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Unmasking the Myth of Development in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*:
A Postcolonial Ecocritical Analysis

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Abstract

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*This study delves into Imbolo Mbue's literary masterpiece, *How Beautiful We Were*, to unravel the intricate themes of environmental exploitation, power dynamics, state vampirism, and the clash between nativist values and developmentalist pursuits. The purpose of this research was to analyze how the myth of development influences the interactions between different stakeholders and impacts the environment in the post-colonial context as reflected in this novel. The objectives of the study were to examine the perspectives of natives and developmentalists on land, explore power dynamics in the narrative, assess the effects of state vampirism on the ecosystem, and understand how the myth of development shapes environmental degradation. The methodology employed was a qualitative approach grounded in postcolonial ecocritical theory, utilizing close reading and thematic analysis to unravel the complexities of the text. Drawing on theoretical analysis, the study uncovered the exploitative practices of multinational corporations and governments, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable practices and social justice. The findings revealed the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on local communities and ecosystems, highlighting the complex relationship between development, environmental sustainability, and social inequality. The implications of this research underscore the importance of reevaluating development paradigms to prioritize environmental protection and community well-being in the postcolonial world. This study serves as a clarion call for equitable and sustainable development practices that honor the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment, paving the way for a more just and harmonious future.*



1. Introduction

Imbolo Mbue, a literary force whose roots trace back to a rich tapestry of cultural heritage and personal experiences, has made a profound impact on the literary landscape with her insightful narratives that delve into the complexities of postcolonial themes. With a background steeped in diverse influences and a keen eye for social commentary, Mbue's works resonate with readers, challenging them to confront pressing issues of our time through the power of storytelling. In her acclaimed novel *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue masterfully weaves a narrative that explores the clash between developmentalist pursuits and nativist values within a postcolonial context, which can be explored as notions of developmental myths.

The myth of development has emerged as one of the most central aspects of postcolonial ecocritical theory today. It was coined by De Rivero (2001) to describe the most radical system of development, which is essentially a myth created by the West that, in the name of modernization, sustains social, political, and economic rifts that it claims to cure. Various environmental critics have used the term development in a very ironic sense, as it includes the exploitation of natives' natural resources for the advancement of Western economic and political power (Escobar 1995). The Global South critics frequently dismiss development as no more than a masked form of neocolonialism (Huggan and Tiffin, 2006). It is, in their opinion, a vast technocratic

apparatus whose primary purpose is to serve the political and economic interests of the West. It is described as a covert form of environmental degradation carried out in the name of economic progress.

Due to the colonial powers' exploitation of natural resources, various colonial development strategies have failed to prioritize the environment. It caused disastrous environmental problems in a vastly colonized world (Maryon-Davis, 2019). In terms of economy, most pre-colonized regions were self-sufficient. Planting staple crops, caring for animals, fishing, and hunting were all ways for people to meet their dietary needs (Rodney, 1972). They were able to build houses and meet clothing requirements by utilizing natural resources and indigenous skills. Their way of life and mode of production were in harmony with nature. New cash crops were introduced during colonial rule, and new industries were established to exploit indigenous resources. The colonized societies' economic structures were completely altered by this new system (Roos & Hunt, 2010).

This new framework, along with its technology and consumption patterns, became so ingrained that Western products and technologies were still imported after independence. The colonial capital was not only maintained but also expanded. For newly independent countries, world trade and its investment system have become a trap. International corporations were extremely im-

portant in this regard. They established manufacturing and trading bases in postcolonial countries, where they sold technologies and products. The goal of these corporations was to develop Third World countries or to create conditions in which these countries would be forced to rely on developed nations for development (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015). These countries were required to export more goods, such as minerals and oil, in order to pay for the importation of modern technologies. These newly developing countries have been sucked deeper into the vortex of the Western economic system in terms of the economy, finance, and technology. Indigenous resources, products, and skills were all lost as a result of this process.

Understanding development's underlying ideas necessitates viewing it as a systematic process of colonial occupation (Noxolo, 2016). For the textual analysis of the selected text, the idea of development can be divided into stages, as taken from Huggan and Tiffin's theoretical notions. These stages include native and developmentalist understandings of natural resources, power creation through sustainable development, and power maintenance through state vampirism, and environmental degradation results from these.

Firstly, understanding the colonizers's and Africans's opposing perspectives on land and the ecological environment is critical. Africans regard the land and ecological environment as sacred resources, whereas colonizers regard them as merely commodities. In a development context,

the "nativist" and developmentalist understandings of land are critical because they are founded on or continue the process of othering. While developmentalists see the land as a material resource that can be traded, native people see it as an unchangeable spiritual obligation (Kochar & Khan, 2021).

The Enlightenment ideology of progress and the Darwinian survival of the fittest are two concepts that Huggan and Tiffin refer to as the myth of development because they provide false justification for this kind of progress. It calls on the less "advanced" southern nations to follow in the footsteps of their wealthier northern counterparts and, in doing so, to embrace a capitalist growth model that is both blatantly unequal and potentially environmentally disastrous (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p. 28).

