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## Land Deterioration and Environmental Damage: A Postcolonial Eco-critical Study of *How Beautiful We Were*

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### Abstract

The paper tries to answer, how western corporations are responsible for land deterioration and environmental damage under the guise of development. It brings forth neocolonial forces into the limelight that have caused ecological damage. The study is guided by the postcolonial eco-critical model of Huggan and Tiffin (2010). Huggan and Tiffin assert the intertwined correlation among environmental violence, marginalization of the indigenous groups, and destruction of land by the neocolonial agencies. The findings are based on data supplied by textual analysis of the novel. The study reveals the ways in which oil corporations exploit the resources, contaminate the land, damage the environment, and cause economic inequality. It is a typical fictional study of neocolonial agencies' ironic dreams of development and progress. The novel not only voices the environmental injustices and the disastrous consequences of Oil Corporation but also cultural and social marginalization of locals. It has been suggested that western neocolonial corporations are the real culprits of ecological damage in Asia and Africa. Therefore, time is ripe for the world to reverse the damage and take a step towards inclusive and human centered sustainable development.

**Keywords:** postcolonial ecocriticism; environmental exploitation; development; oil corporations

### Introduction

The Swahili proverb reflects that when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers (Dyer, 1994). The proverb touches on a significant element of colonization; highlighting the fact that the environment suffers in conjunction with its colonized inhabitants. Humans are collectively considered as a geological force that alters ecosystems, it raises an important question: who starts this process of alteration of environment? In an answer to this question, Sloterdijk (2015) speaks of a 'Eurocene' or 'Technocene', marking western industries and their technocracy as the main culprits of environmental degradation. The responsibility of environmental injustices and calamities



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are on the shoulders of western upper-class agents (Haraway, 2015; Di chiro, 2017). Hence, much of the human and ecological exploitation is a result of imperial colonizing efforts. The Empire has been a significant factor in the climate change and use of fossil fuels. This complicated connection has reconciled ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. It has given rise to ideology of postcolonial ecocriticism that continues to flourish in literary and critical realms. While post colonialism is concerned with displacement and Diaspora; ecocriticism turns on the ethics of locality and stresses the sense of place (Nixon, 2005). Both theories seem to thrive on upturning binaries: for postcolonial, the west/ other binary, and ecocriticism, the human/ nature binary.

Postcolonial ecocriticism draws attention to the fact that the indigenous natives often live in polluted environments. The effects of climate and environmental change in the developed countries are foregrounded, while in the developing countries, it appears more remote and is pushed into the background. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) also claim that the voices of the environmental catastrophes in the periphery are always neglected. This further leads to complex interdependencies of environmental conditions, social, historical, and cultural factors to the long history of colonization. Nixon (2011) considers global climate change as a slow form of violence that starts, fosters, and thrives on environmental changes. In this neocolonial approach, postcolonial nations suffer through the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift deforestation, acidifying oceans, polluted water, and other environmental catastrophes. Feldman and Hsu (2007) claim that such issues remain linked to the question of the race where indigenous people are more prone to face such calamities. The infrastructure of postcolonial nations was designed primarily for the benefit of resource extraction, rather than for sustainability and repair, hence they are robbed of resources. Said (2001), in his book *'Power, Politics and Culture'* also reflects that imperialism is predicated on an act of geographical violence and regaining sovereignty over the land and natural resources. Europeans justified their annexation and appropriation of indigenous land on the basis that the natives were uncivilized and



lacked recognizable skills, unable to tame and cultivate nature. Hence, their land can be appropriated directly by industrious and rational colonists (Benton, 2007). To try and prevent the world's elite from taking economic, social, and political advantage of developing third world, postcolonial ecocriticism becomes imperative. This will help avoid the missteps of the past and prevent the worst of the catastrophe in future that is looming on the horizon.

