

PERSPECTIVE PAPER

Special Issue: Women in Contemporary Science in Africa

Female agency in eco-activism: a study of Imbolo Mbue's *how beautiful we were*

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is increasingly a global crisis. The annual organisation of summits and conferences all over the world geared towards environmental sustainability; during which new measures are adopted and old ones strengthened, demonstrates the urgency for climate change mitigation. These summits and conferences are attended by government representatives, organisations, scholars, scientists and individuals because the fight against climate change necessitates collective efforts. However, in Africa, the African woman's involvement in the struggle is stalled and her specific contributions overlooked by patriarchal power structures. In this paper, I explore the female response to ecocide resulting from oil exploration after the male approach flops. Employing the ecofeminists theory, the research utilises qualitative methods including thematic interpretation and character analysis to illustrate that by virtue of their physiology (life-givers), psychology (greater emotional capacities) and social roles (domestic caretaking), women play a vanguardist role in the struggle for environmental sustainability. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the African woman employs double efforts in the struggle for climate justice as she, first, subverts patriarchal power structures that deprive her of knowledge, limit free expression and manifestation of her potentials, and, then leverages her knowledge and potentials to the benefit of her community and the world at large. The analysis, thus, reveals the need for inclusivity at all levels of decision making to enable more African women participate in climate change advocacy, policy-making and negotiations both locally and internationally.

KEYWORDS:

African woman, agency, eco-activism, ecocide, climate change, environmental sustainability, female agency, government, multinationals, oil exploration

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INTRODUCTION

Africa is rich in oil, supplies approximately 12 percent of the world's oil and still has significant untapped reserves¹. This makes the continent attractive to multinational corporations that vie for the extraction of the oil. The activities of these extractive companies are a mixed blessing because aside involving enormous financial gains capable of catalysing a country's socio-economic development, they cause ecological hazards, principally, in the form of land, air and water pollution that are detrimental to human lives directly and indirectly. This is the case of countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Angola where oil spills and gas flares resulting from oil exploration damage ecosystems and lives of people around the oil sites. Unfortunately, these consequences of oil exploration cannot, completely, be averted but only mitigated. There are international laws that call on corporate responsibility of the actors in oil exploration but, unfortunately, are not, often, respected². The continuous destruction of the environment and human lives with impunity in African countries is enabled by the connivance between oil corporations and governments that conceal their atrocities on the environment and corrupt or suppress remonstrating voices.

The struggle for environmental justice in Africa, like elsewhere in the world, requires collective efforts. Yearly, summits and conferences are held in which progress is evaluated, measures strengthened and new ones adopted for environmental sustainability. These summits and conferences are attended by government representatives, organisations, scholars, scientists and individuals since climate change is a global concern. In Africa, despite women's active participation in the fight exemplified by movements such as Girls for Climate Action in Uganda, Savanna Circuit in Kenya, Herou Alliance in Mali and The Green Belt Movement in Kenya, women's contributions are stalled by patriarchy. Citing countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Rwanda and Mali, Hughes³ notes that following the Paris Agreement in 2015 where countries agreed to apply gender-responsive measures to fighting climate change, the effective application of these adaptation and mitigation strategies are "challenging due to the intrinsic power inequalities embedded in their patriarchal constructs."

The case of Liberia, South Africa and Rwanda is fair but the significant improvement in women's representation in the environmental sector is at the national positions, with an underrepresentation in international delegations.

In this paper, I seek to illustrate that despite the relegation to the background in mainstream scholarship of women's contributions to environmental justice paradigm;^{4, 5} with the case of the African woman stemming, specifically, from socio-cultural disparities between men and women that cause the unrecognition of the latter's contribution as well as the overlooking of specific female-based effects of climate change, she plays a vanguardist role in the struggle for environmental sustainability. By virtue of their traditional social role (domestic caretakers), physiology (givers of life) and psychology (greater emotional capacities) emphasised by cultural ecofeminists such as Ortner⁶, women are closer to nature whom they care for, protect and nurture. Ultimately, I examine the African woman's angst about environmental destruction, her radical approach to environmental justice through which she challenges patriarchal power structures that deprive her of knowledge, limit free expression and manifestation of her potentials, and, then leverages her knowledge and potentials to the benefit of her community and the world at large as represented, fictionally, by Imbolo Mbue in *How Beautiful We Were*.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach to explore the critical role that the African woman plays in combating environmental destruction caused by oil exploration as revealed by Imbolo Mbue in *How Beautiful We Were*. Using the ecofeminists theory, the paper reveals how women, embodied by Thula—the protagonist triumph over patriarchal power structures and spearhead an arduous task for environmental sustainability where male-led efforts flop. The data for this study is obtained through a close reading of the text; identifying themes, motifs, and character development to highlights women's connection to nature through their social roles, and how they acquire knowledge and leverage it

for struggle for environmental justice despite gender-based challenges.

