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The Oil Must Flow at Any Cost: Catastrophic Aquatic Contamination and Literary Eco-Activism in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* and Chinelo Okparanta's Short Story "America"

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ABSTRACT

Water is crucial for the survival of living organisms, especially humans. Yet despite its relevance, there are still billions of people around the world who lack access to clean water for drinking, cooking and sanitation purposes. The United Nations Global Water Security Assessment of 2023 revealed that thirteen African countries are currently facing a severe water crisis. This crisis not only affects the availability of safe drinking water but also has far-reaching consequences for public health, agriculture, economic development and social stability of affected regions. In response to the ecological crisis gripping sub-Saharan African populations, modern women writers are employing their writings to sensitise their readers and promote a moral responsibility towards implementing practical and sustainable ways of reversing the increasing and rapid pollution of water resources. Building upon these premises and broadening the concept of eco-activism introduced by Egya (2020), this study investigates the ways in which *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) by Imbolo Mbue and the short story "America" (2013) by Chinelo Okparanta depict the impacts of human endeavours on the natural aquatic ecosystem. In these terms, specific attention will be directed to the analysis of the use of water imagery by both authors to channel the indecipherable and invisible nature of the structural violence that oil industries perpetuate on sub-Saharan African territory, together with the devastating physical and psychological effects of human activity on people living in polluted environments.

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The Oil Must Flow at Any Cost: Catastrophic Aquatic Contamination and Literary Eco-Activism in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* and Chinelo Okparanta's Short Story "America"

ABSTRACT

Water is crucial for the survival of living organisms, especially humans. Yet despite its relevance, there are still billions of people around the world who lack access to clean water for drinking, cooking and sanitation purposes. The United Nations University Assessment of 2023 revealed that several African countries are currently facing a severe water crisis. This crisis not only affects the availability of safe drinking water but also has far-reaching consequences for public health, agriculture, economic development and social stability of affected regions.

The West African region, in particular, has long been plagued by water contamination, with the exploration and production of crude oil among the most significant contributors to environmental degradation. This pollution has led to the de-naturalisation of the natural environment, posing a significant threat to the aquatic ecosystem, which, in turn, affects the livelihoods of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa. In response to the ecological crisis gripping sub-Saharan African populations, modern women writers are employing their writings to sensitise their readers and promote a moral responsibility towards implementing practical and sustainable ways of reversing the increasing and rapid pollution of water resources. Building upon these premises and broadening the concept of eco-activism introduced by Egya (2020), this study investigates the ways in which *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) by Imbolo Mbue and the short story "America" (2013) by Chinelo Okparanta depict the impacts of human endeavours on the natural aquatic ecosystem. In these terms, specific attention will be directed to the analysis of the use of water imagery by both authors to channel the indecipherable and invisible nature of the structural violence that oil industries perpetuate on sub-Saharan African territory, together with the devastating physical and psychological effects of human activity on people living in polluted environments.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Literature; Eco-Activism; Water Imagery; Imbolo Mbue; Chinelo Okparanta

1. Introduction

The growing body of critical works addressing environmental issues from an ecocritical and postcolonial perspective denotes the consolidation of postcolonial ecocriticism as a field of research. Seminal studies such as Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), DeLoughrey and Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of Environment* (2011) Caminero-Santangelo's *African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (2014) and Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2018) have played a pivotal role in broadening the horizon of ecocritical literary studies associated with the Global South.

According to DeLoughrey and Handley, the decentering logic which characterises the postcolonial field of research enables to bring to light "the long history of […] critique articulated by indigenous, ecofeminist, ecosocialist, and environmental justice scholars and activists, who have theorized the relation of power, subjectivity, and place for many decades" (2011, 9). Differently from the first-wave ecocriticism that originated in the Euro-American academic contexts and which has been strongly defined by the rigid nature/culture binarization (Iheka 2018, 7), postcolonial ecocriticism "brings a focus both on global imperial contexts and on parts of the world often elided even by second-wave ecocritics, whose expertise remains predominately in American and British literature" (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 12). In these terms, by examining the cultural specificity of local and global contexts, postcolonial ecocriticism helps shed light on the environmental damage in Africa and its complex historical basis which has initially been disregarded by Western environmental studies (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 2).

