

# A voice of resistance and activism: A critique of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

Teresia Muthoni Biama\*, Selline A. Oketch and Caroline Kinuu Kimathi

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, P. O. Box 62157-00200. Nairobi, Kenya.

Accepted 5 September, 2022

---

## ABSTRACT

This article focused on the voice of resistance and activism in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The novel voices the environmental injustices and the disastrous consequences of oil corporations. The people of Kosawa know that something is wrong with the land they're living on. They receive acid rain, rivers have grown sickly green, and people are dizzy with the diseases. They also know that Pexton, the oil company is to blame for their loss of life and livelihood. The natives decide to rise up and fight back against an American Oil Company that has been polluting the land. This study investigated how this ecological destruction in Kosawa has triggered eco-activism and resistance from the natives. The study used the qualitative approach employing an analytical research design comprising research methods of content analysis and close textual reading. The research was further informed by Lawrence Buell's (2005) second wave of eco-criticism, which advocates for environmental justice for the victims of environmental degradation. It is also concerned about the destruction of plants and animals. This study depicts eco-criticism as a theory that displays the tools of activism and resistance. The findings of this research show that oil spillage has shattering effects on humans, animals, and aquatic life. The findings also show that the author uses various resistance approaches to fight against environmental degradation such as media, education, revolution, and age mates among others. Mbue's text calls on the African nations to vehemently resist environmental degradation.

**Keywords:** Activism, environmental degradation, environmental justice, eco-criticism, ecology, resistance.

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [biamateresa@gmail.com](mailto:biamateresa@gmail.com).

---

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Assembly declared 2021-2030 as the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which was successfully launched on World Environmental Day, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2021. This is a global effort aimed at restoring the planet and ensuring Health for people and nature. The Decade unites the world behind a common goal, which is to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide. The incredible challenge can only be met if everyone- including members of states, local governments, partners from the private sector, academia, and civil society comes together to find a viable lasting solution (UNEP, 2021). Restoration of ecosystems is fundamental to achieving the Development Goals.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been

viewed as an opportunity to improve the situation of indigenous people worldwide. The SDGs aim is to deal with issues directly related to indigenous people, such as ending poverty, ensuring human rights and inclusion of all; ensuring good governance, preventing conflict as well as ensuring environmental sustainability. Achieving SDGs means respecting and protecting indigenous human rights, recognizing their customary institutions, and the management of their sustainable resources. Going beyond the social and environmental safeguards to fully respect human rights, equitable benefits sharing, and accountability. Indigenous people contribute to sustainability through successful struggles against deforestation, mineral, oil, and gas extraction in their

ancestral lands. They fight against further expansion of plantations and they foster the promotion of sustainable production and consumption systems through traditional knowledge and values. SDGs are far from being achieved as we see the indigenous people still fighting against deforestation, land degradation, climate change, and human rights, which are very detrimental to the environment and the food systems on which we all depend. This highlights the urgency with which environmental concerns must be addressed.

This study focused on Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were*, (2021) to represent ecological violence in the African continent. Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* is a story of a decades-long fight for environmental justice caused by the American oil company Pexton. The novel centres on the Nangis' family, telling their story from multiple different perspectives over the course of the novel. The story begins with the news that something in the water is making the village children sick and killing them. We hear heartbreaking accounts of parents burying their sons and daughters with no one to carry on the family name. When the village seeks help from the government, they're met with gas lighting and denial of any wrongdoing. Finally, some of the villagers have enough of their children dying, and after kidnapping some of Pexton's men, things start to escalate. The main character is Thula. She studies abroad and returns as a tireless activist. She is staunchly committed to non-violent direct action. She organized massive national wide protests against the corrupt government that lets Pexton destroy the environment and make the people sick. Thula works her entire adult life trying to enact change through peaceful protest but in the end, she is unsuccessful. At this point, Thula's peers use funds from Thula to buy guns from the corrupt soldiers using them to murder a number of different Pexton employees. The novel ends with the government burning down Kosawa for becoming too toxic and inhabitable. Mbue's story echoes the old pattern of the west clawing through Africa, scraping away its resources, despoiling its land, and murdering its people. As usual, exploitation is driven by greed.