DISCUSSION

Textual Analysis

Gender Stereotypes

Kosawa, the setting of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, typifies traditional African communities where the local woman's household responsibilities are dependent on the natural environment. The destruction of cultivable land and drinkable water by oil spills stresses them out, profoundly, as they toil more to acquire these necessities that are requisite for their homes.

A case in point in the text is when:

a pipeline burst and oil flooded the farm of the mother of one of my friends—her family barely had any harvest that year...Weeks later, a new spill turned into a fire that ravaged the farms of six families, forcing mothers to go searching for new land deep in the forest, a trek that left many with little strength for toiling.⁷

The excerpt reveals how women's labour in farming is made vain at a time that the burden of household responsibilities on them is exacerbated by the fact that their husbands do no longer go fishing because fishes die from sea pollution. The women are obliged to trek a long distance into the forest in search of cultivable land to the point of getting exhausted upon arrival. The African Development Bank has detailed in a report the effects of environmental degradation specific to rural women and girls such as spending more time in search with food, water and fuel wood for their households. The report reveals associated consequences of the effects of destruction of the household necessities such as "socio-economic challenges such as gender inequality, domestic violence, lack of financial empowerment and lack of access to quality education amongst others."⁸ These challenges and sacrifices peculiar to women underscore the need to consider gender in a bid to understand the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation⁹. They are also essential elements for women's inclusion in movements that seek environmental justice especially because women "have a different sense of what

constitutes a bigger climate risk than men, based on their role at the household and the local community."¹⁰

In Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, the absence of women in the delegation constituted by the Chief of Kosawa, Woja Beki, to plead for government's intervention in the destruction of the village's ecosystems is a synecdoche of the exclusion of women "from environmental decision-making at the local, national and international levels."⁸ This discrimination is, also, seen when Thula is equipped with knowledge to dialogue with the officials of Pexton—the oil company yet, the elders of the village decide that "able men should accompany her, to give the delegation respectability."⁷ This decision does not, necessarily, illustrate that an uneducated man is more logical and rational than an educated woman but demonstrates the deep-rootedness of the patriarchal mind-set in their community, how it is institutionalised and, thus, enforced by rules, norms, customs and traditions. It is no wonder that the decisions that exclude and prejudice women are taken by the chief and elders—the custodians of Kosawa's customs and tradition. This correlation between female marginalisation and environmental degradation prompted Francoise d'Eaubonne—the French critic credited with the emergence of the concept of ecofeminism, to argue that the destruction of male power is indispensable in the fight for environmental protection.

Women, naturally, are protectors of nature so much that whether or not they identify themselves as ecofeminists, they act on the connections of human beings and nature.¹¹ Kosawa women, epitomised by Thula—the protagonist, play a pivotal role in the fight for environmental justice in their community. However, to achieve this, she challenges gender stereotypes by embracing and excelling in her studies, deprives herself of erotic love and rebuffs the stigma of celibacy in her pursuit of a solution to oil explorers' anthropocentric attitude. At a teenage age, Thula distinguishes herself from other young girls by sticking to her books instead of playing with boys. Even when she, occasionally, converses and smiles with them, it is with her books in her hands as a message that; "if you want to get to me, you must prove yourself worthy of my putting down my book for you."⁷ As she matures, she wants not just a lover but a companion who shares her vision for the

protection of Kosawa. Accordingly, she turns down Austin's marriage proposal after an eight-year love relationship because her belief in the urgency to salvage the situation of her people contradicts his conviction that things will, naturally, change with time. Thula's refusal to forfeit her love for Kosawa—an ultimate indication that nothing can replace her love for Kosawa astonishes her male friends who had thought that Austin, whom she praises in her letters, has won her heart. With the belief that "the hearts of women are fickle and easily altered by love,"⁷ the boys had concluded that; "if she were to decide to remain in America for the sake of love...we would accept it. We would rejoice and wish her well."⁷ Hence, Thula's uncompromising resolve for the liberation of Kosawa from ecocide against marriage—a colossal distraction that the patriarchal mentality considers a crucial achievement for women challenges the presumption that women are irresolute and erratic.

