# *How Beautiful We Were*: A Resistance Narrative Uncovering Political Ecology in Postcolonial Eco-Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of political ecology and resistance narrative in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). I argue that political ecology is shaped by neoliberal policies such as slow violence and oil politics. I further contend that environmental degradation, colonial practices, and neoliberal policies exploit the indigenous lives of Kosawa and highlight the resistance narrative of the Kosawa people. My research finds support in the framework of political ecology by Eric Wolf, the concept of slow violence by Rob Nixon, oil politics by Dag Harald Claes, and resistance narrative by Joanna Wheeler. It develops a complex framework because my research contends that slow violence and oil politics contour political ecology. Therefore, my research argues that the selected fiction employs narrative resistance to foreground the entanglement of environmental injustice in colonial practices, ultimately indicating how storytelling becomes an instrumental tool of resistance to reclaim identity.

***Keywords***: *Political Ecology, Neoliberalism, Oil Politics, Slow Violence, Resistance Narrative*



## Postcolonial Eco-Fiction, Political Ecology, and Resistance Narrative

Postcolonialism itself is the writing-back strategy of colonised nations. It does not solely refer to the critical examination of the past but also explores avenues to reclaim

agency, particularly through literature. In this respect, postcolonial eco-fiction has increasingly become a powerful tool to interrogate ecological injustices that are deeply rooted in global history. *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) by Imbolo Mbue presents a fictional but piercingly realistic account of an African village, Kosawa, devastated by environmental degradation from oil exploitation. The narrative builds within the umbrella of political ecology, which intersects neo-liberalism and links to ecological concerns such as slow violence and oil politics. According to David Harvey, the traditional concept of neo-liberalism offers "human well-being" and implies that it is the state's responsibility to safeguard individual economic rights such as access to free markets and legal structures (2). However, in practice, neo-liberal policies promote inequality and the concentration of wealth.

Building on this idea, I draw on Eric Wolf's concept of political ecology, which refers to "landed property relations and the politics of resource management" (6). Political ecology connects with ecological changes caused by the colonial matrix of power that promotes unequal distribution of land, water, and other ecological resources. The contemporary adaptations of political ecology include Nixon's idea of slow violence, Claes's theory of oil politics (Claes xii, 2). Complementarily, Joanna Wheeler's concept of resistance narrative demonstrates how indigenous storytelling functions as a political act. Through a close textual analysis of Kosawa's multigenerational narrators, my study argues that political ecology is not only an analytical tool but also a lived experience of injustice and survival.

This study is significant because it integrates several key areas. By analysing *How Beautiful We Were* through postcolonial eco-fiction and political ecology lenses, the research provides a deeper understanding of how literature articulates ecological challenges and injustices in the Global South. Kosawa, a fictional African village, reflects the Global South on a microscopic level. This paper also highlights the intersection of environmental degradation, neo-liberal policies, and colonial legacies, offering a nuanced framework for analysing the complexities of ecological violence experienced by marginalised communities.

Furthermore, it foregrounds the significance of resistance narrative, showing storytelling as a powerful political strategy beyond cultural preservation. Through multigenerational narration, Mbue bridges theoretical discourse with ecological degradation by also emphasising political ecology and environmental injustice. In doing so, it foregrounds the political ecology's context that postcolonial theory alone may overlook. This research, by centralising eco-fiction, broadens the post-colonial debates, such as the colonial exploitation of land and resources, which reflect real-life struggles that demand

justice, dignified survival, reclamation of agency, ecological consciousness, and envisioning resistance pathways in the face of neo-liberal exploitation and environmental degradation.