Secondly, the politics of colonial power and sustainability are issues in development. There are many different ways to interpret and understand the concept of sustainability. The use of natural resources for the maintenance of existence is in accordance with the environment. It entails protecting natural resources in a way that will be advantageous to both the present generation and future generations. It is a form of development that improves people's quality of life without sacrificing or exhausting resources or having an adverse environmental impact that will make it harder for future generations to meet their needs (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015).

A new level of understanding is added when sustainability is seen through a colonial lens. The term is typically added before development in an effort to create the impression that it is focused on preserving the ecological balance by avoiding the depletion of natural resources while also pursuing economic growth (Sachs & Warner, 2001). For the purpose of upholding their dominance over the native people and their lands and completing their development projects, the colonizers adhere to the concept of sustainability. Huggan and Tiffin (2006) define sustainability as an ongoing adherence to the notion of development as an engine of economic growth.

Finally, state vampirism is used as an instrument for sustainable development. State vampirism was first used by Andrew Apter to refer to the neocolonial elites' tactic of maintaining economic hegemony over the Third World by using puppet native leaders. He clarified his point by using the Nigerian oil industry as an example. The Nigerian state, in his opinion, "expanded at its own expense, ostensibly pumping oil money into the nation while secretly sucking it back into private fiefdoms and bank accounts" (2005, p. 143). The colonizers created a polarity between nature and commodities by distorting the natives' understandings of their environment, and they required the natives to maintain their "development missions" in order to continue pillaging the natural resources. As a result, the colonizers changed into what are now known as "state vampires." State vampirism also refers to the way that native

states and the allegedly greedy politicians who worked for them encroached on the people they were supposed to represent while channeling enormous amounts of money and resources into the hands of a neocolonial elite (Apter, 2005).

The state cares for the materialistic interests of the colonizers and tortures its indigenous people when they speak out on matters affecting their environment. State vampirism thus becomes the global trend of government interference in people's lives (Apter, 2005). When it comes to environmental protection, this state intervention relies on administrative control and technological superiority, which cannot help but imply that many pleas for the survival of the planet are actually nothing more than calls for the survival of the industrial system itself.

In order to analyze Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* using the notion of the myth of development, it is imperative to pose some research questions: How do natives and developmentalists view land in the narrative? How are power dynamics reflected in the text? How has state vampirism impacted the ecosystem as represented in the text? How does the myth of development affect the environment, as depicted in the text? These questions will help uncover the underlying themes of colonization, exploitation, and resistance present in Mbue's novel. By examining the relationships between the native people, the developmentalists, and the environment, a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the concept of development and its

impact on both people and the land is possible.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the themes of environmental exploitation, power dynamics, state vampirism, and the clash between nativist values and developmentalist pursuits as depicted in Imbolo Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. Qualitative methods allowed for a nuanced analysis of the text, focusing on the complexities and underlying meanings embedded within the narrative.

The analysis is grounded in postcolonial ecocritical theory, which provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersections between colonial legacies, environmental degradation, and social justice. Postcolonial ecocriticism is applied to Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* to analyze the intricate themes of environmental exploitation, power dynamics, state vampirism, and the clash between nativist values and developmentalist pursuits within a postcolonial context. Through this theoretical framework, the novel's portrayal of environmental degradation, colonial legacies, and community resilience is examined, shedding light on the unequal power relations, exploitative practices of multinational corporations, and the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on local communities and ecosystems. Postcolonial ecocriticism allows for a nuanced exploration of the myth of development, state vampirism, and the complex relationships between humans, nature,

and sustainability, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable practices, social justice, and a reevaluation of development paradigms in the postcolonial world.

2.2 Data Collection

The primary data source for this study was the novel *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. A close reading of the text was conducted to identify key themes, character perspectives, and narrative dynamics related to environmental exploitation and power struggles. Additionally, thematic analysis was employed to uncover patterns and meanings within the text that illuminate the complexities of development narratives.

2.3 Criteria for Text Selection

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* was selected for the analysis for many reasons. First, it aligns closely with the research objectives of the study, focusing on themes of environmental exploitation, power dynamics, state vampirism, and the clash between nativist values and developmentalist pursuits. The novel is also situated within a postcolonial context, reflecting the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonial power dynamics. It offers insights into the intersections between colonial histories, environmental degradation, and social justice in a postcolonial setting. Further, the novel has a significant focus on environmental themes, such as environmental degradation, exploitation of natural resources, and the impact of development on ecosystems and communities. It provides a rich

narrative landscape for exploring the relationships between humans, nature, and power. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates literary merit and artistic quality, engaging readers through its narrative style, character development, and thematic depth. It is well-crafted and compelling, offering a rich tapestry of storytelling that resonates with readers on multiple levels. Moreover, it has generated interest and scholarly discourse, indicating its significance and relevance to the research topic. It has been subject to critical analysis and discussions within relevant academic circles, highlighting its importance in the field.

