

**Oil Exploitation and Children's Squalid Experience in Imbolo Mbue's
*How Beautiful We Were***
**Exploitation pétrolière et expérience sordide des enfants dans *How
Beautiful We Were* d'Imbolo Mbue**

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Abstract: This paper assesses the impact of oil exploitation on children in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. Using ecocriticism and psychoanalytic criticism, it aims to show that children are the first and most victimized among the people suffering from physical and psychological consequences of environment degradation. As a result, Mbue's novel is part of eco-literature foregrounding the pertinent issue of the sustainable development. Her literary creativity is undoubtedly a call for considering the grim effects of environmental pollution on children as a crime. She strongly rouses the "green consciousness" of oil corporations and governments so as to participate to the environmental safety, a way to enable children to grow without worry.

Keywords: Oil Exploitation, Environment, Squalid Experience, Eco-trauma, Children

Résumé : Cet article évalue l'impact de l'exploitation pétrolière sur les enfants dans *Puissions-nous vivre longtemps* de la romancière Imbolo Mbue. À travers l'Ecocritique et la critique psychanalytique, il vise à montrer que les enfants constituent les premiers et les plus nombreux parmi les victimes des conséquences physiques et psychologiques de la dégradation environnementale. Il s'est avéré que le roman de Mbue représente une éco-littérature mettant en avant la problématique du développement durable. Sa créativité littéraire est sans aucun doute un appel à la considération des effets sinistres de la pollution de l'environnement sur les enfants comme un crime. Ainsi, elle éveille fortement la « conscience verte » des sociétés pétrolières et des décideurs politiques en vue de leur participation à la sécurité environnementale, un moyen de permettre aux enfants de grandir sans souci.

Mots-clés : Exploitation pétrolière, Environnement, Expérience sordide, Éco-traumatisme, Enfants

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Introduction

It is an unquestionable stance that wanton exploitation of crude oil makes the environment suffer from untold hardships. However, one observes that through the degradation of the environment, oil exploitation negatively impacts upon local populations’ life. Since “*humans are part of their natural environment*,” [it occurs that] “activities that harm the natural environment are equally harmful to humans.” (Kopdiya, 2021:29). There is a kind of undeniable connection between the devastation of the nature and the humans’ sordid living conditions. As humans are responsible for what happens, they remain geological force that alters ecosystem. That responsibility can be assessed by working on “Oil Exploitation and Children’s Squalid Experience in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*².”

The concern in this novel is different because characters unpleasantly experiencing these effects are not those degrading the environment. The overhead paradox signifies that the environmental disaster is the fallout of oil over-exploitation by Pexton (an American oil company) whereas the victims of the damages are the villagers and mainly children almost becoming, not to repeat Frantz Fanon, “*the wretched of the earth.*” Therefore, victimized subjects of an environmental disaster [namely children] experience some harmful physical and/or psychological symptoms. From this narration, one may opine with Oba et al (2014:36) that “*the novel x-rays the societies in order to find out how the people dictate and pilot their affairs according to stated values. The novel is a product of society and tries to direct the society by using the aesthetic medium.*” A kind of mimesis is observed in the novel as a literary genre because it portrays aspects of the real world, especially human actions.

It is an opportunity to carry out studies on the relation between humans and environment through fiction as Maleya (2016) examines how human culture impacts upon the environment in Henry Ole Kulet’s novels, Ocholi and Ogunpitan (2019) reveal the devastation of the ecology by man’s hunt for fortune in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, and Musaib and Tania (2022) propose an eco-critical analysis of Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW*. All along these critics, a very little attention has been given to the impact of oil exploitation upon children.

The current work is then developed to show that children are the first and most vulnerable victims among those who suffer from the consequences of the environment degradation. It is conducted firstly under ecocriticism with Lawrence Buell (1995), Glotfelty (1996), and Ekwueme-Ugwu (2020:52); secondly under psychoanalytic Criticism with Kofi Agyekum (2013). What is finally needed here is to know the reality of Oil Exploitation and the plight of Children and the Manifestations of Children’s eco-trauma.

I- Oil Exploitation and the plight of Children in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*

When Sule Egya, commenting on Osundare’s works quoted by Kopdiya (2021:27), observes that “*there is a sense of existentialism to it; earth offers humans existence and the continuation of life and to injure earth in any form is to endanger*

² For the Imbolo Mbue’s novel in use *How Beautiful We Were*, we may next refer to it as *HBWW*

the existence of humans”. This indicates how much the existence of humans becomes unsafe once the nature vanishes since their fate is tied together. Because of the undue exploitation of the environment in fetching crude oil, the people living in oil producing areas become victims of industrial pollution, including children as well. Thereby, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) describes, for instance, the Niger Delta region as:

suffering from “administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict.” The majority of the people of the Niger Delta do not have adequate access to clean water or healthcare. Their poverty, and its contrast with the wealth generated by oil, has become one of the world’s starker and most disturbing examples of the “resource curse” (*Amnesty International*, 2009:9).

From this passage, one can easily infer that life is difficult in areas where oil drilling activities are undertaken. In Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW*, these effects dislocate the social and economic life of Kosawa inhabitants who rely on the nature, unfortunately polluted. Hence, it is worth scrutinizing how oil exploitation unpleasantly impacts upon children through the experience of squalor, health problems, death and relocation.