According to Caminero-Santangelo and Myre (2011) even without being called ecocritics, African writers, in their works emphasize ecological damages and the resistance of indigenous societies against the hegemonic system. Caminero-Santangelo and Myre appraises those African writers who are committed to displaying the continent's environmental concerns and ecological awareness in their literary works. He also acclaims that postcolonial eco-criticism can define and redefine African environmental views as the continent is at the heart of a long-time relationship with colonialism and the present post-colonialism. There are devastating effects on the African environment such as the stripping of natural resources such as diamonds, ivory, oil, timber, and minerals. The intense mining and oil drilling in the west

and South Africa degraded the land, reduced air quality, and polluted local water sources. The result was an overall loss of biodiversity and significant environmental impacts on human health. He also appreciates African writers' engagement and concern with their environment, environmental activism, and the efforts they exert in addressing ecological damages caused by colonial and postcolonial environmental policies and practices. The analysis of the text exposes the environmental pollution caused by the oil company. The oil spillage and its negative impacts trigger a lot of resistance from the natives who want to safeguard their environment.

Krishnan (2019) describes the contemporary position of the African post-colonial natural environment as sacrifice zones for unwanted discontents of globalization, with a particular emphasis on oil pollution, deforestation, and conflict that arise as a result of power struggle and resource extraction. Krishnan's argument implies that the African post-colonial environment is under dire conditions and therefore, it is significant to investigate what has been going on. The probe demands investigations into the voice of ecological resistance and protest heightened by environmental contamination. Concerning the role of literature in saving the natural environment, Glotfelty (1996: xxx) argues that if we are not part of the solution we are part of the problem. This signals a message that literature should play a significant role in bringing solutions to contemporary environmental destruction by elucidating and informing the ways in which we understand environmental crises and responses. Glotfelty also argues that literature as a storehouse of both cultural and physical environment is used as a tool for discovering environmental crises embodied within a literary text. The argument indirectly shows the historical relationship between literature and the natural environment. The current study gives a voice to the natives fighting the oil company and the government for degrading the environment.

Musaib and Tania (2022) investigated how western corporations are responsible for land deterioration and environmental damage in *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The study brings forth neo-colonial forces into the limelight that have caused ecological damage. The study was guided by the postcolonial eco-critical model of Haggan and Tiffin (2010). The research suggests that western neo-colonial corporations are the real perpetrators of ecological damage in Africa and Asia. The current study focused on ecological resistance and activism caused by environmental degradation in the same novel *How Beautiful We Were*. The current study is informed by eco-criticism theory, unlike the former study that relied on the postcolonial-eco-critical model. This study is a challenge to the government to take action against the multinational companies degrading the African environment.

Curtin (2015) argues that the history of ecological

concern in Africa is not only characterised by violence, displacement, and dispossession of indigenous people but also associated with European mastery over the natural resources of the colonies. That ecological violence is followed by the coming of colonialism and its contemporary legacies aimed at extracting natural resources without replenishment. In *How Beautiful We Were*, Yaya, Juba, and Thula's grandmother reflect on centuries of destruction and exploitation from foreigners-first through the trans-Atlantic slave trade to rubber plantations to oil fields and laments what appears to be the end of her home. Colonialism may have officially ended decades earlier but foreigners still arrive to extract what they can from the land and leave the ruins behind. African ecologies have been violated and there is restive resistance from the Africans. It is imperative to inquire into how ecological violence and resistance are reflected in African environments. Hence the study examines ecological violence and resistance as reflected in the selected text employing the eco-criticism approach.

### Statement of the problem

Currently, environmental destruction and the threat to the earth's ecology have become a worry for everyone in almost all concerns of the world. As a result, everyone is putting effort to save this endangered environment, including literary authors who are using their imagination to try and find the solution to this problem. African writers are seen as spokespersons regarding the consequences of environmental problems. Mbue's novel fosters ecological restoration by advocating for resistance and activism against environmental degradation. She becomes the voice for the African ecological plagues. No researcher has explored the use of resistance and activism in Mbue's novel, hence creating a research gap. African environment is under critical condition, so it is pertinent to inquire about what has been going on. This demands an investigation of the different methods that have been used in the fight against ecological violence. The findings show that African writers are conscious of nature and their environment. The study also emphasizes the need to resist any form of environmental destruction.