By considering these factors, *How Beautiful We Were* emerges as a suitable choice for analysis in the research study, offering a rich and complex narrative landscape that aligns with the research objectives and thematic focus of the study.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze key themes such as environmental degradation, power dynamics, state vampirism, and developmentalist and nativist understandings of nature in the novel. Character analysis was conducted to understand individual perspectives and agency within the narrative. These analytical approaches provided a comprehensive exploration of the text and its implications for understanding the impacts of development on both humans and nonhumans.

2.5 Analysis and Interpretation

In Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were*, the environmental impacts of false development are a central theme. The novel portrays how the pursuit of economic growth and progress by the developmentalists leads to the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment. The developmentalists view land primarily as a means for economic advancement and progress, often disregarding the long-term consequences of their actions on the environment.

2.5.1 Nativist and Developmentalist Understanding of Land and People

Imbolo Mbue represents developmentalists as individuals who view land primarily as a means for economic advancement and progress. They see nature as a resource to be exploited for profit, often disregarding the long-term consequences of their actions on the environment. Mbue underscores the nature of those developmentalists in the following excerpts:

You do understand that all people from overseas are the same, don't you? The Americans, the Europeans, every single overseas person who has ever set foot on our soil, you know they all want the same thing, don't you?" ... "You're young," he says. "Someday, when you're old, you'll see that the ones who came to kill us and the ones who'll run to save us are the same. No matter their pretenses, they all arrive here believing they have the power

to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants” (p. 117).

This shows that Mbue calls the developmentalists "overseas people," who do have a selfish and exploitative mindset. She suggests that regardless of their intentions, whether it is to kill or save, these individuals view the colonial environment as a means to fulfill their own desires. Mbue implies that these developmentalists fail to truly understand or respect the needs and aspirations of the local people.

Mbue also states that these developmentalists evolved from a long history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, perpetuating systems of oppression and exploitation. She argues that the legacy of colonialism and imperialism has shaped the mindset of these developmentalists, leading them to view local communities as passive recipients of progress rather than active participants in their own development. She locates the starting point of the developmentalists back to the era of slavery, when the exploitation and dehumanization of enslaved people laid the foundation for the mindset that continues to perpetuate today.

The snatchers came generations before I was born. My grandmother told me about them—the story had been passed down to her of the time when men and women from distant villages appeared in Kosawa bloodied and in tears, bearing accounts of how young and old alike had been thrown into chains. The sick had been left behind

to die alone, babies flung on the ground so their mothers could be dragged away with warm milk flowing down from their breasts (p. 208).

The developmentalists are termed "snatchers" to show their predatory nature and the harm they have inflicted on the natives. This term highlights the brutal and inhumane actions of these colonizers, who not only physically captured the natives but also caused immense emotional and psychological damage. By referring to them as snatchers, it emphasizes the sense of loss and violation experienced by the community, as well as the continued trauma that is passed down through generations.

The author's assertion is to show that the slavery and colonial eras' exploitation and mistreatment of the natives take on a new form—neo-colonization. This modern form of colonialism may not involve physical capture, but it still perpetuates the same sense of loss and violation experienced by the community. The snatchers of the past have now evolved into economic and political forces that continue to exploit the resources and labor of the natives, leaving them marginalized and powerless. The term "snatchers" serves as a plain reminder that the harm inflicted by colonizers did not end with the colonial era but rather continues to haunt and oppress the native population in the present day.

On the other hand, the natives in the narrative perceive land as a sacred entity, deeply interconnected with their cultural and spiritual identities.

Their view of the land emphasizes the importance of sustainability and harmony with nature. This clash of perspectives creates a tension between the developmentalists' pursuit of economic growth and the natives' desire to preserve their traditional way of life and protect the natural world. Ultimately, Mbue's exploration of these conflicting views sheds light on the complex relationship between development and environmental destruction in the postcolonial world.

The foreign corporation, Pexton, views the land and the people as resources to be exploited for their own profit. They do not care about the impact of their actions on the environment or the local communities, and they see the people as obstacles to their business interests. This reflects the developmentalist understanding of land and people, where the land is seen as a commodity to be developed and the people are seen as passive recipients of development (p. 123). This perspective ignores the intrinsic value of the land and disregards the rights and well-being of the local communities. Pexton's exploitative approach not only perpetuates inequality and environmental degradation but also hinders sustainable and inclusive development, as depicted in the novel.

The government officials also have a developmentalist understanding of land and people, where development is equated with progress and modernization.

The representatives told them that drilling for oil would bring something called

“civilization” to our village. One day, the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called “prosperity.” Could the men explain “civilization” and “prosperity” in our language? Our grandparents had asked. The government men had said it was impossible for them to explain such terms fully, because it would be hard for our grandparents to understand what they’d never witnessed or considered a possibility. (p. 83).

The government official’s version of development is depicted in this excerpt as a promise of progress and improvement for the village of Kosawa. They use terms like “civilization” and “prosperity” to convey the idea that drilling for oil will bring advancements and a better life for the people. However, the officials also acknowledge that these concepts may be difficult for the villagers to comprehend, as they have never experienced or even imagined such possibilities. This suggests that the government's version of development may be skewed and based on their own understanding and agenda rather than the true needs and desires of the community.