## Political Ecology and Environmental Injustice in the Global South

Postcolonial eco-critical fiction, often falling under the category of Climate Fiction, foregrounds the politics of land and reflects the lived realities of environmental injustice. This study highlights the foundational concepts of political ecology, particularly as experienced in the Global South. Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell argue that the terms "Global North" and "Global South" are themselves Western constructs that generate a "Us vs Them" binary (12). The people of the Global South encounter systemic injustice and are in constant contestation with their state or the Global North. Similarly, Rick Rowden describes neo-liberalism as a radical experiment in which developing countries are treated like guinea pigs (92). In *How Beautiful We Were*, the fictional people of Kosawa represent the Global South, which was subjugated first by European colonisers and later by American neocolonial forces. The novel is narrated through multiple generations: Thula (the protagonist), her grandmother Yaya, and her mother Sahel. Embedded in their stories is a history of resistance passed down through their male relatives: Thula's grandfather and father, Malabo. This tale of resistance interweaves with Eric Wolf's concept of political ecology, which focuses on how power and land intersect. Political ecology was influenced by anti-colonial struggles, feminist movements, and environmental activism of the 1960s and 70s. It centres the insight that environmental degradation is inseparable from political and social inequality. Bryant and Bailey extend this scholarship by asserting that political ecology explores "how unequal power relations influence environmental access, management, and transformation" (28). It analyses both structural forces (e.g., capitalism, state power) and the agency of indigenous people. According to Jennifer Hasty et. al. in *Introduction to Anthropology* 2022, indigenous people are the original human population of a territory. They are also known as tribal peoples, Native peoples, Aboriginal peoples, and First Nations peoples. In most nations, indigenous people are considered minority populations. Numerous colonising groups tried to eradicate indigenous people and used different approaches to minimise their power to control natural resources and land, and even to preserve their identities and cultures (574-575).

In *How Beautiful We Were*, the forced displacement of Kosawa's people, who are the indigenous people of the land, and the poisoning of their environment, embody Wolf's political ecology, with its attention to land and resource politics. Here, it is pertinent to mention that the power of Western hegemony, as discussed in this research in terms of the

Global North and the global elite, is associated with the US-based oil company, Pexton, and the European settlers who invaded Kosawa over time. Storytelling, in this context, is politically significant as it allows communities to articulate identity, resistance, and belonging. As Joanna Wheeler writes, "narratives and storytelling can play important roles in bringing the lived experiences of injustice into view" (7). Trees and Kellas also emphasise that identity is constructed through storytelling, which gives voice to the silenced and shapes the narrative of struggle (386). As aforementioned in the novel, Thula's story is told through the voices of her family and community. This multivocal narrative structure portrays resistance through generations, from oral traditions to written letters. Mbue's narrative style resists dominant historical accounts and foregrounds indigenous struggle and ecological injustices.

Historically, the Global South has suffered most from ecological degradation, which is deeply tied to colonial histories and persistent economic dependency (Austin 1). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) argue that environmental exploitation in postcolonial societies mirrors colonial patterns, in which land and bodies are commodified. Likewise, Claes' idea in *Politics of Oil* conflates the sovereignty of the state. A state must hold the power to control its resources: "ownership relates to the relationship between the state and the individuals regarding production and extraction of the resources" (4). However, on the global scale, the sovereign connection between land resources and the rights of its people is subjugated, which strips them of their integrity. In the process of this colonisation, the state loses its cultural identity, its ownership of the lands, and ultimately, it lacks the financial strength to stabilise its economy. Mbue's novel supports this critique by portraying Pexton, the American oil company, as a neocolonial force echoing the violence of earlier colonisers.

## Oil Politics, Neocolonial Power, and Slow Violence

The dual presence of exploitation and resistance in the novel also invokes Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. Thula says, "WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn't want us to know?" (Mbue 6). This moment sets up the novel's political ecology framework and marks the beginning of resistance. The degradation is gradual, cumulative is true to Nixon's idea of slow violence (2). The environmental damage is not an immediate catastrophe but a slow unravelling of land, health, and memory. The fictional portrayal of "acid rain," and "green rivers," illustrates slow violence as a form of colonial political tactics of land grabbing. These unwanted

incidents depicting injuries accumulate gradually and quietly until they erupt to form political resistance. The collective harm done to people and to the environment has sadly etched a cumulative and spectral wound that is making it difficult for the villagers to seek justice, which is precisely how slow violence maintains power.