I-1. The Experience of Squalor

The literary imagination employed by Imbolo Mbue in *HBWW* enables the reader to delve into and witness the upshot of the corrosive relationship between the devastated environment and the children’s living conditions. The aftermaths of oil drilling activities wrenchingly impact upon children who, eventually are condemned to live in abject situation. This situation is experienced as a squalor, a “*dirty and unpleasant conditions*” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, 1995). This highlights the plight of ‘victimized’ children who are reduced to experience a squalid situation instigated by oil pollution.

Imbolo Mbue captures the reader’s attention about this plague in the opening paragraph of her novel when children unhappily contend: “*we should have known the end was near*” (*HBWW*, p.3). As can be seen, children’s dirty and unpleasant conditions are a serious matter for the authoress who depicts this environmental scourge. In addition, the dirty and unpleasant life’s conditions of villagers firstly derive from water pollution as rivers serve for irrigation in agriculture, fishing, transportation, leisure activities like swimming and boating, and other domestic purposes as well. However, the novel reveals that children are even denied basic human rights such as the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food. As an illustration, fisheries seen as the main sources of food for many of them, have been damaged because of oil spills and waste dumping. Accordingly, Thula, the protagonist, expresses her sorrow as follows:

It was then, with the increased wastes dumped into it, that whatever life was left in the big river disappeared. Within a year, fishermen broke down their canoes and found new uses for the wood. Children began to forget the taste of fish. (*HBWW*, p.32)

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This passage illustrates how water pollution brings a real bane that extremely harms and ruins the lives of children who even lack basic life amenities. With the devastation of aquatic life in the area and the high unemployment observed in Kosawa, oil pollution further complicates the scenario for children whose fathers “*broke down their canoes and found new uses for the wood*”. One clearly sees how oil pollution, in killing the fish and damaging the ability of fish to reproduce, has instigated poverty and increased hunger. Consequently, “*children began to forget the taste of fish*”, meaning the commencement of soreness as their key source of livelihood is destroyed.

Indeed, living without drinking water is broadly unthinkable. For, in villages, the majority of children does not have an adequate access to clean water but depends on untreated water from wells. However, when drilling crude oil under the soil, water from the well nearby can easily be contaminated. Thus, drinking this toxic water becomes a source of many problems because of its poison, as villagers outcry:

Please, you must do something, one of our aunts cried to the Leader, her baby limp in her arms. It was the poison—the baby was too pure for the filth in the village well’s water, the toxins that had seeped into it from Pexton’s field. (HBWW, p.9)

The impact of oil pollution is clearly seen through the innocent baby who drinks the toxic water from the village well. This quotation evidences the danger of oil pollution and also the violation of the right to water – which occurs when oil spills and waste materials pollute water used for drinking and other domestic purposes. In the same wave, Imbolo Mbue probably blames Pexton, the American oil company for this water toxicity since their crude oil exploration dumps toxic wastes into the river. In this way, Haraway, quoted by Musaib and Tania (2022:67-68), argue that “*the responsibility of environmental injustices and calamities are on the shoulders of western upper-class agents.*” Hence, behind the mask of this toxic river, Imbolo Mbue hides the nostalgia of children which makes them suffer day-to-day. Thula’s reminiscence of her childhood is among examples:

Mama and papa cautioning me never to go near the big river is my first memory of life. (...) Without our parents’ stories about their childhoods in a clean Kosawa, their days spent swimming in rivers that ran clear. (HBWW, p.28)

Through Thula’s bitter mind-set, the authoress tallies the impossibility for young generation to take huge profits of the river through water games, and other ludic activities because of oil and toxic wastes. Indirectly, this exploitation breaks the joy of children, who can no longer approach the river fearing to get contaminated and falling sick, since “*the big river looks like now, green and flowing sluggishly under layers of toxic waste*” (HBWW, p.117). Consequently, oil pollution on the river modifies the ecological balance, and damages children’s space of expression. Thereby, growing without these activities appears as a kind of burden for children.

Furthermore, some interwoven injuries of oil exploitation upon the environment and characters are directed to the land used for farming. Consequently, the land is destroyed because of the toxicity instigated by oil spills. This leads to dramatic shortages in agricultural production and sets off a chain reaction of destruction. In

HBWW, Thula explains how oil spills devastate some families' farmland due to the fire coming from an unprotected pipeline:

At the end of that first dry season, a pipeline burst and oil flooded the farm of the mother of one of my friends—her family barely had any harvest that year; some days, I had to share my food with her during recess. 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. (pp.32-33)

This textual snippet evidence difficult situation that villagers experience under the pain of a calamitous way of extracting crude oil. For, they mostly rely on agriculture for food and for their livelihood, so they witness "*the destruction of any crops that come into contact with the oil. Fires associated with oil spills often increase the spread of the damage*" (Amnesty International, 2009:30). Thus, Thula, a young girl, is obliged to share her food with her friend, for the impact of this environmental damage is strongly catastrophic to the point that it is "*forcing mothers to go searching for new land deep in the forest*". The impact of oil spills upon farmland has also been tackled by Kaine Agary (2006) with regard to Zilayefa who states that during her secondary school days, one of the crude oil pipelines running through her village, breaks and spills oil over several hectares of land including her mother's farm. This sad event makes them landlessness and initiates food shortages since forthwith, they can no longer produce their own food, as she decries: "*my mother lost her main source of sustenance. However, I think she had lost that land a long time ago, because each season yielded less than the season before*" (Agary, 2006:04). This is an instructive assessment of the unconscious attitude and approach to the management of pipelines by the oil companies in the region – an inattentive attitude that resulted in an incomprehensible ecological disaster. Local populations, because of this bad management, are no longer able to feed themselves from productive land.