The landscape is a prominent part of African culture that echoes its history and points towards the genesis of human relations with the land. African ecology is known for its vast green landscapes and dense vegetation. The continent has always tempted foreigners to explore the fascinating culture of flora and fauna. In the long history of colonization, the west clawed through Africa, scraped away its resources, spoiled the land, and murdered its people. This theme is further explored by Imbolo Mbue in the novel, *'How Beautiful We Were'* (2021). The novel reflects both postcolonial and environmental concerns, illuminating a lucid connection between the oppression of colonized people and the pollution of natural environment. The story of corporate greed and environmental destruction serves as an elegy to lost land.

The novel opens in an African village, Kosawa that is touched by the United States from thousands of miles away. Ever since the American oil company installed pipelines in the village, the toxic polluted chemicals poisoned much of the water, clogged the air and food and ruined the land, resulting in undrinkable water, falling of acid rains, rendering farmlands infertile, and death of children. Moreover, the masters' promises of cleanup and financial reparations were made and ignored. The oil company promised 'prosperity' but failed to protect the local people and the environment. They instead reaped only sickness, diseases and deaths (Charles, 2021). The novel celebrates the communal way of life lived close to nature but it ends without offering any solution as it incites action to change the situation. The novel persuasively depicts the capitalist motivations behind colonialism and imperialism that harm both environment and



people. By emphasizing the correlation between the oppression of colonization and damage to the natural environment, the novel supports a postcolonial eco-critical reading in its holistic critiques of capitalist imperialism.

Hence, the current study, through postcolonial ecocriticism aims to unveil how the environment has and is still been radically altered by colonialism and how power relations, industrialization, and colonization affect climate and result in environmental violence. It has been suggested that western neocolonial corporations are the real culprits of ecological damage in Asia and Africa. Therefore, time is ripe for them to reverse the damage and take a step towards sustainable development for the good of everyone.

### **Literature Review**

Global climate change is probably the biggest threat to the only inhabitable planet, the Earth and to human civilization. The seriousness of the topic and urgency of the situation have stimulated academicians, theorists and researchers from not only the domain of natural but also social sciences and humanities. Postcolonial ecocriticism is the brainchild of contemporary critical arguments on the ecosystem and climate change. The framework is still very new and there are wide open spaces and gaps in it that need the focus of literary theorists and environmentalists. Human agency as a geological force affects all aspects of the ecosystem, particularly climate and land. Much of the human and ecological degradation is a result of imperial colonizing efforts. The postcolonial analysis needs to reflect on the human condition without losing sight of environmental violence. Hence, it is important for a postcolonial critique to include an ecological perspective (Nixon, 2011; De Loughrey et al., 2015; Heise, 2017).

Postcolonial ecocriticism has broadly discussed the connection between economic growth and imperialism. As theorized by Huggan and Tiffin (2010), postcolonial ecocriticism asserts the intertwined correlation between environmental violence and the marginalization of the indigenous groups. Western ideologies of development are often associated with a 'top-down' form of economic management. In this regard neocolonialist global corporation march to the indigenous land for industrialization but



in reality, bring disastrous cultural and ecological effects. Mackenthun (2015) further claims that the practice of industrialized nations of locating nuclear plants or oil companies on the properties of the natives has given birth to the concept of environmental racism. This theoretical affinity unveils the abuses of the masters with an ethical commitment to improve the conditions of the oppressed. Hence, it is a matter of the conquest of nature by appropriating local resources.

The present study is directed by postcolonial ecocriticism, applying the framework of Huggan and Tiffin (2010). They have displayed major concerns about the ecological history where the colonizers exploit indigenous land in the name of development and civilization. This is achieved through several methods e.g. media, commerce, trade, commercialization and financial aids. The following sections highlight the elements of the selected theoretical framework in detail.

