

Environmental Activism in and through Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*¹

Imbolo Mbue's latest novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) depicts how Pexton, an American oil corporation, exploits the fictional village of Kosawa in Cameroon. The conglomerate establishes itself in the surroundings of the village and intoxicates their water, air and food supplies. Even though many children of Kosawa pass away from the poison, Pexton keeps expanding the company over the fifty years readers follow the residents of the village. Mbue's novel delineates Kosawa's resistance against the oil corporation over this time period, thereby emphasizing the various sorts of activism used by Kosawa's citizens. It discusses, for instance, physical resistance, legal resistance and resistance through dialogue and protesting. Yet, Mbue's novel goes further than only discussing activism in the content of the novel. In this article, I will argue that *How Beautiful We Were* is also a mode of activism in itself, which can be seen through its narrative strategies and in its emphasis on the exploitation of Kosawa by Pexton. In this way, Mbue's novel is a good example of how literary works play an essential role in activism against climate change.

Since the novel has recently been published in 2021, it has received only limited scholarly attention. Teresia Muthoni Biama's article "A Voice of Resistance and Activism: A Critique of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2022) presents the most current engagement with the novel to date. Biama argues that the novel voices the environmental injustices caused by Pexton.² In her analysis, she considers the various resistance approaches undertaken by Kosawa's residents. In this article, I will consider these approaches as well, however, I will specifically focus on Pexton as a force of corporate greed on the environment. I will examine the novel in accordance with Mary Louise Pratt's analysis of contact zones. Her theory in *Planetary Longings* (2022) centers on the keyword: force. She argues that certain categories, structures, or systems – such as (neo)colonialism – start appearing as unpredictable and mutable *forces* rather than fixed categories.³ According to Pratt, humans and other life forms, such as animals and nature, are increasingly subject to processes they do

¹ This article was originally written as an essay for the Master course of American Climate Change Fictions, which is part of the MA North-American Studies at Leiden University.

² Biama, "A Voice of Resistance and Activism," 312.

³ Emphasis added. Pratt, *Planetary Longings*, 7.

not control and this new unpredictability calls for a shift out of the systemic.⁴ Approaching these structures rather as forces enables thinking “across any range and scale and [it allows] the ability to make things happen in any context” in which they come into play.⁵

Instead of focusing solely on the content of the novel like Biama does in her article, I will center my article on the narratological devices used in the form and content of the novel. A narrative device is the use of a certain narrative technique or style, such as the author’s decision to write a novel in the first- or third-person narration, or the decision to write a novel in (non)chronological order.⁶ These techniques are used by authors to achieve certain literary goals.⁷ I have chosen to center my argument around Pexton, as a force of corporate greed, in relation to Kosawa and the environment, because human domination and exploitation of the ecosphere are particularly prevalent in the colonial landscape.⁸ Scholars Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt argue that while ecocritics are emphasizing that environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing issues such as poverty, wealth, overconsumption, and resource scarcity, postcolonial critics point out how historical struggles over (neo)colonial forces also involve important environmental questions.⁹ Therefore, the combination of addressing the transnational corporation in relation to the environment and the village of Kosawa will allow me to analyze in more depth how these forces interact with each other in *How Beautiful We Were*.

For the method of the analysis of Mbue’s novel, I will closely read the novel focusing on how the narratological devices used in the novel emphasize how the novel itself is a call of activism. During the analysis, I will shift the focus between the narratological devices used, and Pexton’s dominance on other local, national and global forces, since they also point out the marginalization of Kosawa.

1. The Narrative Voices of Kosawa

Mbue’s novel is mostly written from a first-person plural perspective, which both emphasizes the marginalization of Kosawa’s voices and empowers them. The narrators are the children of Kosawa. Most of their names are not revealed in the novel and they recount the story on

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ The Living Handbook of Narratology, “Narrative Strategies.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Roos and Hunt, *Postcolonial Green*, 85.