However, the term postcolonialism has been subject to debate, with some scholars questioning its relevance in today's globalised world (McClintock 1992; Shohat 1992; Olaniyan 1993; Mwangi 2009). For instance, Shohat objects to the prefix "post-", arguing that it represents an "ambiguous locus of continuities and discontinuities" as it enacts a process of "simultaneously privileging and distancing from colonial narratives" (1992, 106-107). McClintock further critiques postcolonial theory for its reliance on binaries (e.g., self-other, metropolis-periphery, civilised-savage), which she claims "re-center[s] […] global history around the single rubric of European time" (1992, 86). Mwangi echoes such sentiment by pointing out that such theoretical framework locates the West as an essential categorical and ineluctable point of reference (2009, 9).

Despite its shortcomings, other scholars emphasise the enduring importance of postcolonial theory, arguing that it serves to shed light, not only on the legacies of colonialism, but also on persisting inequalities, forms of oppression and economic exploitation (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2022; Talib 2002; Young 2012). In response to the critiques surrounding the prefix 'post-', Talib advocates for the need to move beyond the chronological connotation of the term and instead concentrate on the conceptual possibilities it opens through its focus on the discursive and material effect of colonialism (2002, 15). Additionally, Young observes the centrality of postcolonial theory in providing a frame through which to contest the uncritical application of Western categorisations. The critical and political characteristics intrinsic to such theoretical paradigm provide the space for recalibrating ethics, epistemology and power imbalances (2012, 20).

It therefore seems plausible that, as Young aptly observes, postcolonialism has "postcolonized" several fields of research and subfields related to the analysis of processes of diaspora and transnational migration (2012, 22). As mentioned earlier, even environmental theory has been shaped by postcolonial critical lens as it is used to unveil the relation between the colonial past and present postcolonial in terms of "material residues and debris that are indelibly etched on human bodies, cells of life and the physical natural infrastructure" (Doro 2023, 15).

It is embedded within such critical framework that this paper seeks to outline the literary production that denounces the ecological crisis in Sub-saharan Africa. Drawing, specifically, on the concept of eco-activism employed by Egya in *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature* (2020) to refer to West African ecological literary writing, the present study reflects on the ways in which Imbolo Mbue *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) and Chinelo Okparanta's short story "America" (2013) document the impact of anthropogenic activities on the natural systems, incorporating also the use of folktales as means to reflect on such issues. Through the portrayal of water-polluted ecosystems, contemporary sub-Saharan African fiction in English is representative of environmental novels of the times since they highlight the impact of pollution on natural landscapes and the physical and psychological consequences for human-beings living in such areas.

2. Neocolonial Entanglements and the Use of Water Imageries

Water pollution has emerged as a critical issue in West Africa, adversely affecting human health, food security, economic development and biodiversity.

Various factors contributing to water contamination in sub-Saharan countries include domestic pollution, agriculture, natural ecosystem degradation and industrialisation (Pare and Coulibaly 2013, 89-90). The gravity of the situation is underscored by a report from the The United Nations University which indicates that almost 33 % (over 411 million) of the African population does not have access to clean drinking water (2023). The limited availability of safe drinking water, sanification and hygiene services has resulted in mortality from infectious diseases.

The situation is further aggravated by the absence of effective preventive measures against environmental degradation by foreign industrial activities. In this regard, several scholars emphasise that the exploitation of Africa's natural resources is intricately intertwined with historical and ongoing complex power dynamics, which are linked to (neo)colonial, capitalistic and political structures (Doro 2023; Nare et al. 2024).