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

This lack of understanding and familiarity with the government's vision of development raises concerns about the potential consequences of drilling for oil in Kosawa. The villagers may not fully grasp the environmental impact and long-term effects that oil extraction could have on their land and resources. Additionally, the government's portrayal of progress fails to consider the villagers' cultural and traditional values, which may prioritize harmony with nature over material wealth. Thus, the government's agenda may not align with the true needs and desires of the community, potentially leading to a clash between the villagers and the authorities.

The people of Kosawa see themselves as stewards of the land, responsible for its protection and preservation. In the novel, they are depicted as a resilient and united community, unwavering in their determination to defend their way of life and the land that sustains them. The author skillfully portrays their unwavering commitment to their ancestral home as a testament to the strength of their cultural identity and their deep-rooted connection to the land. This connection serves as a reminder of the power and importance of respecting and preserving the natural world and the devastating consequences that can arise when this bond is severed. Through their struggle, the people of Kosawa not only fight for their own survival but also for the protection of the land and the values it represents.

They also see the land as a source of identity and belonging, and they resist the displacement and

destruction of their communities. In the novel, the author highlights the resilience and determination of the people of Kosawa, showcasing their unwavering commitment to preserving their way of life. They draw strength from their history and traditions, using them as a foundation to resist the forces that threaten their existence. Despite the challenges they face, the people of Kosawa stand united, determined to protect their land and pass down their cultural heritage to future generations. Their struggle serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of valuing and preserving our natural resources and the communities that depend on them.

2.6 Politics of Colonial Power and Sustainable Development

The politics of colonial power are depicted in *How Beautiful We Were* through the actions of the oil company, Pexton, and the complicity of government officials. This oil company exploits the natural resources of the village, causing severe environmental degradation and health issues for the residents. Despite the clear negative consequences, government officials turn a blind eye to the suffering of their own people, prioritizing their personal gain and maintaining their alliance with the colonial powers. This power dynamic highlights the devastating impact of colonialism on the lives of the oppressed and the lengths to which those in power will go to protect their interests.

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

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

As depicted in the novel, government officials are also often bribed by the corporation and use their power to enrich themselves at the expense of the people. They are complicit in the exploitation of the land and the people, and they do not take action to protect the people or the environment. This is similar to the collaboration between colonial powers and local elites in colonized countries, where the elites benefited from the exploitation of their own people (p. 134). The novel highlights the corrupt nature of government officials, who prioritize their own personal gain over the well-being of the nation. This echoes the historical pattern of power dynamics in colonized countries, where the ruling elites aligned themselves with the colonizers to maintain their own

privileged positions. The parallel between these two situations underscores the universal theme of power and corruption, emphasizing that these exploitative practices are not limited to a specific time or place.

As depicted in the novel, the government officials embezzle funds that were meant for public infrastructure projects, leaving the citizens to suffer from inadequate healthcare and crumbling infrastructure. This mirrors real-life instances where corrupt officials in colonized countries would divert resources meant for development into their personal accounts, leaving the majority of the population impoverished and oppressed. The author's depiction sheds light on how power imbalances can perpetuate corruption and exploitation across different contexts.

Moreover, the novel also highlights the legacy of colonialism in the country. For example, it is mentioned that the government gave Pexton power over the people and their land, which reflects the legacy of colonialism, where foreign powers often controlled the resources and people of the colonized country. The novel also suggests that the government's actions are motivated by a desire to maintain their power and control over the people, which is a legacy of colonialism, where the colonizers often used violence and intimidation to maintain their control over the colonized people.

When we heard “overseas,” many of us weren’t sure what to think—what good ever came to us from overseas? —but the

men from Bézam assured us that the masters and the people from Pexton came from different parts of overseas. They said Pexton was not from Europe, they were from America; they said Pexton had no relationship with our former masters. If we needed to know the truth, they added, American people were far better than Europeans. American people liked to mind their business and only do good—we would soon get a chance to see that for ourselves. The one thing we had to know, they went on, was that if oil was found under our land, Pexton would take over most of the valley—they'd need a lot of land to do their work (p. 215).

These show how the politics of colonial power are depicted in *How Beautiful We Were* through the actions of the multinational oil company and the complicity of government officials. The exploitation of the land and the people, the collaboration between the corporations and the government officials, and the policies of land dispossession and forced relocation are all reminiscent of the colonial era.

Thula, the central character in *How Beautiful We Were*, represents the younger generation that is affected by the politics of colonial power and the struggle for sustainable development. Thula is a young girl who grows up in a village that is being destroyed by foreign corporations and government officials. She witnesses the pollution of the rivers and the air and the displacement of her

own people. She also sees the resistance and the fight for justice by the older generation, such as her father and the other activists (p. 7).