⁹ *Id.*, 251-252.

behalf of their village; they represent the village as a collective. This narratological decision not only points out how children, who are the next generation, are mostly the victim of this climate disaster, but it also creates a feeling of ‘us versus them’; it is the children of Kosawa versus Pexton. In this manner, the narrative centers on what the children, and its citizens in general, have done to prevent the ruin of their village against Pexton. This ‘us versus them’ feeling is immediately evoked at the opening of the novel, with the first paragraph:

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.¹⁰

From this paragraph, it becomes clear that the novel centers the voices of the unheard children in Kosawa and simultaneously creates a binary between Kosawa and Pexton. Rachel Weidinger argues in the *Narrative Initiative* (2023) that polyvocality is a way to resist certain power structures and creates the possibility for narrative shifts.¹¹ When centering many voices – and the plurality within these voices, for instance, a perspective or standpoint – it forces “a rethinking and questioning of ways of knowing”.¹² Similarly, polyvocality repeats the same values and worldviews in different ways, which not only expands “the bandwidth and frequencies of a narrative”, but also transforms and undermines dominant narratives.¹³ Therefore, polyvocality empowers marginalized voices. Likewise, the first-person plural narration in Mbue’s novel shifts the narrative focus from a Western perspective toward the perspectives of Kosawa’s children. Instead of the ‘we’, with which most Western readers usually associate themselves, the ‘we’ now stands for Kosawa’s perspective and the ‘they’ for the American corporation and their standpoint. This narrative shift forces readers to rethink their knowledge about oil corporations in Africa.

In addition to the first-person plural narration, Mbue’s novel also includes various first-person singular perspectives, such as Thula, Bongo, Sahel, Yaya and Juba’s narrative.

¹⁰ Emphasis added. Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 3.

¹¹ Weidinger, *Narrative Initiative*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

They are one of the families living in Kosawa. The novel alternates chapters both between the plural and singular narration and between characters. This narrative strategy, which creates a kaleidoscopic overview of the various perspectives, follows the notion of polyvocality, since it shows the plurality within Kosawa's residents. While all characters stand against Pexton, they also have their own views on the matter. For instance, Thula is one of the children of Kosawa's village. In the novel, she is an "age-mate" from the children who narrate collectively.¹⁴ Her perspective reveals the urgency of the climate disaster in Kosawa. She explains in detail the consequences of Pexton's oil corporation, for example, how Pexton's oil well exploded near her village or how a new oil well led to "increasing wastes dumped into [the river]", which killed "whatever life was left in the big river".¹⁵ She also notes how the wells poisoned their soil, from which the village cultivated their vegetables.¹⁶ Her perspective makes Kosawa's climate disaster personal and concrete for readers. In addition, Thula's perspective emphasizes how Kosawa's voices are small in comparison to Pexton's influence. Multiple times, she mentions that she has "no words" for the situation she is in, because "[n]one of this makes sense".¹⁷ She also accentuates that when she grows up, she will never forget "how it felt to be small and in need of protection, [because] much of the suffering in the world was because of those who had forgotten that they too were once children".¹⁸

The kaleidoscopic overview of perspectives also allows readers to compare and contrast singular perspectives with each other. For instance, Thula's perspective, which symbolizes the views of the younger generation within the village, is juxtaposed with Yaya's perspective, Thula's grandmother. Her narration exposes how Pexton's exploitation of African villages relates to centuries of Western exploitation of Africa. She notes, for example, how Kosawa was spared in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, but was not spared from the Europeans using African laborers for the rubber plantations in Africa: "Nowadays young people talk about the oil as if it's our first misfortune; they forget that, long before the oil, the parents of our parents suffered for the sake of rubber".¹⁹ By including Thula and Yaya's perspectives, *How Beautiful We Were* points out how Kosawa's climate disaster is a contemporary issue, with contemporary causes, but can also be placed in a historical framework. It reminds readers that these historical causes should not be forgotten when

¹⁴ Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 52.

