



Environmental Degradation: A Case Study Of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract: Environmental problems and their effects have become a significant threat to the people and the environment. One of those problems is Environmental degradation. Environmental degradation is the process through which the environment is deteriorating through the depletion of resources such as quality of air, water and soil, plant animals, and all other living and non-living elements of the planet of earth. This process can be completely natural (flood, typhoons, droughts, rising temperatures, fires, etc.), or it can be accelerated, or it can be caused by human activity (modern urbanization, industrialization, overpopulation growth, deforestation, etc.). But the main cause of environmental degradation is the damage to the environment created by humans through industrialization. The industrialization has increased harmful flows and emissions of pollutants in water, soil, and air. These pollutants have caused severe and irreversible destruction to various species in that particular ecosystem. In this context, the present research paper attempts to study how the concept of environmental degradation is reflected in Cameroonian-American novelist Imbolo Mbue's impactful second novel *How Beautiful We Were*. This is the story of some people living in fear due to the environmental degradation formed by the American oil company and a fearless young woman who starts a revolution against this company. This is a story of environmental destruction which is told through the eyes of the people who experience it. This novel shows that the degradation of the environment created by the American oil company does a lot of harm to the people of the village. They have built underground oil pipes on land owned by the village people. These oil pipes have created toxic waste in the river, destroying fishing and polluting the water. The novel depicts the degradation of the environment by polluting agricultural land and killing children with drinking water. I have tried to find answers to some environmental questions through this research paper. How are the pollutants formed by different organizations like the American oil company harming both the environment and human beings in the novel *How Beautiful We Were*? At the same time, in the age of globalization, I have tried to highlight the role of human beings towards nature in maintaining the harmony of man and nature, the survival of humanity, and the preservation of nature.

Index Terms – Environmental Degradation, Environmental Problems, Ecological Disaster.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism emerged as a literary theory in the late twentieth century and the early twentyfirst century. According to ecology, nature indicates the completeness of the physical environment which consists of humans and non-humans. The main and important cause of environmental degradation is human exploitation. The man-made deterioration of the ecosystem is a global, ongoing problem. Due to environmental damage and its adverse effects on animals, plants, and humans, the environmental study began in 1960. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the most popular book about environmental degradation, shows how toxic wastes created by various industrial chemicals are harming humans and animals. Many theories have emerged in the shadow of ecocriticism like environmental degradation, Eco philosophy, postcolonial ecocriticism, and social ecocriticism, etc. Man's relationship with nature has been changed due to industrialization. But instead of protecting nature, people are using it for their own purposes. Lynn White says, "Formerly man had been a part of nature, now he was the exploiter of nature Man and nature are two things, and man is the master" (8).

Environmental degradation is one of the biggest concerns in the world today. Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through the reduction of resources which includes all biotic and abiotic elements which form the air, water, soil, plants, animals, and all other living things of our planet. There are many types of environmental degradation.

This paper is to examine the perspective of ecological degradation in Imbolo Mbue's famous novel *How Beautiful We Were*. Imbolo Mbue is a Cameroonian-American novelist and short story writer famously known for her first novel *Behold the Dreamers* which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Imbolo Mbue's second novel *How Beautiful We Were* sends readers to the fictional African village of Kosawa, which has long been exploited by an American oil company, resulting in barren farmland, toxic water and eventually the death of its inhabitants. This is an unforgettable novel about the environmental destruction made by an American company. Major disasters such as oil spills have devastated the local environment.

Mbue's novel shows how the environment is being destroyed by the oil wastes from the American company. In this paper, I have tried to analyse two issues related to the environment through the novel *How Beautiful We Were*. In the first chapter, I am going to analyse how environmental degradation is caused by pollutants emitted by an American oil company. And in the second chapter, I am going to analyse the fight of Thula, the main protagonist of the novel, and the other villagers against the American oil company.

II. CHAPTER-I: ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION AND HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE

Oil plays a huge and important role in our society, as it is organized today. Oil represents far more than the major energy sources used by mankind. On the other hand, the oil industry has a great potential for danger to the environment and it can affect at different levels: water, air, soil, and consequently all living beings on our planet.