The Bhopal Gas Disaster (1984) in India is recorded as the deadliest industrial disaster that resonates with the idea of long-term effects. The aftermath of this incident led to environmental and health consequences which lingered for several generations, exactly like the description of the children specifically who suffered from higher fever (39) that led to whooping cough and ultimately "vomiting blood" (40), in the selected fiction. This idea elaborates on the explanation of slow violence coined by Nixon.

Moreover, the land in *How Beautiful We Were* becomes the site of multiple violences: environmental, physical, cultural, and historical. When Pexton arrives, their oil refinery does not just remind the people of Kosawa of their colonial past; it exacerbates their loss and trauma. Their rivers turn poisonous, destroying the foundations of their livelihood: fishing, farming, and hunting. Mbue writes, "It was then, with the increased wastes dumped into it, that whatever life was left in the big river disappeared. Within a year, fishermen broke down their canoes and found new uses for the wood. Children began to forget the taste of fish. The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude" (39). According to *The Guardian's* article, oil pollution by companies like Shell and Chevron has caused decades-long environmental degradation in the Niger Delta (Taylor and Watts). In the same vein, the gradual vanishing of the river life exemplifies Nixon's slow violence, but at the same time it also identifies its steady impact on the memory and culture of the indigenous people by eroding their life practices, flavours and the art of survival along with nature. The slow poisoning of water stripped Kosawa village of the essential means of survival.

This degradation is exactly what Claes refers to as oil politics. In chapter 3 of *The Politics of Oil,* he argues that the authorities exercise political control over oil resources, their extraction, production, and their regulation in the market (Claes 33). This theoretical framework matches the exertion of power by the Global North, which, through companies like Pexton, deprives communities like Kosawa of land, health, and dignity. These companies prioritise self-interest over human life; they also secure protection from the local government and eventually escape accountability. This act of invasion not only politically destabilised the region but also caused economic instability and environmental degradation. People of the village were merely hunters and fishermen, but due to the invasion, they did not have sufficient food to survive. This helps to understand Pexton's role as a neocolonial agent disguised as a development partner in the Global South that ruins the livelihood of the

indigenous people of Kosawa. My research through this depiction exemplifies political ecology. As Wolf encapsulates it, the harm is inseparable from power relations and global capitalist structures. The destruction of the river is not merely an environmental destruction, but rather it is the outcome of the political and economic dominance of Pexton over the village. Mbue sketches this ecological nuisance as the corporation's waste dumping becomes a material expression of exercising power, replicating the historical patterns of colonialism that are fused in slow violence and land grabbing, practised on the communities in the Global South.

Additionally, the imagery of the text highlights how the novel constructs environmental awareness rhetorically and aesthetically while illustrating political ecology and slow violence at once. The line "sky began to pour acid, and rivers began to turn green" (Mbue 6) offers a symbolic and literal example of environmental toxicity. Acid rain poses lethal threats to all life forms, and green rivers suggest chemical contamination. Mbue's narration transforms the gradual environmental crises into a political indictment, while illustrating the idea of how the environment becomes a political tool. Hence, the integration of the politics of oil with political ecology and slow violence illustrates the exercise of the political control of Pexton over Kosawa's land resources. Thus, my research provides a sheer critique by indicating that colonial legacies promote environmental injustice and silence the indigenous communities.