¹⁵ *Id.*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Id.*, 59.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Id.*, 222.

discussing environmental disasters in Africa.

Moreover, the two perspectives create different insights about how global forces, such as Pexton and/or European coloniality have influenced Yaya and Thula's lives. Following Pratt's theory on contact zones, in both Thula and Yaya's perspectives the (local) village of Kosawa comes into contact with national and global forces. As mentioned, Thula continually reminds readers of how small her voice is. In the novel, the size of her voice is contrasted with Pexton's influence, which underscores the differences in scale of influence on the national government: "Pexton has been paying off people in the district office to shut their eyes, or turn them to the ground, or to the sky, to anywhere but the children dying in front of them".²⁰ Like Pratt's theory, Kosawa's residents are subjected to larger processes they cannot control. Although (neo)colonialism seems like a set system or structure, it rather appears as an unpredictable and mutable force.²¹

Pratt argues that approaching structures like (neo)colonization and globalization as forces empowers thinking "across any range and scale" in which they come into play.²² She bases her theory on "the concept of friction"; she researches the interactions between people and global forces: "everything that enters from outside can do so only through traction with something that is already there, and that friction between the given and the new produces unplanned effects".²³ For instance, the force of coloniality considers the still evolving afterlives of colonial world-making; it analyses how this force reiterates and mutates in the present and into the future.²⁴ In this manner, forces can "move beyond" the fixed structures of (neo)colonization, globalization, and environmentalism toward a "multi-centric and pluralizing" world, which centers non-homogeneity.²⁵

Returning to Thula's example, her perspective gives readers an insight into how her voice is almost powerless compared to the force of Pexton's money. Her narrative highlights how forces of different scales interact with, or overtake each other. Similarly, Yaya's narration shows how global forces mutate over time or are replaced with new forces (e.g., coloniality with neo-coloniality and corporate greed). Her perspective also emphasizes how historical and contemporary forces are intricately entangled with each other, which in turn illuminates the complexity of resolving the consequences of these mutable forces. Therefore, the various

²⁰ *Id.*, 38.

²¹ Pratt, *Planetary Longings*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Id.*, 8.

²⁴ *Id.*, 20.

²⁵ *Id.*, 12.

singular perspectives not only add to the polyvocality of the novel, but they also reveal to readers the tensions, disruptions and impact of global forces, such as Pexton, on Kosawa as a local force.

2. The Force(s) of Pexton

By analyzing the force of Pexton in more depth, it becomes clear that the corporation is depicted as an antagonistic character. Mbue's novel does not focus on the people who work for Pexton. Altogether, only two representatives are mentioned by name: Mr. Kumbum and Mr. Fish. All other employees are not given a name, but are rather described in general terms, such as "the Leader", the "Sick One", or "the Round One".²⁶ The anonymity of Pexton's employees accentuates how the corporation functions as one abstract entity. As a result of its facelessness, there is a distance between readers and the company. In this way, readers cannot relate to the policies of the oil corporation. Moreover, the facelessness of Pexton emphasizes how the corporation represents all American oil corporations in Africa with its capitalist ideologies. Yet, paradoxically, the company is also personified in the novel. As a character, Pexton moves through the novel as the antagonist. The American corporation directly causes the deaths of Kosawa's residents and even though the representatives of the conglomerate know this, Pexton continues to drill oil wells indifferently. Additionally, when the press publishes Kosawa's story in American newspapers, the corporation makes hollow declarations for offering support for the village. They offer reparations in the form of money and bottled-drinking water for a while, but they simultaneously expand their drillings over the years.

This hypocrisy of Pexton is again emphasized when Mr. Fish, the new overseer of the oil corporation, comes to Kosawa with an offer. To compromise for the poisoned food, water and air, the corporation has decided to give the village a share of Pexton's profits. When making this promise in front of the media Mr. Fish emphasizes that: "Pexton wants to do what's right[.] ... Sharing profits with communities is not something corporations do, but we're going to do it, because that's who we are. ... At Pexton we believe our duty should be to people first, not to governments".²⁷ However, during the conversation, Pexton's representative also implies that the village should accept whatever payment Pexton deems

²⁶ Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 7.