The undermining of a woman's ability to catalyse change is also seen in the rebuffing of Thula's political ambition by government officials on the basis of her gender. When she lambastes His Excellency and his cronies for disregarding environmental sustainability and plunging the country into misery, they ask mockingly; "what can one angry woman do?"⁷ The pervasiveness of the patriarchal outlook in Thula's community is seen, as well, in the local people's reticence to subscribe to her vision of ousting His Excellency from power, democratically, and building a country that prioritises the people's interest. According to many of them, that she is a woman; especially not married shows that "her deficiencies were many, too many for a man to take on."⁷ The underestimation of woman's potentials in Kosawa is rather ridiculous when even the boys whom Thula leads, infallibly, in the fight against ecocide wish that "with time, she'd find a husband, someone with whom she'd have a child so that she could become a real woman, because nothing could make her respectable besides motherhood and marriage."⁷ The attribution of respect to gender, and then marriage and motherhood rather than on savviness and bravery is an impediment to the African woman's expression of her potentials as well as "reinforces gender imbalances against women...invisibilizing women's contribution"¹² towards socio-economic and political problems. Ecofeminists

connect the prejudicing of women with the exploitation of nature and, thus, content that the struggle against anthropocentrism should be concomitantly with that against androcentrism.

Gleaning and Leveraging Knowledge

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* shows that the destruction of the environment and human lives with impunity by oil corporations operating in Africa persists because of the complicity of oil corporations and governments. While the oil corporations have finances to bribe and power to lobby their way both at national and international levels, the government uses its soldiers to squash local dissenting opinions and uprisings. In Kosawa, the killing of numerous men including Thula's father and uncle in their efforts to urge the government and Pexton officials to stop the destruction of Kosawa's ecosystems and human life, and the failures of a non-governmental organisation and judicial courts to call Pexton to order, results in a general pessimistic perception of the fight against environmental justice.

However, at a time the indigenes of Kosawa begin to resettle in neighbouring villages, Thula, although a 10-year old girl plans to continue the fight. The promise that "someday I will make Woja Beki and his friends in Bezam pay for what they've done to my family"⁷ tells of her exasperation at environmental destruction and foreshadows the radical approach to the situation after the non-violent one led by men flops. That Thula knows "nothing about how a girl makes men pay for their crimes"⁷ but decides to figure it out as she grows illustrates her determination for the course. It is worth noting the young Thula's affiliation of patriarchy with environmental damage when she observes that Woja Beki—the Chief of Kosawa, and Pexton and administrative officials whose conspiracy perpetuates ecocide in Kosawa are all men.

As a student, Thula knows that education is power and blames her people's failure in stopping Pexton's destruction of their village to lack of knowledge and strategy. When soldiers storm the village in search of administrative authorities suspected to have been held hostage in the village and men go to meet them with neither machetes nor spears, Thula is flabbergasted and wonders; "shouldn't a conversation with soldiers

involve weapons?”⁷ This lack of strategy and resolve on an issue that concerns the survival of the community reduces Thula’s esteem for men. The sarcastic description of the way they chat and laugh, rub their bellies and brag of their wives in the face of danger is a subtle mockery of rationality and bravery often attributed to men.

In a bid to obtain the right tools and master the best strategy for the struggle against environmental degradation and bad governance, Thula decides to “acquire knowledge and turn it into a machete that would destroy all those who treat us like vermin.”⁷ To achieve this goal, while her female mates abandon school and “began spending more time with older girls and women: going to the farm, doing laundry, going to the market, taking care of babies, gossiping in kitchens”⁷—a feature of traditional patriarchal African societies, she embraces her studies. Thula is fond of revolutionary books such as *Pedagogy of the Depressed*, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *The Communist Manifesto* that her mother identifies as “her closest friends”⁷. The wealth of knowledge she gleans from them inspires her to right the wrongs in her society. Her quest for knowledge is, also, seen in the journey every day to the neighbouring village for secondary school studies—the only girl amongst a group of boys which is crowned by her selection for a scholarship in America. The feat achieved in predominantly boys’ school shows an African girl’s aptitude in domains reserved for boys by patriarchal power structures. Liberal ecofeminists opine that women do not differ from men as rational beings and that it is exclusion from educational and economic opportunities that prevent them from realizing their own potential for creativity in all spheres of human life.⁹