### **Land**

The concept of land is very pivotal to both postcolonial and ecological theorists. The land is the converging point between two contradicting and relatively dissimilar fields of study. Almost all postcolonial critics and their narrative is grounded in the European colonization of lands in Asia and Africa. In postcolonial theory, land is more than a place or terrain. Land is the source of bread, culture, and above all dignity. On the other side, ecology also accentuates the importance of land. Ecologists consider land as a terrestrial biosphere or ecosphere. Along with air and water land is the place where both biotic and abiotic components not only survive but thrive. So, land is the converging point of ecology and post-colonialism. Former talks about aesthetics and cleanliness and later stresses historicity and custody of land.

Huggan and Tiffin highlight the significance of land at multiple levels. According to them, "Land is not land alone, we breathe into it, it is touched by our modes and memories" (2010, p. 115). The idea of land goes far beyond the land itself. It is the site of memories, moods and the air that people breathe. Besides, land includes "soil, water, plants and animals" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 106). This over inclusive definition of the



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land incorporates everything above and inside the land as land. Likewise, Zammito et al. (2008) considers the land as a nonhuman member of the community. Hence, when a colonizer subject kills an animal, cuts a plant, digs out the soil, and exploits the natural resources or any other malicious activity that damages land comes under the jurisdiction of postcolonial ecocriticism.

If the land is of so much importance, then the question arises who controls the land. Here, Huggan and Tiffin touch upon the most sensitive and controversial idea of land rights. Contrary to postcolonial critics who consider land as the property of those who reside over it, postcolonial ecocriticism does not consider it a commodity. According to Huggan and Tiffin (2010), “humans must abandon the view that land is a commodity and come to be seen not as conquerors of nature but citizens on it” (p. 44). This sets the ground that land is not personal property but a universal asset. It has a right of continued existence in the pure, cleanest and natural form. These critics oppose both the developmental and nativist view. The former, that land belongs to people and the later that people belong to land. But if land is no one’s property then how it is going to be used? Huggan and Tiffin (2010) explain that use of land is the right of the individuals who inhabit it with the regulation and prior perception of the environment.

Furthermore, postcolonial ecocriticism has exposed the colonizers’ ulterior motives of the exploitation and the plunder of land and its resources. According to Huggan and Tiffin (2010) this right to loot the land and resources is usually justified on two grounds. First is the “self-accorded right of conquest or discovery” (p. 121). Land does not belong to aboriginal people but it is the property of one who conquers or discovers it. This thought sowed the seeds of colonization and the desire to expand the empire. On this pretext, European colonizers drained the resources from Asia and Africa. With strong armies and naval power colonizers captured and discovered the lands across the globe and altered the ecosystems by exploiting resources. The second pretext is the “inability of the natives to use land” (p. 121). According to Harris (2013), this pretext is





neo-colonialist in nature. The land belongs to the indigenous people but as they cannot make use of the land, therefore, multinational corporations and global chains gain the right to exploit it. Showing quixotic dreams of development and under the guise of globalization, western MNCs annihilate the diversity of flora, fauna and above all human lives and dignity.

Huggan and Tiffin (2010) also explain the process of westerners' exploitation of land in Asia and Africa. They quote horrifying stories of environmental degradation and human displacement emanating from the activities of American oil companies in the Niger Delta. "In the first tradition, the landscape is rendered empty or silent" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 99). The forceful displacement of the natives, cutting trees and damaging the biodiversity is making land empty and silent. Bringing in the case study of native tribes from the Niger delta, Huggan and Tiffin mention how they were forced to empty land for the American multinational giant- Shell. The oil company has emptied the flora, fauna, lives and culture of the delta. Once the land is emptied, in the second step, it is polluted, but only at the expense of removing the labor of those hands that make the landscape speak. The emptied land is polluted with machines, chemicals and foreign workers at the cost of biodiversity. De Loughrey (2014) posits that land is dotted, decayed and ruined with the remnants of grandeur ancient. This circle of emptying the land and inhibiting it once again with something foreign and artificial, Trulijo, (2016) titles it "marketability of nature" (p. 32). The Wilderness, cleanliness and culture of the land is traded for minerals, oil and timber.

