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Capitalism Delusion in Ex-colonies: A Postcolonial Analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue

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Abstract

Like other economic models, capitalism is a solid one that has demonstrated its resilience by overpowering political vagaries. From its inception in the 19th century to the present day, it has proven its worth as a development factor in various European societies and to competition. Over time, it has emerged as a foremost political *weapon* serving the cause of Western imperialism beyond its geographical borders. Development aid to Southern societies, as illustrated in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), is a perfect example. Ex-colonized areas such as Kosawa have fragile and poor economies; the West is committed to supporting them by establishing Pexton, a mining company whose purpose is to boost the domestic economy. Enthused by promises, local inhabitants show hospitality towards their benefactors. However, later, to their surprise, their hope gave way to despair, as Pexton's activities caused enormous trouble and diminished the quality of life for the residents. Any nationalist denunciation that demands compensation risks retaliation. As the story unfolds, the environment is polluted, changing the inhabitants' daily lives. Pexton's inaction in the face of this ecological crisis raises suspicions about the reliability and viability of development projects piloted by American backers. The study of those discrepancies is crucial, and it is here that the postcolonial critique proves its undeniable relevance, as it contributes to unmasking Western assistance as a form of disguised imperialism, providing the conceptual framework to decipher the ideological continuities between past colonial practices and present-day neo-colonial realities. By focusing on the experiences and voices of marginalized individuals, this method remains a powerful tool for disclosing how the so-called development factor paradoxically impoverishes formerly colonized people. However, its nuanced application is essential, as its tendency to focus on external forces can sometimes obscure

the complexities of internal community dynamics and risk presenting the subaltern experience as a monolithic narrative. In terms of structure, the current inquiry is composed of two lines of research: "Seduction of capitalist promises" and "Capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm."

Keywords: capitalism, Southern societies, formerly colonized areas, ecological crisis, discrepancies

Introduction

Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) meticulously depicts the profound and devastating changes that befall the population of Kosawa with the arrival of the American oil company.

This exploration of the illusion of capitalism reveals how the Western promise of economic progress can conceal the harsh realities of corporate exploitation and trigger profound transformations in the lives of vulnerable communities. Before analyzing those social changes, it is worth considering some of the critical reflections that have already been carried out on the new forms of exploitation known as neo-colonialism. This concept, as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah (1965), provides a decisive framework that contributes to comprehending Pexton's operations. According to that Pan-Africanist figure, multinational corporations often exploit African resources for their own profit and leave local communities impoverished. *How Beautiful We Were* vividly illustrates that dynamic; the American oil company Pexton's extraction of resources from Kosawa mirrors Kwame Nkrumah's critique.

Moreover, the book *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (1995) by Bill Ashcroft and various other critics helps to elucidate the mechanisms of postcolonial power. It highlights how Multinational Corporations, such as Pexton, often perpetuate neo-colonial structures and extract resources while disregarding the well-being of local populations. Mbue's novel exemplifies that troublesome social reality, showing how Pexton's promises of development hide a reality of environmental destruction and social disruption. Besides, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) raises vital questions about marginalized voices and resistance, pertinent to the Kosawans' struggle. Moreover, the critical studies by James Ferguson (1999) and Achille Mbembe (2000) shed additional light on the mechanisms of dependency and control. Furthermore, David Vogel's approach (2005) offers a critical lens that helps to analyze corporate behavior and environmental degradation. Similarly, the "slow violence" inflicted upon the Kosawan communities aligns with Rob Nixon's (2011) framework.

As shown above, those theoretical works proffer significant tools that can contribute to interrogating the novel under consideration. Apart from them, various other critical reflections focus on Mbue's literary project. For instance, the article "Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2022) by Brygida Gasztold examines the ongoing suffering in former colonies, such as Kosawa. According to Gasztold's analysis,

> Mbue's novel critiques the hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation, which put human health and life at risk. It demonstrates how uneven distribution of oil's benefits sanctions corruption and fosters economic injustice, while all attempts at restoring justice are thwarted as much by local as by foreign culprits. (Gasztold, 2022, p. 195)

Clearly, in terms of metaphor, Mbue's creative art is a *weapon* of denunciation. It decries the deliberate social injustices imposed on the Kosawan people, which prevented them from pursuing equitable development. Moreover, in "Extraction and Environmental Injustices: (De)colonial Practices in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*," Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty assert that "the prolonged occupation of the Pexton oil company in Kosawa destroys the local ecological system and relegates the indigenous people of the village to the status of marginalized anomalies" (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023, p. 129). Likewise, examining Pexton's involvement in the ecological crisis that kills the children of Kosawa, Syahruni Junaid, and many other critics maintain,

> Environmental pollution occurs in the community's fields, which are the income of local residents also suffered damage due to infertile soil; water becomes polluted and dirty due to oil spills. This caused the community to lose money because of the damage to their fields. (Junaid *et al*., 2024, p. 281)

Additionally, in her article titled "Hopeful Resistance and Solidarity from Below in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2024), Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez shows how Western imperialist forces hinder development processes in ex-colonized regions such as Kosawa and reveals the way forward to overcoming these hostile mechanisms. Conversely, in her critical work entitled "Wokewashing and Greenwashing: The Silent Architects of Eco-apartheid in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025), Iftinan Rose Putri Safana looks into the contempt of Pexton's representatives towards the Kosawan people. By the same token, Muhannad Salman Obaid Al-Qaraghouli and Salam Fadhil Abed Al-Taee's article, "Intergenerational Trauma and the Immigrant Experience in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025), analyzes how the environmental degradation in Mbue's novel creates intergenerational trauma and shapes the immigrant experience. Similarly, the article,

"Racial-Economic Disparities and Environmental Suffering in Postcolonial Africa: A Reading of Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2025) by Ikpemhinoghena Yvonne Ewedemi *et al*. uses a postcolonial ecocritical lens to explore how colonial legacies and neocolonial exploitation exacerbate racial and economic disparities and environmental suffering.

