

Between Silence and Resistance: Environmental Risk Narratives in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful we were*

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Abstract

This paper examines Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through the lens of the Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD) to explore how environmental risk is communicated as a tension between silence and resistance. Developed by Ogungbemi (2016), IMIRD synthesizes the ideological depth of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the structural precision of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and lexical analysis to investigate how language encodes power, agency, and ideological positioning. Applying this model, the paper analyzes transitivity structures, agency assignment, and discursive silencing in Mbue's depiction of a fictional African village devastated by corporate oil pollution. Through a close reading of narrative voice, clause structure, and dialogic framing, we demonstrate how Mbue's linguistic choices—such as collective narration, passive constructions, and high-transitivity clauses—represent the villagers' oscillation between voicelessness and defiant resistance. The study reveals how narrative grammar functions as a site of ideological struggle: one where corporate actors are obscured or backgrounded, while subaltern voices struggle for recognition. Ultimately, we argue that *How Beautiful We Were* is not only a literary account of environmental injustice but also a compelling discourse of resistance, showing how storytelling—when examined through IMIRD—operates as a vehicle for reclaiming agency, memory, and ecological justice.

Keywords: Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*, environmental risk, transitivity, petrofiction.

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation and its human toll have become urgent subjects in literature, particularly in works emerging from regions on the frontlines of ecological injustice (Ghosh, 2016; Nixon, 2011; Oppermann & Iovino, 2016). Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) is a notable example of this trend, set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, where an American oil company's operations poison the land and people over decades (Mbue, 2021). The novel dramatizes a community's fight for environmental justice against two formidable adversaries: a giant oil corporation (Pexton) and a complicit national government, capturing the intersecting pressures of corporate power and state betrayal (Mbue, 2021; Nixon, 2011). As children fall ill from toxic water and the "sky [pours] acid" rain (Mbue, 2021, p. 47), the villagers oscillate between fearful silence and courageous resistance, reflecting what Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence" – the gradual, often invisible nature of environmental harm that disproportionately affects marginalized communities.

Mbue narrates this struggle through multiple perspectives, including a collective "we" of Kosawa's children and individual family members, thereby giving voice to a whole community's experience (Mbue, 2021). This narrative choice aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which emphasizes the need to recover suppressed voices and highlight the human dimensions of ecological crises (Ghosh, 2016; Oppermann & Iovino, 2016). Such narrative strategies resonate with theories of "petrofiction" – a literary genre focusing on the cultural and ecological impacts of oil exploitation (Ghosh, 2016; Nixon, 2011).

This paper investigates how *How Beautiful We Were* communicates environmental risk and injustice through discourse. We specifically examine how the novel's language encodes transitivity, agency, and silencing, and how these linguistic features relate to broader themes of resistance versus complicity. The title "Between Silence and Resistance" underscores our central argument: Mbue's narrative dramatizes the vacillation between voicelessness and protest in the face of environmental risk. In Kosawa, long periods of

enforced silence – due to fear, oppression, or deception – are punctuated by acts of resistance where marginalized villagers assert their agency and demand justice. By analyzing the text with tools from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2008) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), we aim to reveal the subtle ways in which language either empowers characters to speak and act or strips them of voice and agency.

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach. While the novel has been read as a commentary on environmental and social injustices in postcolonial Africa (Mbue, 2021; Nixon, 2011; Ghosh, 2016), our analysis hones in on the linguistic mechanisms that construct those injustices within the story. We bridge literary analysis and discourse analysis, treating Mbue's novel not just as a work of fiction but as a discourse about environmental risk communication. In doing so, we engage with wider conversations in African literature and ecocriticism, such as the tradition of petrofiction (Ghosh, 2016; Nixon, 2011) and the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). Moreover, by using CDA, we connect the novel's micro-level language choices (e.g., grammar, dialogue) to macro-level issues of power, colonialism, and corporate greed. Using SFL, especially the transitivity framework, allows us to dissect who is portrayed as doing what to whom – crucial for understanding agency and blame in a story about pollution and protest (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

In the following sections, we first outline the theoretical framework, explaining key concepts from CDA and SFL relevant to our analysis, and review relevant literature on environmental risk narratives in Africa and discourse. We then describe our methodology for analyzing Mbue's text. The analysis section is organized around major themes: the novel's narrative voices, the representation of environmental damage (transitivity and agency), the discourse of resistance (voices that challenge oppression), and the discourse of complicity and silence (how powerholders and circumstances silence certain voices). Finally, we conclude with insights on how Mbue's use of language and narrative contributes to a deeper understanding of environmental risk communication and justice.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Power in Language

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a lens to examine how language reflects, reinforces, or challenges power relations in society. As pioneered by scholars like Norman Fairclough, CDA views discourse (text, talk, and other communicative practices) as a form of social practice intertwined with ideology and power (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In other words, language is not neutral; it often serves the

interests of those in power or, conversely, can be wielded as a tool of resistance (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough's framework distinguishes between power in discourse (how power is exercised within communicative events, e.g., who gets to speak, how they are heard) and power behind discourse (the social structures and institutions that shape and constrain discourse) (Fairclough, 2013, pp. 46-58, Ogungbemi 2016b). Both aspects are pertinent to *How Beautiful We Were*: within the novel's dialogues and narratives, power dynamics are constantly at play – for instance, who speaks in village meetings and who is silenced – reflecting larger power structures of neocolonial exploitation and authoritarian governance (Mbue, 2021; Nixon, 2011).