This section will analyse the element of environmental degradation such as pollution and environmental changes in *How Beautiful We Were*. The story begins with a conversation between three representatives of an American oil company called Pexton and the residents of a fictional African village called Kosawa. The main point of the conversation is the environmental degradation created by the American oil company which has led to the complete destruction of the village of Kosawa. The local inhabitants in *How Beautiful We Were* live under the threat of environmental degradation and injustice caused by development and industrialization. The villagers in the novel are worried about the environmental degradation created by a joint venture between the Pexton and the African government. Toxic wastes from oil spills have made water poisoned and unsafe to drink, making people sick and children dying. All the arable land in Kosawa village has been destroyed due to the leakage of oil pipelines passing through the village made by the American oil company. Products carried through the oil pipeline can affect the environment and cause injury or loss of life as well as property damage. The soil provides a medium for the growth and cultivation of different plant species. It also works as a habitat for many animals and microorganisms that contribute significantly to maintaining ecological balance. When the pipelines are planted on the bottom of the cultivable land, the land needs to be dug deep. Because of this process, the land loses its cultivable capacity in large quantities. At the same time, when leakage from those pipelines releases contaminants and mixes with the soil, the land loses its ability to grow new crops. When the soil structure is contaminated due to removal of harmful wastes or use of chemicals, it becomes harmful to the organism. As a result, the land becomes unusable. On the other hand, when the pollutants emitted from the pipelines are mixed with clean and drinking water, the water also becomes contaminated. As a result, those who drink the contaminated water or use it for other purposes get sick or die. As shown in the novel *How Beautiful We Were*, as a result of drinking contaminated water, villagers are getting sick and children are dying and also, they are unable to cultivate their land because of oil pipeline leakage but African government and the Pexton (American oil company) are not taking any action to alleviate the plight of the villagers except sending their representatives. It shows us how the environment and human beings interact with each other. If the environment is harmed, people will be harmed. Similarly, if human beings are harmed, the environment will also be harmed. This damage and environmental degradation occur due to some greedy people and the pollutants emitted from their oil-producing or gas-producing factories. In this novel, Imbolo Mbue highlights the harsh reality of colonization that how colonization has remained as the cause of the decline of green culture. As Nixon explains, environmental problems affect the most exposed groups of people since they lack the resources to survive environmental degradation, and create environmental injustice in colonized regions (4). Mbue in her novel focuses on endless human greed which harms not only the environment but also human beings. This is how the American involvement in the African fictional village has caused environmental damages. These environmental damages of the novel illustrate the concept of ecology.

III. CHAPTER-II: PROTEST AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE

Environmental protests are a demonstration against the destruction of the natural environment by people, companies or government which puts human beings at risk. Protests are held to draw attention to environmental problems and to take swift action to prevent or address environmental problems. In her second novel *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue has shown such a protest through the protests of the villagers of Kosawa and Thula, the protagonist of her novel against the American oil company called Pexton.

“We should have known the end was near,” (Mbue 3) the story begins. “When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead” (Mbue 3).