As shown above, existing critical works excel at substantiating the tangible consequences of unchecked capitalism on vulnerable communities and their environments. They also highlight the importance of collective action and cultural preservation in the face of overwhelming odds. However, the issue of capitalism delusion remains evanescent and substantial. Hence, the problem raised by the topic under investigation is that the Western company (Pexton), disguised as an agent of development, functions as a tool of neocolonial exploitation, stripping the Kosawans of their autonomy and traditional way of life. This raises the following questions: How does Mbue's novel depict the illusion of capitalism's promises as a catalyst for profound and detrimental change in the lives of Kosawa's people, and how does that change reflect neocolonial power dynamics?

To delve into that double-barreled interrogation, the use of postcolonial critique will be advantageous. The pertinence of such a methodological tool lies in its capacity to expose the insidious continuities between colonial and neo-colonial power. This method is of crucial relevance for addressing change in communities such as Kosawa; it unmasks capitalist promises as a continuation of colonial domination and offers the necessary tools to comprehend the ideological feature of that change by explaining how exploitation is accepted through psychic alienation and the desire for development. However, its nuanced application is crucial, as a rigid adherence to its theoretical framework can risk reducing all transformations to the colonial legacy, overlooking the internal dynamics or specific community factors that also influence change. It is therefore essential to use it with caution, recognizing that current forms of exploitation are not just echoes of the past, but complex realities that require an analysis attentive to their own specificities.

To that end, the use of Lyn Innes's book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), and Simhachalam Thamarana's article, *Significance of Studying Postcolonial Literature and its Relevance* (2015) will be contributive. Their works underscore the significance of reclaiming and redefining marginalized experiences. Mbue's novel illustrates this by giving voice to the Kosawans, whose perspectives are systematically ignored by Pexton and the local corrupt government.

In terms of structure, the current exegesis is divided into two axes: "seduction of capitalist promises" and "capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm". The former depicts

how the allure of economic prosperity masks the exploitative characteristics of capitalist ventures in Mbue's novel—it highlights the devastating consequences when communities prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability. The latter sheds light on the devastating consequences of neocolonial resource extraction and explores the potential for community-driven resistance to forge a more equitable and sustainable future.

Seduction of Capitalist Promises

This stage aims to analyze the insidious nature of capitalist promises and demonstrate how they ensnare and ultimately devastate vulnerable communities such as Kosawa. It also examines the deceptive allure of economic prosperity, progress, and development.

To begin with, the seduction of capitalist promises in post-colonial contexts is not a simple matter of economic exchange but a profound psychological and ideological phenomenon, a neo-colonial mirage that Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* lays bare with exceptional acuity. In this novel, the Pexton oil company embodies the promise of Western-style modernity and economic prosperity, functioning as a sophisticated instrument of domination that exploits the genuine aspirations of the Kosawan communities for a better life. Beaming with the immense benefits of the new project, the Kosawan people are ecstatic, as illustrated by the excerpt below,

> They would pour libations over and over to thank their ancestors. They would sing songs of gratitude to the Spirit every morning for having put oil under their. Our grandparents had rejoiced upon hearing this. They believed Pexton's lie, and for a long time, our parents did too, convinced that if only they remained patient the thing called 'prosperity' would arrive like a cherished guest for whom the fattest pig had been slaughtered, and all of Kosawa would live in brick houses like the one Woja Beki would eventually own. (Mbue, 2021, p. 73)

Obviously, the ideological foundation of Pexton's seduction lies in the myth of development, a master-narrative that has long been a cornerstone of both colonial and neocolonial discourse. The people of Kosawa are not merely offered money; they are offered an escape from what the Western world, and increasingly their own leaders, have taught them to consider as their backwardness. The collective voice of the narrative recalls the arrival of the white people from Pexton with a sense of wonder and hope, a sentiment deeply rooted in the historical promise of civilization. Pexton's representatives tell the Kosawan people, "drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village.

One day, the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity" (Mbue, 2021, p. 73). More importantly, the company's representatives speak of jobs, of building a bridge that would connect them to the wider world, of clinics that would heal their sicknesses, and of schools that would educate their children. However, the reality quickly diverges from those seductive narratives. The environmental devastation caused by Pexton's operations serves as a stark counterpoint to the company's promises. Analyzing that irrational exploitation of Kosawa's resources and its subsequent consequences, Uchenna Ohagwam and Queen Albert avow,

> Through all sorts of treachery, divide and rule tactics, and manipulative schemes, Pexton, supported by village elites and the state government, drills oil from Kosawa and pays little or no compensation to the indigenous peoples. Spanning the length of four generations with specific attention to actions between the 1980s and 2000s, the narrative is tragic and riveting. (Ohagwam & Albert, 2024, p. 199)