These complex issues are poignantly narrativised in Imbolo Mbue's second novel, *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), which denounces the harmful effect of dehumanising capitalistic logic. The novel is set in Kosawa, a fictional village presumably situated in West Africa. It uses a non-chronological time structure and a polyphonic intergenerational narration to "reflect[…] the ways in which the effects of oil extraction are at once personal but also communal" (Nare *et al*. 2024, 356). Through the interplay of multiple voices, the author depicts the ecological devastation, displacement and dispossession experienced by the local community in a postcolonial context.

Water, in particular, serves as a powerful symbol to unveil the destructive impact of industrialisation on natural resources and communities. Generally conceived as a symbol of life and regeneration, in *How Beautiful We Were*, water is stripped of its sustaining and life-giving properties and rather becomes a life-threatening element. The pervasive presence of death, especially among young children, prompts parents to question: "[…] what was in the water their children were drinking — how could poison have found its way into a covered well?" (Mbue 2021, 34). In a society deeply rooted in spirituality where the natural environment and the non-human entities are believed to possess agency, the people of Kosawa community initially attribute the cause of such deaths to the wrath of the Spirit, the governing force within their cosmovision. However, it soon becomes apparent to them that the illnesses and fatalities result from the aquatic contamination caused by Pexton's oil extraction activity. As Thula, one of the main female characters, observes: "It was […] 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 uses for the wood. Children began to forget the taste of fish. The smell of Kosawa became the smell of crude" (Mbue 2021: 32).

Through the vicissitudes and deaths narrated, the reader is offered an insight into the slow but fatal dispersion of toxic components in the aquatic landscape. Nothing seems to be spared, whether it is water, soil or air; everything has been contaminated by multinational oil company's pervasive activities. The corrosive effect of capitalistic exploitative practices on the community's lives already foreshadows the novel's conclusion and impellent downfall of Kosawa.

The portrayal in the *How Beautiful We Were* of the hidden and insidious nature of the structural violence perpetuated by oil industries can be more effectively understood through Nixon's notion of slow violence. He introduces such concept to articulate the long-term environmental wreckage that often goes unnoticed. Unlike other forms of violence that are immediately apparent, slow violence is covert and subtle, characterised by "delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2011, 2). This type of violence, it might be argued, represents a direct consequence of the neocolonial ideology that foregrounds the capitalistic logic of industries from wealthier countries. According to Lagan, neocolonialism can be conceptualised as "a situation of infringed national sovereignty and intrusive influence by external elements" (2018, 1). Unlike colonialism, which relied on the so-called "language of the civilizing" mission of the nineteenth century and was enacted through territorial conquest and resource appropriation, neocolonial strategies tend to exert control through subtler means (Faleiro 2012: 14). Strategies enacted include market manipulation and natural resource management in developing countries. For instance, neocolonial practices may involve the establishment of unequal trade agreements that favour foreign enterprises, the extraction of resources without adhering to adequate environmental legislations and the dumping of toxic waste in developing countries.

The pollution of the natural aquatic environment is also depicted in Chinelo Okparanta's short story "America". The text is part of the collection of short stories, *Happiness, Like Water* (2013), and thematises the impact of aquatic contamination. Set between Port Harcourt and Lagos, it features Nnenna Etoniru's journey to the embassy where she has an appointment for a visa interview at the US Embassy on Victoria Island. Motivated by the hope to migrate to America to join Gloria Oke, the woman she is in love with and her former school colleague

who is already studying abroad, the protagonist plans to pursue a master's degree in environmental engineering (Chaskes 2019, 118).

The story's opening scene is characterised by the portrait of a polluted environment in which the reader's attention is promptly addressed to the consequences of oil spills on the Nigerian aquatic landscape. As the bus passes through villages along the Bonny River, there is one particular image which captures the protagonist's attention, namely, that of two children whose "skin, and even the cloth around their waist, gleams an almost solid black, the blackness of crude" (Okparanta 2013, 85). What should have been typical children's play becomes disrupted by the contaminated presence of "Shell oil glowing on their skin" (Okparanta 2013, 98).