As can be seen, Imbolo Mbue does not only depicts the impact of the environmental disaster upon children through the experience of the squalor that is the dirty and unpleasant conditions as she insists: "*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*" (*HBWW*, p.32). Although children experience this unbearable situation where the whole village becomes the concert of Pexton's noise with a dirty smell in air, the authoress also scrutinizes health problems met by Kosawa children.

I-2. Health Problems

When oil extraction which includes exploration and operation to bring crude oil to the surface occurs near human populations, this activity frequently harms their health. For, once the environment is vulnerable, the entire ecosystem is endangered. The failure to enforce laws of protecting the environment and preventing pollution always leads to violations of the right to health. Consequently, harmful chemicals or other detrimental environmental conditions directly or indirectly impact upon human health.

In *HBWW*, the exploitation of crude oil by Pexton turns Kosawa atmosphere into a nightmare wherein characters suffer from different diseases, especially children seen as the very first victims of this scourge: “*the disease preferred the bodies of children*” (p.8). This indicates how children are fragile vis-à-vis the harmful substances as they are totally exposed. In villages, children like playing and running everywhere, eating and drinking whatever can please them: “*We hurry out to play. Across compounds, friends and siblings start hiding and seeking, kicking balls of plantain leaves and rubber, everyone enjoying a hopefulness we'd feared we'd lost*” (*HBWW*, p.55). Yet, the entire Kosawa is submerged into a chaotic situation related to oil pollution which devastates the nature and negatively attacks local population. Since everything correlated, “*the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from the land that lost its purity*” (*HBWW*, p.5) constitute the basic elements which cause illness to children. The villagers' ignorance about oil pollution makes them captive of drawbacks of the environmental damages.

Furthermore, oil spills and gas flare have the potential to affect children in many ways. The child might come into direct contact with the oil by touching it, inhaling it, or ingesting it. Direct or indirect exposure to oil, dispersants or burnt oil, can cause itchy eyes, trouble breathing, headache, dizziness, rashes, and blisters, among other issues. The authoress fictionalizes this phenomenon through the character Wambi, Lusaka's son whose health is troubled by the cough, as the narrator reports:

We'd been alive for centuries combined, and yet we'd never heard anyone cough the way he did. When the cough hit, his eyes watered, his back hunched out, he had to hold on to something to steady himself. It was sad to watch, pitiful. (*HBWW*, pp. 7-8)

This passage clearly highlights the negative impact of oil pollution and environmental damages upon villagers, mainly children. Sentences “he had to hold on to something to steady himself. It was sad to watch, pitiful” epitomize the case of Wambi suffering from terrible cough, and it is taken as the microcosm of children exposed to deadly danger due to harmful chemicals or other detrimental environmental conditions. This means that the devastation instigated by oil pollution directly influences children to experience physical health problems — diagnosed as respiratory symptom.

Similarly, it appears prominent to notify that air pollution from oil exploration contributes to the ruin of local populations' health. Diseases caused by air pollutants kill and hospitalize millions of people every year due to conditions associated with air pollution. In the novel under examination, this distressing situation is also observed since “*the smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude*” (*HBWW*, p.32). Indeed, the entire air of the village is dominated by toxic smell of crude oil. As air is the invisible mixture of gases that surround the Earth and contains important substances, such as oxygen and nitrogen, and that most species need to survive; the dirty smell of crude oil becomes unavoidable and develops respiratory symptoms once breathed, as the population wonders:

How could we have imagined such a thing would happen to us? That several of us would develop raspy coughs and rashes and fevers that would persist until our deaths? Please stay away from us with that ugly cough of yours, we'd said to Wambi. But it wasn't just an ugly cough,

we would later find out. The dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. (HBWW, p.8)

As can be seen, children of Kosawa minimize the dreadful fallout that air pollution could beget. They could not imagine that Pexton oil extractions activities were the cause of their health problems as they utter: “*we did not initially suspect the oil field*” (HBWW, p.33). Their ignorance betrays their naivety which eventually leads them to health problems. The sentence “*that several of us would develop raspy coughs and rashes and fevers*” testifies the peril emanated from air pollution.

It is clear that the dirty smell of crude oil, coming from oil spills, gas flares and burnt pipelines, frequently causes coughs and fevers to humans living close to production oil fields. Wambi’s long-term exposure to polluted air results in a loss of lung’s capacity and a decrease lung function. His chronic cough can be seen as a symptom of tuberculosis. Imbolo Mbue in creating this doleful scene, seeks to draw the reader’s intention about public health impact emanating from crude oil exploration and production. She helps the reader to delve deeply into the stand which points out impacts of polluted air on health, mainly with respiratory irritation or breathing difficulties. However, she measures the danger of this scourge and calls for an environmental consciousness.

In the same wave, health problems are also identified as the emanation of polluted water. Water being one of the most vital good among the natural resources for the survival of all living organisms including human and food production, the fallout of water pollution is unquestionably a serious threat to the well-being of children. Yet, the underground water moves into streams and wells which are the only sources of local water supply in the community which results in the rise of water-borne diseases. From this perspective, Kosawa villagers who depend on untreated surface water and wells for drinking water, lead them to health problems. As the story unfolds, one observes some children’s horrible symptoms originating from their physical contact with oil polluted water, as narrator testifies:

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 from hut to hut, some children urinating blood, others burning with fevers no amount of cold baths could bring down. (HBWW, p.33)

As the situation keeps on worsening, Thula hopelessly furthers:

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 only grown hotter, no amount of wiping with a cold cloth sufficient to cool him down. (HBWW, p.35)

From the foregoing, it is noticeable that the water system which is widely polluted and on which many villagers and children rely on for drinking and for other domestic purposes, has conducted them to health problems. By using phrases such as “*vomiting blood*”, “*some children urinating blood*”, “*others burning with fevers no amount of*

cold baths could bring down”, “*body aches before progressing to a fever so high*”, Imbolo Mbue depicts the fallout of environmental catastrophe by oil corporations as a horrible crime towards children.