### **The Myth of Globalization and Development**

One of the central thoughts of postcolonial ecocriticism is contesting and challenging the "western ideologies of development and providing alternatives" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 27). By rightly rejecting the western notion of development and entitling it as a myth, postcolonial ecocriticism accentuates local solutions for local problems rather than foreign. Development is a western capitalist ideology forced upon the eastern countries under the pretext of globalization and expansion. According to



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Huggan and Tiffin (2010) “development is largely filtered through economic myths of progress: ‘amenity’, ‘benefit’, ‘improvement’” (p. 71). There are a number of fundamental reasons why postcolonial ecocriticism detests development.

Development has snatched more than it gifted. A shift from agrarian to industrialist economy and society has engendered the thought that flora and fauna are of no worth to the globe. This shift of practices and ideologies has caused huge damage to both humans and ecology. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) say that undervaluation of indigenous people and environmental abuses are practiced in the name of development. Development has pauperized millions of people in the agrarian sector by diminishing the stock of plants, water and soil at an alarming rate. The overvaluation of western substance-based corporations has ravaged the relationship between nature, the non-human world and the human community. Therefore, Black (1999) considers development a “disguised form of neocolonialism” (p. 268). Development primarily serves the political and economic interests of the west.

Within the human community, development has widened the rift of haves and have-nots Marxist critic Lazarus (2006) titles it “development’s destruction” (p.12). He considers development a synonym of destruction. The question arises if development is detrimental to the global ecosystem and environment then why a comprehensive climate treaty is not signed to check the environmental degradation and human displacement. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) have a very simple answer to it. Environmental degradation is not tackled largely because it will tackle the growth of capitalism. They believe that development and environmental sustainability can’t go hand in hand as the western world prefers capital over nature.

Rejecting the western idea of development, postcolonial ecocriticism propounded indigenous and ecological ideas of development. Firstly, “development is first and foremost human development” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 29). If development is not benefiting the indigenous population and causes deaths, displacement and damage then





it is rather a destruction as said by Lazarus. Secondly, “development of an environment arbiters between people and nature” (p. 80). Huggan and Tiffin define this as sustainable development. It strengthens and mediates between humans and the environment rather damaging that relationship. Escobar (1997) explains it as a human-centered developmentalization of the environment. A model of development in which both the environment and humans are the beneficiaries. Thirdly, development is all-inclusive. According to Huggan and Tiffin (2010) historically marginalized social groups are equally rewarded and recognized through sustainable development. This idea of development never creates the rift of haves and have-nots. This postcolonial Eco critical view of development is human-centered, environmentally friendly, participatory, and sustainable.

### **Research Methodology**

The study employs a non-empirical research approach in which the data is based on the interpretation of a literary text to present the major findings of the research. The study uses the text, *‘How Beautiful we were’* (2021) that is analyzed in the light of Huggan and Tiffin’s model (2010) of Postcolonial Ecocriticism. Morrow and Brown (1994) describe non-empirical research as text-based research. Further, Mouton (2001) reflects that non-empirical research is based on the theory that starts with its application and ends with results controlled by the theory. The present study has also selected a novel and is directed by Postcolonial ecocriticism theory, the framework of Huggan and Tiffin (2010).

Since the study is non-empirical, it opts for textual analysis as a data analysis tool. Krippendorff (2004) defines textual analysis as a research technique for making valid inferences from the text. According to Mckee (2003), textual analysis is “a way to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (p. 1). It shows that textual analysis is not only a research method of data analysis but of understanding human beings and their nature. Besides this, textual analysis is a technique to acquire critical textual meaning from a piece of a given literary text (Cuddon, 1999). A literary text is studied and analyzed critically by a researcher in the light of theory through textual



analysis. Similarly, interpretation of the selected novel and building opinion in the light of postcolonial ecocriticism theory is the main objective of this research study. Hence, all these features of textual analysis make this a suitable method of data analysis that is to be used in this study.