The above paragraph accounts for the manipulative feature of Pexton's seductive rhetoric. Those promises are not just logistical offers; they are symbolic gestures of an entry into a superior, modern existence. As the Nigerian critic Simon Gikandi argues in his book entitled *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (1996), post-colonial societies often internalize the colonial project of self-improvement, where progress is measured by the degree to which they can mimic the material and social structures of the West. Thus, the Kosawan inhabitants are presented with a false choice: their traditional way of life, with its hardships and vulnerabilities, versus a modern, Westernized future of ease and security. The seduction lies not in a mere preference for wealth, but in a profound ideological conversion, a belief in the inherent superiority of the capitalist model as a means of salvation. This belief, a willing suspension of disbelief in the face of history, is the very essence of the delusion. The narrator's words corroborate Pexton's false promise, as in the excerpt below,

> The representatives told them that drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village. One day, the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity.' Could the men explain 'civilization' in our language? Our grandparents had asked. The government men had said it was impossible for them to explain such terms fully, because it would be hard for our grandparents to understand what they'd never witnessed or considered a possibility. But as soon as 'civilization' and 'prosperity' arrived, they added, our grandparents would be in awe of what a beautiful life they offer; they lose all comprehension of how they and their ancestors could have lived without the wonders heaped upon them by rapidly changing world around them. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 72–73)

This utopian facade is particularly effective because it preys on real, material needs, skillfully transforming suffering into a justification for exploitation. Diseases, the arduous labor of subsistence farming, and a sense of being forgotten by the broader world mark the history of the Kosawan communities. When Pexton arrives, it promises to solve those problems, but time proves otherwise. Indeed, the narrator exposes the false promises of Pexton's representatives:

> Pexton had told our grandfathers that if they came to work for them, for a certain number of hours a day, and did as they were told to do, they would earn a fixed amount of money a month. Our grandfathers, however, had no interest in losing ownership of their lives—every one of them had turned down Pexton's offer and returned to the thrill of killing for food as trees were felled all over the valley to make room for the oil field and pipelines and Gardens. (Mbue, 2021, p. 73)

Noticeably, the irony, however, is that Pexton's solutions are a poison disguised as a cure. The promise of the clinic, for example, is offered to people whose health is about to be systematically destroyed by the very company that promises to heal them. In essence, those promises create a facade of goodwill that obscures the company's exploitative practices and fosters a sense of trust among the people of Kosawa. Woja Beki, Kosawa's Chief, describes that relationship, anchored in hypocrisy, as follows: "Pexon and the government are your friends, the Leader said. Even on your worst day, remember that we're thinking about you in Bézam and working hard for you" (Mbue, 2021, p. 7). The seduction extends beyond material promises to encompass the manipulation of cultural values and social structures. That cultural disruption is a subtle but profound form of manipulation, as it erodes the very foundations of the Kosawan communities and leaves a vacuum for Pexton to impose its own values and practices. Indeed, the psychological dimension of that attractiveness is equally significant. It raises the hopes of Kosawa's inhabitants, as corroborated in the following passage,

> Pexton created a scholarship in honor of the overseer and his wife, the Augustine and Evelyn Fish Memorial Peace and Prosperity Scholarship. The scholarship was for our children only. It would allow them to go to the best schools and someday become learned, like Thula. There was no land left to fight for, so Pexton had no fear that our children might grow up to wage a war against them. They'd already begun digging a new well in what used to be our village square when they announced the scholarship. They'd already uprooted what was left of the mango tree under which we'd played—whatever hadn't turned to ashes. Most of our children got the scholarships. (Mbue, 2021, p. 335)

In accordance with the aforementioned textual clues, the scholarship maintains a deceptive ambiguity and offers false hope by strategically misdirecting the focus of the Kosawan communities from their immediate and existential problems. The very name, "Peace and Prosperity Scholarship," is a profound irony, a promise of a future that Pexton's actions have systematically destroyed in the present. While the scholarship gestures towards a path for the children to become "learned, like Thula," it is offered only after the foundation of their identity and existence has been irrevocably dismantled. The excerpt pointedly juxtaposes that promise with Pexton's destructive deeds: the company has already "uprooted what was left of the mango tree" and left "no land left to fight for." In other words, the scholarship is not a solution to the polluted environment, the displaced heritage, or the destroyed communal life. Instead, it is a calculated project to manage the consequences of those actions. The collective narrative voice describes the Kosawan people's suffering as follows: "We were different tribes thrown together with no common dream. We were forced to build upon sinking sand, and now we're crumbling from within" (Mbue, 2021, p. 335).

By offering the children a future away from the village, a future of individual ascent within the very system that exploited their communities, Pexton effectively neutralizes the next generation's potential for collective resistance. The scholarship is not a bridge to a better life, but a final, ideological act of erasure, designed to make the communities accept a new narrative of success that requires them to forget the very land they lost. Addressing the aesthetic scope of the scholarship granted to the Kosawan youth, Iftinan Rose Putri Safana, one of Mbue's critics, avers, "these scholarships are not aimed at helping the education of the younger generation but only as an effort to build a positive image in society" (Putri Safana, 2025, p. 17).