Thula is also part of the younger generation that is concerned about the future of her village and the need for sustainable development. She and her friends discuss the impact of human activities on the environment, such as the dumping of toxic waste into rivers and the ocean. They also talk about the need for renewable energy and the protection of the forests. Thula is aware of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of preserving the balance of nature. Thula represents hope for the future and the possibility of change. She is part of a generation that is more aware of environmental issues and more willing to take action. She is also inspired by the older generation's fight for justice and the power of coming together to make a difference. Thula's story shows that sustainable development is not only about protecting the environment but also about empowering the people and building a just and equitable society.

Thula's vision for the country is one where the people have control over their own resources and are able to use them for sustainable development. Thula's vision is contrasted with the government's approach, which is shown to be corrupt and focused on maintaining power and control over the people. Overall, the novel suggests that sustainable development is only possible if the country can take control of its resources and use them for the benefit of its own people, and that

Thula's vision for the country represents a path towards achieving this goal.

The people of Thula's village, Kosawa, view the land as sacred and believe that they have a responsibility to protect it for future generations. They see themselves as stewards of the land and are deeply connected to its natural rhythms and cycles. They also have a strong sense of community and view themselves as part of a larger collective that includes both the living and the dead. They are willing to come together to fight for their rights and their future, and they are willing to use both peaceful protests and acts of sabotage to disrupt the oil companies' operations.

2.7 State Vampirism

State vampirism is depicted in *How Beautiful We Were* through the ruthless actions of the government and its connection with the oil company Pexton. In the novel, the state exploits its own people and resources for personal gain in collaboration with multinational corporations. As depicted in the novel, it allows the oil company to exploit Kosawa's resources, leading to ecological devastation. Despite repeated pleas from the villagers, neither Pexton nor the government have taken action to mitigate this destruction. This shows how the state, represented by the local government, sacrifices its own people and environment for the sake of economic gain from Pexton.

Firstly, state vampirism is reflected in the complicity of the government, which is supposed to

safeguard its people. The government plays the puppet role. It manipulates the laws and regulations to benefit corporations and industries that contribute to the destruction of the environment. This collusion between the government and powerful entities not only disregards the welfare of the community but also perpetuates the cycle of exploitation and devastation. As a result, the community is left powerless and marginalized, unable to break free from the grip of poverty and hardship. The government's failure to address these environmental issues is a clear indication of their indifference towards the well-being of the community and their complicity in the destruction of the ecosystem.

As depicted in the novel, the government grants a foreign corporation, Pexton, the right to extract oil from Kosawa's land without consulting or compensating the local people. This is explicitly stated in the novel as: "Three decades before, in Bézam, on a date we'll never know, at a meeting where none of us was present, our government had given us to Pexton. Handed, on a sheet of paper, our land and waters to them" (p. 15). This blatant disregard for the rights and well-being of the indigenous people of Kosawa highlights the corrupt and exploitative nature of the government. It symbolizes the deep-rooted inequality and power imbalance that exists between foreign corporations and local communities. The consequences of this decision are devastating for the people of Kosawa, as they are forcibly displaced from their homes and their traditional way of life

is destroyed.

The government officials are careless and indifferent to the hardships faced by the indigenous people. As depicted in the novel, they prioritize the interests of foreign corporations over the well-being and rights of their own citizens (p. 275). This arrangement clearly shows the government's complicity in prioritizing corporate profits over the needs and rights of marginalized communities. The indigenous people are left to bear the burden of environmental degradation and health issues caused by the extraction activities, while the government turns a blind eye. This illustrates the extent of corporate greed and the lack of accountability that exists within the government, perpetuating the cycle of injustice and marginalization faced by these communities.

The government gives the people of Kosawa a false development promise, which can be expressed as a myth of development. The myth of development is a common tactic used by governments and corporations to justify their exploitative actions and disregard for human rights. In the case of Kosawa, the government presents the extraction activities as a means of economic growth and progress for the community. However, this promise of development is nothing more than a facade, as the true beneficiaries are the corporations reaping enormous profits from the exploitation of natural resources. The people of Kosawa are left with polluted lands, contaminated water sources, and a deteriorating quality

of life. The government's complicity in perpetuating this myth only serves to deepen the injustices faced by marginalized communities, further widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. The author highlights this fact in the following excerpts:

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? When we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, they told us it would soon be over, that we would all be well in no time. They asked us to come to village meetings, to talk about it. They told us we had to trust them (p. 6).

In this excerpt, the author shows how the myth of development, which the government subscribes to, is used to deceive the people and cover up the harmful effects of their actions. The government's insistence on attending village meetings and gaining the people's trust only further illustrates their manipulative tactics. This passage suggests that the government's priority is not the well-being of the people but rather maintaining control and perpetuating the illusion of progress and prosperity.

Secondly, in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, state vampirism is reflected in the government's

actions, which include the use of violence and intimidation to suppress dissent and maintain control. For example, soldiers are sent to villages to intimidate and threaten the people, and those who speak out against the government or Pexton are arrested or killed. The government also uses propaganda to control the narrative and portray itself as a benevolent force while demonizing those who oppose it (p. 153). In the novel, it spreads false information about dissenters, labeling them as terrorists or enemies of the company and the state. In addition, the government manipulates the media to silence any criticism or independent reporting, ensuring that their version of events is the only one that reaches the public. It uses these tactics, which is the insidious nature of vampirism, to drain life and autonomy from the people, leaving them powerless and voiceless in the face of an oppressive regime.