In this manner, Kosawa's ecological downfall is not a singular event but part of a long history of colonial incursion. In a flashback, Thula's grandfather remembers, "The Europeans had traveled here to understand what kind of people we were… how they could help us so we could live better lives" (Mbue 241). The "help" was merely a cover for domination. As part of their civilising mission, the colonisers deemed local beliefs and deities false, substituting them with European Christianity. Later, violence erupted: "For the sake of rubber, a generation of our young men was wiped away" (247–248). This recalls the historic rubber atrocities in Congo under King Leopold II's reign, who extracted the natural resource, wild rubber, for his own personal profit, claiming it to be for humanitarian purposes (Hochschild 115). This colonial mentality persists through Pexton. It aligns with Eric Wolf's theory that land becomes politicised and commodified under neo-liberal regimes.

Nevertheless, Kosawa's ecological landscape and cultural lifeways are further dismantled with Pexton's arrival. Their rivers become unusable, fish disappear, and even the air becomes unsafe. The novel details the growing horrors: "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… With every new oil spill or day of gas flares so savage our skin shriveled and we needed to shout to hear each other over the screaming flames" (Mbue 39). This moment finds parallel with the Chernobyl Nuclear disaster's legacy, which is identified as a catastrophic case of long-term environmental destruction because the leaked radioactive elements contaminated the environment, which resulted even decades later in affecting human health, socio-economic conditions of Europe and the displacement of people (International Atomic Energy Agency).

Reading the main life event in relation to political ecology by Eric Wolf helps to examine how ecological degradation is produced through unequal power distributions, especially those that are profoundly embedded in colonial histories. Mbue's depiction of Kosawa's contaminated water, poisoned soil, and worsening crops reflects precisely the idea that my research argues is that environmental destruction is not merely an ecological accident but an act of political practice. This is illustrated in the novel by Pexton's profit-driven decisions and the government's involvement. Through the villagers' deteriorating environment, the novel further illustrates how ecological conditions emerge, reinforce and structure a series of domination. Like, Europeans and then the US invasion, with the complicity of the local government. In addition to this, the ecological sufferings reflected are unfolded through the borrowed idea of slow violence by Rob Nixon, which is the gradual yet invisible harmful effect

This ecological suffering unfolds through what Rob Nixon calls slow violence: the gradual, often invisible, harmful effects perpetrated over years. In the fictional village of Kosawa, illnesses and the slow death of livelihoods reveal the long-term effects of industrial pollution that has been carried out by Pexton. All these theoretical underpinnings of slow violence, oil politics, and political ecology under the garb of neo-liberal practices echo the colonial practices of exertion of power. In doing so, the profit-gaining multinational companies exploit the indigenous people and their environment, as Pexton's control over Kosawa exemplifies this. Mbue illustrates how Western corporations' continued colonial exploitation has treated African land as disposable. Their continued infliction on the villagers is not accounted for. The affected villagers' repeated complaints, ignored reports, petitions, and illegal abduction obstructed legal pathways, thus reflecting the powerful dominance of systems that have more power over the other.

Leading on to the debate, Thula and her generation experience the most acute consequences of these decades of neglect. Their elders died quietly, often not understanding the causes of the illness. When one of the American hostages also falls ill, the symmetry becomes clear: "The Sick One… was half dead, in fact. We'd been sick, we'd seen our

brothers and sisters and friends get sick" (Mbue 137). Finally, their suffering is seen through the body of a foreigner. This moment illustrates how slow violence manifests differently across privileged lines as attempts to seek justice through official government channels fail repeatedly. Every man sent to the capital city of Bezam disappeared. The author shows that both the local government and American companies colluded in this destruction; therefore, resistance became the solution.