In America, Thula gleans more knowledge on how to salvage the situation of her community. In a letter to her friends back home, she testifies; “I came here to find what I’m searching for, and I get it every day, in my classes, and in the books.”⁷ Nonetheless, she, later, realises that more is needed in the fight ecological damage than education when she learns that some American citizens suffer the effects of oil exploration as much as the people of Kosawa. She intimates; “I’d long thought that our problem was that we were weak, lack of knowledge our greatest incapacity.”⁷ Knowledge of

the existence of environmental destruction with impunity in America—a country where human and environmental rights are rigorous, discloses acute connivance and hypocrisy in the struggle for global environmental justice and sustainability, and shapes Thula’s vision for climate justice. She thinks that the fight for climate justice should be fought anywhere one finds themselves. Unger¹³ postulates that this practice characterises women and, most especially women of colour from indigenous communities, who have suffered the impacts of environmental degradation. Having suffered the gruesome effects of environmental degradation in Kosawa, organises and champions peaceful protests against the oil company and American government’s environmental irresponsibility and until gets jailed. The central role Thula—a black woman plays in the protests is explained by Kossow¹⁴ that “there is a unique role of women of colour in the [environmental justice] EJ movement; environmental crises caused by industry...because of their connection to health, safety, family survival and community well-being.” Thula’s outstanding advocacy for environmental justice is reminiscent of African-women eco-activists like the Kenyan, Wangari Maathai—whose Green Belt Movement brought environmental restoration and preservation.

Upon her return from America, Thula re-engages dialogue with the director of the oil corporation in a bid to find common ground beneficial for the company and her people. Her friends recognise the power of education and are hopeful that; “she would speak to him in the way she’d learned how to speak to American men while living in their country. We had no better bridge between them and us than her.”⁷ This trust illustrates that educating the African girl-child is a best form of empowerment. The government’s indifference towards environmental damage which is a testament of her neglect of the general wellbeing of the citizens makes Thula believe that having at the helm of the country a patriotic and conscientious leader will be a panacea to environmental destruction and penury in the country. Consequently, she rallies people against His Excellency and in her speeches, she blends fury, remorse and sacrifice which ignites in them the spirit of patriotism, and followed by protests in all parts of the country in which people decry environmental exploitation and general hardship. This same strategy of

street protests has been used by women in countries like Nigeria, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Somali to decry ecocide. In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, women even stripped themselves naked, sang and dance in front of the offices of oil corporations.^{15, 16} The weaponisation of their body is evidence of the African woman invaluable contributions to the struggle for environmental sustainability. Tamale¹⁴ avers that women's use of their bodies to fight against injustice is "very powerful and always effective in that it draws attention to the issue under dispute." The practice that is capable of laying curses on the targeted people pushed the oil company in Nigeria to seek a truce by signing a memorandum of understanding with the women¹⁷.

In line with her belief in the power of education, Thula exploits her position as a teacher to share her revolutionary ideas with her students and continues to tour the country sensitising her compatriots. With a clenched fist, a stern face and an unwavering resolve, she addresses crowds in the cause of which her boldness and conviction in preaching the possibility of having a country free of ecological damage and bad governance is regarded with a mixture of admiration and awe. She teaches that great nations like "America and the prosperous countries in Europe did not become what they are today without generation after generation of people fighting and dying for peace."⁷ In reaction, for the first time in their country, "people lifted their voices and demanded a democratic election, demanded that His Excellency give them the right to choose their own president so they could create their dream country."⁷ Thula's eventual creation of a political party to pressurised His Excellency to hold the first presidential election in the country's history aligns with cultural ecofeminists' vision to "liberate women and nature through direct political action"¹¹. Her willingness to die for her people's freedom and intention to allow anyone who rises within the ranks of the party to challenge His Excellency in elections illustrates sacrifice and selflessness which differentiates the African woman from sit-tight male leaders like His Excellency.

In the meantime, the unsuccessful endeavours to coerce administrative and Pexton authorities to mitigate the impacts of oil exploration activities on man and the environment push Thula to resort to arson. She

declares; "the government and Pexton have left us with no choice but to do what we must in order to be heard. They speak to us in the language of destruction—let's speak it to them too, since it's what they understand."⁷ However, she pleads with the boys not to hurt anyone and gets annoyed when she, later, learns that the boys attack labourers at Pexton in a bid to draw the attention of the officials. She tells them; "blood on its hands was the last thing Kosawa needed"⁷ and withdraws financial support to them temporary.