Such a portrait of ecological catastrophe comes as no wonder especially taking into account that the Niger Delta represents one of the massive oil deposits in the world. For decades, the Nigerian government and the multinational oil companies' exploration and exploitation of oil has affected the Niger Delta ecosystem and the livelihoods of the communities living in this area. According to Osuagwu and Olaifa, within the decades 1976-2015, there were a total of 16, 476 spills resulting in approximately 3 million barrels spilled into the environment. More than 70% of this oil was not recovered, 69% of these spills occurred offshore, a quarter occurred in the swamps and 6% spilt onto the land (Osuagwu and Olaifa 2018, 5).

In response to these dire conditions, local communities have long demanded compensation from the federal government and multinational corporations for the environmental damage inflicted on their lands and their precarious living conditions (Human Rights Watch 1999, 9). A notable example of this resistance is the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) that emerged in the 1990s and was led by the prominent Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa. Despite garnering significant international support, Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP activists were accused of having murdered four leaders in Ogoni and were hanged by the military government on the 10th of November 1995 (Human Rights Watch 1999, 9).

The vicissitudes these activists faced have inspired and continue to inspire numerous West African authors to continue advocating for justice and human rights. This inspiration is particularly evident in contemporary sub-Saharan literature that addresses environmental pollution. Exemplary are literary works such as Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005), Kaine Agari's *Yellow-*

Yellow (2006) as well as poetic artistic representations such as Nnimmo Bassey's "We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood" (2016) (Egya 2020; Feldner 2018). In line with the environmental justice agenda pursued in such texts, Okparanta raises ecocritical concerns by bringing into view the catastrophic consequences of oil spills in Niger Delta. Positioning herself within what Egya defines as "Nigerian eco-criticism" (2020, 124), the Nigerian writer adopts a realist mode of narration through which she sensitises the reader to environmental issues confronted by modern Nigeria thereby constructing activism in her literary work (Egya 2020, 120). For instance, in a passage from the short story "America", Nnenna describes an oil explosion that results in the leakage of hundreds of thousands of crude oil into the Gulf, forming "black clouds" and polluting "waters that would usually be clear and blue" (Okparanta 2013, 97). The reference to the contamination of the aquatic natural environment is instrumental as it brings to light the negative impact of the activities undertaken by the Shell oil industry in Nigeria.

Lamenting the apparent devaluation of the lives of local communities, Nnenna reflects on the pervasive environmental neglect and the ways in which, in Nigeria, "spills were expected" (Okparanta 2013, 97). Her observation resonates with Caminero-Santangelo's critique of the double standard underpinning the environmental policies of multinational oil companies. As he points out, while these corporations rigorously adhere to strict guidelines issued in countries such as the United States and Europe, they operate without restraint in Africa by engaging in exploitative practices that devastate local ecosystem and marine landscapes (Caminero-Santangelo 2014, 141).

Besides bringing attention to how the actions of multinational companies and the Nigerian government impact on the livelihoods and health of Nigerians, the text also attempts to tackle the challenges encountered by exploited countries to improve the situation. The choice to frame the short story from the perspective of Nnenna, who is a science schoolteacher and would rather "be doing something more hands-on, working directly with the earth like in [her] garden", is paramount (Okparanta 2013, 88). Her experience highlights the struggles encountered by those who, like her, wish to pursue a career in restoration ecology (Okparanta 2013, 88). In this regard the protagonist expresses her desire to work on something related to aquatic ecology. More specifically, she would like: "[…] running water-quality reports, performing stream qualification, restoration, wetland determinations, delineations, design and monitoring. But there were none of those jobs during the time [she] did [her] job search, even though there should have been plenty of them, especially with the way things were going for

the Niger Delta (Okparanta 2013, 88).