Think about it, Pexton isn't acting alone. They only have power over us because our government gave them power over us. The government gave them our land. The government sent the soldiers that afternoon. The government hanged our men. If we were to get Pexton to leave, wouldn't the government return in another form to continue smothering us? Which means that our ultimate enemy is not Pexton, it's our government (p. 254-255).

The novel portrays the government as being very cruel. The government is shown to use violence

and intimidation to suppress dissent and maintain control, as seen in the novel (p. 217) where soldiers take tax receipts from individuals and rip them up in front of the entire market, handcuffing and imprisoning those who object.

In Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, the government is also unresponsive to the needs and concerns of the people, and there is no mechanism for holding officials accountable for their actions. This lack of accountability allows officials to act with impunity and use violence to maintain their power. As a result, the citizens of Kosawa are left feeling helpless and voiceless, trapped in a never-ending cycle of oppression. This further reinforces the feeling of powerlessness and fuels their determination to fight for justice, even if it means risking their lives. The lack of response from the government only strengthens their resolve, as they refuse to be silenced and continue to resist the forces that seek to exploit and oppress them.

Whenever I saw one of his soldiers walking around Lokunja, ready to shoot, I was reminded of his iron fist around our necks. With the power vested upon them by His Excellency, the soldiers needed permission from no one to mete out punishment. Laws were for us to obey, not to question. I have relatives in the sibling-villages who had to give up lands so offices could be built and roads that connected our district to the rest of the country could be widened. One of my cousins,

they took his hut and left him with nothing. The soldiers said that if the government wanted someone's land, the government had the right to the land. My cousin went to the district office and cried, but all he was told was that nothing could be done: the orders came from Bézam, from His Excellency (p. 214).

In line with the concept of state vampirism, this excerpt shows how the state suppresses any resistance from its own people. The tormentors mentioned in the passage represent the oppressive state that thrives on controlling its citizens. The author suggests that no matter how well-behaved and non-violent the people are, the state still fails to recognize their humanity and grant them the basic rights to live their lives freely. This highlights the inherent power imbalance and the state's ability to suppress any form of dissent, perpetuating a system of state vampirism where the state feeds on the lives and rights of its own people.

Finally, in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, state vampirism is reflected in the government's involvement in corruption and its unresponsiveness to the needs and concerns of the people. Officials are often bribed by corporations, and there is no mechanism for holding them accountable for their actions. The government's insatiable greed and lack of empathy, much like a vampire, drain the life out of the community, leaving them impoverished and powerless. The citizens, like helpless prey, are

left to suffer the consequences of their leaders' insidious actions. Mbue's powerful portrayal of vampirism serves as a metaphor for the predatory nature of a corrupt government, ultimately highlighting the urgent need for change and justice. Corrupt officials, driven by their greed for personal gain, accept bribes from the oil company to overlook environmental regulations and exploit natural resources without regard for the local communities. As a result, these communities suffer from polluted water sources, displacement from their lands, and a loss of livelihoods.

What I can attest to is that, the day he ascended to the top in Bézam, 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 built houses in Europe grander than we can fathom. He has hired European men to paint pictures of him dressed like one of their kings. He has bought boats on which he dines with Americans. They say his shoes alone cost more money than a hundred men make in a year (p. 214).

In conclusion, *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue offers a profound critique of state vampirism. Through the experiences of the villagers of Kosawa, the novel exposes the exploitative practices of the state in collusion with multinational corporations, leading to environmental devastation, health crises, and cultural erosion. The state's indifference to its people's suffering and

its violent suppression of resistance further underscores the concept of state vampirism. The novel also highlights the emotional and psychological impact of state vampirism. The villagers live in constant fear and uncertainty, knowing that their protests could be met with violence from their own government. This creates a climate of fear and oppression, further illustrating the destructive effects of state vampirism.

2.8 The characters in the novel struggle to find a sense of safety and security in a world where their own government is their biggest threat. The emotional toll of living under such oppressive conditions is palpable, as the villagers grapple with feelings of helplessness and despair. The author effectively conveys the devastating consequences of state vampirism on both a personal and societal level, shedding light on the urgent need for change and resistance against such oppressive system

2.9 Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation, which is a direct result of false development, is a central theme in *How Beautiful We Were*, and it is reflected in various ways throughout the novel. The pollution of the land, water, and air is a major source of environmental degradation in the novel. The multinational corporation Pexton dumps toxic waste into rivers and the ocean, causing the death of fish and other marine life. They also emit harmful gases into the air, leading to respiratory problems

and other health issues for the local communities. They further dump industrial waste and chemicals, rendering the land infertile and unfit for agriculture. The government officials are complicit in this pollution, as they allow the corporation to operate without proper regulations or oversight.