### Justification of the study

Today's environmental literature and the study of humans and ecosystem is fast spreading in Africa and finding expressions in literary works. Environmental issues in Africa include deforestation, pollution, climate change, oil spillage, soil erosion, and harmful untreated wastes among others. The analysis of the text has examined environmental pollution caused by a multinational oil company. The Selection of the next was motivated by the

need to account for Imbolo Mbue's evolving ecological consciousness. The study is justified because it broadens perspectives on ecological resistance and activism in Africa's continuous ecological crisis. It provides insights and perspectives on the African environmental struggle to restore ecological destruction. This study may inform other studies on forms of environmental resistance and activism since it will contribute to the current data on environmental resistance and activism in literature.

### Theoretical framework

This study is based on a theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism unifies humanity and nature. The theory not only emphasizes harmony with nature but also deals with the destruction caused by nature due to the changes that take place in the modern world, for most of which human is responsible. This theory best informs this study, on the basis that, the activities carried out by human beings affect the environment, and later the environment affects the human beings. This study adopted Lawrence Buell's (2005) second wave of eco-criticism that explores deeper the destruction of the environment that is caused by human action. The theory also emphasizes environmental justice and is also concerned with the endangered landscape and marginalized minorities, peoples, and communities both at home and abroad and with texts that engage such concerns. This theory has enabled the researchers to examine and expose crimes that are ecological and by extension, human injustice. The study shows interest in ecological resistance and activism as a result of the consequences of human activities on nature or the ecosystem in the wake of heavy and rapid industrialization.

Clark (2011) contends that eco-criticism, a western outgrowth literary approach investigates the relationships between literature and the physical environment. It provides an Earth-centred approach to the analysis and interpretation of literary texts produced during colonialism or its aftermath. According to Ramachandra (2014:22), eco-criticism targets the modern materialistic civilization that makes man the butcher of Earth. It seeks to restore Edenic nature and curb the over-exploitation of the natural environment and plays an important role in saving the endangered earth. Violence specifically is ecological because it consists of the killing of living and non-living; destabilization of the whole ecosystem. It is generally the process of harming and destroying the ecosystem knowingly and unknowingly and mainly as a consequence of human activities. The analysis of the selected text reveals that the violence exhibited here is out of exploitation. The American oil company wants to benefit from the oil in Kosawa without caring about the negative impacts.

Nixon (2011) lists some forms of ecological violence as

air pollution, water, and food contamination, forest destruction, overhunting of wild animals, domestic and wildlife, industrial toxins, and bad environmental smells. Nixon also pinpoints the marginalization of local communities and their natural environments, in the name of resource extraction or infrastructural development, as tools of African environmental resources appropriations, during and after colonialism in the history of the continent. He argues that the world's most vulnerable environmental resources are at a risk because of those runaway capitalists' resource appropriations, especially in the global south. Nixon also explains that the natural environment is the only medium, for the infliction of much slow violence which can be caused by climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills, etc. Such kind of violence is considered, as Nixon argues a new form of environmental injustice that pushes nature to their restive resistance. Since then, the world, including Africa has seen different environmental activism and resistance in response to ecological environmental violence. The theoretical framework highlighted above is relevant to this study because it addresses major concerns raised by the respective theory. The various forms of ecological resistance and activism have been addressed and analysed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

UNEP (2017) defines environmental issues as the harmful effects of any human activity on the environment. African environmental issues are caused by anthropogenic effects on the African natural environment and have major impacts on humans and nearly all forms of endemic life. African environmental issues include deforestation, soil degradation oil spillage climate change among others. Previous studies show that the environment has been degraded in the African continent. Nnaji (2012) investigated one of the greatest problems facing the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. According to him, environmental pollution is the one causing great damage to the earth. The negative impacts on crucial environmental services such as the provision of clean water, air, and arable land without which life on earth could be difficult. In Niger Delta, environmental pollution is caused by oil exploration and related activity. In an oil-producing region, oil spillage is one of the most outstanding causes of water and land or soil pollution while air pollution is mostly caused by gas flaring and industrial effluents' direct impact on oil exploration in the region. Some of those issues include ecological degradation, environmental pollution associated with human rights abuses, high inflation, and loss of livelihood. The study employed a content analysis method in examining the manifest content of four national dailies to find out the coverage of environmental pollution

in the Niger Delta by the Nigerian press. In Kosawa the environment has also been degraded by an American oil company which has affected the children who are sick and dying, the rivers are green with toxic the land can longer support the growth of medicinal herbs and the rain is acidic. The current study focuses more on how the natives react to this environmental degradation.