## Storytelling as Resistance: Memory, Voice, and Collective Agency

Imbolo Mbue's narrative thus transforms politically exercised environmental damage into a tool of resistance narrative. As the community witnesses their environment's death, for example, the polluting of the river, the disappearance of the fish, and deforestation, their shared suffering begins to manifest into collective awareness. It marks the beginning of a process that sets the stage for storytelling as resistance. These narrations become a way to reclaim agency and challenge the hegemonic narratives imposed by corporate power. Drawing on the idea of resistance narrative by Joanna Wheeler, my research argues on the impression that despite relentless oppression, resistance developed in Kosawa. The uprising began when Thula and others captured American representatives as hostages. Not out of vengeance, but to make their story known, as this would bring attention to both violence and visibility. During this movement, Thula finds a friend, a journalist, Austin, who becomes an unexpected ally who assists in amplifying their voices abroad. This led to the "Restoration Movement to Kosawa since our story reached America and people who share no blood with us arrived, determined to save us" (Mbue 148). However, the aid received did not directly address the issue. It was a superficial attempt to showcase sympathy—mineral water bottles, relocated and renovated schools, and international scholarships. But none of these aids addressed the environmental concerns; rather, they were used as a political strategy to divert the attention of the indigenous people from the development of the Restoration Movement.

In due course of time, Thula was awarded a scholarship to study in the United States. However, she makes the best of the provided advantage. She acquires the US scholarship, avails herself of their training strategy, but does not assimilate into Western comfort. Instead, she seizes the opportunity to organise resistance. In her letters, she transcribes her resisting ideas, notwithstanding that her letters also documented her transformation from witness to activist. As Sahel narrates, Thula returns as a leader. She declares, "Money is just a small part of the issue. We deserve to live in a safe environment" (Mbue 333). Her movement culminates in the event of *Liberation Day*, envisioned as the rebirth of Kosawa:

"Her vision for the revolution was for it to begin officially on a day we would call Liberation Day… the rebirth of our country" (Mbue 327). Here, Wheeler's theory supplements this act as storytelling is not only a mode of cultural preservation but also a political act (45). Through storytelling, Thula mobilises collective memory and action. Her resistance is informed by intergenerational trauma and collective hope, which Joanna Wheeler argues as "narratives can mobilize political agency" (47), and Mbue's narrative structure mirrors this theory by embedding protest within intimate voices.

## Martyrdom, Memory, and the Afterlife of Resistance

Correspondingly, I postulate this idea by drawing from the history of Mexico. Mexico records the Zapatista Movement started in 1994. The indigenous people (Mayans) of Mexico revolted against the neoliberal policies imposed on them because it threatened their public land rights. The resistance contested the local government and US agricultural subsidies that endangered their farms, autonomy of farmers and eventually their livelihoods. The Zapatista Movement recorded its resistance through its art of storytelling, symbolism and media. They instilled their strength on the internet and bypassed the mainstream media.

Referring to political ecology as the crux of the entire debate, this narrative describes it in a multifaceted fashion: land invasion, stealing of resources, environmental degradation, and violence. Thula's evolution is shaped by these intersecting forces. As stated, storytelling is integral to both resistance and character formation (Wheeler et al. 52). Nonetheless, after several years of legal battles against local government, US agencies, and the American soldiers under the command of the hegemonic power relentlessly retaliated. Regardless of gender, they murdered every individual who opposed them. This also included the death of Thula. Other tribal women were abducted, raped and imprisoned. Thula's mother records this as a successful preservation of dignity and truth. This also finds support in the global history of Ogoni Resistance led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian activist in the early 1990s. The movement was initiated against the Shell Oil Company. Saro-Wiwa, the leader from Ogoni who represented the indigenous people of the Niger-Delta, led a peaceful protest to demand environmental justice against the decades of oil destruction in their land. He fought to safeguard the environment and the livelihood of his people. In doing so, he also received public support; however, in 1993, Nigerian authorities responded with violent repression. This included raiding the villages, murdering people and displacing a large number of locals to other areas. The repression led to the arrest of Saro-Wiwa and his eight followers, ultimately resulting in their execution (Nwabughiogu). Similar to the execution of Thula and her companions. The final chapters narrate the legacy of Thula. Even dead, Thula

remained alive in the heart and mind of her people. "We've planted seeds in minds, the seeds are bound to germinate and spread; we only need to be patient, people will awaken" (Mbue 336).