²⁷ *Id.*, 262.

necessary, and he suggests that they could use the offered money to move to another area: “if you need help from us on how to use your money to improve your lives, we’ll gladly send people to help you. If you’d like to move to Lokunja, or buy land in one of the other seven villages –”.²⁸ In this manner, the corporation just uses Kosawa to improve its image in the media, while convincing them to move somewhere else. By depicting Pexton both as an antagonistic character and a faceless entity in the novel, Mbue’s novel plays with the reader’s ability to understand the corporation. Instead of understanding, the novel creates a distance between readers, Pexton, and its capitalist ideologies. Consequently, all empathy of readers is directed at the village of Kosawa.

Simultaneously, these examples of Pexton reveal how the corporation functions as a force throughout the novel. As mentioned, the transnational oil corporation operates like a global force in the novel, which comes into contact with other forces at any scale. The most obvious example of a contact zone in the novel is the friction between Pexton and the local environment around the corporation. The nature around the conglomerate is subject to the processes of Pexton and cannot control this new force. By drilling oil wells, the company causes reactions of predictable and unpredictable consequences. For instance, it causes the poisoning of the air, water and soil in the local environment. It damages nature and causes a human-made climate disaster. However, Pexton’s force is more complex and unpredictable than these direct consequences of human domination over nature. Following Pratt’s theory, all life forms interact continuously with animate and non-animate forces in big and small ways.²⁹ In this way, “[n]onanimated actors determine the conditions for life and death of all living things”.³⁰ Likewise, in *How Beautiful We Were*, the force of Pexton causes a chain reaction, in which the nature around the corporation imperils human lives in Kosawa. Within the village, many women have miscarriages, and babies and children are passing away as a result of the poison.³¹ Furthermore, the insecurity of this urgent situation causes instability within the community. The elders of the village do neither know how to solve the situation nor how to resist Pexton’s force. In this way, Mbue’s novel reveals that when nature is destroyed, it will imperil human survival as well.

Furthermore, Pexton does not only affect the local environment, but it also interacts with other forces, such as the national government of Cameroon. The corporate greed of

²⁸ *Id.*, 262; 300.

²⁹ Pratt, *Planetary Longings*, 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 28;49.

Pexton initiates a series of complex causes on different scales. Whereas it causes disasters for the climate and the residents of Kosawa on a local scale, it influences political decisions on a national scale. As a result of the instability and corruption within the national government, which in turn are caused by forces of coloniality, Pexton can bribe policymakers on various levels to “shut their eyes [from] ... the children dying in [Kosawa]”.³² In this way, Pexton can get the oil they wanted, while the “government [can get] more of their money” from which His Excellency can profit.³³ This collaboration between the two parties enables a vicious circle. The narration of Juba, Thula’s younger brother, emphasizes this cycle. He exposes the long-term consequences of the collaboration. After he and his mother Sahel move away from Kosawa to Bézam, the capital city of Cameroon, he gets into the “sole government leadership school in the country” in order to change the corruption within the government:

What the country needed was a government made of people like us, those who had suffered the consequences of bad policies and knew how things ought to be. ... My classmates were like me, convinced that we would never be corruptible like the older generation[.]³⁴

However, Juba’s vision changes while working for the government for a few years, since he has started to take on bribes as well: “I have amassed riches from payoffs I take after [my partner] tells me how much a requested favor is worth”.³⁵ Juba’s example points out how Pexton’s force indirectly overtakes the citizens of Kosawa and that they have now become part of the problem, thereby enabling the forces of the government and Pexton to continue growing. In this regard, Pexton’s force emphasizes how ecological problems interact with social and political issues.

