

Environmental Degradation as a Form of Identity Loss and (Re) Construction in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract

A people's identity is closely related to their environment. Their sense of belonging can be strengthened or eroded based on how they relate to it. This is one of the reasons why communities make efforts in ensuring that their environment is kept clean. However, in some instances, environmental pollution may arise as a result of the decisions made by those in power which may end up having adverse effects on people's relationships and rituals. This paper examines how the identity of a village named Kosawa in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is eroded as a result of environmental degradation that is fueled by the greed of local leaders and international corporations. Ironically, these environmental problems provide an avenue for women to redefine their identity by challenging traditional gender norms. The paper employs the theory of postcolonial ecocriticism to demonstrate how environmental problems arise from systems of domination. Taiye Selasi's concept of identity as relationships and rituals has also been used to demonstrate the link between identity loss and environmental degradation. Additionally, this paper uses Judith Butler's theory of performativity to discuss identity reconstruction.

Key Words: Environment, Identity, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Relationships, Rituals

INTRODUCTION

Set primarily in a village named Kosawa, *How Beautiful We Were* is a novel that explores the physical and psychological effects of environmental degradation that is fueled by greed. Imbolo Mbue gives an in-depth narration of these effects at family, community and national levels. She does this by using the strategy of shifting narrative voices between the children of Kosawa and members of the Nangi family. The novel covers the postcolonial period between 1980 to 2020 in which a progressive narration is given of how the oil mining company, Pexton, set its roots in Kosawa and the effects its activities have on the environment and the people of Kosawa. The people are tricked into believing that they will benefit economically from the oil mining activity

but instead, the environment is polluted and children begin to die. Those who attempt to get a solution from the government are killed and eventually, Kosawa is brought down. Mbue gives some of her characters the names of cities in Africa where the mining of different minerals takes place such as Juba (oil) and Lusaka (Copper). By so doing, Mbue presents the narrative as an allegory of Africa such that what happens in Kosawa can happen in any other postcolonial state in Africa.

Mbue (2021) in an interview with Arun Venugopal on “Fresh Air” remarks that the novel was inspired by her childhood experience of living in a place where an oil refinery was located in Cameroon. The people living in this place did not benefit from the wealth that came from the oil as much as the government and international corporations did. This is the same experience that the people of Kosawa in the narrative go through. She also suggests that the narrative is inspired by the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian environmentalist who was unlawfully executed through hanging because of putting up a fight against oil companies like Shell whose oil mining activities had adverse effects on the land and people. In the narrative, characters such as Malabo and Bongo encounter the same fate as they fight for environmental justice.

The people of Kosawa fight for the purification of their land as the pollution caused by Pexton not only leads to death, but also threatens their identity. This paper thus examines how environmental degradation leads to the erosion of people’s identity. It also demonstrates how environmental problems can become a trigger for women to (re)construct their identity through challenging gender norms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Zapf (2016) notes that in postcolonial ecocriticism, the focus is on environmental justice and the disaster that arises from industrialization (p.48). In as much as industrialization is viewed as a positive thing, Zapf (2016) explains that reckless economic exploitation has arisen from it which is a threat to the survival of people and the environment. Garrard (2023) further suggests that environmental problems arise from systems of domination and exploitation where those in power engage in capitalistic forms of production that result in destruction (p.26). In postcolonial African states, some of the leaders engage in the exploitation of nature for their own benefit at the expense of the lives of the people they are meant to serve. This is what Mishra (2016) terms as shallow ecology where the emphasis is on the systematic use of natural resources mainly for the benefit of men (p. 168). This leads to the development of an environmental crisis which Mbue reflects in Kosawa where the air and land are polluted because of oil mining. The water

becomes unsafe for drinking and there is a rapid increase in the death of the children such as Wambi.

Postcolonial eco-critics suggest that in order to deal with environmental problems, there is need for change in the political organization of States which might lead to positive developments (Zapf, 2016; Garrard, 2023). Postcolonial ecocriticism is thus used in this paper to demonstrate how environmental exploitation by those in power results in the people of Kosawa losing their identity that is tied to their environment. Further, the theory demonstrates how the children of Kosawa led by Thula advocate for a change in their political system as a means of restoring their land.