Argut (2016) examined the impact of China's development and industrialization activities and its trade with Kenya on the environment, using a case study design within a qualitative framework. According to Lomo, China has been driven by development ventures related to the country's need for natural resources such as crude oil to power its modern, growing economy and also to support its expanded industrial base, as well as to cater to the rapid growth of its manufacturing sector. The study showed that China's development strategy prioritizes resource extraction for the global market; this has negative ramifications on the environment. Just like any other development partner, China is interested in natural resources just like other donors and has transferred some industries to Kenya. Most of the industries that have been transferred from China usually have a large carbon impact. The finding of this study shows that there is a need to strengthen existing policies and regulations so to guard against dirty industries that are degrading the environment in Africa

Edebor (2017) examined the environmental mindfulness of the Nigerian novelist, Habila, using the sociological approach. The study adopted the content analysis method. In his study, Edebor found out that Habila's *Oil on Water* describes the misappropriation of social resources in the Niger –Delta of Nigeria and noticed that the environment, society, and other living things are thoroughly isolated. The present study has examined the impact of American Oil Company on a fictional African ecology and ecosystem. It also examined ecological resistance and activism efforts attuned to the environment by the citizens there. Unlike Edebor's, the present study employs Eco-criticism theory in order to highlight the ecological crisis prevalent in the ecology of the area, and the resistance of local citizens in defending and protecting their natural ecologies from neo-colonial activities.

Similarly, Akung and Iloeje (2018) examined the relationship between ecology and literature by analysing the novel *Yellow Yellow* using eco-criticism as a contemporary literary approach. Akung and Iloeje went further to explore the socio-cultural effects of environmental degradation on society and the effects of coastal communities in contact with the sea in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The study also dealt with the political ecology of Nigeria and examined the place of women within that political environment. Much of the focus of the study was on the impact of social evils on the environment, culture, and women. The researchers here

found out that the environmental crisis has brought about severe challenges and violations of the rights of women and cultural misappropriations. The present study unlike Akung and Iloeje investigated the forms of ecological resistance and activism.

Dagnachew (2020) states that African postcolonial environments are battlefields, where resistance is met with unabated struggles to protect and preserve environments of African nature, from colonial and postcolonial destructions. This study examines ecological violence and resistance as reflected in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow*. The writers of the mentioned novels tried to articulate the ongoing ecological violence and the resistance against it. The novels show that there is a connection between humans and nonhumans. The present study examined the ecological resistance and activism in *How Beautiful We Were*. The focus was the ecological resistance and activism that is generational. The present research used eco-criticism theory to examine the ecological crimes meted out on the environment resulting in resistance and activism.

Ecological violence has also been witnessed in many environmental activists' movements. The Nigerian writer and activist, Ken Saro- Wiwa's case is a good example. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers (2011) argue that Saro-Wiwa's commitment and endurance in voicing for ecological degradation as well as advocating for human rights are regarded as an important concern for the dying ecological conditions of Africa. He also states that MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People) and Saro-Wiwa had tied their non-violent advocacy for human rights in Ogoni land to highlighting the oil industry's (Shell Oil Company) devastating impacts on the ecosystem of the Niger Delta Homeland. Saro-Wiwa's strategy of non-violent resistance to the rest post-colonial business empires saved the violating ecology of the Niger Delta Eco region and the people of Ogoni in Niger Delta of Nigeria. He also used this strategy to resist the crisis through his literary works. He wrote poems while in prison that addressed the ecological and social injustices made to the ecology and the community of Ogoni in the Niger Delta.