Further elaborating on Wheeler's idea of resistance narrative, my research foregrounds the resistance of the indigenous people of Kosawa, who used storytelling as a resisting strategy and recorded their protests through literary documentation**.** Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* weaves together an entangled tapestry of political oppression, ecological crises, and collective defiance, hence offering the novel as a powerful reading site to identify the interconnected theoretical frameworks of political ecology, slow violence, oil politics, and storytelling as resistance. In the closing chapters, the highlight of the villagers' collective memory demonstrates the power of narration to mobilise collective identity and challenge hegemonic power.

Notwithstanding, Thula's journey, which includes her letters, speeches, organising efforts, and eventually her martyrdom, represents narrative as a form of political agency. Her observation of the unusual environmental behaviour and her generationally transferred stories instilled consciousness at a very young age. She had her father's and grandfather's energy to stir the villagers to stand for their rights. This led her stories to awaken consciousness, unite the villagers, and preserve memory. It was her efforts that Kosawa's struggle did not vanish even when activists were silenced. Her metaphorical seed of resistance germinated in her people's lives even after her death. This becomes obvious that even after the activists are gone, their lifelong efforts leave a vivid impact historically. Therefore, this research identifies that storytelling becomes an insurgent practice that counters manipulative narratives of progression and development, thus reclaiming voice for the oppressed.

Thus, my research, borrowing several real-life stories, highlights the environmental injustices that have taken place globally. It is pertinent to mention that most of these incidents have been predominantly conducted by the global elite, such as esteemed oil companies, regional political powers, and local governments, to name a few. Referring to the theoretical framework of political ecology by oil politics, the research clearly indicates that the political strategies involve environmental resources for political gains. In doing so, my research also underpins the attention to critically examining the neo-liberal policies. For example, the monetary requirements are fulfilled by the degradation of the environment; in this manner, Western hegemonic powers such as Pexton company in the selected fiction, do not have to utilise military resources, instead soft power methods of land grabbing are employed under the guise of developmental projects. Therefore, in the text *How Beautiful*

*We Were,* Mbue ultimately highlights the atrocities of the Global North at various levels. She denotes the strength of literature to become an archive of resistance that strengthens Wheeler's concept of resistance narrative. Indeed, resistance does not guarantee a just path, but contestation from the indigenous people is the sole tool of survival that history has recorded. Their efforts to safeguard their lands, sovereignty, and resources are the markers of their identity that challenged the Western hegemonic powers and attempted to dismantle the systemic structures while voicing environmental injustices.

## Conclusion

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is a Postcolonial Eco-fiction that powerfully critiques Western hegemony. Under the umbrella term of political ecology, neo-liberal policies are covertly embedded in the Global South, such as oil politics and environmental injustices. By developing the theoretical frameworks of political ecology by Eric Wolf, slow violence by Rob Nixon, oil politics by Douglas Claes, and resistance narrative by Joanna Wheeler, we see how land and its resources are politicised, and storytelling becomes a tool for both survival and resistance. Although the people of Kosawa do not achieve full liberation, their constant struggle asserts their humanity to reclaim their environmental resources and livelihood from local and foreign power regimes. Thus, the selected fiction employs narrative resistance to foreground the entanglement of environmental injustice in colonial practices, ultimately indicating how storytelling becomes an instrumental tool of resistance to reclaim identity. In doing so, we witness that Mbue makes a conscious attempt to highlight the strength of literature that preserves resistance, in this case, the generational narrative of Kosawa. This article contributes new knowledge by exposing political ecology that supplements postcolonial readings of the novel by revealing the ecological and economic procedures of domination that a postcolonial theory alone may not highlight. The novel also expands on the possibilities of centralising eco-fiction within the post-colonial debates by foregrounding the art of intergenerational storytelling of the indigenous people as an ecological and political force.

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