In the context of environmental degradation, the migration to America appears as an appealing option as it would enable the protagonist to pursue an education in environmental studies and find a pragmatic way to improve the situation in Nigeria. The prospect of migrating also leads the protagonist to compare the two nations, referencing also water imagery. In particular, the image of cleanliness associated with America contrasts with the portrait of a polluted and contaminated Nigeria. While the United States is described as a place "where water formed a cold, feather-like substance called snow, which fell leisurely from the sky in the water" (Okparanta 2013, 93), Nigeria is depicted as "strewn with trash" and as a place that rarely "anyone cared to clean […] up" (Okparanta 2013, 97). Through these contrasts, Okparanta constructs an ironic counter-narrative that is made explicit in Nnenna's observations. She continues her line of reasoning by ultimately stating that: "[b]ecause we were just Africans. What did Shell care? Here the spills were happening on a weekly basis" (Okparanta 2013, 97).

In a similar vein, in *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue showcases the negative repercussions faced by countries grappling with massive developmental issues. These territories are often "treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism" (Nixon 2011, 4). As a result, these communities experience a "systematic disadvantage" which occurs when social structures create profound, pervasive, asymmetrical and nearly inescapable barriers that severely diminish individuals' well-being prospects and, consequently, their potential for decent human life (Powers and Faden 2019, 16). In this regard, in a passage of the novel recounted from the perspective of the children, the narrators observe:

> We hated how, whenever a pipeline spilled in our farms, it took them days to fix it, after which they told our parents that all they needed to do to reclaim their farmlands was to remove the topsoil and toss it aside. When our parents tried to explain that doing so wouldn't work, since the poison went deep and the oil spread wide, and that perhaps the best solution would be for Pexton to get better pipelines, the laborers chuckled and asked if we expected Pexton to pack up and leave just because we didn't like them.
>
> […] After these exchanges, the laborers returned to their houses to breathe the same air as we did, but not to drink the same water, or eat the same food— they had enough money to buy all of their food from the big market, and Pexton made sure that their water came in through pipes, not from a well, which was why their children weren't dying like us (Mbue

2021, 74-75).

However, as it is prominently brought into view in the novel, the blame is not solely on the oil company but also on the government for failing to take actions in defence of local communities. The collusion between the government and the multinational oil industry demonstrates the complicity of the elite class, constituted by politicians and policymakers, in the exploitation of the vulnerable population for profit. In particular, His Excellency and Woja Beki, through their pursuit of self-interest and acceptance of bribes from Pexton, epitomise what Nare *et al*. "the moral decadence of "neocolonialism" where the postcolony is entangled in matrices of global finance" (2024, 361). As Frimpong asserts, the collaboration between the governing elite class and multinational corporations tends to prioritise foreign interest over local development, particularly concerning environmental and social regulations (Frimpong 2021, 101). In line with such line of reasoning, the collective narrative voices of the children bitterly observe how: "His Excellency and Pexton have no qualms about spilling our blood for their gain" and this consequently leads them to the conclusion "why should we not [therefore] seek to combat that?" (Mbue 202, 290).

Focusing on the issue of eco-consciousness and activism, the following section examines how Mbue and Okparanta weave in folktales in their narrative and depict various forms of resistance. The struggle for freedom in their works involves drawing on indigenous knowledge systems, engaging in either pacific or armed resistance or choosing to migrate in order to gain knowledge about eco-environmental strategies which can be applied to one's home country. Through storytelling, both authors encourage a critical reflection on the principles underlying the profit-driven politics of contemporary oil industries and their impact on local communities.

3. Indigenous Environmental Folktales, Activism and Eco-Consciousness

In an interview with Arun Venugopal, the Cameroonian author reveals that *How Beautiful We Were* was inspired by her childhood experiences growing up in a few African villages and a town situated close to an oil refinery. This situation made her particularly sensitive to oil politics and the ways in which local communities' well-being and economy are significantly affected by systematic neocolonial

dehumanisation processes. Additionally, Mbue reflects on how the prominent environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, profoundly impacted her as a child. She recounts how his execution "got the bells ringing in [her] head about how much injustice is involved in [the] process of oil exploration" (2021).