A similar perspective of activism that blends ecological and social justice was also held in East Africa. Wangari Maathai was a Kenyan Noble Peace Prize Winner for her forest preservation efforts in Kenya. She devoted her full time to social movement and eco-activism by establishing environmental and social campaigns called Green Belt Movement. According to Caminero-Santangelo and Myre (2011), Wangari believes that the continuous deforestation and frequent drought that Africa has experienced directly or indirectly comes from environmental injustice practices by social-cultural dominations of colonizers and the inability to manage the indigenous ecologies of Africa. Wangari as an alternative

solution provides that, fighting the alarming ecological destruction through local ecological consciousness and reforestation should be the duty of every citizen, especially those who are constantly victimised by the contemporary postcolonial and global ecological catastrophes. This shows the devotion to blending environmental activism and social justice. Both Wangari and Saro-Wiwa have provided an alternative way of understanding nature, conservation, and development. Imbolo Mbue's characters are activists. Especially Thula is very committed to movements and campaigns against environmental violence. Though she gets minimal support because of gender discrimination and the fact that she is not married and has no children. The author seems to suggest that unless we resolve the conflicts that are based on gender it is not easy to win the fight against environmental violence.

Caminero-Santangelo (2014) notes that there is no useful framework for thinking about political and environmental problems across the geographic scale. African texts should change the way they think about environmental justice and political ecology more generally. In other words, Africa's environmental writing is not an adjunct to global discourse about environmental justice and political ecology- it should be read as contributing to these projects as well. Caminero-Santangelo positions African literary texts as active contributors to the discourses he considers. He suggests that literature can provide a way of conceiving environmental problems, an area that needs to be explored. The insights derived from Caminero-Santangelo are relevant to this study because of the social and political issues associated with environmental degradation and environmental justice. In the events of defending and safeguarding the natural environment from this era's disaster, the role of literature is not only left from the west as this research has found out but African literary works are also found to represent natural environmental issues and concerns. The writer of the novel selected for this study has been found involved in illuminating various forms of ecological destruction, resisting and changing the situation against it by using different resisting approaches. This study adds to the knowledge on environmental restoration by contributing to the various resisting strategies.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a qualitative approach in this study. The method of textual analysis was used as a way of gathering evidence from the selected text. A range of textual features was considered in undertaking the analysis of the ecological activism and resistance in the selected novel. Textual analysis was carried out through close reading. Close reading is a systematic and

organized method of looking into a text and searching the related material from the entire text. It is an in-depth reading to analyse the selected novel. Close reading is disciplined, mindful reading of an object that helps deepen understanding and its meaning (Brummett, 2018). Settings and events with their particular observations and experiences by characters and writers' articulations on what is going on in the natural ecology have been identified for analysis. The study focused on the behaviours, interactions, and feelings of characters. The narrative voice offers clues about the person telling the story. This narrative voice provides an important indication about whom and by whom the ecology is being violated and the resistance being made. Ecological violence and resistance were viewed based on the points of view of the characters and the narrator who tells the story of ecological destructions and resistance as observed in the novel. The collected data was analysed using iterative data analysis from the data that was coded inductively.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to Caminero-Santangelo (2014) African Environmental writings, tend to prioritize social justice, lived environmental livelihood, and the relationship among environmental literature. Mbue's writing goes beyond to demonstrate resistance and activism. Mbue focuses on the fight against Oil companies polluting the water and land as well as affecting the livelihood of the people. The villagers use resistance as a tool to fight the oil company and the government. The first paragraph of the book announces that the end is near, referring to the ecological catastrophe and death that has been wrought upon Kosawa. The first chapter calls for resistance against ecological damage. The child narrator says, *'we should have known the end was near when the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green. We should have known our land would soon be dead. We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting – liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil. We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers flung pejoratives upon their fathers and prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them and we hated their meetings but we attended all of them. We were dying. We were helpless, we were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation'* (Mbue, 3). This study reflects the need for government to involve the natives in looking for a solution to environmental degradation and environmental justice. The government should develop a meaningful engagement in matters relating to the environment and the exploitation of natural resources. The natives should know the ideals that should be in a society where there is environmental justice. They should be able to access

relevant environmental information, in different ways including newspapers, television, posters, and barazas among other processes provided in law where communities can get the relevant information in forms and language that they can understand and appreciate.