The impacts of the oil spill upon children’s health appear to persist years after the disaster. Hence, the pollutants which are the corrosive sources of diseases, also become the cause of several deaths. In the novel under consideration, the authoress tackles this tragic situation that needs to be scanned.

I-3. Death

There are evidence that determine the extent to which oil pollution harms human health. It has been known for decades that oil pollution causes health problems and premature death. Since the impact of oil pollution on children’s health appears to persist years after the disaster, this automatically leads to death. Characters in Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW* experience these tragic events and have “*linked their death to Pexton*” (*HBWW*, p.34). Kosawa children live with death as if it were one of their relatives, as Thula argues: “*I’ve spent my entire life around death*” (*HBWW*, p.26). She furthers epitomizing the situation as follows:

We were reminded of our parents’ lies whenever there was a new death, sometimes in our huts, sometimes in the hut next to ours, sometimes children younger than us, babies and toddlers, children who had barely tasted life, always children we knew. We were young, but we knew death to be impartial. (*HBWW*, p.9)

This passage indicates how the smell of crude oil becomes the smell of death. However, children are always the very first victims of death emanating from oil pollution. This is the case of Wambi, “*a child who had died from Pexton’s poison*” (*HBWW*, p. 25). This means that oil pollution does not only develop disease, but also causes children to die, as evidenced through Thula’s gloomy speech:

Not long before I turned eight, two children died in one month, both of them having suffered high fevers but otherwise different symptoms. Papa and the other men of Kosawa made the coffins and dug the graves, and Mama and the women cooked for the bereaved families and wept alongside the broken-hearted mothers. (...) Nobody thought much about the fact that two children had died in one month—in a village of dozens of children, it was not uncommon for such a thing to happen. (*HBWW*, p. 33)

Through this excerpt, one easily understands the lethal side that oil pollution bears. When Thula outcries “*two children died in one month, both of them having suffered high fevers but otherwise different symptoms*”, she clearly expresses how harmful chemicals or other detrimental environmental conditions which directly or indirectly impact upon human health, provoke children’s death. Here, high fevers and other different symptoms suffered by children increase their helplessness. Likewise, the sentence “nobody thought much about the fact that two children had died in one month” reveals the vulnerability of Kosawa children. This involves some characters to evince their fed-up as they say: “*we’ve already had too many deaths*” (*HBWW*, p. 6). From these interpretations, Imbolo Mbue teaches the reader about the deadly danger of oil pollution, especially the case of children.

It is important to underscore that, studies of biomarkers have uncovered irreparable harm to humans exposed to oil and gas from spills. These effects can be grouped into respiratory damage, liver damage, and decreased immunity, and increased cancer risk, reproductive damage. This shows how the exposure of children to pollutants is the source of their death, as the narrator asserts:

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 the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling. (HBWW, p. 5)

One can infer that the human health impacts from oil extraction are inextricably connected to the environmental damages. Children in oil producing regions are exposed to high levels of toxic chemical from air, water, and soil. The sentence “*our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water...*” clearly underscores that oil drilling is undoubtedly the main cause of children’s death. The different potentials from oil producing areas that would bring happiness to local populations, unfortunately provide them with the most tragic scenario.

The dirty and unpleasant conditions including health problems and death, are not the only negative effects of oil pollution and the environmental disaster that children experience in the novel under the analysis. However, Imbolo Mbue also paints the issue of relocation.

I-4. Relocation Phenomenon

Oil pollution with its subsequent drawbacks frequently leads to the relocation of many villagers, children among them. This has become a topical concern due to the human tragedy and insecurity associated with it. Since oil production has worsened environmental degradation, the preference of people in leaving the polluted area finds credence. Indeed, the term relocation can be explained as the action of moving to a new place and establishing one’s home or business there. In this context, relocation is caused by the fact that local populations are fed up with oil pollution, environmental damages, dirty and unpleasant conditions including health problems and death. This appears in How Beautiful We Were when Kosawa children decide to leave the village because staying in it becomes a non-stop hardship that oil pollution instigates, as Thula’s friends contend: “*Several of our age-mates left Kosawa in our mid-adolescent years, forced to bid their friends and cousins farewell by parents who had once sworn that they would never surrender to the gas flares and oil spills*” (HBWW, p. 195). As the story unfolds, these activists even further with the reasons which prompt the population to leave their homeland. The novel keeps providing evidences of children’s displacement:

One of our age-mates needed to leave the village because of a condition that caused her monthly bleeding to last for weeks, accompanied by blood clots and backaches and severe cramps. This friend had followed all the directions the womb doctor gave her and drunk the prescribed herbs, but relief never came. In the absence of Jakani and Sakani, she had no choice but to leave Kosawa in search of a cure. Other friends of ours had to move to new villages because a father had died and a mother deemed it best to live among her

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people, or a mother had buried more than one child and knew that the burial of another would be more than she could endure. (HBWW, p.195)

Narrations such as “*because of a condition that caused her monthly bleeding to last for weeks*” and “*she had no choice but to leave Kosawa in search of a cure*” show how dirty condition emanating from oil pollution which makes villagers suffer from insupportable symptoms, lead them to leave the polluted village. The monthly bleeding of Thula’s friend which lasts weeks for occurring, sometimes accompanied by blood clots, backaches and severe cramps, is an example among others that makes young female villagers to leave Kosawa seeking for a treatment elsewhere and eventually live there. Villagers leaving in marauding waves for new villages because of the innumerable deaths, indicates how oil pollution horribly devastates them.