Firstly, the pollution of the water is a serious concern in the novel. The text depicts how the oil company, Pexton, spills oil on the land with recklessness, which has led to pollution of the water. The river that runs through the villages is extremely polluted until the villagers are unable to fish in the river, which is their main source of livelihood. Mbue describes the deadly situation as:

"...the state of Kosawa only compounded her indecision—the graveyard had doubled in size in her absence; a few huts that had once been crowded with families now stood empty and derelict; so much oil had spilled into the big river that the little ones no longer called it the big river; they called it the sad water" (p. 247).

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

highlights the devastating consequences of corporate negligence and greed, emphasizing the urgent need for environmental protection and corporate accountability.

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 (p. 39).

This excerpt highlights the devastating consequences of water pollution on both the ecosystem and the livelihoods of the villagers. This stands as a stark reminder of the interconnectedness between the environment and human health. The once-thriving river, which used to sustain the villagers both physically and economically, has now become a toxic wasteland. The disappearance of fish not only affects the villagers' diet but also their income, as fishing was their main source of livelihood. This serves as a poignant example of how pollution can have far-reaching effects, impacting not only the natural world but also the well-being and survival of communities.

Secondly, air pollution is also a major theme in the novel *How Beautiful We Were*. The text describes how the oil company causes severe air pollution in the village of Kosawa through its gas flares, which emit toxic fumes and black smoke that cause respiratory problems and other health issues among the community members.

In the midst of all this, the gas flares got worse, the smoke blacker. For reasons we couldn't understand, the smoke always blew in our direction, never in the direction of Gardens and the hilltop mansion of the American overseer. 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 (p. 39).

It is evident that the community members in Kosawa are suffering greatly due to the harmful effects of the gas flares. The fact that the smoke always blows in their direction while sparing the wealthy American overseer highlights the unequal distribution of the consequences of oil production. The description of their skin shriveling and the need to shout over the flames paints a vivid picture of the extreme conditions they are forced to endure on a daily basis. The detrimental effects of the air pollution are further highlighted as the children of Kosawa suffer from chronic coughs and difficulty breathing. The village natives, who are already struggling with poverty and limited access to healthcare, find themselves helpless in the face of this environmental crisis. The pollution of the air is described in the following excerpt as affecting the overall health of the people:

That several of us would develop raspy coughs and rashes and fevers that would persist until our deaths? Please stay away from us with that ugly cough of yours,

we'd said to Wambi. But it wasn't just an ugly cough, we would later find out. The dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. Before we knew it, Wambi was dead (p. 11).

This serves as an obvious illustration of the devastating consequences of air pollution on human health resulting from unsafe development. The people's initial dismissive attitude towards Wambi's cough demonstrates their lack of awareness about the dangerous consequences of polluted air. Unfortunately, Wambi's condition worsened as the toxic air took a toll on his body, ultimately leading to his untimely death.

This symbolizes the tragic loss of life that can occur as a result of neglecting environmental concerns and prioritizing economic development, particularly in postcolonial environments. Wambi's death serves as a plain illustration that the pursuit of economic growth at all costs can have dire consequences for human well-being. It exposes the inherent flaw in prioritizing short-term gains over long-term sustainability and the need for balanced development strategies. Moreover, it highlights the urgent need for communities to be educated about the potential dangers of air pollution and to actively advocate for cleaner and healthier environments.

Moreover, *How Beautiful We Were* depicts how pollution from a developmentalist's oil company devastates the local ecosystem, destroying trees and other vegetation and making it difficult for

people to grow crops and raise livestock. Mbue's portrayal of the pollution of the soil serves as a powerful commentary on the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on the natural environment and the communities that depend on it. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, the toxic waste and spills from the oil refinery contaminate the soil, and the natives' farmlands are burned down as a result.

At the end of that first dry season, a pipeline burst and oil flooded the farm of the mother of one of my friends—her family barely had any harvest that year; some days, I had to share my food with her during recess. Weeks later, a new spill turned into a fire that ravaged the farms of six families, forcing mothers to go searching for new land deep in the forest, a trek that left many with little strength for toiling (p. 39).

From the excerpt, it is evident that the devastating effects of oil spills have had a profound impact on the local community. Not only do they contaminate the soil, but they also destroy the livelihoods of the natives, who depend on farming for sustenance. The consequences of these spills ripple through the community, leaving a trail of hunger, desperation, and the need for relocation.

The loss of fertile land due to the fire has further exacerbated the already dire situation. Without suitable land for farming, the families are left

with no choice but to venture into the unforgiving depths of the forest in search of new territory. This arduous journey takes a toll on their physical and mental well-being, leaving them with little strength to toil and cultivate the land they find. The struggle for survival becomes even more challenging as they face hunger and desperation; their once reliable source of sustenance is now tainted and destroyed by the oil spills. The need for relocation becomes inevitable as the community grapples with the devastating consequences of these environmental disasters.

This is one of the environmental challenges of false development that often goes unnoticed in postcolonial environments. The community's dependence on the land is further shattered as they witness the destruction of their sacred sites and the loss of their cultural heritage. Their connection to the land, which once provided them with a sense of identity and belonging, is now severed. The community is left with no choice but to seek refuge in unfamiliar territories, where they must adapt to new ways of life and struggle to preserve their traditions in the face of adversity. This environmental challenge serves as a stark reminder of the long-lasting impacts of colonialism and the urgent need for sustainable development that respects and protects indigenous communities and their environments.