Maathai (2006) argues that ecological feminism links environmentalism with feminism. Obi (2002) takes it further and argues that women turn out to be the most affected by environmental degradation. Their responsibilities include domestic and reproductive roles that compel them to apply pressure on the environment. Mbue draws attention to the gender dimension of the environmental struggle in Africa. She portrays a woman protagonist who resists ecological violence caused by the oil company. Thula is the one organizing her age-mates to resist and protest against the government and the oil company. She is also seen funding their activities and buying for them guns. Thula is a liberated professional woman who demonstrates the strength of feminine devotion. She is totally involved in the revolutionary activities, the men actually consult her. This marks Mbue's attempt to transform the status of a woman from that of an object to that of a subject. She is actually the model of womanhood in Kosawa. We also learn from Austin that she is not only a model of womanhood in Kosawa but also in America. *'Thula wasn't eating well, she wasn't sleeping well, she was spending too much time helping organize fights against governments and corporations, and not enough time thinking about her own well-being'* (Mbue, 243). Austin had written a letter to the sweet one and the cute one explaining his fear about Thula, who had recently travelled with some friends to another area of the country to be part of a human wall meant to prevent government workers from throwing poor people out of their homes and taking their land. This study acknowledges Mbue's gender dimension in the notion of the liberation of the environmental crisis in Africa.

Mbue uses Kosawa's people's beliefs and traditions to actively resist the ecological violence affecting their land. The people of Kosawa believed that the land was given to them by their ancestors. His Excellency was taking it away from them. He was the one benefiting from the oil exploration and so he gave the oil company power to do what they could on the land. The narrator says, *"what I can attest to is that the day he descended to the top in Bezam, this country became his property. From it, he harvests whatever pleases him and destroys whoever displeases him with our sweat and blood paid as taxes, he has more than we can fathom. They say his shoes alone cost more money than a hundred men."* (Mbue, 226). The Kosawa people are determined to fight back. If they are to be conquered let it not be because they never fought. According to them, no one has the right to make them prisoners on their land. No one has the right to take from them that which the spirit gave their ancestors. The

narrator says, *'The government and Pexton have left us with no choice but to do what we must in order to be heard. They speak to us in the language of destruction; let us speak to them too since it's what they understand'* (Mbue, 40). The analysis of the text selected for the study shows how ecological violence can marginalize and exclude communities from natural resources. The study seeks to correct this situation by promoting environmental justice.

Mbue also uses education as an eco-resistance tool to fight against environmental degradation. Thula is the closest to a protagonist in the novel. She is a determined woman who becomes a leader in the movement to unshackle Kosawa. Her motivation brings her to study in America, where she learns from other people in protest spaces and understands Kosawa's dilemma in a larger context. She draws her purpose out of her fight to free Kosawa. Education provides Thula with a way out. First gifted copies of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *The Communist Manifesto*, which her uncle owns but cannot read. Though physically distant, her soul is never far from her homeland, and she eventually returns to lead a revolutionary movement which Mbue depicts in deep and large detail. Thula says, *'I promised myself after the massacre that I would acquire knowledge and turn it into a machete that would destroy all those who treat us like vermin. I badly wanted to grow up so that I could protect Kosawa and ensure that children of the future never suffer as we did. The knowledge I believed, would give Kosawa power'* (Mbue, 208). Education to a great extent is what gave Thula power as a woman to start a revolution. People listened to her and joined the revolution because they believed she had learned something in America that could assist them.