CDA emphasizes that discourse not only reflects reality but also helps construct it. By analyzing word choice, framing, and narrative viewpoint, we can uncover embedded ideologies – for example, a government official's euphemistic language that masks environmental harm, or a rebel's passionate speech that reframes pollution as injustice (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Reisigl, 2001). The goal of CDA is often to reveal implicit power imbalances or manipulations in texts, especially those that appear “natural” or taken-for-granted (Van Dijk, 2008). In the context of Mbue's novel, a CDA approach prompts us to ask: How is the story of environmental risk told, and who controls the narrative? What rhetorical or discursive strategies are used by the powerful (the oil company, the state) versus the powerless (the villagers)? Are certain viewpoints or truths being suppressed or privileged?

One relevant concept is the silencing of voices in discourse – a process by which certain people or information are excluded or marginalized. CDA scholars like Theo van Leeuwen have discussed how social actors can be backgrounded or omitted in discourse, effectively silencing their agency or complicity in events (Van Leeuwen, 2008). This can occur through linguistic strategies like passive constructions, nominalization, or the erasure of agency, as in the often-quoted phrase “mistakes were made” (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 28). In *How Beautiful We Were*, silencing occurs both literally (characters who are intimidated or eliminated) and linguistically (through narratives that omit or obscure the agency of perpetrators) (Mbue, 2021). Our analysis will draw on this critical insight: by identifying moments of silence or omission in the text, we can see how the novel critiques those very gaps as products of domination or fear (Mbue, 2021; Nixon, 2011).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL): Transitivity and Agency

While CDA provides the critical lens, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as developed by M. A. K. Halliday, offers a systematic method for dissecting the language structures that realize those discourses. SFL posits that language has three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal, and textual – of which the ideational

metafunction is concerned with representing experience and reality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The transitivity system is central to the ideational function: it is the aspect of grammar that deals with "who does what to whom, when, where, and how" in a clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 213-217). In practical terms, transitivity analysis means examining the types of processes (actions, events, mental states, speech, etc.), the participants involved in those processes, and any relevant circumstances.

Halliday's model categorizes processes into several types – most commonly material (physical actions or events), mental (thoughts, feelings, perceptions), verbal (speech acts), relational (states of being or relationships), with behavioral and existential as additional minor types (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Transitivity choices in a text are revealing of how the author encodes reality. For example, consider the difference between saying "Pexton's oil poisoned the river" versus "the river became poisoned." The former is a material process with an explicit Actor (Pexton's oil) and Goal (the river), directly assigning agency and blame, whereas the latter is an intransitive or middle construction that obscures who caused the poisoning. SFL scholars have long noted that such grammatical choices are often ideological: they can foreground or background responsibility and agency (Fowler, 1996; Thompson, 2014). In news discourse, for instance, studies have shown that authorities might use passive voice or nominalizations to downplay their culpability in environmental disasters (Fowler, 1996; Richardson, 2007).

In literary discourse, authors may consciously manipulate transitivity to reflect characters' perspectives or thematic tensions (Ogunbemi 2016c). For instance, in *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue often shifts between constructions of passivity and clauses that explode with agency. Consider the communal narrator's simple declarative clauses, "We were dying. We were helpless. We were afraid," which emphasize the villagers as passive, voiceless victims with no explicit Actor causing their state (Mbue, 2021, p. 47). This contrasts sharply with moments where the villagers assert their agency, as in the bold ultimatum they deliver to the oil men: either Pexton stop killing their children or face deadly retribution (Mbue, 2021, p. 183). These shifts are not random; they mirror the oscillation between silence and resistance that defines the community's response to risk (Mbue, 2021).

Closely related to transitivity is the notion of agency. Agency in linguistics refers to the capacity of entities (usually the grammatical subject/actor in a clause) to act and effect change (Fowler, 1996; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, Ogunbemi 2016d). By analyzing who the active participants are in crucial processes (e.g., poisoning, protesting, speaking out, silencing), we can see which characters or forces are presented as powerful

or impotent. Agency also connects to voice and perspective: an entire scene might be recounted from the villagers' collective perspective, emphasizing their feelings and reactions, whereas another might be narrated in an impersonal tone that makes the devastation seem like an inevitable fate, thus absolving human agents of blame (Fowler, 1996; Richardson, 2007). SFL provides the technical means to parse these differences, encouraging us to examine the frequency of passive constructions, or the presence of particular process types like verbal processes (say, ask, tell), which indicate who is given a voice in the narrative and who isn't (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

By combining CDA and SFL, we can perform what Fowler (1996) called a critical linguistic analysis of literature – one that connects grammatical form with sociopolitical meaning. This dual approach has been used in other studies of texts dealing with power and injustice, such as how colonial narratives depict indigenous peoples through biased transitivity patterns, or how protest literature gives agency to the oppressed (Fowler, 1996; Thompson, 2014). In the case of *How Beautiful We Were*, our theoretical framework directs us to scrutinize both what is said (content) and how it is said (form), revealing the political stakes embedded in linguistic choices.