This angle of vision on which the story focuses, is far from being only a fiction since some experts on the ground testify this situation. In this vein, Opukri and Ibaba (2008:174), accordingly write:

We argue that environmental degradation, caused by the Oil industry does not only have the potentials of exacerbating the tragedy of internal displacements in the Niger Delta, but is responsible for many of the dislocations experienced in the area. The collapse of local economies, induced by oil spillages, gas flaring, and other activities of the oil industry had displaced many from their occupations, without providing viable alternatives. We argue that the pressures of survival do encourage forced migration or induce voluntary movement that manifests as rural – urban or rural – rural migration in the area.

All things considered, environmental degradation generated by the oil industry has the potentials of exacerbating the tragedy of internal displacements. Imbolo Mbue’s description of this situation is a damning indictment to evil practices of oil drilling which result in grim effects, and ultimately cause relocation. Moreover, after discovering negative impacts of oil-polluted environment upon children’s lives, it appears necessary to examine their psychological disaster.

II- Manifestations of Children’s Eco-Trauma in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*

The injurious and psychological symptoms are considered as eco-traumatic since the term ‘Trauma’ is defined as “*any event which inflicts physical damage on the body or severe shock on the mind or both*” (*The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, 2009:552). To mean an ecological definition, one easily infers that ‘Eco-trauma’ in its widest sense, carries connotations of an injurious mental condition emanated from witnessing an environmental ruin with its subsequent drawbacks. Thus, this part articulated as such, becomes obviously significant by the fact that it explores eco-trauma as a psychological disaster in Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW*.

II-1. Fear and Regret

To better understand the way Kosawa villagers experience eco-trauma, we should have an agreement on what is ‘fear’ and ‘regret.’ To begin with ‘fear’, Lisa Fritscher (2022) says:

Fear is a natural, powerful, and primitive human emotion. It involves a universal biochemical response as well as a high individual emotional

response. Fear alerts us to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, whether that danger is physical or psychological. Sometimes fear stems from real threats, but it can also originate from imagined dangers. Fear can also be a symptom of some mental health conditions including panic disorder.

This unpleasant feeling caused by the presence of danger, pain or the threat of harm is a sign which characterizes eco-trauma. Consequently, it makes the traumatized character think about the past when he lived peacefully. To keep on with 'Regret,' it is "*a feeling of sadness or disappointment, especially at the loss of somebody or something*" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*). Obviously, there is an intertwining between 'fear' and 'regret' to tackle the experience of eco-trauma by Kosawa inhabitants.

Oil pollution and the environmental devastation with its negative impact upon children implant a burden in their mental health. Hence, the pollutants which are the corrosive sources of diseases, instigate a perceptible fear to bereaved persons. Imbolo Mbue tells events with children who witness both environmental damages and health problems. Indeed, these children are traumatized to see many persons suffering from different illnesses in the village. They develop fear vis-à-vis oil pollution because it is a source of diseases leading very often to death. This pushes children to think about their departed friends whenever someone manifests fever or cough around, as they complain:

We feared someone in our homes would catch this sickness that had arrived like a thief in the dark and was now hovering outside every hut, waiting for its chance to enter. We worried for our entire families, though the disease preferred the bodies of children. We feared the first person to catch it in our huts would pass it on to another person, and the second person would pass it on to someone else, and before long our entire family would contract it and die, one after another, or maybe all at once, but most likely one after another, from the oldest to the youngest. (HBWW, p.8)

Through the beginning (*We feared someone..., We worried for..., We feared the first person*) of the three sentences making this quotation, narrations show the extent of the environmental damages psychologically caused to children. They are afraid of the present danger which they consider as a death trajectory. When they witness someone having a difficult or painful illness such as some friends coughing and vomiting blood (the case of Wambi), certain friends urinating blood, or others burning with high fevers, they automatically experience an eco-traumatic. Consequently, children are overwhelmed with the nostalgias of a past without fear. Through Thula's voice, one easily infers the feeling of sadness mixed with a strong affection when she thinks of happy times in her parents' childhood:

Mama and papa cautioning me never to go near the big river (...) covered with oil and toxic waste. Without our parents' stories about their childhoods in a clean Kosawa, their days spent swimming in rivers that ran clear, (...) wasn't an ordinary occurrence in the lives of other children our age? (HBWW, p. 28)

Thula is so remorseful while she is thinking not only about rivers which were not ordinarily covered with oil and toxic waste, but about how her parents spent pretty

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moments in swimming in rivers that ran clear. In effect, she is disillusioned to realise that her childhood is not as pleasant as her parents' ones. Children's fear which mingles with regret, proves how oil exploitation has traumatized them. Imbolo Mbue attempts to show how fear which emanates from the repetition of tragic events related to the destruction of the environment, makes children feel regretful. In addition, the dread of death takes many forms: the fear of their own death, the fear of family members or close friends dying, the fear of children preceding parents or the death of an entire culture.