Clearly, this is a classic neo-colonial mechanism where the imperialist, or in this case, the corporation, creates a state of dependency by offering a solution to a problem that they either created or exacerbated. The gifts of Pexton, scholarships, jobs, and the promise of healthcare are not acts of benevolence but strategic tools to dismantle the Kosawan communities' self-sufficiency and replace them with a reliance on the corporation. The Kosawan people's hope for a better life is turned against them, thus becoming the very key that unlocks the door to their own dispossession. This tragic paradox underscores the fundamental dishonesty of the capitalist promise in this context, asserting that it is an instrument designed not for the development of the communities but for the extraction of their resources, subjugation of their people, and pollution of their environment, as exemplified in the quotation below,

> Whatever life was left in the big river disappeared (…). The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude. The noise from the oil field multiplied; day and night we heard it in our bedrooms, in our classroom, in the forest. Our air turned heavy. At the end of that first dry season, a pipeline burst and oil flooded the farm of the mother of one of my friends. (Mbue, 2021, p. 32)

More importantly, the power of Pexton's seduction is amplified by the internal complicity of the subaltern, a critical element of neo-colonialism that distinguishes it from its predecessor. Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* documents how the local leadership, particularly the Chief and his council, become unwitting or even willing agents of the capitalist delusion. A close look at the narrator's words helps to discover Woja Beki's contempt towards his people,

> That night, from my mat, I listen as Papa gives Mama more details about his visit, whispering in the dark. Mama is silent—she became tongue-tied the moment Papa returned from Woja Beki's house and told her of his plan to go to Bézam. I picture Papa lying on his back, his hands clasped on his chest, as he tells Mama about Woja Beki's theory that 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. They deserve the punishment that would inevitably be theirs someday, Woja Beki had said. How could people show such contempt for the laws of the Spirit? Was money so important that they would sell children to strangers seeking oil? Look at me, he said to Papa. Look at how he always made sure to put some of his own money in the hands of bereaved families. Look at how he spoke to even the least in the village as if they were the most significant, because isn't that how it should be? (Mbue, 2021, p. 38)

More explicitly, figures, such as Woja Beki, who should have been the guardians of their communities' interests and traditions, are the first to be compromised. Indeed, Woja Beki's chameleon-like behavior tarnishes his good image and compromises his people's interests to the detriment of his own. He behaves as if he worked for his village, yet at night, he plays right into the hands of Pexton's representatives. By analyzing his attitude, Morayo Joy Akingbelue avers, "alongside state violence, corruption and betrayal from within contribute to complicity. The character of Woja Beki, the village head, is an embodiment of local complicity" (Akingbelue, 2025, p. 159). Obviously, his acceptance of paltry bribes and his dismissal of the villagers' growing concerns are symptomatic of a deeper ideological fracture. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon warned against the dangers of a national bourgeoisie that, upon independence, would simply step into the shoes of the colonizers, perpetuating the same exploitative systems for their own benefit.

In other words, the Kosawan leaders are a tragic embodiment of that phenomenon. Their limited vision and desire for personal gain, however small, make them complicit in the corporation's grand deception. They prioritize the short-term benefits, the cash, the status of negotiating with the powerful white men, over the long-term well-being of their people. Worse still, their complicity creates a fissure within the Kosawan communities, making it difficult to mount a unified front against the external threat. This internal betrayal is a crucial component of the capitalist delusion, as it enables the external power to operate without the need for overt force, using the very structures of the communities to enforce its will. The ensuing paragraph captures the Kosawan people's sense of betrayal towards their leader,

> We knew he was one of them. We'd known for years that though he was our leader, descended from the same ancestors as us, we no longer meant anything to him. Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them. We'd seen with our own eyes, heard with our own ears, how Pexton was fattening his wives and giving his sons jobs in the capital and handing him envelopes of cash. (Mbue, 2021, p. 257)

Apparently, the seduction's grip on the internal psyche is so profound that it leads the local elite to actively silence dissent and to gaslight their own people. When the villagers first report the strange oil slick on their river and the illness of their children, the leaders, already compromised, are quick to dismiss their concerns. They echo the company's narrative, attributing the ailments to other causes or dismissing them as unfortunate side effects of progress. Instead of reproaching Pexton's representatives for their lack of concern for Kosawa's young people and their environment, the Chief, Woja Beki, and his council avoid incriminating them. As an illustration, let us consider the collective narrative voice:

> We did not initially suspect the oil field—it had been there for decades, and despite our hatred of it, we'd never before looked at one of our departed and linked their death to Pexton. (…) Many parents thought it might be a curse, a jealous relative from another village targeting their children, a relative whose wrath was directed at a particular Kosawa family, but was nonetheless going after all the children in the village to create the sense of a random act, render it untraceable. Or perhaps Kosawa had wronged the Spirit? Perhaps our parents needed to atone for one thing or another so their children might be spared? (Mbue, 2021, pp. 33–34)

The denial of reality is a powerful tool of the delusion taking place. The Chief, Woja Beki, and his council, by virtue of their position, act as a buffer between the communities and the reality of the exploitation, reinforcing the fantasy that Pexton is a benevolent partner.