According to Gujarat (2017), environmental journalism is a significant tool in exposing environmental degradation and raising public awareness about today's endangered environmental concerns. Mbue uses media to foster activism. Bongo, Lusaka, and Tunis go to Bezam in search of a newspaperman to write about the situation at Kosawa, when the Pexton agents declined to help them. The newspaperman was Austin. Bongo takes time to explain to him the situation at Kosawa. He tells him about the big river that now looks green and flows sluggishly under layers of toxic waste. He told him how meagre the next harvest is likely to be and how because of the bad harvest they may lack money to pay the taxes. Austin not only listened to the story but also travelled with the three men from Bezam to Kosawa. Upon reaching Kosawa, he took photographs of the river, the vegetation, and the graves of the dead children. Austin wrote the story of Kosawa in an American newspaper which helped to expose the activities of the American Oil Company in Kosawa. Many people all over the world, came to know the evil done by the company, were against it, and held demonstrations against the oil company. Austin later got

threats from the government. The narrator says, *'The government had sent him letters threatening him with expulsion from the country if he didn't cease writing things His Excellency did not like'*. (Mbue, 174). This study argues that the role of the media is important in exposing environmental degradation. It is regrettable that many media reports on the environment tend to contribute to the crises or challenges rather than dwelling more on problem-solving mechanisms. The goal of sustainable development cannot be achieved if the government silences the media.

According to Nixon (2011), ecological resistance and struggles in Africa have physical and psychological features. The physical form of resistance, for example, include bombing western corporations' development-driven projects, breaking oil pipelines, kidnapping human and environmental resources, and infrastructure damage. Nixon argues that African ecological resistance aims at resisting environmental destructions but also draws efforts to save the endangered African natural environment against manmade practices. Mbue used age mates as a tool for resistance against environmental injustices. The age-mates used strategies like burning the houses belonging to the Pexton agents and kidnapping their children and the company's overseers. They also bought guns. They sometimes shot and killed people. This was a way of resisting the oil company's operation factors and a sign that the oil company should be evacuated from the ecological area. The age mates were the ones mobilizing the other villages for the revolution, protests, and liberation day. This kind of ecological tool seems resistive and forceful. This is what forced the government of Kosawa to burn the Kosawa village.

The analysis of this study shows that Mbue also advocates for the use of non-violence and peaceful protests in her work. Malabo Thula's father and six other men travelled to Bezam in search of government officials to have a conversation with them on the environmental issues affecting the children of Kosawa and have a solution. Austin takes Thula to meet with activists who work on various human rights issues and it doesn't take long before Thula becomes a fierce activist herself. Thula is staunchly committed to non-violent direct action. The children who are Thula's peers have a different approach. They believe that peaceful protests have a limit. Thula forbids them from using violence, threatening to withhold funding, for their cause if they violate their agreement to remain peaceful. But after a certain point, Thula's peers use funds from Thula to buy guns from corrupt soldiers anyway, using them to murder a number of different Pexton employees. They also carry out sabotage campaigns setting fire to Pexton facilities in the hopes that they will finally leave after seeing how unwelcome they are. Meanwhile, Thula eventually returns to Africa, becoming a school teacher and organizing massive national wide protests against the corrupt government

that lets Pexton destroy the environment and make people sick. Thula works her entire adult life trying to enact change through peaceful protest, but in the end, she is largely unsuccessful. The study argues that a hybrid approach is needed to fight ecological violence. There is no one right way.

This study has also examined Mbue's legal tool as a means to pursue justice for the people affected by environmental violence. The village children are dying from contaminated drinking water and the land can no longer produce medicinal herbs. The Restoration Movement which came to the rescue of the natives decided to sue the oil company in order to force it to clean up Kosawa's land and water. A Pexton executive comes to visit the village with an offer, the company, he said has decided to give the villagers a share of the profit it makes off their land. Though he could not say what the exact percentage will be. '*You have to remember, Pexton has a lot of people who want some of it. The government here wants their share. All the people who work for Pexton, need their monthly salaries. But your share is also very important. Because together we inhabit the valley, and we must do so peacefully*' (Mbue, 278). The executive then says his employer would be happy to offer the villagers advice on what to do with their newly found wealth, such as using it to move somewhere else. We also have characters in the novel who are executed without a proper trial for the alleged kidnapping. Bongo and his four friends are hanged without proper trial. Thula was able to hire a lawyer to sue Pexton in a USA court for reparations. She thought that the legal pressure will compel the company to do the right thing, particularly after it is implicated in a shattering act of violence. The novel ends with the shattering hopes for legal restitution and with yet another episode of violence and tragedy. The researchers argue that the necessary legal and institutional framework is crucial in ensuring environmental justice at the global regional and national levels. Access to courts is an important pillar in promoting environmental justice. Courts have been faced with a number of challenges that hinder people particularly local communities from vindicating their environmental rights.