This paper also employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity and the ideas on identity proposed by the novelist, Taiye Selasi. It adopts Butler's idea of identity in discussing how it can be reconstructed when gender norms are challenged, and Selasi's argument on identity as (being) formed by one's experiences. Selasi also notes that identity loss results from restrictions which prevent people from living their identities. Butler (1990) in her theory of performativity views gender as "a stylized repetition of acts such that the appearance of something is a constructed identity which is a performative accomplishment that the actors and social actors come to believe and perform" (As cited by Mambrol, 2016). Therefore, gender identity can be viewed as a tradition. However, Butler argues that people can challenge traditional gender norms by performing identity differently. She notes that "the task is not whether to repeat but rather how to repeat, which displaces the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (As cited by Allen, 2024). Butler's notion of identity is used in discussing how environmental problems create an avenue for characters such as Sahel and Thula to challenge traditional gender norms that result in identity (re)construction.

Selasi in a TED talk she delivered in October 2015 titled *Don't Ask Where I'm from. Ask Where I'm a Local* defines identity based on the experiences that people have in a place. She says that people's relationships and rituals form these experiences. The places where these experiences occur are defined as home. Therefore, Selasi relates the identity of a person to their home (environment) and not necessarily to who other people say they are. Selasi however notes that there are restrictions such as poor governance that might hinder people from living where their meaningful relationships and rituals occur. This paper adopts Selasi's argument on identity in discussing how the relationships and rituals of the people of Kosawa are disrupted by greedy leaders such as His Excellency and international capitalism.

IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON RELATIONSHIPS AND RITUALS

Selasi (2015) posits that people's experiences (identity) are made up of their relationships and rituals. Relationships, she argues, are people who we constantly talk to face to face, be it physically or virtually. These people shape our emotional experiences and can be considered as home. In *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue writes of how the oil mining done by Pexton damages relationships at various levels. According to Gasztold (2022), this damage is embodied in the slow violence that the people of Kosawa face which comes in the form of fear, futile promises and death (p.202). Parents such as Yaya and Lusaka lose their children either because of air and land pollution as in the case of Lusaka, or as a result of their children joining the fight for the purification of their land as in the case of Yaya who loses both her children, Malabo and Bongo.

The narrative oscillates between the children of Kosawa and members of the Nangi family. It is mostly told by children which portrays the slow violence they face as a result of fear. The children are robbed of the relationships that they enjoy among themselves as they grow up such that they constantly live in fear of death. Wambi is among the first children to die and other children soon follow. It gets to a point that the children know that death is impartial (Mbue, p. 9). This becomes the motivating factor for the children to fight Pexton as they do not want their future generation to experience what they did when they were growing up. When Austin begs Thula, the one leading the children in the fight against Pexton and the Government, not to leave him and go back to Kosawa to lead the rest in a revolution, Thula remarks:

...he doesn't understand. How could he, when he didn't live our brand of fragile innocence? When his childhood didn't end with friends dying in succession? When he never went to sleep wondering if he'd live to see the next day, wondering if soldiers or drinking water would be his demise? How can he appreciate our resolve to give to the children what Pexton stole from us? (Mbue, p. 271)

In as much as the children do not get to fully experience the joys of childhood, they come together to fight for the cleansing of their land as it is only in Kosawa that they feel at home. Abbenyi (2007) notes that belonging to a land gives one an identity and history that is deeply grounded in a culture (p. 713). The children thus fight for the purification of their land as this would lead to the preservation and formation of lasting relationships that define their identity. Thula in her final letter to the children tells them that if they die in the process let it be that they died for peace (Mbue, p. 287). Even though some of the children unite to fight for their land when they grow older, they did

not get to enjoy much of the joys of child-child relationships when they were younger.

In addition, family relationships are damaged as a result of husbands taking part in fighting against Pexton. Abbenyi (2007) posits that women and children are mostly affected by the post-colonial relations to the urban environment that kills children's dreams, brings disillusionment and often death (p. 708-9). Women such as Sahel and Cccody become widows as their husbands are killed when they go to Bezam to try and find a solution for their polluted land. The children (when older) who take part in the fight are also not present for their families such that their wives spend many evenings comforting each other and they tell their children that one day their absentee fathers will spend more time with them (Mbue, p. 353). This results in the women and children experiencing great psychological effects. Sahel feels doomed to aloneness as she is widowed at the age of twenty-nine and is expected to be alone because her society says that women are built to endure (Mbue, p. 146). Mbue thus portrays that environmental degradation has adverse effects on people's relationships in that it leads to separation, loneliness and death. The destruction of the relationships of the people of Kosawa means that they do not get to experience relations which are meant to shape their identity.