This psychological manipulation is a defining characteristic of neo-colonial control. This is not just about physical control of the land, but about shaping perception, memory, and truth. By denying the reality of the pollution, the local leaders deny the very evidence that would shatter the capitalist delusion, effectively trapping their communities in a cycle of exploitation and false hope. This internal betrayal is, in many ways, more devastating than the external threat, as it undermines the very foundation of trust and communities' solidarity, rendering them vulnerable to the forces that seek their ruin. As the story unfolds, the lack of solidarity continues to rage; as a result, both the Kosawan young people and their elders fail to agree on effective strategies to oppose the resistance against Pexton's representatives. The quotation below is illustrative of that break-up,

> We defy them tonight and we stand a chance of being free again, some said. We don't need freedom, we need to stay alive, others argued. Let us show them that we're people too. The soldiers are going to shoot us dead. The Spirit has sent Konga to tell us that we can and should fight. Fight with? Fight with what we've got. What have we got but spears? We've got machetes and stones and pots of boiling water. How can you be so stupid as to think we have any chance? Konga has shown us we stand every chance. Konga is a madman. Perhaps madness is what we all need. How can you say such a thing? We were once a brave people, the blood of the leopard flows within us—when did we lose sight of that? We'll be dead tomorrow—is that what you? Everyone was standing, shouting; no one was listening. Konga and the Leader shook their fists at each other. The four young men stood between them, unsure of which side they were on. (Mbue, 2021, p. 22)

The most potent manifestation of that delusion, however, is its profound psychological impact on the next generation, a generation caught between the deep-seated traditions of their communities and the alluring promise of a Westernized future. The character named Thula is the most compelling embodiment of that ideological struggle. She is intelligent, ambitious, nationalist, and driven by a desire for knowledge, change, and an accomplished life. Her initial aspiration is not to become a better Kosawan, but to transcend her Kosawan identity entirely. She dreams of going to America, attending a university, and returning with the knowledge to fix her village's problems. In one of her letters to her fellow people, she claims,

> Yes, if we are to be conquered, let it not be because we never fought. Our fathers, brothers, uncles, friends—what did they die for? They died so that we could live peacefully in Kosawa, and if not us, then at least the next generation. No one has the right to make us prisoners on our land. No one has the right to take from us that which

> the Spirit gave our ancestors was taken from them, and now they live at the edge of society, a plight worse than ours. At least we still walk the paths our ancestors walked, but who's to say that one day all our land won't be taken from us like it happened here? The ancestors of these trampled people in America fought hard, and they lost, but what's most important is that they fought. (Mbue, 2021, p. 213)

This is a desire that is both deeply personal and fundamentally political, as it is a direct consequence of a colonial education, which taught her to devalue her own culture and to see salvation in the mastery of the colonizer's knowledge. This ideological framework, as postcolonial critic Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* (1978), is part of a larger project that casts the West as the center of civilization and the former colonies as its periphery. The capitalist promise in the novel feeds directly into this narrative, suggesting that the West, by following the path, lays out the only way for the people of Kosawa to achieve true worth and dignity,

> I believe we can do it. We may be the only village breathing air poisoned by Pexton, but their pipelines pass through other villages and spill in them too. Soldiers are menacing innocents everywhere. The entire country is suffering under the yoke of His Excellency. Millions want him gone. That's an opportunity right there. We can join forces with people who are as ready for change as we are. Rouse them to get out on the streets and demand a new country. I've studied such movements; they have happened in America and Europe. People have gone out onto streets and changed their countries by marching. (Mbue, 2021, p. 277)

Plainly, the psychological toll of that delusion is the creation of a profound sense of cultural alienation. Thula and the other young people of Kosawa feel a deep-seated disconnection between their lived reality and the idealized future they have been taught to desire. The novel under consideration captures the state of "unhomeliness," a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the ambiguous, often painful condition of post-colonial identity—a state of being neither fully at home in one's own culture nor fully accepted by the culture one aspires to join or adopt. The capitalist promise offers a false solution to this alienation by suggesting that the adoption of Western modernity will resolve this inner conflict. Thula initially believes that by Western values (language and knowledge), she can find a place in the world and, in turn, save her communities. The delusion is that she can use the master's tools to dismantle their house without first understanding that the tools themselves are part of the system of oppression. One can therefore argue that her journey is a tragic testament to the power of that seduction, as it compels her to embark on a quest for a self that is, at its core, a reflection

of the very forces that seek to destroy her home. In terms of change, the journey to America helps to change Thula's mind and discover that the use of violence cannot save her village from Pexton's manipulation and subjugation.

> I hope the love that dwells today in my heart remains forever, but if it doesn't, may this letter serve as a testament that there once was a day when all I wanted was for peace to reign. Tomorrow I may wake up in pain with a mind crowded with images of what nothing more than to punish Pexton. I may wish I hadn't sent you this letter, but it'll be too late. You may have read my words and decided to join me in freeing Kosawa without causing pain to anyone; without any word, thought, or action that destroys another. You may have vowed never to break or burn again, because you wonder if I was wrong, if we were all wrong to believe that we could seize freedom through destruction. (Mbue, 2021, p. 286)

The seduction of capitalist promises in *How Beautiful We Were* is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism. It functions as an ideological masterstroke that bypasses the need for overt force by preying on the hopes and needs of the communities, relying on internal complicity, and offering a false sense of belonging to a new world order. Mbue's novel masterfully deconstructs that delusion, exposing it as a neo-colonial mirage that promises a new beginning but delivers only a violent end. The utopian vision of progress, internal betrayal of the local elite, and psychological allure of the West all serve to trap the Kosawan communities in a system of exploitation. That intricate process of seduction, however, cannot endure indefinitely. Its inherent violence and fundamental disregard for human life and the environment eventually cause the illusion to shatter.

Regarding the next stage, it aims to examine the capitalist exploitation and post-exploitative paradigm in the novel.

Capitalist Exploitation and Post-exploitative Paradigm

The current step explores the dynamics of capitalist exploitation and the potential for a post-exploitative paradigm. A particular consideration will be given to the devastating impact of neocolonial resource extraction and the possibilities for community-driven resistance.