The novelist's personal connection to environmental injustice might have had a significant impact in spurring her to craft a narrative that not only humanises the affected communities but also mobilises the reader through emotional resonance and political urgency. Recalling early generations of West African writers' use of literature to centralise othered subjectivities, Mbue uses storytelling as a vehicle to grant voice and agency to marginalised individuals. Within such framework, writing becomes a political act enacted to make issues that might be perceived as abstract and distant, personal and urgent.

Concerning the political role of storytelling, Okparanta as well highlights its potential to address difficult issues that can eventually lead to the challenge of dominant power structures. In an interview in 2014, the Nigerian writer comments:

> I used to say I was not a political person, that my writing just happened to be political. I've grown as a writer, and I do realize that I am naturally concerned with the politics around me. I think most people are political, even when they are unaware of it. I think certain kinds of literature would actually do well to be more political, not for the purpose of stirring up trouble, not be controversial merely for controversy's sake, but rather for the purpose of encouraging difficult discussions that can potentially lead to real social changes, even seemingly small ones (Okparanta interview by Clemmons).

It is interesting to note how both female authors deploy the act of narration as a powerful means to explore the different modes of resistance adopted by the characters and prompt the reconnection of people to nature (Manson 2021, 23). More precisely, their works contrasts the principles and ethics which govern African indigenous societies and epistemologies with capitalism-driven politics. In *How Beautiful We Were*, for instance, against the backdrop of intrusive Western notions of "resource", "economy" and "trade", the novel showcases Kosawa community's understanding of beauty which is intertwined with the culture, myth and spirituality that shape the human-nature relationship (Nare *et al*. 2024, 356). The presence of the Spirit and ancestors are prominently depicted in the novel, highlighting the importance of African spiritual sensitivity in this relationship.

As West aptly observes, in the indigenous cosmosvision, "spirituality rests in the belief that all entities – formed and formless, interconnect and that the degree to which humans honor and understand this interconnectedness speaks to and shapes their fortune" (2011, 1).

This aspect is further illustrated in the folktale about the origins of Kosawa which centers on three brothers who ventured into the forests to check on their traps and discovered a leopard caught in one of them. Although capturing the leopard would have brought them wealth, the brothers, moved by her suffering, choose to set her free so that she could return home to her cubs. In gratitude, the leopard forms a blood pact with the brothers, promising that from that day forward, her blood will flow in their veins and the veins of their descendants (Mbue 2021, 31). As Nare *et al*. argue, this tale highlights "the eternal bond between human and the animal worlds", emphasising the value placed on the relationship between animals and nature, communality and their roles in their world (2024, 367).

Similarly to Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, Okparanta weaves folktale elements into her narrative to reflect on the consequence of the capitalist pursuit of immediate profits and the resulting neglect of the long-term impact on the environment and its inhabitants. On her way home, after obtaining the green card and realising her imminent departure from Nigeria, Nnenna reminisces a folktale her mother used to tell her as a young girl. The story is centred on Nnamdi and his mother. Having his father been killed and robbed by an older man, the two end up being left with no possessions and forced to live in the bush. One day, however, Nnamdi and his mother find a goat which represents their only hope, as by selling it once it is grown, they might be able to improve their living conditions. However, rather than waiting for the goat to grow, as suggested by his mother, Nnamdi goes to the marketplace where he is tricked into selling it for seeds. Once his mother learns that her son has mistakenly sold the goat in exchange for mere seeds, she furiously tosses them into the bush. The next day, Nnamdi finds an *udara* tree that he climbs against his mother's wish. At the top of the tree, the protagonist discovers the house of the wicked old man who murdered his father. Nnamdi steals a golden hen and the sack of coins it laid before returning home.

As Chaskes argues, the folktale represents a metaphor for "ecological exploitation" (2019, 126). It is interesting to note that Nnenna, as a child, interrogating her mother about the unresolved ending of the tale parallels the indefinite ending of the short story "America". Reflecting upon the suspended

conclusion of the folktale, the protagonist imagines the land and Nigerians to be hens and the crude as gold and further questions "What happens when all the hens are gone, when they either run away or have been destroyed?" (Okparanta 2013, 108). However, similarly to Nnamdi's folktale, there is no definite answer to such issue.