Finally, noise pollution is a theme explored in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. The author states this as "the noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms,

in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy" (p. 39). The constant presence of noise from the oil field is not only an inconvenience but also a symbol of the destructive impact it has on the community. The author vividly describes how the noise permeates every aspect of their lives, from their bedrooms to the classroom to even the once serene forest. This incessant noise not only disrupts their daily routines but also weighs heavily on the air they breathe, further highlighting the pollution caused by the oil industry.

This is a constant reminder of the disruption and destruction caused by the industry in colonial and postcolonial environments. It becomes impossible for the community to escape the noise, as it follows them everywhere they go. The author's description of the heavy air suggests that the pollution from the oil field is not only auditory but also physical, affecting the overall well-being of the people and the environment. The perpetual noise and polluted air serve as a powerful symbol of the negative impact of the oil industry on the community's quality of life.

As depicted in the novel, the people of the community are constantly reminded of their diminished health and happiness due to the oil industry's presence. They are trapped in a never-ending cycle of suffering and despair as a result of noise pollution, toxic waste, and the constant fear of accidents and spills.

We are eating when we hear it, the sound

of an engine over the noise of our chewing, something chugging down the narrow road from Gardens... Ours is a small village, too little for noises of certain sorts to find hiding places. Even with the oil field nearby, cars seldom arrive in Kosawa, for there is nothing past us, nothing but trees and grass as far as one can travel, which is why the sound of an approaching vehicle is enough to make us pause and change the direction of conversations, speculating on who's in the car and what they've come for. The food in my mouth turns to garbage (p. 65).

The people of Kosawa, accustomed to the tranquility of their surroundings, are momentarily taken aback by the intrusion of noise and movement. It disrupts their peaceful existence, causing them to momentarily lose their appetite and focus on the unknown presence that has disrupted their quiet village life. Villages in Africa are known for their harmonious relationship with nature, where the sounds of birds chirping and leaves rustling create a soothing backdrop to daily life. The sudden intrusion of a vehicle's noise shatters this harmony, reminding the villagers of the outside world and its potential disruptions. It serves as a stark reminder that even in the most peaceful of places, change and uncertainty can always make their presence known. It is a reminder that the tranquility of the village is fragile and can be easily disrupted by developmentalists.

3. Discussion

Imbolo Mbue's literary masterpiece, *How Beautiful We Were*, intricately explores the contrasting perspectives of developmentalists and nativists regarding land, power dynamics, sustainable issues, state vampirism, and environmental degradation within a postcolonial ecocritical framework. The narrative vividly portrays the clash between these viewpoints, shedding light on the complexities of development and its impact on both people and the environment.

The developmentalists in the novel view land primarily as a resource for economic advancement, often disregarding the long-term consequences of their actions on the environment. Their exploitative mindset reflects a power dynamic where profit and progress take precedence over environmental sustainability and community well-being. In contrast, the nativists hold a deep reverence for the land, viewing it as a sacred resource that must be protected for future generations. This clash of perspectives underscores the underlying power dynamics at play, where marginalized communities are marginalized and exploited for the benefit of the powerful elite.

The concept of state vampirism emerges as a central theme in the novel, depicting how governments prioritize the interests of colonizers and multinational corporations over the needs of indigenous peoples. This state interference perpetuates environmental degradation and social ine-

quality, leading to a cycle of exploitation and oppression. The narrative exposes the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on local communities and ecosystems, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable practices and social justice.

Environmental degradation, a direct result of false development, is portrayed as a major source of concern in the novel. The pollution of land, water, and air by multinational corporations like Pexton leads to devastating consequences for the environment and public health. The complicity of government officials in allowing such practices further exacerbates the environmental crisis, emphasizing the detrimental effects of state vampirism on the ecosystem.

Overall, *How Beautiful We Were* serves as a powerful critique of the exploitative practices of developmentalists and the destructive impact of state vampirism on the environment and marginalized communities. The novel underscores the importance of reevaluating development paradigms to prioritize environmental protection, social justice, and sustainable practices in the post-colonial world. By examining the complexities of power dynamics, land ownership, and environmental degradation, the narrative prompts readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment, advocating for equitable and sustainable development practices that honor the well-being of both present and future generations.

4. Conclusions

In Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were*, the environmental consequences of development are a central theme. The novel explores the clash between the developmentalists' pursuit of economic growth and the natives' desire to protect the environment, emphasizing the destructive impact of unchecked industrial development on the natural world and local communities. Mbue critiques the exploitative practices of multinational corporations and governments, highlighting the concept of state vampirism, where governments prioritize economic gain over the well-being of their people and the environment. The novel vividly portrays how the myth of development perpetuates environmental degradation, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable practices that prioritize environmental protection and social justice. Through its powerful narrative, *How Beautiful We Were* sheds light on the complex relationship between development, environmental sustainability, and social inequality in the postcolonial world.

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