In the *HBWW*, fear and regret justify the experience of eco-trauma by characters insomuch that Kosawa children die as animals in the forest. The recurrence of death in the village makes some of them develop a feeling of a great worry. The sensation that originates from the discernment of imminent danger, is a tool that has been used by Pexton to keep Kosawa's inhabitants in a constant state of hysteria. The following passage proves helpful to comprehend this phenomenon: "*Most of us children began crying, our sad sounds lost in the chaos that had become our lives. Some of us cried for fear that death would arrive the next day, others for the illness that might lead to death the next month*" (*HBWW*, p. 22). Children's sad sounds, lost in the chaos that had become their lives, explain the constant state of hysteria. Indeed, children are presented as the victims of eco-trauma by the fact that they lose control of their emotions and start to cry. They cry because they fear to die soon after the illness. Imbolo Mbue furthers the indication through the doleful says of children, as it can be read in the following lines:

We were desperate for relief from our fear of death, which had been exacerbated when one of our younger sisters died the day Lusaka and his team left for the capital. This younger sister's death had been sudden — neither her rash nor her cough was severe — and from this we inferred that death had grown more ruthless lately. (*HBWW*, p.125)

Once more, children witness different deaths coming from oil pollution through thanatophobia which is the intense fear of death. Having a traumatic experience related to a loss of a loved parent caused by the degradation of the nature, makes some local populations imagine wonderful milieu where no toxic chemicals could be present. This imagination is sustained by a great regret of a lost paradise where families are united and enjoy the natural endowments like creeks, rivers and the forests, which play a major role in the community's life. With regard to this analysis, it is clear that the authoress attempts to tell the reader that eco-traumatic makes the subject imagine a treasured past. Imbolo Mbue does not only limit the manifestation of eco-trauma to fear and regret, but also evokes sleep problems as a result of hysteria, anxiety and thanatophobia.

II-2. Sleep Disturbances

It is an inevitable truth of life that disasters are a complex global problem. Every year, individuals and communities affected by environmental disasters which disrupt their mental health and well-being. Subsequently, these disasters create a significant burden of mental health conditions on an individual and the community. Following these lines of reasoning, oil pollution which damages the environment, directly

disrupts mental health conditions of local inhabitants who witness these disasters. This posture is evidently upheld by James Cochran (2022:6) when he writes:

We have the potential for a positive relationship with the ecological world, but our ideological constructions and actions often result in trauma instead. (...) humans' destructive tendencies toward the environment stem from a fear and anxiety about death. Our sense of interconnection with everything results in a sense of "pandemic of human violence and the existential anxiety that it causes".

As it can be seen, destructive actions toward the ecological world result in eco-trauma as manifested through sleep disturbances such as insomnia or recurring nightmares. Applying this stance in Mbue's novel, one can swiftly see how children confront with sleep problems in witnessing day-to-day drastic events.

Sleep problems are observed through insomnia in *HBWW*. Indeed, insomnia is a common sleep disorder that prevents to fall asleep, or causes someone to wake up too early and not be able to go back to sleep. This is the case of Kosawa children who suffer from insomnia because of the fear about death caused by oil pollutants. They feel worried that something bad is going to happen, and they are scared of being dead as their fellows; that is why they are unable to sleep. The narrator's words help buttress this view:

We thought about our departed friends whenever we developed fevers or someone coughed around us. We feared someone in our homes would catch this sickness that had arrived like a thief in the dark (...) We worried for our entire families, though the disease preferred the bodies of children. We feared the first person to catch it in our huts would pass it on to another person, (...) and die, one after another, or maybe all at once, but most likely one after another, from the oldest to the youngest, (...). Our anxieties kept us awake at night. (*HBWW*, p.8)

Thula's words "*our anxieties kept us awake at night*" prove how insomnia is common following exposure to trauma since it appears as a feature of posttraumatic stress disorder. As seen in the text above, the fact of witnessing tragic events which make the victims fear about their turn to be harshly sick or meet death, impedes them to fall asleep. The novel brings deeper evidence with Thula's experience:

Only late at night do I consider my own pain, when I hope everyone is sleeping; it is then that I cry, (...). Images of my dead friends enter and exit my dreams. I think about what our unborn would have looked like if it had been allowed to be a fully formed child (...) and my surviving friends and I weren't spending precious minutes contemplating the day our turn would come to die. (*HBWW*, p.49)

This textual snippet unveils how eco-trauma disrupts the victim's sleeps. Here, Thula who, surrounded by death as she says: "*I've spent my entire life around death*" (*HBWW*, p.8), is flooded by dreadful thoughts about the day her turn would come to die. These thoughts hinder her to feel sleepy since late at night, images of her dead friends enter and exit her dreams. She even regrets her unborn sibling who dies because of her mother's depression. She, instead of sleeping, eventually considers her pain in the night.

Furthermore, sleep problems related to eco-traumatic experience can also be justified through nightmares. It is a shared-view that many people have difficulty falling asleep as demonstrated above, however some wake up more often during the night, and have trouble falling back asleep after a traumatic event. This feature of posttraumatic stress disorder is all about nightmare.

In *HBWW*, the same reality is dramatized by Nangi Family whose departure of Malabo, lets the entire family pass nights swamped of nightmares: “*twenty days come and go, twenty nights of nightmares*” (*HBWW*, p.45). Nightmares are the dreams whose contents are unpleasant or anxiety provoking and which, depending on their intensity, can awaken the sleeper. Juba who is Thula’s little brother is extremely fragile and incapable to overcome shocks he undergoes as far as his father’s death and other catastrophic events are concerned. This results in nightmares as his uncle Bongo tells it: “*I pray for protection upon my brother’s children. Juba has nightmares from which he wakes up sweating*” (*HBWW*, p.85). Juba’s nightmares confirm a disorder that develops in some children who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event, mainly environmental disaster. By the way, the peruse of Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW* also unveils how despair indicates characters’ eco-traumatic experience that needs to be scrutinized.

