehensive overview of the emerging thematic preoccupations in Niger Delta literature, reflecting the socio-political shifts in the region. This paper successfully identifies and discusses three predominant themes that are central to the contemporary discourse within this literary field: environmental degradation, political corruption, and youth restiveness. Davies' analysis is methodically robust, drawing on a variety of contemporary literary works to illustrate how these themes manifest in the narratives of the Niger Delta, thus providing a vivid picture of the region's evolving literary landscape. The discussion on environmental degradation captures the devastating impact of oil exploitation, which has long been a focal point of Niger Delta literature but continues to find fresh resonance in the works of new writers who document the ongoing ecological crises.

Ogungbemi (2024) is pivotal for its detailed examination of how language can construct narratives that centralize ecological interdependencies and the agency of non-human entities. Employing methodologies from systemic functional linguistics and ecolinguistic analysis, Ogungbemi meticulously analyzes how Okri's deliberate language choices do not merely describe the environment but animate it, turning rivers, trees, and wildlife into dynamic, willful participants in the story. The study critically challenges the dominant anthropocentric narratives that have long characterized much of literary discourse, which typically relegate non-human elements to the background of human activity. Instead, he highlights how Okri's narrative promotes a symbiotic relationship among all life forms. This shift in narrative perspective is significant as it contributes to broader discussions on environmental sustainability and advocacy, suggesting that our storytelling choices reflect and can therefore influence our ecological values and actions. The implications of Ogungbemi's findings are profound for the field of ecological literature. By illuminating the role of language in shaping our perceptions of nature and our ethical relationships with the world around us, the study encourages further exploration into literary practices that prioritize ecological and ethical consciousness. Ogungbemi argues that narratives like "The Famished Road" have the potential to reshape our environmental consciousness by fostering a deeper empathy and respect for the natural world. This research not only contributes to academic discourse on the intersections of linguistics, literature, and ecology but also serves as a call to action for writers, educators, and policymakers to consider how narrative forms can be harnessed to advocate for a more environmentally sustainable and ethically responsible world. Ogungbemi's work underscores the transformative power of literature, positing that through thoughtful engagement with the language of storytelling, society can foster a more inclusive and sustainable relationship with the environment.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Ecological Loss Explored

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 (12).

The text vividly portrays a distinct power dynamic and social hierarchy as the aunt appeals to the "Leader," signaling a societal structure where the Leader holds significant authority and responsibility to effect change. This hierarchical setup underscores the villagers' reliance on this authoritative figure to resolve critical situations, as illustrated by the desperate plea for help regarding the poisoned well water. This incident not only emphasizes the social issue of environmental contamination but also sheds light on the broader themes of environmental justice and inequality. The source of the contamination, "Pexton's field," suggests possible corporate or agricultural negligence that impacts the less powerful segments of the community, particularly affecting the most vulnerable—a baby described as "too pure" for the filth of the village well's contaminated water. The phrase "Please, you must do something," spoken by the aunt, underscores the urgency and desperation of the situation, intensifying the emotional weight of the narrative and highlighting the helplessness felt by those affected, as portrayed by the poignant image of the limp baby in her arms. This evokes a strong emotional response from the reader, drawing attention to the dire circumstances and the critical need for immediate action.

In the given text, the transitivity analysis identifies several key participants and processes. The primary actor, "one of our aunts," actively seeks assistance, demonstrating agency by appealing to the "Leader," who is positioned as the receiver of this appeal. This interaction highlights the aunt's proactive stance in seeking help for her affected baby, who is portrayed as suffering due to environmental contamination. The processes involved include a material process, "cried to the Leader," which describes the aunt's action of verbally soliciting help. Additionally, a relational process, "It was the poison," assigns causality for the baby's condition, directly linking the baby's suffering to environmental factors. Furthermore, an existential process, "the baby was too pure for the filth," characterizes the baby's condition in relation to the polluted water, underscoring the innocence and vulnerability of the affected individual. The circumstances enrich the narrative by specifying the location of the contamination, "in the village well's water," and its cause, "the toxins that had seeped into it from Pexton's field." This detailed transitivity framework not only outlines the actions and actors but

also situates the event within a broader environmental and social context, emphasizing the interaction between human activity and environmental impact.

At another level of analysis, the company Pexton's exploitation of natural resources directly leads to the contamination of water—essentially a decision that prioritizes corporate profit over the health and lives of the village's inhabitants. The toxins in the water, a direct result of the corporate activities, embody the exercise of a necropolitical power that dictates the life and death of the local population. Further, the power to enforce death or the risk of death upon others can be overt or covert. In this scenario, the violence is insidious, cloaked in the banality of corporate operations, making it less visible and thus, less likely to be addressed by those in distant power structures. The environmental toxins seeping into the well are a form of slow violence—a concept related to necropolitics—where the damage unfolds gradually, invisibly, and devastatingly over time (Ogunbemi and Bamgbose 2021).

The aunt's plea to the Leader is a moment of resistance against this imposed death. By bringing the limp baby directly to the Leader, she forces the acknowledgment of the ongoing injustice and violence. This act of resistance highlights the local population's struggle against their imposed death and demands recognition of their plight, seeking a change that could pivot them away from the margins of survival toward the center of societal concern. In Mbembe's theory, the environment can become a tool of political control through the allocation or denial of access to resources. In Kosawa, the environment is both a life-giving and life-taking force, manipulated to serve the necropolitical interests of those in power, both locally and globally. The contamination of essential resources like water reflects a broader geopolitical agenda where external corporate entities exert control over life and death.