Environmental Risk Narratives and African Petrofiction

In addition to linguistic theories, our analysis is informed by literary and cultural scholarship on environmental risk communication and African literature. Lawrence Buell's concept of "toxic discourse" is particularly relevant here. Buell defines this as "expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency" (Buell, 1998, p. 640). *How Beautiful We Were* squarely fits into toxic discourse: it portrays a community's anxiety and outrage at the slow poisoning of their environment by corporate activities (Mbue, 2021). Buell and others, like Ursula Heise and Rob Nixon, have argued that contemporary literature increasingly takes on the challenge of representing environmental risk and slow violence, which are often diffuse, long-term, and hard to visualize (Nixon, 2011; Heise, 2008). Narratives, they suggest, play a crucial role in making these abstract risks concrete and emotionally resonant (Buell, 1998; Heise, 2008). Mbue's novel demonstrates this by translating statistics about pollution into the visceral experiences of characters – sick children, barren fields, acrid air – thereby turning environmental risk into a tangible human story (Mbue, 2021).

African literature has a growing corpus of what scholars term petrofiction – a term popularized by Amitav Ghosh in 1992 – novels that grapple with the socio-cultural impact of oil extraction (Ghosh, 1992). Notable examples include Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

(2010), set in the Niger Delta, and Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* (2011), which touches on Somalia's resource conflicts (Habila, 2010; Farah, 2011). *How Beautiful We Were* contributes to this genre by focusing on an African village's decades-long confrontation with an oil company's greed (Mbue, 2021). This aligns with the broader tradition of postcolonial ecocriticism, which emphasizes the intersection of environmental degradation and social injustice in formerly colonized regions (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010). The novel underscores how environmental injustice in postcolonial settings often involves a collaboration between foreign capital and local corrupt elites – a dynamic sometimes described as environmental neocolonialism (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Nixon, 2011). Indeed, the fictional country in Mbue's story, though unnamed, mirrors real cases where multinational oil companies operated with impunity under dictatorships, such as Shell in Nigeria during the 1990s or ExxonMobil in Equatorial Guinea (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Shaxson, 2007).

Through a literature review, we find that scholars like Ogungbemi (2023), Ogungbemi and Walker (2025) and Kalu (2019) have examined African literary responses to ecological destruction and cultural survival, highlighting how such works connect local struggles to global structures of power. Our approach builds on these insights by examining the linguistic details through which such themes are realized. A key element of Mbue's narrative strategy – noted by critics and pertinent to our study – is her use of multiple narrators and perspectives (Mbue, 2021). The story is told by an ensemble: a first-person plural voice of "The Children" of Kosawa, and first-person singular voices of individual family members across generations (e.g., Thula, Sahel, Juba, Yaya) (Mbue, 2021). This polyphonic approach aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, where diverse voices and worldviews coexist in a text (Bakhtin, 1981). This multiplicity of perspectives highlights the complexity of resistance; the fight against environmental harm is shown not as a single narrative, but "a tapestry of voices" with different approaches and motivations (Bakhtin, 1981). For example, some villagers advocate non-violent legal action, others lean toward militant revenge, while some (initially) place hope in dialogue and promises. Such narrative structure is inherently linked to the theme of voice: by allowing the subaltern (including women, children, even the village "madman") to narrate, the novel itself resists the typical silencing of indigenous communities in mainstream discourse (Mbue, 2021). However, within the story, not all voices carry equal weight – and the tensions between who gets heard and who gets ignored form a critical part of the risk communication depicted.

In summary, our theoretical framework synthesizes: (1) CDA's focus on discourse, power, and silencing; (2) SFL's granular analysis of transitivity and agency in language; and (3) literary perspectives on

environmental risk narratives and African petrofiction. This integrated approach positions us to dive deeply into *How Beautiful We Were*, examining not just what the novel is about, but how its language and form convey a powerful critique of environmental risk and injustice.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship and critical responses to *How Beautiful We Were* provide valuable context for our analysis. Although the novel was only published in 2021, it has garnered attention in fields like postcolonial ecocriticism, African literature studies, and environmental communication. Here, we review three pertinent areas of literature: (1) analyses of Mbue's novel itself, (2) studies of discourse and narrative in environmental justice contexts, and (3) broader theoretical works on risk communication in literature.

Studies on *How Beautiful We Were*

Early analyses of Mbue's novel highlight its portrayal of environmental injustice and community resistance. For instance, Chiara Xausa (2023) provides a postcolonial ecocritical reading, arguing that the novel critiques "hazardous methods of crude oil exploitation" and their devastating impact on an African village. Xausa notes that *How Beautiful We Were* illustrates how the benefits of oil are unevenly distributed – enriching corrupt officials and foreign investors while the local villagers suffer pollution and loss (Xausa, 2023). She also observes the novel's multigenerational span and its defense of traditional ways of life in the face of Western modernity, emphasizing how the community's cultural memory serves as a form of resistance.