II-3. Despair

The experience of eco-trauma manifests through despair as well. It appears significant at first, to explain this concept for a better comprehension of this section. Thus, ‘Despair’ is defined as a “*complete loss or absence of hope*” (*Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1993). When individuals are in despair, they feel a complete loss of hope, usually accompanied by desperation, anguish and sadness. People in despair may get up every day and go out for their business, without joy and passion for life. Instead, desperation, anxiety and hopelessness fill their day. The feeling of having lost all hope is observed in the novel as Kosawa children complain:

One of our classmates is getting sicker; he wasn’t in school today. Another friend’s baby brother fell ill; she had to stay home to take care of him so her mother could go to the farm. Whatever hope we had only days ago is fading; Kosawa can’t shake off its desolation. (*HBWW*, p.62)

In other words, children lose their hope vis-à-vis different drastic events they witness. It is clearly demonstrated the absence of hope for a wonderful life that they wish to live again. The personification and the metonymy used by the authoress directly draws the reader’s attention on the strongest despair in which young inhabitants are unfortunately drowning.

Yet, this despair extremely affects them when soldiers come to massacre them because they have kidnapped three Pexton representatives with their driver. Looking at these soldiers delves them into a desperation which psychologically devastates them as they complain: “*it was then we knew the end had arrived*” (*HBWW*, p.179). The visibility of this end makes Kosawa’s children feel sorry, as they appear hopeless. Next to it, Imbolo Mbue eventually relates this eco-traumatic experience to depression whose examination within this chapter finds credence.

II-4. Depression

Eco-trauma as demarcated previously, manifests also through depression which derives from ‘to depress,’ “*to make somebody sad and without enthusiasm or hope*” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (1995)). In other words, depression is a medical condition in which a person feels very sad and anxious. This psychological shock resulting from an injury of violent incident, mainly an environmental disaster, makes seriously the traumatic subject suffer more than imagined. Depression is a strong shock that a traumatic person experience. Imbolo Mbue, in her novel, tries to acclimate this shared-view through her created young characters.

First and foremost, it is noticeable that oil pollution and the environmental damages with the subsequent drawbacks have caused a feeling of sadness in Kosawa children’s psyche. The exposure to dramatic violent events which results in depression can be seen thanks to the new and strange behaviour of a traumatized person. Since depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest, it affects the way traumatic subject feels, thinks and behaves. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. Imbolo Mbue illustrates this reality in a clear way. The reference to children’s artwork as the expression of their sadness towards violent events undoubtedly reveals the eco-trauma they experience. Accordingly, the authoress presents Juba’s drawings as a materialization of eco-trauma he suffers from. Through the voice of her mother, Sahel, one can read:

He asks me to buy him drawing books and crayons every time I go to the big market. Morning, afternoon, evening, there’s no way of knowing when he’ll feel an urge to draw. He has filled a dozen books with pictures. He draws things I don’t understand—a man’s face with features scattered all over, mouth on the forehead, nose on his cheekbone; fishes and trees in the sky, standing in the place of clouds; the sun and the stars falling down. I ask him why he draws that way, why he can’t draw things the way they are. He says he doesn’t know. He can’t explain, but I know it’s grief. (HBWW, p.135)

Hence, it is clear that the grief Juba suffers from has been externalized through drawings since this pain is strongly unbearable for him, being an eleven years old child. With this regard, ABC Learning Center (2015) provides a further clarification on this issue:

When kids draw, they use a dose of imagination, paired with their real-life experiences. Unlike adults, who think too deeply about everything, children do not censor their artwork based on what people might think of it. Typically, they just draw whatever comes to mind; this is what makes kids’ artwork extremely telling.

From this assertion, one can surmise that a child draws whatever comes to mind. Since Juba suffers from eco-trauma whose mental health is highly troubled, his interpretation of the harmful situation that Kosawa experiences, is identified in the details of his drawing. When Juba draws “*a man’s face with features scattered all over, mouth on the forehead, nose on his cheekbone; fishes and trees in the sky, standing in the place of clouds; the sun and the stars falling down*”, we notice, to borrow Chinua Achebe’s words, “*Things Fall Apart*,” even

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though Sahel is unable to seize the deep meaning of this drawing as she argues: “*he draws things I don't understand*”.

Here, Juba shows how a beautiful place has been dislocated and how things have collapsed because of oil pollution which damages the environment. The sentences such as “*I ask him why he draws that way, why he can't draw things the way they are. He says he doesn't know. He can't explain, but I know it's grief*” reveals how the traumatic subject who expresses his pains through drawings cannot really explain what he draws, since he is submerged into an unbearable grief. Looking at Juba's drawings might grant the reader insight to his inner thoughts. So, the devastated environment surrounding Kosawa makes him suffers from eco-trauma in its manifestation through depression.