In addition to the use of folktales rooted in indigenous cosmovision, both authors illustrate the different acts of resistance enacted by their characters to counter the inordinate use of natural resources on the West African terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem. In the short story "America", migration appears as a pragmatic and the most viable response to the systematic instrumentalisation and exploitation of the Niger Delta ecosystem. The United States is idealised and perceived as a "sort of Utopia, a place where you go for answers, a place that always has those answers waiting for you" (Okparanta 2013, 101). As a result, the protagonist aspires to relocate there because she believes that "going to America will allow [her] to learn first-hand the measures that the US government is taking in their attempt to deal with the aftermath of their spill" (Okparanta 2013, 100-101).

While Okparanta's work proposes an individual trajectory by positioning migration and education as a potent tool for resistance and transformation, *How Beautiful We Were* presents a multilayered picture of forms of resistance which include indigenous belief systems as well as pacific or armed resistance. Among the figures who inspire a radical act of agency through collective struggle, there is Konga. Regarded as the "village mad man", he is the one who urges his fellow villagers towards an act of defiance by proposing to steal the keys of the three men who work for Pexton (Mbue 2021, 4). Despite being initially met with scepticism and hesitations from the male leaders of Kosawa, his idea eventually sparks the consideration of rebellion against Pexton. Believing "that the Spirit had possessed Konga" and that it is the entity "talking through him", the male components of the Kosawa community begin to seriously ponder the idea of rebelling against the American company (Mbue 2021, 23-24).

In this context, it is important to note that, as Mwaga *et al*. (2024, 164) aptly highlight, Konga occupies a unique position given that he is "the only person who did not attend [Pexton's] meetings" and "lived without fears of what was and what was to come" (Mbue 2021, 4). His character embodies what they term "ecological agency" (Mwaga *et al*. 2024, 162). Although Konga's uprising initially appears futile – resulting in the government soldiers massacring innocent villagers in order to rescue the Pexton representatives – it inadvertently triggers a series of

events that leads to the identification of a journalist named, Austin, who is related to one of the prisoners (Karmakar and Chetty 2023, 139). Austin becomes instrumental in drawing public attention to the Kosawa community's struggles through the involvement of an American activist group called The Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated People (Karmakar and Chetty 2023, 139).

This movement represents another example of eco-activism, albeit one which has its roots in foreign intervention from America. Similarly to contemporary eco-movements, The Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated People is committed to advancing social and environmental justice by holding Pexton accountable for the extensive damage caused to the natural ecosystem of Kosawa and advocating for the education of the community's children as means to acquire awareness and empowerment. Their support is, however, perceived as limited and not efficient enough to address the impactful damage and suffering endured at the hands of the American multinational company.

Besides representing forms of activism against corporate exploitation rooted in indigenous worldview and foreign intervention, the novel also showcases nonviolent modes of resistance, which is personified by the female protagonist, Thula. As Mbue explains in an interview with Yvonne Battle-Felton: "[y]ou need a certain level of madness to try to do something like this, to try overthrow a system, to try fight an American oil company" (2021). This "level of madness" and "hope" also resonate with the female protagonist, Thula, as well as to her friends who rally around her call for revolution (Mbue 2021). Having studied in America, where she had the opportunity to connect with other environmental activist groups, including the journalist, Austin, Thula develops an eco-consciousness that impacts her decision to return to Kosawa and peacefully fight for her community's freedom and rights. In her letters to her friends, the protagonist poignantly outlines her vision for the collective revolution. She imagines a peaceful demonstration filled with hope and unity, in which they are all "marching to Pexton, singing, dancing in front of soldiers" (Mbue 2021, 287). Her approach and viewpoint recall Saro-Wiwa's movement and peaceful resistance.