Similarly, Nare, Moopi, and Nyambi (2024) situate the novel in the context of global coloniality, examining how it depicts the entangled oppressions of corporate capitalism and dictatorial governance – what the *Boston Globe* review called "the nexus between avaricious Western fossil fuel companies and dictatorial regimes in the developing world" (Nare, Moopi, & Nyambi, 2024). These scholars underscore that Mbue's fiction, while set in a fictitious country, resonates with real events, such as the history of oil in Cameroon (Mbue's birthplace) and the notorious case of Shell in Nigeria (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). This echoes broader trends in African petrofiction, a genre that critiques the socio-environmental impacts of oil extraction (Ghosh, 1992; Habila, 2010).

One unique aspect noted by critics is the novel's use of a collective first-person narrator ("we") for the children of Kosawa. Reviewers like Rebecca Starks (2022) have pointed out that this collective voice adds a powerful moral dimension: it emphasizes the communal nature of suffering and hope. The children's chorus swings "from optimism to cynicism, trusting to scorning" as they witness promises broken over the years (Starks, 2022). Their viewpoint is tinged with pathos because, as one poignant line states, "They do not get to

be children” in a poisoned, crisis-ridden environment (Starks, 2022). This narrative choice aligns with what ecocritical narratology calls collective focalization, allowing the novel to present a shared consciousness of risk and resistance.

Velu & Rajasekaran (2024) suggest that through this technique, Mbue advocates for collective resistance and memory – the idea that the community’s shared stories and remembrance of how beautiful their land once was fuel their fight against exploitation (Velu & Rajasekaran, 2024). This strategy also resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, where diverse voices and worldviews coexist in a text, creating a polyphonic narrative that resists monologic interpretations (Bakhtin, 1981).

Discourse and Narrative in Environmental Justice Contexts

There is a growing body of research examining how environmental risks and injustices are communicated through discourse, including in fictional narratives. For instance, Eko (2013) analyzed African literary narratives of oil and found that they often use irony and moral storytelling to counter official discourses that downplay harm. In *How Beautiful We Were*, we see this when the villagers dub the company men with nicknames like “the Round One” and “the Leader” and pointedly note how the men whisper to “ensure they had their lies straight” – a narrative tactic that subtly undermines the authority’s credibility.

Scholars in ecolinguistics and eco-critical discourse analysis have also contributed ideas relevant to our study. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) discuss how language can either highlight or hide connections of cause and effect in ecological issues – for example, saying “forests were lost” versus “logging companies destroyed forests.” This is analogous to what we examine in Mbue’s text: whether the language exposes who is destroying Kosawa’s environment or obscures it.

Stibbe (2015), in his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, introduces the concept of “erasure,” where linguistic choices can obscure the agency and impact of environmental destruction. This is particularly relevant to *How Beautiful We Were*, where the language often shifts between assigning blame and obscuring responsibility, reflecting the complex power dynamics at play in the story.

Additionally, Olarotimi Ogungbemi’s recent studies provide critical insights into the discourse of environmental justice in African literature. In his 2023 article, “Literature as Resistance: The Pragmatics of Ecological Advocacy in ‘Oil on Water’ by Helon Habila,” Ogungbemi (2023) examines how Habila employs pragmatic strategies to advocate for ecological justice, highlighting the role of literature in resisting

environmental degradation. Building on this, his 2024 study, “Nature Speaks: Agency and Environment in Ben Okri’s ‘The Famished Road,’” explores the agency of the environment in literary narratives, emphasizing how nature is portrayed as an active participant in the struggle against ecological injustice.

Risk Communication in Literature

Finally, theoretical works on risk and narrative provide a backdrop to understand why a novel like Mbue’s matters. Ulrich Beck’s theory of the Risk Society (1992) argued that modern society is increasingly organized around managing and communicating risks, many of which (like environmental pollution) are invisible and delayed in their effects. Telling the story of risk – making it visible through narratives – thus becomes crucial (Beck, 1992). Paul Slovic (2015) has also written about the importance of story and emotion in the perception of environmental risk, noting that statistical information alone rarely moves people, whereas concrete narratives can (Slovic, 2015). *How Beautiful We Were* can be seen as a narrative of risk communication: within the story, characters try to communicate the risk to each other and to external audiences, dramatizing how information is controlled or released (Mbue, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach that draws on Ogungbemi’s (2016a) Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD), a comprehensive framework that blends the macro-level ideological insights of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with the micro-level textual precision of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and lexical analysis. Developed in Ogungbemi’s doctoral research, IMIRD provides a nuanced approach to analyzing how language encodes and transmits ideology, particularly in literary and poetic texts. It integrates van Dijk’s ideological square, which focuses on how dominant groups represent themselves positively while casting others negatively, with the fine-grained grammatical tools of Halliday’s SFL, including transitivity and lexical choice, to capture the subtle ways in which power dynamics and social hierarchies are embedded in language (van Dijk, 2008; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Unlike more rigid analytical frameworks, IMIRD is designed to accommodate the layered and context-dependent nature of literary texts, encouraging analysts to consider metaphor, cultural voice, and aesthetic style as part of a broader ideological reading. This interdependent approach allows for a more flexible yet rigorous examination of discourse, aligning well with the goals of this study, which seeks to uncover the complex ways in which *How Beautiful We Were* constructs narratives of environmental resistance and complicity.