Textual analysis is carried through close, in-depth reading to analyze the selected novel. Close reading is disciplined, mindful reading of an object that helps deepen understanding its meaning (Brummett, 2018). It is a systematic and organized method of looking into text and searching the related material from the entire text. Close reading is to understand meaning between the lines besides surface-level superficial meaning. This careful interpretation will aid in understanding the text from the point of view of the elements of theory. This research technique questions the relationship between us and text and how we see text and represent (Rockwell, 2003). Therefore, a close reading will be used as a technique for analyzing the text of the selected novel.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Development: A Disguised form of Colonialism

Huggan and Tiffin (2010) together with postcolonial critics consider western ushered development as a disguised form of colonialism. The novel *How Beautiful we Were* (2021) justifies the similar notion. The exploitation of resources, contamination of culture and degradation of the environment were carried out under the noble cause of development.

The novel mentions that “drilling for oil would bring something called “civilization” and “prosperity” (p. 78). Unveiling the unreal dreams of progress, Pexton (A fictional American oil company) drills the land. The ordinary indigenous people of Kosawa (fictional town in Africa) were bamboozled by the ideal vision of progress and development. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) also elucidate that “development is largely filtered through economic myths of progress: ‘amenity’, ‘benefit’, ‘improvement’ (p. 71). With the little dreams of brick houses, Kosowan people cherished the arrival of Pexton and discovery of oil under their land. As Thula- a girl child-says in the novel that



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“our parents rejoiced and believed in Pexton’s lie” (p. 78). Innocent indigenous people did not smell the upcoming menace. Therefore, Huggan and Tiffin consider this neo-colonization of corporations as the worst form of colonialism.

In this regard Kadafa (2012) compares the first arrival of European colonizers under the pretext of ‘civilization’ and now the arrival of their corporation with the golden dreams of progress and development. In this regard Yaya -old lady- says in the novel that “all people from overseas are the same, don’t they? The Americans, the Europeans, every single overseas person who has ever set foot on our soil, you know they all want the same thing” (Mbue, 2020, p. 107). Earlier European colonization for ivory, slaves and rubber and now American corporation for the oil. Kosawa’s people realized that nothing useful had arrived from the shores. Therefore, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) focus on the localized generation of wealth and local solutions for the local problems rather foreign.

Furthermore, Huggan and Tiffin define how western led Multinational Corporations function and exploit the resources by deeply damaging the ecosystem. They first pledge to bring prosperity to the land. As it is found in the novel how Pexton showed a prosperous future to the people of Kosawa. Moreover, MNCs get the license of exploitation as the natives don’t have technology to use what is beneath their earth. Taking the advantage of “inability of the natives to use land” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010 p. 121) corporations do all the malpractices. Rowell (2017) summarizes it as corporations arrive to provide panacea for the world's problems but in reality they trigger human and environmental catastrophe. A catastrophe that is inestimable and can only be felt not counted and measured. Kosawa’s people later realized the gravity of the situation when Bongo says, “we now realize the fullness of the curse that came from living on the land beneath which oil sat” (p. 31). The natural resources that should have brought prosperity but contrastingly have caused death of children and proved a curse for locals. Thus Black (1999) considers this model of development as exploitative and self-privileging.



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The wealth generated in Kosawa ends up in the hands of corporations; only unusable toxic residues become the fate of inhabitants. As Sahel in the novel says, “no reason why citizens should lack when the country had bauxite, oil, and timber” (p. 342). Not to speak of improvement of the living condition, Kosawans suffered despite wealth under their feet. People of Kosawa needed land to cultivate and rivers to drink water, not the oil. Thus, it was evident how something useless for people of Kosawa can bring prosperity in their lives. Huggan and Tiffin consider this as a neo liberal development rather than egalitarianism. The oil drilled from Kosawa was of no use to the indigenous people. As Malabo explains to Thula, “Pexton came to Kosawa to get oil so that their other friends in America would have oil for their cars” (p. 32). The oil fueled the cars and energized the industries in America while the ecosystem and humans suffered a great loss in Kosawa. Yaya, Sahel, Bongo and Thula smelled the oil in their air while American powered their machines with the same.