The term post-exploitative paradigm is not a formal academic term. This means a new way of life, thought, and values that rejects the logic of exploitation and seeks to forge a more equitable, dignified, and sustainable future. This paradigm is not a utopian endpoint but a process of struggle and reclamation. Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is a profound

and unsparing chronicle of capitalist exploitation, but it is equally, if not more importantly, a powerful articulation of a post-exploitative paradigm. This novel deconstructs the mechanisms through which a multinational corporation, Pexton, extends its neo-colonial power over the fictional African village of Kosawa. However, it transcends a mere lamentation of victimization by detailing the arduous and often tragic process through which subaltern communities reject the logic of exploitation, reclaim their agency, and construct a new framework for existence rooted in collective memory, indigenous values, and unyielding resistance. Although Thula is abroad, she continues to exhort her fellow people to show resilience. The excerpt below shows how committed she is:

> Think about it, Pexton isn't acting alone. They only have power over us because our government gave them our land. The government hanged our men. If we were to get Pexton to leave, wouldn't the government return in another form to continue smothering us. Which means we need that our ultimate enemy is not Pexton, it's our government. That is not to say we shouldn't take a stand against the government too. I know this is going to sound outrageous, you'll probably think it's far beyond our capacity, but what if we started a movement to bring down His Excellency's government? (Mbue, 2021, p. 277)

In other words, the initial phase of this dialectic is the anatomy of capitalist exploitation itself, which Mbue depicts not as a singular event but as a multi-pronged assault on the communities' integrity. At its most visceral, this exploitation is environmental, a form of ecocide that serves as the material foundation of the neo-colonial project. The novel's collective narrative voice recalls a time when their river, their beautiful, clean river, was the lifeblood of their communities. However, Pexton's arrival transforms this sacred artery into a toxic wasteland, polluted by the black rain of oil slicks and the invisible poisons of chemical waste, as described in the ensuing quote:

> For reasons we couldn't understand, the smoke always blew in our direction, never in the direction of Gardens and the hilltop mansion of the American overseer. With new oil spill or day of gas flares so savage our skin shriveled and we needed to shout to each other over the screaming flames, Woja Beki sent someone to Gardens to talk to the supervisors, who, in turn, sent laborers to inspect the damage, patch up what they could of the old, rusty pipelines, and assure us that the spills were of no harm, the air was fine, Pexton was abiding by the law. Not long before I turned eight, two children died in one month, both of them having suffered high fevers but otherwise different symptoms. (Mbue, 2021, p. 33)

The postcolonial critique here is that this environmental destruction is a continuation of the colonial mentality, which viewed indigenous lands not as living ecosystems but as inert resources to be plundered for profit. The degradation of the land is a form of symbolic violence, an attempt to erase the communities' history and their spiritual connection to its territory. In the work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) by Rob Nixon (2011), it is not sudden, dramatic violence, but a gradual and incremental one, the effects of which accumulate over time and disproportionately affect the most marginalized. That gradual destruction is described as depicted in the textual clues below:

> Anyone could tell Juba's illness was no ordinary illness, this disease, which started with him moaning from body aches before progressing to a fever so high his body gyrated like a fish on dry land. Sakani came over in the morning and gave him a potion to drink, but by nightfall his body had grown hotter, no amount of wiping with cold cloth sufficient to cool him down. (Mbue, 2021, p. 35)

Noticeably, the villagers' initial inability to pinpoint the source of their children's sicknesses or the death of their fish is a direct result of this slow violence, which hides its destructive force under the guise of progress, thereby complicating the initial recognition of exploitation. The environmental assault is inextricably linked to the economic exploitation that Mbue depicts as a system of unequal power relations designed to create dependency and consolidate corporate control. The Kosawan inhabitants are not simply robbed; they are lured into a predatory relationship under the pretence of fair compensation:

> They didn't arrive bearing guns. No, the men who arrived were a smiling group. It appeared as if, for once, something good was coming from Bézam. The men told us about some people who sold oil overseas and called them Pexton. (…) They said Pexton was not from Europe, they were from America; they said Pexton had no relationship with our former masters. If we needed to know the truth, they added, American people were far better than Europeans [were]. American people like to mind their business and do good—we would soon get a chance to see that for ourselves. (…) All we had to do was sit back, let Pexton do its job and hand us our share of the money. (Mbue, 2021, p. 227)

In essence, Pexton's offers of money and meager jobs are presented as a lifeline, but they are, in fact, a way to purchase complicity and silence dissent. The payments are a symbolic act of appropriation, substituting the intrinsic value of the land and the health of the community with a transient monetary value that is utterly insignificant in the global market. This dynamic is a textbook example of neo-colonial economics, where multinational corpo-

rations, rather than colonial governments, control the resources and dictate the terms of engagement. As Kwame Nkrumah, a foundational figure in postcolonial thought, argued in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), this new form of domination operates through economic control, where the former colonizing power—or its corporate proxies—keeps on exploiting the resources of the developing nation while giving the illusion of sovereignty. The Kosawan people's helplessness in the face of Pexton's power, even with the support of their nominally independent government, underscores the reality that their freedom is compromised by an economic system that functions solely for the benefit of the global North. The collective narrative voice exemplifies that economic exploitation:

> One of our fathers asked if Pexton could in the meantime send us clean water, at least for the youngest children. The Leader shook his head; he'd heard this question before. He took a deep breath as he prepared his standard response: Pexton was not in the business of providing water (…) Months later, Pexton men arrived for their first meeting with the village. When our elders asked the Leader at that initial meeting where he thought our vanished men might be, he told them that he knew nothing, Pexton did not involve itself with the whereabouts of the citizens of our country, unless, of course, they were its workers. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 9–10)

Beyond the environmental and economic, the most devastating form of exploitation is the social and bodily violence inflicted upon the Kosawan communities. Mbue uses the bodies of the sick and dying children as the ultimate site of that violence, a harrowing manifestation of what Achille Mbembe terms "necro-politics," where the corporation, with the complicity of the state, wields the power to determine who lives and who dies. Indeed, the illnesses, the birth defects, and the high mortality rates are not unfortunate by-products but a direct consequence of a system that places corporate profit above human life. The exploitation is not just of a resource but of the very biological integrity of the subaltern. The bodies of the children become the tangible evidence of the capitalist delusion's lethal lie. Pexton's representatives show no remorse for economic exploitation in the face of that tragedy:

> Nobody thought much about the fact that two children had died in one month—in a village of dozens of children, it was uncommon for such a thing to happen. Only after my classmate Wambi began coughing while the rest of us laughed, and then began vomiting blood; only after we'd buried Wambi and coughs like his began echoing across the school compound and bouncing hut to hut, some children urinating blood, others burning with fevers no amount of cold baths could bring down, several dying. (Mbue, 2021, p. 33)

This physical suffering is compounded by a deep psychological exploitation, which fragments the communities' trust and creates internal divisions. The fear of speaking out, the despair over the loss of their children, and the erosion of their communal bonds all serve to break the spirit of the people, leaving them isolated and vulnerable to the continued assault. This multi-layered exploitation, environmental, economic, and bodily violence, is the brutal crucible from which a new, post-exploitative paradigm emerges.

The emergence of that paradigm marks a pivotal turn (change) in *How Beautiful We Were*, as the communities shift from being a site of passive exploitation to a space of active reclamation and re-creation. The first and most critical element of that shift (change) is the rejection of capitalist value. The turning point is not a sudden revolution but a slow, painful awakening to the fact that the token payments and false promises are not a fair exchange for their health and their land. At a pivotal moment, the people of Kosawa stop trying to negotiate within the capitalist framework and instead begin to demand something that money cannot buy: the restoration of their natural world and the health of their children. Therefore, they ask Thula for financial help to buy guns and launch attacks on Pexton:

> Six months after her return was when she gave the money for the guns. She did it without ceremony. She simply took out an envelope while we were sitting in one of our huts. In it was the full amount we had requested to buy five powerful guns and sufficient ammunition. She said nothing as we stood up, one after another, stooped next to her, bowed our heads, took her hand in ours, and expressed our gratitude. When she did speak, her tone was stern. She told us that we were not to use the guns without her permission. We were not to use them for anything but the defense of our lives and those of our families and friends. (Mbue, 2021, p. 293)

This is the moment when the post-exploitative paradigm begins to take shape. It is a fundamental shift in epistemology, a rejection of the global market's system of valuation, and a reassertion of their own indigenous values. They begin to value clean water over money, communal health over individual wealth, and the preservation of their heritage over the pursuit of Western modernity. This move is a powerful decolonial act, as it disengages from the very system that has defined their worth and, in doing so, re-establishes their own terms of existence.

Central to that new paradigm is the reclamation of memory and identity through storytelling. The novel's narrative structure, told through the collective "we", is itself an act of resistance. It is a refusal to allow Pexton and the corrupt government to write the history of Kosawa. Instead, the communities tell their own story, asserting their agency in

defining their own past, present, and future. The title, *How Beautiful We Were*, is a poignant anchor for this reclamation. It is not an act of nostalgic escapism, but a political tool for remembering a time before the capitalist delusion took hold, a time of harmony, of respect for the land, and of communal strength:

> Only the mercy of the Spirit kept us from losing our resolve, for it gave us reasons to smile in the laughter of our children, the appearance of rainbows that left us in awe, the euphoria on full-moon nights when we took out our drums and our children skipped around the square while the elders cheered and our wives twirled their hips, causing our groins to stiffen. At times like these, we thought mostly of how blessed we were, what boundless promise life bore. Such moments reminded us that, no matter how long the night, morning always comes. (Mbue, 2021, p. 292)

The memory of "how beautiful we were" becomes the philosophical and moral bedrock of their resistance. In postcolonial theories, this act of reclaiming memory is crucial for decolonization, as it counters the hegemonic narratives of the colonizer that have historically sought to erase the histories and identities of the marginalized beings. The narrative of the novel, therefore, does not just describe the post-exploitative paradigm; it actively embodies it, creating a new literary space where the voice of the subaltern is not just heard but is the very fabric of the story.