However, as the novel foregrounds, even among those united for a common cause, reaching consensus on how to resist is not always straightforward. This internal tension is exemplified by the differing perspectives of Thula's childhood friends, who, unlike her, reject nonviolent approaches. They contend that the "time for friendliness with [their] enemies had come and gone", believing that

armed resistance is a necessary response to the systematic exploitation inflicted on their community (Mbue 2021, 287). Their viewpoint reflects real-life conflicts in the Niger Delta region, where the youth are drawn into militancy and violence due to systematic oppression and environmental degradation (Obi 2011; Adunbi 2015).

The novel's final passages encapsulate how power structures can render communities powerless, in spite of their resilience and the desire for change. Wrongly accused of having kidnapped two representatives of Pexton, Thula is killed, and, in an act of retaliation, the village is burnt down, so that, as one of the collective narrators observes: "[n]othing remained of Kosawa, except for what we kept in our hearts" (Mbue 2021, 358). In an ironic twist, towards the novel's final pages, one of the components of the former Five movement observes how his children as well have come to use the oil to drive their big cars. He thus wonders: "Sometimes we ask our children about the cars they drive. The cars seem to be bigger than they've ever been, needing more oil. Do they think about it, about the children who will suffer as we once did just so they can have all the oil they want? Do they worry whether a day will come when there'll be no more oil left under the earth?" (Mbue 2021, 358). The same irony can be seen in Thula's younger brother who ultimately joins the government and enriches himself by becoming part of that same corrupt system that his sister so vehemently fought against.

As previously noted, the final pages of *How Beautiful We Were* depict the ultimate demise of Kosawa, demonstrating the deep entanglement between local realities and neocolonial power strictures. Resonating with the ending of the short story "America", the novel refrains from providing a reassuring or redemptive closure. Instead, it displays the various forms of resistance that can be adopted, outlining also the consequences that opting for one mode over the other entails. Narrative imagination, in this context, thus emerges as a powerful tool to unveil the intricate and complex issues underlying systematic injustice. As Egya suggests, it might be argued that West African women writers can be viewed as "militant[s]" whose work "push[…] the boundary towards activism" (Egya 2021, 6). Language and storytelling become a vehicle for raising awareness and promoting resistance. While these endings may not provide clear or positive resolutions, they urge readers to engage critically and remind them that the struggle for environmental justice is far from being over.

4. Conclusions

This paper sought to illustrate how, through their writings, Mbue and Okparanta eloquently raise paramount environmental and socio-political issues addressed by contemporary West African societies. Both literary works, *How Beautiful We Were* and "America", expose the often imperceptible, yet pervasive forms of violence inflicted upon sub-Saharan African communities by multinational corporations and corrupt governments. Water imagery, in particular, serves to effectively denounce the consequences deriving from the exploitation of natural resources as well as the social injustices and oppressive conditions endured by many people in the region due to exploitation and systematic corruption.

Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and the notion of eco-activism, the study highlighted the ways in which the synergy between the governing elite and corporate industries play an important role in fostering neocolonial exploitation and ecological devastation. Simultaneously, this analysis demonstrated the multiple forms of resistance enacted by the characters in their struggle for freedom. Whether forming an eco-agency based on indigenous knowledge system or engaging in pacific or armed resistance or, alternatively, deciding to migrate in order to return in one's home country with the knowledge on eco-environmental politics acquired abroad, Mbue and Okparanta illustrate the different ways in which West African communities have been attempting to fight back for their own rights. Importantly, the paper foregrounds that there is no unique path to resistance; what matters the most is the refusal to remain silent by passively accepting the state of things as it is central that West African authors persist in their effort to bring to the forefront these compellent issues.

By giving voice to the marginalised and weaving together environmental and social concerns into their narratives, these writers thus reflect their eco-activist intent and the belief that literature can serve as a "catalyst for social action" (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 12). Their works not only function as a powerful tool for raising awareness but also inspire action at local, national and international levels by demanding greater accountability from both governments and corporations. Ultimately, they illustrate the profound cost of modernity, emphasising the fact that progress often comes at a significant price for those who are least empowered to advocate for themselves.

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