The western led and owned pseudo development has also stratified the world. As Marxist critic Lazarus (2006) claims that the world is more unequal today than before as the gap between the haves and have-nots has increased. As Mbue (2020) mentions in the novels “Woja Beki drinks bottled water of Bezam, lives in brick houses and wears American clothes” (p. 43). Woja Beki was rewarded for supporting Pexton. Intervention of neocolonial forces made a class of people whose mean of production-Land- was destroyed and a class of people like Woja Beki who thrived. Once an egalitarian community, Kosawa was now divided into haves and have-nots as a result of development. Furthermore, the gap between poor Kosawa and rich city Bezam within the same country speaks volumes about the rising gap. As Thula writes in the letter addressed to the Kosawans “Flickers of progress are brightening lives in isolated corners of the world” (p. 287). This development benefits the few at the expense of a major portion of the world. Therefore, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) consider this form of development that snatches more than it gifts, a disguised form of colonialism.



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### How Ugly We Are: The Story of Kosawa's Land

Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is an account of the cultural and environmental transformation of an imaginary African village at the hands of neocolonialist agents. The novel addresses the journey of Kosawa's land from purity to pollution. This section analyzes and discusses the environmental degradation and cultural deterioration of Kosawa from the lens of Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) neologism of Land.

Huggan and Tiffin believe that Land is not land alone. It includes soil, water, plants and animals (2010). In this regard the story of Kosawa's land in the novel is the story of destruction of almost everything that Huggan and Tiffin define as land at the hands of neocolonial agencies. The portrayal of destruction of land is in the very first sentence of the novel. Children of Kosawa say, "Sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, our land should be dead soon" (Mbue, 2021, p. 6). The children of Kosawa were well aware of the environmental degradation. They know acid rains from the sky and poison from the rivers will put everything to death. As Yaya says, "One day, we know, our world and our ways will vanish in totality" (p.36). This neo colonial dual onslaught on both the culture and environment makes the little world of Kosawa inhabitable for the people. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) highlight the significance of land. According to them "we breathe into it, it is touched by our modes and memories" (p. 115). But in the novel natives cannot breathe in Kosawa, their memories are wiped out and their modes are being remolded. Discovery of Oil in Kosawa brings with it not prosperity but cultural and environmental catastrophes.

Mbue (2021) describes the level of pollution and its consequences after the unfortunate arrival of Pexton- an imaginary American Oil Corporation. Water, the most essential and vital component of life, was the first thing to be contaminated. As Thula- a girl child - describes "Mama and papa cautioning me never to go near the big river covered with oil and toxic wastes" (p. 31). Once clean and pure water of the big river that Thula's ancestors used to swim in, changed into a dirty and toxic place. The native inhabitants of Kosawa were barred from swimming in their own river and drinking its



water. It was not only the humans who were devoid of the benefits of the river but also the fishes. As mentioned in the novel "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. 35). This "environmental apocalypticism" as defined by Buell (1995) is the outcome of blatant violation of nature. Kadafa (2012) in her environmental study of the contamination of the rivers of Niger Delta because of Oil exploration says that "rivers don't just provide water, but they are sacred source of civilization" (p. 41). The toxification of the river deprives the people not only from the water but also the deep-rooted civilization and culture that thrived on its banks. Along with the ecosystem, the old ways of indigenous people were spoiled and poisoned. Once thriving land of Kosawa later becomes a mammoth oil well. Besides river water, the amount of poison was so high that it seeped into the underground water. As described in the novel "It was poison not water, the toxins that had seeped into the well's water from Pexton's field" (p.12). The underground water of the well and flowing water of the big river both were filthy and unfit for use. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) consider it as an environmental nightmare.