Apart from relationships, rituals also build one's identity. Rituals are activities that people engage in constantly and can be viewed as traditional practices. In *How Beautiful We Were* some of the rituals the people of Kosawa engage in include celebrating new births, marriages, and when girls have their first menstruation. However, environmental pollution prevents the people of Kosawa from engaging in some of these rituals such that their offspring acquire new ways of performing these rituals. As the novel draws to a close, the child narrator says that "for births and deaths and marriages, their children celebrate in the ways of their former masters. They dance to their music as if theirs was a relic to be admired" (p. 359). As a result of Kosawa being burnt down to ashes on orders from His Excellency, the future generations of the people of Kosawa do not get to have any experiences in and of Kosawa and this is why the child narrator says that their children do not celebrate their rituals the way they did. In the final chapter of the narrative, Mbue writes that nothing is left of Kosawa other than ashes and memories such that the children of the children (from Kosawa) do not speak their language or recognize their Spirit (p. 355).

Selasi (2015) presents another view on rituals by arguing that rituals are more than traditional practices. They also include the things that people do daily with their close relationships in places they consider as home. In *How*

Beautiful We Were, one of the rituals Thula had with her father while young was chatting and laughing on the veranda in the evenings (p. 30). Thula would imagine herself and her father engaging in this ritual when he fails to return from his mission in Bezam. This results in her becoming withdrawn. Also, by using the child narrator, Mbue portrays the psychological effects that children experience as a result of environmental pollution as they cannot engage in daily activities with their meaningful relationships. Mbue writes that “the children feared their death was close such that they thought that with time they would have no friends their size with whom they could stick out their tongues and taste raindrops or play in the square” (p. 8).

POOR GOVERNANCE, IDENTITY RESTRICTION AND (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY

People’s experiences may be limited by various restrictions such as poor governance. This prevents them from living in the places where their most meaningful rituals and relationships occur (Selasi, 2015). The environmental pollution that occurs in Kosawa arises from neocolonialism and international capitalism. His Excellency and Pexton are driven by the need to make profits at the expense of the lives of the people of Kosawa. Political ecologists suggest that in order to deal with environmental challenges, “there should be change in the political organization of the society so that production to meet real needs replaces production for wealth accumulation” (Garrard, 2023, p.27). This is reflected in the narrative as Thula believes that a change in governance would lead to finding solutions for the environmental problems that they are facing.

Environmental degradation also demonstrates the persistence of colonial legacies in postcolonial African states. According to Gasztold (2022), some of the problems that African countries face are rooted in the colonial past, especially in terms of power relations (p.204). During the colonial period, the colonialists used force to make Africans work for them. Through Yaya’s recollections, we learn that during the colonial period, the men in Kosawa were forced to work in rubber plantations and those who resisted were shot dead. In the plantations, the men were treated harshly and forced to work for long hours. The wives of those who escaped were raped while their children were beaten in public (Mbue, p. 223). This kind of violence persists in post-colonial states in that leaders such as His Excellency in the narrative use power to get what they want. Zapf (2016) notes that this human drive to dominate nature in order to maximize on profits has resulted in sicknesses and death because of pollution (p.43). Those who are most affected are the people in the lower class who live where the exploitation of nature takes place, thus environmental problems are interconnected with class (Zapf,

2016). This is seen in the narrative through His Excellency who devalues the people of Kosawa as they are of a lower class than he is. By allowing Pexton to continue its operations, His Excellency contributes to the loss of identity of the people of Kosawa as they are unable to experience their meaningful relationships and rituals in their land.

His Excellency, just like the colonial masters, uses force to get his way. Failure to obey him often results in death. He uses force when the people of Kosawa kidnap the officials of Pexton by sending soldiers which results in a massacre that leaves the children traumatized. He also sends soldiers when the five (older) children kidnap Mr. Fish and his wife. The soldiers order the people of Kosawa to leave immediately and the village is burnt down to ashes. This abuse of power devalues the identity of the people of Kosawa such that they are forced to accept the terms created for them. This leaves those who survive with a feeling of nostalgia as they would like to return home (Kosawa) but they cannot (Mbue, p.360).