Another excerpt offers a stark illustration of Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics. "In the midst of all this, the gas flares got worse, the smoke blacker. For reasons we couldn't understand, the smoke always blew in our direction, never in the direction of Gardens and the hilltop mansion of the American overseer. (p.36)" Here, the allocation of environmental hazards and the effects of pollution are distributed in ways that align with necropolitical decisions about whose lives are valuable and whose are expendable. The description of the gas flares and smoke worsening and specifically affecting only the local community, not the affluent areas like "Gardens" or the hilltop mansion of the American overseer, signifies a deliberate exercise of power and control over the environment. This differential impact based on geographic and social divisions underscores a necropolitical exercise of sovereignty, where the bodies of the marginalized are exposed to death or deadly conditions by those who hold power. In addition, the selective direction of the smoke—away from the overseer's mansion and towards the village—implies a valuation of lives where the health and wellbeing of the corporate elite are prioritized over the indigenous population. This aligns with Mbembe's assertion that necropolitics involves the decision of who gets to live and who is left to die, based on their perceived value and utility to power structures (Ogunsiji and Ogunbemi 2016).

The scenario also speaks to the concept of environmental racism, where minority or marginalized communities bear an unequal share of environmental burdens. This situation reflects a systemic issue where the deleterious effects of industrial processes are inflicted upon those least capable of resisting or relocating, further entrenching social inequalities. The fact that the affected community notices the direction of the smoke but feels powerless to change their circumstances reflects another dimension of necropolitics — the visibility of the means of repression and the invisibility of the mechanisms of resistance. It highlights how state and corporate powers not only decide who lives or dies but also control the narrative and perception of the inflicted damage.

In another excerpt, Mbue highlights biopolitical control to harm both humans and the environment. "Please stay away from us with that ugly cough of yours, we'd said to Wambi. But it wasn't just an ugly cough, we would later find out. The dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. Before we knew it, Wambi was dead" (10). The narrative detailing Wambi's progression from coughing to death illustrates the biopolitical control exercised through environmental degradation. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics extends to the ways in which the state or powerful entities exert control over populations not only through direct violence but also through control of the environment. In Wambi's case, the "dirty air" represents a silent, pervasive form of violence, a slow poison authorized by the political and economic policies that prioritize profit over people's health.

In the following excerpt, we remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures—our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling (7).

The sentence under analysis reveals a complex interplay of power dynamics and ideological battles between a marginalized community and a powerful external corporate entity, represented here as "Pexton." The phrase "the day Pexton came drilling" signifies a crucial temporal and causal shift, marking Pexton's arrival as the beginning of severe

ecological disruptions that have had devastating effects on the local community. This not only sets a timeline but also cements the notion that corporate intrusion is intrinsically linked to environmental degradation and the resulting health crises, framing Pexton's activities as the catalyst for widespread suffering.

In portraying the social actors, the analysis further deepens the conflict: the victims, described as "our siblings and cousins and friends," are personalized and humanized, emphasizing the direct impact of the environmental damage on individual lives. In stark contrast, Pexton is depersonalized, represented solely through its corporate actions ("came drilling"), which positions it as the clear antagonist within the narrative. This sharp dichotomy underscores the narrative of an impersonal corporation against a tightly-knit community. The lexical choices enhance this narrative, with the repeated use of "poison" in connection to water, air, and food amplifying the sense of pervasive contamination and danger. Such language not only highlights the severity of the ecological destruction but also frames it as either intentional or the result of reckless negligence, contributing to a narrative of victimization by an external, powerful force.

Transitivity analysis enriches this perspective by identifying Pexton as the actor whose actions initiate the narrative of environmental destruction and loss. This results in direct effects on the community members, who are portrayed as the afflicted victims of diseases caused by the poisoning of their essential resources. The material process "came drilling" triggers the onset of these issues, while relational processes such as "had died from diseases with neither names nor cures" and "the land that lost its purity" describe the resulting states and changes caused by these external actions. The mental process "We remembered" captures the collective memory and ongoing trauma experienced by the community, underscoring the lasting impact of these events. By detailing the circumstances of cause ("from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food") and time ("the day Pexton came drilling"), the narrative pinpoints the onset of the ecological and health crises to specific corporate activities. This sentence structure, focusing on action and impact, not only underscores the direct consequences of environmental disruption on human health but also illustrates how language is used to construct a power relationship and assign responsibility for the tragedy, thereby mobilizing a discourse of ecological and social justice against corporate exploitation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has effectively utilized Imbolo Mbue's "How Beautiful We Were" to delve into the profound ecological and economic impacts of environmental exploitation on the fictional village of Kosawa, reflecting wider real-world scenarios faced by many resource-rich yet marginalized communities. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and systemic-functional linguistics, the paper has illuminated the intricate ways in which the narrative constructs and communicates issues of environmental justice, corporate accountability, and the socio-economic devastation wrought by external corporate entities. This analysis highlights the stark realities of environmental degradation, emphasizing the narrative's power to evoke emotional responses and drive home the urgency of addressing these global injustices. Furthermore, the study has shown that literature not only mirrors societal challenges but also serves as a formidable tool in advocating for change and influencing policy. "How Beautiful We Were" provides not just a narrative of despair but also one of resistance, illustrating how communities can confront and challenge the forces that threaten their survival and well-being. The findings of this paper advocate for a more integrated approach in literature and policy discussions, suggesting that understanding and addressing the interplay of ecological and economic factors are crucial for achieving sustainable development and true environmental justice. This work underscores the importance of narrative in educating, mobilizing, and inspiring both communities and policymakers to pursue more equitable and sustainable paths forward.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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