The primary object of analysis is the text of *How Beautiful We Were* itself (Mbue, 2021). Given the novel’s length (over 350 pages) and the scope of this

paper, we focused on key passages that are particularly illuminating for environmental risk communication. These included: the opening chapters (which establish the environmental problem and the villagers' initial reactions), scenes of confrontation such as the village meeting where Pexton's men are taken hostage, pivotal character monologues or dialogues (e.g., Thula's letters from America, the madman Konga's warnings), and the ending sections that reflect on the outcome of the struggle. We also paid attention to any explicit discussion of risk, fear, or responsibility in the dialogue and narration.

For each selected passage, we examined the context and the power dynamics at play. Questions guiding this analysis were: Who is speaking and to whom? What is the purpose of the communication (e.g., to persuade, to deceive, to inspire)? What knowledge is shared or withheld? For instance, in village meeting dialogues, we looked at how the company representatives address the villagers versus how villagers express dissent or doubts. We also noted instances of explicit silencing (e.g., threats, interruptions, violence) and implicit silencing (e.g., internalized fear that prevents someone from speaking up). A CDA lens meant being attuned to ideology in language – for example, how the rhetoric of the authoritarian government (“His Excellency”) might manifest, or how the narrative voice might carry an ironic tone toward the powerful.

We conducted a micro-level analysis of language in the same passages, coding clauses for process types, participants, and other grammatical features. Concretely, this involved breaking down sentences to identify the verb processes (material, mental, verbal, etc.), their subjects (agents) and objects (affected entities), and any use of passive voice or nominalizations. We charted who or what is frequently in the Subject/Actor position when discussing key events. For example, when describing the contamination and its effects, do sentences use Pexton or “oil” as the Actor (e.g., “Pexton poisoned the water”), or do they use abstract nouns or nature as the Actor (e.g., “poison seeped into the water” or “the water turned poisonous”). By combining the strengths of CDA, SFL, and IMIRD, this methodology aims for a rich, and broad reading of *How Beautiful We Were*. It allows us to dissect the text's linguistic fabric and connect it to the novel's social and political commentary, capturing both the overt and covert ways in which power and ideology are encoded in language.

ANALYSIS

Transitivity and Agency in Depicting Environmental Harm

One of the most critical questions in an environmental risk narrative is: Who (or what) is causing the harm? The answer might seem obvious – in this story, an oil company is poisoning the land – but how the text linguistically represents causation and agency can

significantly shape the reader's perception of responsibility and victimhood. Mbue's novel uses transitivity patterns to sometimes spotlight the perpetrators of environmental damage and at other times emphasize the villagers' passive suffering or nature's reactive fury. This oscillation not only reflects the villagers' evolving awareness of the situation but also serves to critique how official narratives often obscure culpability.

In the early chapters, when the children's collective voice describes the onset of the environmental crisis, there is a notable use of non-human agents and passive constructions to portray the damage. For example: “*the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green*”, and “*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*” (Pg.1-2). In these descriptions, grammatical agency is assigned to the sky and rivers (they “pour” acid, they “turn” green) or to abstract substances like poison (children died “from the poison” – an agentless cause). Pexton, the oil company, is conspicuously absent as an actor in the syntax, even though logically the acid rain and poisoned water are results of Pexton's activities. This initial framing can be interpreted in a few ways. From a narrative perspective, it reflects the villagers' initial bafflement and lack of information – they witness the effects (acid rain, polluted rivers) without yet being able to directly tie them to a cause. The text mirrors this state of partial knowledge: nature itself is depicted as acting strangely (as if betraying them), which aligns with how a remote village might first experience industrial pollution – as a mysterious curse.

However, the novel also subtly hints at agency behind these phenomena. The children say, “*how could we have known when they didn't want us to know?*” (pg 1). Here, in contrast to the natural processes, a human agent is implied: “they.” The pronoun lacks an explicit antecedent in that paragraph, but from context “they” refers to the representatives of Pexton and perhaps the authorities who keep assuring the villagers everything is fine. By using “they” (an unspecified plural) in a clause about knowledge, the narrative indicates there *were* agents actively suppressing information. This is a case of what van Leeuwen calls backgrounding – the social actors (company officials) are present in the discourse (as “they”) but not fully specified. Grammatically, “they didn't want us to know” is a material/mental process (wanting as a mental/intentional process) with a clear actor, but it's still somewhat vague. This vagueness captures the community's sense of an unnamed malevolent force at work, without yet the empowerment to name it outright as Pexton or the dictatorship.