3. Reflecting in and on *How Beautiful We Were*

Shifting away from Pexton as a force and returning to the novel’s narrative strategies, the characters in *How Beautiful We Were* also continually ask (rhetorical) questions. These questions stimulate readers to critically assess the causes of Pexton’s environmental disaster.

³² *Id.*, 321; 38.

³³ *Id.*, 137.

³⁴ *Id.*, 334-335.

³⁵ *Id.*, 337.

When Thula narrates about the broken pipeline of Pexton, she asks the question: “why should Pexton replace it when the cost of its negligence would be borne largely by us?”³⁶ Although she clearly condemns Pexton for the climate disaster in her village, she phrases the question in such a manner to emphasize the hypocrisy of the oil corporation, thereby accentuating that the conglomerate only acts in its own interest, which is reaching the highest profit for the least costs. In this manner, the question is asked rhetorically or ironically, because Thula knows well no transnational corporation takes responsibility when there is no institution to hold them accountable. This question is also indirectly asked to the readers. *How Beautiful We Were* is the answer for readers, since Mbue’s novel exposes the consequences of when oil corporations do not take responsibility for their impact on the environment. Furthermore, the novel addresses Kosawa’s problems regarding the environment and human rights through these rhetorical questions. For instance, when the children ask: “was the death of one Pexton man more tragic than the deaths of all our friends and siblings combined?”³⁷ The question addresses how human lives are valued differently in the world and while readers instantly know what the answer to the question should be, the phrasing of it emphasizes the reality of the matter. In this manner, the questions force readers to think critically about these global problems. It motivates them to examine the underlying causes of the problems addressed in the novel. This thinking-mode can eventually lead to change, because knowing what the causes are is the first step to enabling changes.

Another narrative strategy which enforces readers to critically reflect on Kosawa’s situation is the novel’s elegiac writing style. Mbue’s novel is written retrospectively and addresses the grief and loss of the village and its residents from the beginning on:

We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures – our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from our land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling.³⁸

Like an elegy, which is a piece of writing, or a song that reflects and mourns the dead, the novel laments the death of the children and adults of Kosawa.³⁹ This lamentation returns in

³⁶ *Id.*, 38.

³⁷ *Id.*, 127.

³⁸ *Id.*, 5.

³⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, “Elegy.”

the title of the novel as well, since it comments in the past time on the beauty of the village and its residents: *How Beautiful We Were*. Furthermore, the collective narration of the children can also be interpreted as a chorus lamenting the events happening in Kosawa, which adds to the elegiac writing style. As a chorus, they emphasize the urgency of Kosawa's story. There is an urgency that this story needs to be told: "*This story must be told, it might not feel good to all ears, it gives our mouths no joy to say it, but our story cannot be left untold*".⁴⁰ When telling its story, the novel gives voice to the marginalized perspectives of Kosawa's children. At the same time, it reflects on Kosawa's tragedy and enforces readers to reflect on it as well.

Additionally, when grieving the loss of the village, Mbue's novel again emphasizes the complexities of Pexton as a force, since it eradicates Kosawa's culture and traditions as well. At the end of the novel, the loss of the village is mourned:

We were refused one last chance to enter Kosawa and empty our huts. The government decided the land had become too contaminated for human presence. His Excellency ordered Kosawa burned. What once were our huts became ashes. Our mother's kitchens, ashes. Our barns and outhouses, ashes. Our ancestors' pride, ashes. Nothing remained of Kosawa, except for what we kept in our hearts.⁴¹

In this passage, the children collectively narrate (as adults now, since the novel has progressed fifty years in time) about the loss of their village. They not only grieve the physical loss of their village, but also its culture. The village symbolizes their traditional ways of living, for instance, their ways of cooking, their ancestor's pride and their self-sustainability. In this way, Pexton also indirectly caused Kosawa's traditions to fade away, since people from Kosawa are now forced to disperse into various nearby villages and cities. For instance, the spirit or force of the leopard fades out with the deconstruction of Kosawa. When creating the village, three brothers encountered a leopard in their trap in the forest. Instead of killing the rare animal, the brothers set the leopard free and as a gift, the leopard "forged a blood pact with each brother", ensuring that their descendants will live as "indomitable men".⁴² Yet, the chorus children note how this guiding legend is not passed on to the next generation anymore, because they do "not recognize our spirit, a rejection that

⁴⁰ Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, 138.