Kosawa's pure and clean air in which Thula's ancestors breathed for centuries is smoky, dirty and deadly after intervention of neo colonial agents. Mbue (2021) describes "the air of Kosawa progressed from dirty to deadly" (p. 35). Besides, the smoke and soot emitted from Pexton's oil fields make the air unbreathable. The level of the air pollution in Kosawa can be gauged by the way that even rains will not bring water but acid on the ground as mentioned in the novel "sky began to pour acid" (p. 6). Yaya, Sahel, Juba, Bongo, Malabo and other indigenous people of Kosawa had no right over their air. As mentioned "they (Pexton) own the air we breathe" (p. 101). Neocolonialist corporations like Pexton claim the right over land on the pretext that it's a natural commodity and we have the right to exploit it. Huggan and Tiffin deny their claims and say "human must abandon the view that land is commodity and come to see not as conquerors of nature





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but citizens within it" (2010, p. 44). Land (that includes water and air) can only be rightly used when neocolonialist corporations consider them stakeholders of the land rather than conquerors with greed of resources.

Moreover, the noise of the machines and sound of explosions have disturbed the peace and silence of Kosawa. As mentioned in the novel "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. 35). The tumultuous noises plagued the peace and overshadowed the chattering of birds and hissing of animals. The noise pollution as we call it added to the psychological disturbance of the people of Kosawa.

Besides water, air and noise the topographic outer land surface was directly devastated by the wrongdoings of Pexton. The novel brings in notice all the environmental problems including the deforestation, oil spills, landslides, fires, sea intrusion and infertility of the soil. Kosawa's land was also devastated by the network of the pipelines under and over it. As mentioned "Trees were felled all over the valley to make room for the oil field and pipelines" (p. 77). Forests were erased and trees were cut to make space for the pipelines and oil wells. With it animals, birds and the entire ecosystem of the place was altered. Oil spill and fire made the land infertile for crop production. "Farms that had been rendered useless after fires; they examined the shriveled-up products of our soil. (p. 142). Kosawa's soil will no longer produce the crops to sustain the life over it. Network of pipelines under and over the land represented the authority and claim of neocolonialist agents over the Kosawa's soil. As the novel says, "pipelines violated the sanctity of the soil" (p. 214). These neocolonial malpractices damaged the ecosystem and the livings of the indigenous people. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) elucidate that these neocolonial practices dispose the locally generated wealth and fundamental human rights. The possessions of the locals of Kosawa including, land, water, crops and air were taken over and vandalized. All this was carried out under the pretext of development and sustainability.



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### **Pexton as a Neo Colonial Corporation of Exploitation**

Who is more powerful - countries or corporations? A million dollar question in the age of globalization. Chamberlin (2003) in his study titled "If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories" discusses the devastating stories of powerful corporations. According to him indigenous claims over the land are weaker than corporations' claims. Similarly, in the novel *How Beautiful We Were* an imaginary American oil company 'Pexton' was more powerful and influential than indigenous people. Pexton is an undeclared dictator that owns everything above and over the Kosawa as mentioned "they even own the air we breathe" (P. 101). These are the corporations "whose bellies are never full" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 90). Pextons is the neo colonial organ that damages the land, cuts the forests, poisons the water, disturbs the social fabric, and above all kills the people for the sake of their greed. *How Beautiful We Were* is an account of how a corporation does all these things under the guise of development and sustainability and still goes unpunished.

Ziai (2007) claims that these transnational companies are the tail ends of the colonial movement. They have still kept the colonial tradition alive till date in a different way. Pexton bought the loyalty of Woja Beki and the government like a typical colonial country. As said in the novel "he (Woja Beki) descended from the same ancestors as us, but Pexton had bought him" (p. 8). This made it easier for the Pexton to do what it wanted to under the patronage of powerful man and head of community. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) quote the example of Shell and Chevron that how they twanged ecological war in the Niger Delta under the protection of the Nigerian government. In the novel Mbue brings the similar story but in fiction.