Further, that reclamation of memory and value culminates in the articulation of a new collective agency. The post-exploitative paradigm is inherently communal and anti-individualistic, standing in stark contrast to the atomizing logic of capitalism. The Kosawan people's resistance is not led by a single, Western-style hero, but by a collective of voices, each contributing to a unified struggle. This collective agency is manifested in their initial protests, their refusal to accept further bribes, and their eventual resort to more militant actions:

> We promised her that if she provided the funds for the guns we would do all we could to see her vision of a revolution come true. As soon as she gave us the word, we would start meeting with village heads in our district and nearby districts to listen to the stories of their people's woes of mudslides cause by government mass deforestation; lands under seizure by decrees; dying children; raging soldiers; schools collapsed roofs. We would ask the village heads if they wanted to join us to defeat our common enemy. (Mbue, 2021, p. 290)

Clearly, this is a form of power that is not rooted in individual wealth or political office but in the strength of their communal bonds. The new paradigm recognizes that their survival depends on their solidarity, their ability to trust one another, and their shared commitment

to a future free from exploitation. Indeed, the communal resistance is a direct refutation of the capitalist ideal, which pits individuals against one another in a relentless competition for resources. In Kosawa, the paradigm shift is a move from a fragmented, exploited populace to a unified, self-determining community, bound together by a shared struggle and a collective vision of a better future.

The most powerful and tragic articulation of the new paradigm is apparent through the journey of Thula, who acts as the symbolic bridge between the capitalist delusion and the post-exploitative reality. Initially, Thula embodies the capitalist promise, a bright young mind whose dreams of a Western education represent the community's hope for a modern future. However, her return from America marks a profound change. She has a decolonized mind, using the knowledge she gained in the West to fight against the very system that created her. The collective narrative voice reveals Thula's deep desire for social change as follows:

> Her vision for the revolution was for it to begin officially on a day we could call Liberation Day. On that day, men and women from towns and villages in our surrounding districts would gather in Lokunja. She would invite a newspaperman, the man who had taken over Austin's job. The newspaperman would take pictures and chronicle the rebirth of our country. If Liberation Day went well, we would have more rallies in other towns and in as many districts as we could, until we were ready for men and women to march in protest on a single day, in every town, in every village all across the nation, fists clenched up and chanting, until the walls of the regime fell down. (Mbue, 2021, p. 296)

Obviously, Thula's journey to America is a testament to the power of a hybrid agency, a concept central to the postcolonial paradigm. Indeed, her resistance is not a simple rejection of Western knowledge but a critical appropriation of it, blending her legal and political understanding with the indigenous strength and collective will of her people. Her ultimate sacrifice and the ongoing struggle of the young revolutionaries she inspires solidify the novel's vision of a post-exploitative paradigm as a continuous, and often tragic, process. This new way of being is not a peaceful utopia but a state of perpetual struggle, a constant fight to reclaim humanity in the face of a system that would deny it.

As proven above, *How Beautiful We Were* is a masterful postcolonial text that meticulously charts the journey from capitalist exploitation to the articulation of a post-exploitative paradigm. It discloses how the initial seduction of modernity is a multi-faceted neo-colonial delusion that is brutally shattered by the reality of environmental, economic, and bodily violence. The community's subsequent journey towards a new

paradigm, defined by a revaluation of their indigenous culture, the reclamation of their collective voice, and the emergence of a militant agency, is a powerful testament to the resilience of the subaltern. This narrative ultimately offers a profound and necessary lesson: that liberation from the shackles of exploitation requires a fundamental shift in values, an unwavering commitment to collective action, and a radical, unending process of re-imagining a future on one's own terms.

Conclusion

This study embarked on an examination of the capitalism delusion as depicted in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, with the primary objective of unravelling the intricate mechanisms through which capitalist ideology seduces and ultimately exploits vulnerable communities, such as Kosawa.

The analysis of the first axis revealed that the initial embrace of capitalism was not a simple economic choice but a profound ideological seduction, a mirage of modernity that preyed upon the Kosawan communities' legitimate desires for progress. The second axis charted the brutal rupture of that delusion, revealing how the violence inflicted upon the land and the bodies of the people of Kosawa catalyzed a radical awakening. The novel's overarching achievement, as this work has shown, is its masterful portrayal of that dialectical journey from a state of passive hope to a fierce and active resistance, thereby forging a change or a new paradigm of existence that fundamentally rejects the dehumanizing logic of exploitation.

In terms of findings, this inquiry has varied results. Academically, it contributes to the burgeoning field of petro-fiction and postcolonial environmental literature, providing a model for deconstructing the ideological scaffolding of corporate power. Socially and politically, its findings give a powerful voice to marginalized communities facing similar struggles against global corporations, serving as a cautionary tale and a source of inspiration for resilience. Religiously, it illuminates the spiritual dimension of resistance, showing how the Kosawans' connection to both their land and ancestors can become a powerful weapon against a materialist ideology.

As to the relevance of the postcolonial critique in this work, it was not merely contextual but determinative. It provided the essential hermeneutic tools to move beyond a simplistic narrative of corporate greed versus some helpless communities, underscoring the complex internal dynamics of complicity, the psychic alienation of the seduced, and the profound political nature of the collective subaltern voice. This method helps

to interrogate Mbue's novel as a sophisticated commentary on neo-colonialism, where Pexton operates as a proxy for global capital, and the Kosawan people's resistance becomes a struggle not just for their land, but for their very humanity and historical memory. However, this theoretical approach is also subject to several limitations. Although it has meticulously accounted for the central dialectic of seduction and resistance in Mbue's novel, it did not provide a complete analysis of all forms of capitalist exploitation.

Therefore, future research could explore the specific spiritual rituals and indigenous cosmologies of the Kosawan communities as an explicit source of their anti-capitalist worldview, or conduct a comparative analysis with other African literary works on petro-fiction to broaden the scope of this emergent post-exploitative paradigm.

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