Furthermore, silence is among usual signs of a traumatic subject who is suffering from depression. The environmental disaster which leaves the victims in a state of shock, develops a psychological distress or depression as a result of negative impact upon mental health. Some of them become silent, withdrawing from social interaction. They present a marked lack of enthusiasm for things that used to bring them pleasure. The depiction of Thula as a silent observer of the drastic course of events, helps buttress this view. In fact, Thula's depression is linked to the death of her parents and friends from oil pollution. She expresses her sadness in being silently alone: “*Thula sits alone on the veranda*” (HBWW, p.100). It is a shared-view that serious injury and death of a loved person further aggravate someone's depression and make them silent, as Thula unhappily confesses:

Papa is the only one I ever truly yearned to talk to, because our conversations were like the rustling of leaves, slow and gentle, followed by silence. Now that he's gone, I prefer to spend more time alone in my head, pondering why the world is the way it is. (HBWW, p. 56)

Thula's loss of daily routine emanating from her father's assassination, makes her alone and troubles her doing normal day-to-day activities. She loses interest in friends and activities that they normally enjoy as she contends: “*I respond to no questions; I want everyone to leave me alone*” (HBWW, p. 43). Thula's withdrawal from others makes her feel as if life is not worth the living. This accounts for her uncle Bongo's soreness for her. As his niece's sadness gets higher, Bongo helplessly wishes her death when he utters: “*If she were any other girl, I would merely wish that the Spirit mend her heart and free her of the agony she bears, but she's my brother's child*” (HBWW, p. 86). The use of euphemism by Bongo clearly expresses the great pain that Thula heavily and gloomily bears.

The novel keeps showing evidence on Thula's silent depression when she, being alone, spends some days in a blocked house. Indeed, after Bongo's assassination by the government because of his eco-protest, Thula has gone straight to his bed and curled up under his old clothes. She remains there all day and all night. She does answer when her friends come and knock on the door, begging her to open it because they want to be with her and comfort her. Thula remains alone in Bongo's bedroom, lying on the sheets. Her isolation worries her mother who eventually decides to break the door, as the novel clearly renders:

After that first day stuck in a gloomy fog, when I'd gathered whatever strength, I could, I sent a message for my cousin Tunis to come help me break down the door to the back room so we could get Thula out—I couldn't let her stay in there with no food or water. Tunis came over and called out to Thula to please unlock the door so he wouldn't have to break in. Thula stayed on the bed and ignored us. Tunis found a way to open the door without causing much damage and left. Quietly, I entered the room. I found her lying under Bongo's clothes, her face tear-stained. (HBWW, p. 149)

Here, Thula's isolation justifies the magnitude of her pain. In this regard, one can infer that withdrawal from activities is one of the key signs of depression. This occurs because the disorder takes up all of the person's time and energy. Depression makes it very difficult to carry on with daily life, aside from what is absolutely necessary, because the pain becomes too excessive. Those who suffer silently might start dropping one or two activities from their schedule in the hope that no one will notice. The novel talks about Thula concerning this matter as Sahel reports that "*she avoided us, as if her grief and ours were parallel rivers*" (HBWW, p.149). This means that many persons who suffer from this kind of depression do not want to admit that they have a problem and do not want others to know about it, perhaps their silence can help them release their pain.

Moreover, depression can affect the appetite of traumatic subjects and change their way of eating. It can cause to eat unhealthily, eat more than usual and it can also lead to a loss of appetite. In this connection, Dr Gary Kennedy (online), Director of geriatric psychiatry at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, New York, accordingly opines that "*a sudden change in weight, either gaining or losing, can be a warning of depression, especially in someone who has other symptoms of depression or a history of depression*". Imbolo Mbue raises this issue through the traumatic character Thula who finds no interest in food because of violent events she experiences, especially the death of her father. The following passage helps buttress this observation:

Papa is gone by the time I return home from school. I say nothing to Mama and Yaya besides greetings. I go into the bedroom and lie on my mat with my school uniform still on. I cover my head with my blanket and try to imagine life in a perfect world, but all I see is Papa's face. (...) Mama calls for me to come eat, but I don't respond. I have no interest in food. (HBWW, p. 43)

Thula loses appetite because of her pain. Her depression impacts upon her energy levels, causes weight loss and health problems; progressively drawing her towards a depression, as her mother, Sahel, deeply worries:

I worried about her weight. I worried about the fact that her bleeding hadn't started though she had reached the age for it. I worried that her friends' breasts had grown past the size of oranges and hers weren't up to that of a cashew. (HBWW, p. 56)

Of course, Thula's depression even disrupts her physiological functioning. Hence, it is undoubtedly observed that the bad results of oil exploitation both on the environment and the characters have been possible through the cruelty of corporations and the governments. However, this oil scourge which provokes traumatic conditions to some characters, initiates them to uprising or Eco-Activism.

Conclusion

This paper focused on Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW* to evidence how oil exploitation damages the environment with impacts upon children’s lives. This germane study has also investigated a problematic related to children’s experience of eco-trauma since victimized subjects of an environmental disaster frequently experience some harmful symptoms either physical, or psychological or both. Using Ecocriticism as the theoretical framework, the paper has examined Mbue’s novel as an eco-literature, foregrounding pertinent issues it raises. The analysis of the fallouts of oil exploitation on the Environment and children particularly, has been the attempt to epitomize the experience of eco-trauma in Imbolo Mbue’s *HBWW*. It has evidently shown that children characters are victims of the pervasive abuse and destruction of the nature due to its oil exploitation by capitalists results in psychological pains and sufferings such as fear, regret, sleeps disturbances, despair and depression. In essence, *HBWW* contributes to the environmental consciousness through activism undertaken by a great number of characters in the hope of living safely in their own environment. As a final assessment, the authoress’s literary creativity has purposely been to call attention to the grim effects of environmental pollution on children, considered as a crime. Thereby, she rouses the ‘green consciousness’ of readers, especially oil corporations and governments, so as to participate to the environmental safety, a way to enable children grow without worry.

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