In October of 1980, three representatives of an American oil company called Pexton come to meet the villagers of a fictional African village called Kosawa. In *How Beautiful we were* when we meet the villagers of Kosawa, the loss of their homeland is already extensive. The American oil company named Pexton has failed to save these local people and the environment from degradation. The oil spills and leakage of pipelines, along with the contaminated chemicals emitted from the Pexton, have poisoned the water, polluted the air, and also destroyed the land. As a result, children are carrying toxins by drinking water and they are dying or getting sick. “Those of us who survived feared our death was close;” (Mbue 8) the narrator says. “We were certain we’d be the next, though sometimes we feared we’d be the last” (Mbue 8). In the midst of all this, the American oil company has not taken any significant steps to resolve these issues except sending representatives every eight weeks to assure them that all is well. After that when the villagers realize that the Pexton and the African government will do nothing for them Kosawa residents want the company to leave and the land to return to its former state as it was before Pexton was created, many years ago. The American company does not give any response. Even those who are going to protest are going missing or their dead bodies are being found. The villagers have tried their best to get rid of those greedy people who are destroying both the environment and the people. They have kidnapped the representatives. They meet with an American journalist, hoping that an article can change the way people feel about them. When there is nothing to do, Mbue introduces us to Thula, the central character of the novel. Thula, who eventually becomes the pioneer of Kosawa's resistance movement, is a young girl. After her father's death, Thula develops a strong sense of justice learned from her father. She is intelligent, and her talent takes her to a modern school in a nearby town and eventually to the United States. After spending some time in the U.S., Thula learns the lessons of the civil rights movement and builds a commitment to nonviolence like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela. At the same time Thula becomes the leader of her peers in Kosawa despite being thousands of miles away. As Thula and her mates matured, they become more active in opposing Pexton. When Thula returns from the United States, the action becomes more intense and the speed is finally faster. Finally, the most interesting thing in this novel is not the political and economic struggle, but the expression of customs and traditions, and the perspective of the villagers of Kosawa. This ethnographic dimension of the novel is a rich element that takes the story to a higher level.

Environmental movement is a broad term that is commonly used to describe and understand the various types of local struggles and conflicts related to livelihood problems in line with environmental degradation within the larger context of the development debate. The kind of protest that Mbue has shown in her novel against the degradation of the environment is something we have seen in our real life and some of the notable names of which are “Bishnoi Movement”, “The Chipko Movement”, “Narmada Bachao Andolan”, etc. Such protests are needed to bring back the environmental awareness of the people. As Christopher Rootes points out:

“Local environmental campaigns are ubiquitous and recurrent, even in times when environmental issues are not salient on national agenda. Yet their relationship to trans-local environmental movements and issues has been relatively neglected. Local environmental campaigns are variously related to national and local organizations, and the peculiarities of place are one factor in that variation. But place itself acquires meaning through campaigns, and communities forge identity even as they mobilize against threats of their survival. The relationship between local campaigns and global environmental issues is problematic, but the ways in which local mobilizations often combine issues of environment, economic justice and democracy mirror the emerging agenda of transnational environmentalism” (722).

IV. FINDINGS

Environmental degradation is one of the most important environmental problems. Generally, this study has provided a perfect picture of the nature and emergence of environmental movements. The above two analyzes show that the man-made degradation of the environment has now become a major concern in our life. Those who are the creators of this kind of degradation are not looking for a solution to stop this but let it go on for ages. Even as a result of this degradation, the death of innocent people, children, and other animals does not change the position of those greedy people. The eyes of these greedy people are always on making money and

they understand nothing but money. In this case, the common man should oppose the environmental degradation created by such barbaric people and companies as the residents of Kosawa and Thula have done in *How Beautiful We Were*. Analyzing this novel, it can be concluded that various factories like Pexton should deliver the pollutants emitted from their company to the right place so that these wastes do not harm the environment and they need to increase their environmental awareness. Otherwise, a movement will be formed against them as happened in this novel.

V. CONCLUSION

Environmental degradation due to oil spills has a socio-economic impact on the oil producing community. It destroys all good qualities of water, soil and all other aspects of the environment. Ecocriticism plays a strong role in the study of human relationships with nature. In her novel *How Beautiful We Were* Imbolo Mbue considers nature as a sensitive tool and explains the commitment of the human world to the inhuman world. She has proved through her novel that colonization is not only the destroyer of the environment, but also of mankind. This novel is a perfect part of storytelling which crosses the central story and composes multiple stories. Mbue's use of several major narrators spanning four decades can easily become an understandable hassle, but her unwavering hand does not allow it to happen, when the reader needs full attention. This novel solves contemporary problems such as globalization, environmental destruction, feminism and the survival of traditional language and culture. So, this novel *How Beautiful We Were* will be a warning to the human world that over a period of time the abuse of nature will lead to the wrath of nature.

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