With the passing of years and all attempts: peaceful protests, negotiations, court case, and arson having failed to make Pexton control oil spills in Kosawa, the boys express the need to use guns against their tormentors. This violent phase of the struggle against the consequences of oil extraction is evocative of conflicts in countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan especially due to "inequalities in the allocation of oil revenues especially when the local communities near the oil reserves are disadvantaged as is the case in the Niger Delta of Nigeria."¹⁸ Thula, once more, rejects killings but pressure from the boys who threaten to give up on the fight makes her succumb. Still, she is hesitant in giving them money to acquire guns because she values human life and when she does, she, sternly, warns them not to use the guns without her permission and invites the Spirit to bear witness that she did not give "us her blessings to take the life of another human."⁷ Yet, Thula's revelation that the venture "sounds like a mission that will consume the remainder of our lives, but I'm willing to dedicate my life to it..."⁷ reveals her identification with the radical approach and disposition to assume its consequences.

The apex of the radical approach is the kidnap of the Director of Pexton and his wife by the boys; a situation reminiscent of the kidnapping of over one hundred western workers between 2006 and 2007 in the Niger Delta of Nigeria¹⁹. In the text, ransom letters, supposedly, written by Thula are sent to Pexton and the government. Thula's involvement in this extremist tactic is unsurprising because the quest for environmental protection pushes women, just like men, to extremism. Nigeria's Niger Delta, women play active roles including spies, armed combatants, cooks and mediators in kidnapping incidents²⁰. In an effort to

rescue the Director of Pexton and his wife, the boys are killed by military men and Thula goes missing. Some people of Kosawa speculate that she must have run into the forest with bullet wounds. The collective search for Thula testifies the importance accorded to her in the community. And the impossibility of seeing her corpse leading to the presumption that she decides to die a river so that her enemies do not see her corpse—a manner different from the death of the boys illustrates her unique strength, courage and abilities in the fight for environmental justice. Another popular belief that “the Spirit caused her belly to swell, and birds and leopards tended to her, wiped her brow, and watered her lips as she pushed forth the child, and in unison, all the living things sang: For unto us a child is born. Could this child someday return to us, reclaim for us what was stolen?”⁷ reveals the people’s recognition of Thula’s sacrifices for Kosawa. The wish for her to have put to birth a child like the biblical Jesus; a sort of reincarnation that would bring redemption for Kosawa illustrates the people’s acknowledgement of and dependence on Thula for the freedom of Kosawa in particular and the country in general. Thula’s death like that of the Honduran, Berta Caceres, killed in 2016 for defending community land and environmental rights attests the ultimate price that women, irrespective of race, pay in the fight for climate justice.

CONCLUSION

I set out, in this paper, to examine the African woman’s contributions to the fight against environmental degradation perpetuated by an oil corporation in a context where the connivance between the company and government conceals evidence of environmental destruction as well as corrupts and silences opposing voices. Through Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*, I illustrated the African woman’s exceptional concern for the environment. Where men’s efforts to secure the protection of the environment and human lives from oil spills and gas flares flop, a woman adopts more daring and, extremist measures even at the cost of her life. However, as I also demonstrated, her contributions are stalled by patriarchal power structures that deprive her of knowledge, limit free expression and manifestation of her potentials. Consequently, this validates the ecofeminists’ view that the struggle for the environmental sustainability should

be concomitantly with women empowerment. This will be beneficial to humanity since “women would act differently from men when taking decisions about climate change problems and solutions.”²¹

Generally, I revealed that despite the relegation to the background in mainstream scholarship of the African woman’s contributions to environmental justice paradigm^{4, 5}, she is at the vanguard of the fight. Thula’s intransigence, intelligent ideas, undaunted bravery, and unparalleled sacrifices invalidate the passive role ascribed to the African woman in the fight for environmental justice. The text ends with an undergoing reconstruction and reconceptualisation of the underlying patriarchal mind-set that present the African woman as irrational and incomplete without a man. Thula’s angst and sacrifices for climate justice both in America and Kosawa call for inclusivity at all levels of decision-making in a bid to enable more African women to participate in climate change advocacy, policy-making and negotiations both locally and internationally.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the submitted work.

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