As the villagers become more aware and assertive, the language of the novel shifts to assign agency more directly. A turning point comes when the

villagers confront the Pexton representatives in a dramatic meeting. We see material action processes like kidnapping articulated from the villagers' perspective. The text (through the children's voice) recounts: "*Konga ordered the four young men to seize the Pexton men and Woja Beki and follow Lusaka.*", and one man threatens, "*If Pexton doesn't stop killing our children, I'll kill these three of its children with my bare hands*" (pg. 26-27). This moment is crucial linguistically: it is the first time in the narrative that someone states *Pexton is killing our children*. The clause "Pexton [Actor] stops killing [material process] our children [Goal]" places the blame unequivocally on the company. The villagers, in voicing this, demonstrate they have identified the agent of their suffering and are now demanding a change in action. Likewise, the retaliatory threat "we will kill three of its children" has "we" (the villagers) as Actor – a startling assumption of agency to perform violence, and "its children" meaning the company's (or possibly its employees') children as Goal. The symmetry of this phrasing (Pexton killing *our* children vs. *we* killing *their* children) is a deliberate discourse strategy: it frames the situation as an exchange of harms to force the recognition of the villagers' humanity. In transitivity terms, it's making Pexton's implicit violence explicit and promising an equally explicit counter-violence. The novel thus uses this direct language of agency to break the earlier silence. It's also notable that these lines are delivered in dialog by a villager, meaning they appear as a *quote* within the narrative – giving the words extra weight and a sense of immediacy.

Imbolo Mbue masterfully contrasts the material processes that describe environmental destruction with the mental and verbal processes that capture human reactions to this devastation. This linguistic strategy reflects the power imbalance between the corporate agents of destruction and the marginalized villagers who suffer the consequences. Mbue often describes environmental harm using direct, high-transitivity material processes that emphasize the physical impact of pollution. For example: "*Though Pexton has been here since Papa was a little boy, they didn't start becoming the cause of many deaths until three years ago, after they decided to add a new oil well at Gardens. It was then, with the increased wastes dumped into it, that whatever life was left in the big river disappeared*" (p. 45). "*Children began to forget the taste of fish. 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*" (p. 46).

In these passages, the verbs "*dumped*," "*disappeared*," "*forgot*," "*became*," "*multiplied*," and "*turned*" capture the irreversible transformation of the environment, reflecting the relentless advance of pollution. The choice to position inanimate elements like "Pexton" and "oil pipes" as the primary Actors in these processes effectively shifts the blame away from the

corporations and onto their physical machinery, creating a metonymic distance between the corporations and their destructive actions. This aligns with the corporate tendency to frame environmental degradation as a technical, impersonal phenomenon rather than a direct consequence of corporate greed and neglect.

Imbolo Mbue captures the gradual transformation of the Kosawa villagers from passive victims to active resisters. This shift is crucial for understanding the novel's portrayal of agency, power, and environmental justice. The linguistic evolution from Behavers and Sensors to fully realized Actors reflects a deeper narrative of awakening and resistance, as the villagers move from merely enduring oppression to actively challenging it.

Initially, the villagers are primarily framed as passive sufferers, characterized by mental and verbal processes that emphasize their emotional responses rather than physical actions. For example, the novel frequently uses phrases like "*we hated them*" and "*we were dying. We were helpless. We were afraid*" (p. 89). These mental processes highlight the villagers' internalized anger and despair, reflecting their psychological suffering under Pexton's oppressive presence. In these moments, their role is one of passive endurance, absorbing the impact of corporate exploitation without the immediate power to resist.

However, the novel gradually introduces moments where the villagers begin to assert their agency, shifting from passive recipients of suffering to active initiators of resistance. For instance, Thula, one of the central figures in the resistance, evolves from a quiet observer to a powerful leader. The text describes her transformation as follows: "*She still traveled the country, to speak to occasional gatherings of her supporters, the young people who walked with high shoulders even in the presence of soldiers and greeted each other by raising clenched fists*" (p. 260). Here, Thula is not merely reacting to oppression but actively organizing and inspiring others. The active verb "*traveled*" and the collective action of "*raising clenched fists*" symbolize a broader shift towards open defiance.

The villagers' children also undergo a similar transformation, moving from being passive victims to active resisters. As the novel progresses, the youth begin to engage in more direct, confrontational actions against Pexton. For example, the text recounts: "*During the year our friends were in prison, monthly, sometimes weekly, as often as we could, the rest of us burned a parked car here, dislodged machinery there, sent a letter threatening to kill everyone at Gardens if Pexton did not leave*" (p. 288). This passage is filled with high-transitivity material processes ("*burned*," "*dislodged*," "*threatening*"), marking a significant escalation in the villagers' tactics. These actions are not merely symbolic

but constitute real, physical acts of resistance aimed at disrupting the oppressive status quo.

However, the villagers' attempts to assert their agency through formal channels, such as the American legal system, present a different, more frustrating form of passivity. While they technically become Actors as plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit, the text captures the futility and slow progress of this approach: "*It was bound to make its way slowly from one American court to another. Because the American court system moved at the pace of a corpulent snail, our children would likely be parents before the time came for a judge to listen to both sides and make a final decision*" (p. 292). Here, the metaphor of a "*corpulent snail*" encapsulates the disempowering nature of bureaucratic justice, contrasting sharply with the immediate, direct actions of physical resistance.