## CONCLUSION

The study has examined the voice of resistance and activism in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. The study has explored how the characters struggle and resist ecological woes as reflected in the novel. The resistance and activism against the destructive oil company practices are informed by the fact that the ecological crisis committed by the company should be curbed to save the environment. Protecting the environment of Africa is an issue that needs to be examined more carefully and incorporated into an overall

strategy of sustainable economic development. The key argument on findings of this study reveals resistance and eco-activism are very important in restoring the endangered environment. In the novel, ecological destruction is connected to the nature of exploiting natural resources aimed at making more income without considering the loss of ecology. The study shows that there is no one right way to tackle this enormous problem. Perhaps a hybrid approach will be the path we take. The study also implies the urgent need for ecological environmental consciousness. The study has also realised that indigenous people are not able to access legal justice. The courts do not dispense justice fairly, speedily, and without discrimination. Legal frameworks are available to not protect human rights and ensure the delivery of justice. For the sustainable development goals to be achieved in Africa, the environmental issues must be resolved. The role of the media in exposing environmental degradation must be respected.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The scope of this study was limited to eco-activism and resistance. Hence, the study recommends further literary research on how ecological violence affects the family bond.

The researchers also recommend research to be done to investigate how the government responds to eco-activism and resistance.

The indigenous people should be engaged in public debates, informed, and educated on environmental sustainability.

The policies of sustainable development are needed that do not stratify society and damage the ecosystem.

## REFERENCES

- Akung, W, and Iloeje, A. (2018).** Kaine Agarys Yellow Yellow. A Study in Ecocriticism. International Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vol. 6, No 2.
- Argut, L. K. (2016).** The Environmental Impact of China's Activities in Kenya. The University of Nairobi.
- Brummett, B. (2018).** Techniques of Close Reading. Sage Publication.
- Buell, L. (2005).** The Future of Environment Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination. Harvard University Press.
- Caminero-Santangelo, B. (2014).** Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology. The University of Virginia.
- Caminero-Santangelo, B., and Myers, G. A. (2011).** The Environment at the Margins of Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa. Ohio University Press.
- Clark, T. (2011).** The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University.
- Curtin, D. (2015).** Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Dagnachew, A. (2020).** A post-colonial Eco-critical Reading of Ecological Violence in Selected Anglophone African Novels (2000-2010). Dissertation. Addis Ababa University.



- Edebor, S. A. (2017).** Rape of a nation: An eco-critical reading of Helon Habila's oil on water. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 6(9): 41-49.
- Glotfelty, C. (1996).** *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Gujarat, G. (2017).** Environmental crisis and the role of media. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 1(4): 684-697.
- Krishnan, M. (2019).** Mutuality and Nature: Writing Africa in the Anthropocene. *Cambridge Journal of postcolonial literary inquiry*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/10117>.
- Maathai, W. (2006).** *Unbowed: Memoir*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Mbue, I. (2021).** *How Beautiful We Were*. New York.
- Musaib, J., and Tania, S. S. (2022).** Land deterioration and environmental damage: A postcolonial eco-critical study of *How Beautiful We Were*. *University Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 6(1): 67-88.
- Nixon, R. (2011).** *Slow Violence and the Environment of the Poor*. Harvard University
- Nnaji, G. (2012).** Press Coverage on Environmental Pollution in the Niger Delta. A content Analysis of the Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Sun, and This Day Newspapers. University of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Obi, C. (2002).** *The Politics of the Nigerian Oil Industry. Implications for Environmental Governance*. Publisher for Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Lagos.
- Ramachandran, G. (2014).** *Environmentalism: Global History*. New York. Routledge.
- United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) (2017). Responding to Climate Change. UN. Journal. [www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org).
- United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) (2021). The United Nations Decade Ecosystem Restoration. 2021-2030. UN. Journal. [www.unep.org/www.foa.org](http://www.unep.org/www.foa.org).

---

**Citation:** Biama, T. M., Oketch, S. A., and Kimathi, C. K. (2022). A voice of resistance and activism: A critique of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. *African Educational Research Journal*, 10(3): 312-320.

---