On the other hand, international corporations such as Pexton work with the government to exploit the land and the people. Despite the complaints made against Pexton, His Excellency allows the corporation to continue with its operations because of the wealth he gains from it (Mbue, p. 137). Pexton tells the people of Kosawa to direct their issues to their government and not to them as the government is the one that has allowed them to carry out its operations. However, it is evident that Pexton uses His Excellency's corrupt nature to enhance its operations. Gasztold (2022) suggests that the international capitalism shown through the link that Pexton has with the government "leads to the destruction of cultural heritage that erodes the traditional way of life for the people of Kosawa that serves as a basis of their self-identification" (p. 206).

During the colonial period, the colonizer was considered as the occident while the colonized were the orient. Said (1978) notes that while the occident is considered as ordered, rational, good and masculine, the orient is considered as irrational chaotic and feminine, (As cited in "An Introduction to Post Colonialism"). The colonizer saw African states as the 'other', ascribing feminine qualities to them. This colonial legacy continues to play in post-colonial states such that men are seen as the only ones deemed fit to rule the nation and a woman's attempt to rise in leadership is met with opposition or is not taken seriously. Boehmer (2005) further posits that the "national structure in nations have been organized according to masculine patterns" (p. 6). According to Boehmer, nationalism is an ideology that promises liberation and transformation through political action. However, it is also characterized by marginalization and the concretization of traditional gender

roles (p. 6) such that the woman remains 'othered'. Thula in Mbue's narrative comes to the realization that their biggest problem in fighting for the purification of their land is the government and not Pexton. This leads her to call for a revolution. However, she is not taken seriously as the head of the revolution that is expected to free her country from neocolonialism. A few people come to listen to her and some men even suggest that she gets married to their sons. His Excellency is also not shaken by Thula's campaigns since she is a woman. Mbue writes that the government yawned when they heard of Thula's village meetings and questioned what one angry woman could do (p.343). In as much as Thula's vision to liberate her country does not actualize, through her character, Mbue challenges the view that only men can lead. Thula's character creates a new possible identity of women as national leaders who are fearless. Through Thula putting up the fight to liberate her people, she becomes a voice for the marginalized women who are in the oriental position when it comes to leadership.

On the other hand, through Sahel, the single story of a woman being strong to endure after her husband's death is contested. Women in the narrative are not expected to marry after their husbands die. Chimamanda Adichie, during a TED talk delivered in 2009 titled *The Danger of a Single Story*, notes that the single story is defined by power. It creates stereotypes which are incomplete. It robs people of humanity, makes recognition of humanity difficult and emphasizes differences instead of similarities. Sahel is seen as a woman who becomes embittered after the death of her husband who was part of the delegation that had gone to Bezam to find a solution for the environmental pollution they were facing. She is widowed at the age of twenty-nine and cannot be romantically involved with another man because tradition does not expect her to. Mbue presents Sahel as a woman who still longs for comfort after Malabo's death such that she does not mind having a secret affair with the Cute One. Mbue challenges this tradition through Yaya who encourages Sahel to give the Cute One's uncle a chance. At first, Sahel feels that by so doing she will be betraying her dead husband, but later on embraces this idea. Mbue thus challenges the norm of widowed women remaining in singlehood such that she presents a possibility for them to find happiness again in new relationships.

Through the characters of Thula and Sahel, Mbue gives women agency amidst environmental degradation. These women are able to perform identity differently which Butler argues enables them to displace the gender norms that society has created for them. This results in them defining a new identity for themselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the link between identity and the environment. The environment is the space (land) where the people of the fictional village of Kosawa in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* experience their relationships and rituals which form their identity. However, as a result of environmental degradation that arises from neocolonialism and international capitalism, the identity of the people of Kosawa is eroded. Mbue shows the interconnectedness of the environment and people such that as the environment is degraded so is the lives of the people that inhabit it, especially those who do not have power. However, these environmental problems trigger women to reconsider gender norms which results in them (re)constructing their identities.

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