In conclusion, the transitivity and agency analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* reveals a dynamic pattern: the language alternates between depicting the villagers as passive victims of environmental harm and as active agents of resistance, mirroring the story's moral movement from silence to uprising. The oil company and its allies, initially backgrounded, are increasingly foregrounded as the narrative progresses – thereby firmly assigning blame. Importantly, Mbue does not let the ultimate outcome negate the moments of agency the villagers seize. Even if their revolution faces tragic setbacks, the very act of saying "Pexton is killing our children" and "we will fight back" is a reclamation of narrative agency. In a critical discourse sense, the villagers seize the discourse from the company's hands, if not the practical power. The novel's grammar, therefore, is a vehicle of empowerment at key junctures – it names the guilty and elevates the oppressed from object to subject position linguistically, which is a prerequisite to any real challenge to power.

Complicity and Silencing: Discursive Power and the Absence of Voice

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Imbolo Mbue presents a powerful critique of the forces that enable environmental destruction and human rights abuses. Central to this critique are the intertwined themes of complicity and silencing, both of which operate through linguistic and social mechanisms that obscure accountability and suppress dissent. Complicity, in this context, refers to those characters and institutions that enable or ignore the exploitation of their communities, whether out of self-interest, fear, or resignation. Silencing, by contrast, is the active suppression or passive erasure of resistance, ensuring that inconvenient truths remain hidden and marginalized voices remain unheard.

One of the most striking examples of this dynamic is the sentence "*Their bodies were packed in plastic bags*" (p. 283). This passive construction

effectively removes the direct agents responsible for this gruesome act from the grammatical spotlight, reinforcing the anonymity of the perpetrators and the disposability of the victims. In the context of the novel, this phrase likely refers to laborers who suffered fatal accidents at Pexton's drilling sites, where safety protocols are frequently ignored in the pursuit of profit. The passive voice here obscures agency, distancing the corporation and its managers from the physical act of handling the dead and erasing the human decision-making that led to these fatalities.

This linguistic strategy aligns with the broader theme of corporate impunity, where powerful entities evade moral and legal responsibility for the human cost of their operations. By choosing the passive voice, Mbue not only captures the moral distancing typical of corporate risk communication but also echoes a more sinister form of discursive erasure: silencing by terror. This is an extreme form of power where the consequences of speaking out are so dire that most choose silence to survive. In such contexts, the act of disappearing bodies without explicit perpetrators mirrors countless real-world cases of activists and dissidents disappeared under authoritarian regimes, where bodies are never found and official records deny any wrongdoing.

In this way, Mbue's use of passive constructions becomes a critical part of the novel's broader indictment of complicity and repression. By erasing the actors behind these atrocities, the language itself participates in the broader process of silencing, reflecting the complicity of both corporate and state actors in maintaining violent systems of control.

Alongside state violence, corruption and betrayal from within contribute to complicity. The character of Woja Beki, the village head, is an embodiment of local complicity. He is described as having set the table for the Pexton men at the meetings, symbolically showing his role as host to the exploiters. Woja Beki's actions – perhaps accepting bribes or parroting the government's line to keep villagers calm – represent the discourse of compliance. The excerpt "*We knew he was one of them. We'd known for years that though he was our leader, descended from the same ancestors as us, we no longer meant anything to him. Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them. We'd seen with our own eyes, heard with our own ears, how Pexton was fattening his wives and giving his sons jobs in the capital and handing him envelopes of cash*" (p. 257) captures the deep sense of betrayal felt by the villagers toward their local leaders.

This passage highlights the complicity of Woja Beki, the village head, who aligns himself with Pexton in exchange for personal gain. The language is direct and accusatory, using active voice to emphasize the villagers' awareness of the betrayal ("we'd seen," "we'd

known," "we'd heard"), contrasting sharply with the passive constructions used to obscure corporate wrongdoing in other parts of the novel. This active structure reinforces the villagers' collective realization of their leader's complicity, framing him not just as a passive participant but as an active enabler of their suffering.

The metaphor of "sold our future to them" captures the irreversible nature of his betrayal, positioning Woja Beki as a traitor who prioritizes personal profit over communal welfare. This complicity is further underscored by the material benefits he receives – "fattening his wives," "jobs in the capital," "envelopes of cash" – which symbolize the tangible rewards of aligning with the oppressor. In this context, Woja Beki embodies the local collaborator who, by accepting bribes and privileges, helps maintain the power imbalance between the villagers and the corporate exploiters. This internal betrayal deepens the villagers' sense of isolation and helplessness, revealing that their oppression is not just imposed by external forces but also sustained by those within their own ranks. This complicity is presented as particularly insidious because it corrupts the very structures meant to protect the community, turning leaders into agents of their people's continued subjugation.

Another form of complicity is the inaction or indifference of the international community (or ordinary consumers represented by "cheerful" Americans). The passage "We wondered if America was populated with cheerful people like that overseer, which made it hard for us to understand them: How could they be happy when we were dying for their sake? Why wouldn't they ask their friends at Pexton to stop killing us? Was it possible they knew nothing of our plight? Was Pexton lying to them, just as they were lying to us?" (p. 75) captures the novel's sharp critique of global complicity through inaction and selective ignorance.