⁴¹ *Id.*, 355.

⁴² *Id.*, 31.

surely makes our ancestors weep”.⁴³ Likewise, the chorus of children narrates at the end of the novel how they took the “umbilical-cord bundles before [they] fled Kosawa, hoping to pass them on to [their] children”.⁴⁴ Similar to the spirit of the leopard, the umbilical-cord bundle represents the bloodline of Kosawa. It is “the essence of [Kosawa’s] existence”, because every person in the village ties their umbilical cord to the bundle, which binds each generation to their past and future in the village.⁴⁵ However, the next generation has “no use for them” anymore.⁴⁶ Instead, they “have good jobs with the government [and] with corporations in Europe and America”.⁴⁷ They drive new cars, which use oil, and they do not think about “the children who will suffer as [their parents] once did”.⁴⁸ Tragically, the traditions upon which Kosawa is founded die out, because Pexton’s force, together with the force of modernity, has overtaken them. More ironically, the next generation works for transnational corporations like Pexton and uses the natural resource of oil themselves, a resource their parents suffered for. This irony emphasizes how the next generation enforces the very same forces their parents tried to resist. Likewise, it accentuates to readers the need for action against transnational corporations in African countries.

4. Conclusion: Activism Through the Written Word

The elegiac writing style, together with the failed acts of activism within the novel, such as the village meetings with Pexton’s representatives, can come across to readers as if all forms of activism are meaningless. Even though the content of *How Beautiful We Were* might suggest the tragedy of activism against Pexton, Mbue’s novel itself is a form of activism. According to ecocritical writer Graham Huggan, imaginative writing can function “as a site of resistance to authoritarian attitudes and practices”.⁴⁹ This resistance returns in *How Beautiful We Were*. It is through Mbue’s act of writing – and the narratological devices she used – that the complexities and consequences of Kosawa’s climate disaster become most visible. To be more precise, the polyvocality of perspectives in the novel subverts Western dominant narratives and allows Kosawa’s voices to be heard. Additionally, the seemingly paradoxical personification of Pexton and the framing of the corporation as an abstract entity

⁴³ *Id.*, 359.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*, 122.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, 359

⁴⁷ *Id.*, 358.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Huggan, “*Greening Postcolonialism*,” 703.

creates a distance between readers and Pexton's ideologies, which enlarges the empathy readers feel for the village. Moreover, the rhetorical questions and the elegiac writing style within the novel enforce readers to critically assess Kosawa's situation and the causes thereof.

Furthermore, by analyzing Pexton's interactions with various forces on local, national and global scales and ranges, the gravity of Kosawa's situation is revealed. The forces demonstrate the unpredictable and far-reaching consequences of Pexton's decision to start an oil corporation in Cameroon. It does not only affect the local environment and the living conditions of Kosawa's residents, but the corporation also influences local and national government policies, and stimulates cultural adaptation on the next generation of Kosawa's children. Hence, Pexton's force increases over time, which causes the next generation of Kosawa's people to become part of these dominant forces. In delineating the devastating effects of corporations such as Pexton, Mbue's novel opposes the forces of corporate greed and neo-coloniality. Using words to give voices to marginalized perspectives is a powerful act of activism, because it enables new insights into the consequences of corporate greed. Simultaneously, it allows the legacy of villages like Kosawa to continue, if only in symbolization. Lastly, it reveals how literary works, through the use of its narrative devices, can convince public opinion in ways documentaries, protests, or physical activism cannot. Therefore, *How Beautiful We Were* is a powerful example of how novels can be a form of activism against transnational corporations and climate change.

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