Furthermore, Mbue describes Pexton as "greedy and reckless". It is the corporation, more powerful than the people, courts, and countries. It uses all the means of dictatorial control e.g. repression of the opponents, suppression of the dissent, curbing the freedom of media and forceful disappearances of the people. In addition, the ecological damage caused by Pexton is inestimable and enormous. In the novel, Yaya



compares Pexton with European colonizer countries. She says “I asked which was worse: the European masters, or Pexton and the government. My husband shrugged and said he couldn’t decide. Maybe the masters were better” (p. 231). Therefore, Pexton’s control over the Kosawa seems more strict and oppressive than that of any European colonizer. Despite the struggles of the restoration movement, protests of American people, media campaigns by the Austin and Thula, and interference of American courts, Pexton stands on the land of Kosawa taller and stronger than before.

Moreover, the deaths and massacre carried out by the Pexton in the greedy pursuit of wealth and the ecological damage caused is irreversible. Kosawa was changed into the oil well and indigenous people were displaced. As Juba said, “we have no land left to fight for” (p. 367). The sacrifices of Malabo, Bongo, Thula, countless children, the mango trees, big river and animal species were in vain. Pexton did not only snatch the land, life, and ecosystem but the culture as well. As Juba mourns in the end of the novel “our children speak English and recognize foreign spirit” (p. 368). This cultural and environmental damage in the developing countries by the corporations like Pexton is aptly described by Arundhati Roy in her essay *End of Imagination*.

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe? (Roy, 1999, p. 124).

### Conclusion

This study has examined the role of neocolonial corporations in creating environmental and cultural catastrophe with reference to Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The study has explored how western multinational corporations are responsible for land deterioration and environmental damage under the guise of development as



reflected in the selected novel. Since the present study is about imperial colonizing efforts in human and ecological exploitation, Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) model of Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a theoretical framework has guided this study. The key arguments based on findings of this study reveal the cultural and environmental transformation of an imaginary African village at the hands of neocolonialist agents. The novel addresses the journey of Kosawa's land from purity to pollution. Discovery of Oil in Kosawa brings with it not prosperity but cultural and environmental catastrophes. This neo colonial dual onslaught on both the culture and environment makes the little world of Kosawa inhabitable for the people. Water, the most essential and vital component of life, was the first thing to be contaminated. The native inhabitants of Kosawa were barred from swimming in their own river and drinking its water.

Kosawa's pure and clean air in which the ancestors breathed for centuries became smoky, dirty and deadly after intervention of neo colonial agents. Besides, the noise of the machines and sound of explosions have disturbed the peace and silence of Kosawa. Besides water, air and noise pollution, the topographic outer land surface was directly devastated by the wrongdoings of Pexton. The novel brings in notice all the environmental problems including the deforestation, oil spills, landslides, fires, sea intrusion and infertility of the soils in the novel. Furthermore, the oil corporation disturbed the entire social fabric by creating inequality and classes of haves and have-nots that divided the Kosawa. Moreover, the next generation of Kosawa was cut off from the roots and became alien to ancestral language and culture. The novel brings out the fictional case study that how greedy MNCs and their supporters have devastated the environment, purity, and old customs under the guise of globalization.

The study recommends that western neocolonial corporations are the real culprits of ecological and cultural damage in Asia and Africa. They must be held responsible for the environmental and cultural genocide. The time is ripe for western world to accept the crimes they committed under the pretext of development. They must feel responsibility



and help the developing countries in reversing the damage. In this regard role of world organization like UNO is vital. Policy of sustainable development is needed that does not stratify the society and damage the ecosystem. Earth needs development that is suitable, sustainable all-inclusive and above all human centered.



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