Here, the children of Kosawa directly confront the moral distance that allows people in the global North, represented by "cheerful" Americans, to remain indifferent to their suffering. The rhetorical questions emphasize the children's confusion and anger at the apparent disconnect between the lives of comfort enjoyed by Americans and the daily violence inflicted on their own community. This juxtaposition between cheerful, unaware Americans and the dying villagers creates a powerful contrast, reinforcing the novel's broader critique of global inequality.

The repeated questioning in the passage ("How could they be happy...?" "Why wouldn't they ask...?" "Was it possible they knew nothing...?") reflects a desperate search for accountability, revealing the children's hope that, perhaps, the American public is simply unaware of their plight. However, the final question – "Was Pexton lying to them, just as they were

lying to us?" – introduces a darker possibility: that this ignorance is not merely a result of distance, but of deliberate deception by corporate actors like Pexton.

This passage also functions as a discursive challenge to the reader, implicating those who benefit from global resource extraction without confronting its human costs. By framing this critique as a direct address to the imagined American public, Mbue breaks the fourth wall, transforming the reader from a passive observer into a potential participant in the structures that sustain Kosawa's suffering. This strategy forces the audience to confront their own complicity, raising the uncomfortable question of whether their comfort comes at the cost of others' lives. In doing so, the novel positions the reader within the moral economy of the text, effectively collapsing the distance between the oppressor and the witness and challenging the global silence that often accompanies environmental and human rights abuses in the Global South.

Within the village community, fear is a major engine of silencing. We have talked about fear of violence, but there's also fear of ostracism or of being wrong. The passage "We defy them tonight and we stand a chance of being free again, some said. We don't need freedom, we need to stay alive, others argued. Let us show them that we're people too. The soldiers are going to shoot us dead. The Spirit has sent Konga to tell us that we can and should fight. Fight with what? Fight with what we've got. What have we got but spears? We've got machetes and stones and pots of boiling water. How can you be so stupid as to think we have any chance?" (p. 24) captures the intense internal conflict within the Kosawa community as they grapple with the decision to resist their oppressors.

This dialogue exposes the psychological struggle between the desire for freedom and the instinct for survival. It reflects the deeply ingrained fear that can suppress collective action, even in the face of extreme injustice. The exchange is structured around a series of rapid-fire arguments and counterarguments, capturing the chaotic, conflicted atmosphere of a community on the brink of rebellion.

The alternating voices in this passage illustrate the clash between courage and caution, reflecting the broader theme of internalized oppression. Phrases like "We don't need freedom, we need to stay alive" and "The soldiers are going to shoot us dead" reveal the pervasive fear that shapes the villagers' worldview, acting as a powerful deterrent to resistance. These expressions of doubt and self-preservation reflect what Paulo Freire calls the "internalized voice of the oppressor" – when the oppressed begin to police their own actions, fearing the consequences of speaking out.

Moreover, the repeated question "Fight with what?" captures the villagers' awareness of their

material disadvantage, reinforcing the sense of futility that can stifle rebellion. This internalized despair is further emphasized by the mocking tone of the final line, “How can you be so stupid as to think we have any chance?” – a rhetorical blow that silences the more hopeful voices in the group. Mbue’s portrayal of these fearful characters is compassionate. Rather than condemning them for their caution, she presents their hesitation as a natural response to decades of trauma and repression. This compassionate framing highlights the complexity of resistance, acknowledging that silence is often a survival strategy rather than a simple act of cowardice. In doing so, the novel captures the profound psychological impact of long-term oppression, revealing how fear can fracture even the most determined communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *How Beautiful We Were* presents a profound exploration of environmental risk communication through the intertwined themes of resistance, complicity, and silencing. The novel uses diverse linguistic strategies to capture the complexities of power dynamics in the context of ecological destruction. By employing material, and mental processes, Mbue highlights the ways in which corporate actors like Pexton exploit natural resources while obscuring their culpability through passive constructions and nominalizations. At the same time, the villagers’ gradual shift from passive suffering to active resistance is articulated through a progression from mental and behavioral processes to high-transitivity material actions, reflecting their growing agency and determination to reclaim their voice.

Moreover, the text exposes the complicity of both local and global actors in sustaining this oppression. Characters like Woja Beki symbolize internal betrayal, showing how local leaders can become active participants in their community’s exploitation for personal gain. Meanwhile, the broader critique of international silence, represented by the “cheerful” Americans who remain oblivious to the suffering in Kosawa, challenges readers to confront their own potential complicity in the systems that enable environmental injustice. By framing these critiques within a narrative that alternates between collective and individual perspectives, Mbue captures the moral complexity of resistance and the psychological toll of prolonged oppression.

Ultimately, Mbue’s novel demands that we recognize the voices of those marginalized by environmental violence. It calls for a reimagining of agency – not just as the capacity to act, but as the power to narrate one’s own story against forces that seek to silence it. In doing so, *How Beautiful We Were* not only critiques the corporate and governmental actors responsible for environmental destruction but also serves as a powerful act of resistance in itself, challenging the

reader to reconsider their place within the global networks of power and responsibility.

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