



East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

eajis.eanso.org

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024

Print ISSN: 2707-529X | Online ISSN: 2707-5303

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5303>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative

Daniel Tia¹*

¹ University of Felix Houphouët-Boigny, 01 BP V 34, 01 Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

*Author's ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2928-3257>; Email: yawejanet@yahoo.com

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.7.1.2471>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

02 December 2024

Keywords:

*Postcolonial Novel,
Life Forms,
Intimate Motion,
Irrational
Exploitation,
Transformations.*

The postcolonial novel features two categories of normative apparatus. Each is endowed with cognitive skills, but paradoxically, they entertain a toxic relationship. One, heir to colonial and imperialist practices, believes itself to be better, and more cunning, and arrogates all power to itself, keeping the other in a situation of submission and dependence. This relationship, a hotbed of latent tension, has a negative influence on the forms of life, prevailing in that fictional universe. In terms of intimate motion, members of the dominant category suffer from the strong pressure exerted by the dominant one. As a result, their existence is drastically altered. As to their natural resources, they undergo unprecedented, irrational exploitation, becoming a source of pollution and impoverishment. Imbolo Mbue's fiction offers the reader a rural space in the grip of similar crises; its inhabitants and ecosystem acquire several states due to the transformations; the title of her novel, *How Beautiful We Were* exposes some of those states; one is explicit and the other implicit illustrating the concrete level and the abstract one. Each of both levels being crucial in the process of elucidation of the transformations, the current study aims to examine the event represented, including the respective transformations undergone by the bodies such as Kosawa's inhabitants and its environment. The use of narrative semiotics as a methodological tool will help to look into the factors and types of transformations highlighted in the novel under consideration. For that purpose, two points of interest will be scrutinized, namely "narrative structure" and "narrative transformations".

APA CITATION

Tia, D. (2024). Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative. *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7(1), 458-470. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.7.1.2471>.

CHICAGO CITATION

Tia, Daniel. 2024. "Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative". *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 7 (1), 458-470. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.7.1.2471>.

HARVARD CITATION

Tia, D. (2024) "Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative", *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7(1), pp. 458-470. doi: 10.37284/eajis.7.1.2471.

IEEE CITATION

D., Tia "Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative", *EAJIS*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 458-470, Dec. 2024.

MLA CITATION

Tia, Daniel. "Semiotics of Prose in Imbolo Mbue's Postcolonial Narrative". *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 1, Dec. 2024, pp. 458-470, doi:10.37284/eajis.7.1.2471.

INTRODUCTION

The artistic work achieved by migrant women writers such as Imbolo Mbue in American society is immense and exemplary. Her *How Beautiful We Were* thematizes cultural and traditional values and socio-economic difficulties. In terms of aesthetic scope, her fiction contributes to training the American intellectuals and the rest of the world where access to knowledge is possible. Through the picture of Kosawa (a fictional village located in Cameroon), Mbue's novel implicitly describes the environmental crisis, which destroys most of the ex-colonies in Africa. An attentive glance at the dispute between Kosawa's people and Pexton's representatives helps to discover that Mbue's fiction does not only inform readers but also sensitizes non-altruistic minds on the uniqueness of humanity. What is required by one of Mbue's characters is respect for Kosawa's people. In terms of interpretation, Mbue's novel arouses debate on the relationship between the ex-colonial powers and the ex-colonies. Officially, the ex-colonized beings are said to be economically independent, but in reality, they remain in the chains of colonial oppression and exploitation. Kosawa's case is a tangible illustration. Values, such as "look", are deeply codified in the novel. According to Vincent Jouve, the "look" acquires a particular codification. Pexton's representatives epitomize a "bad look": "The representatives told them that drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village. One day the government representatives said, Kosawa would have a wonderful thing called 'prosperity'" (Mbue, 2022, 72-73). Instead of

providing Kosawa's people with both values, they rather plunder Kosawa's natural resources. Worse still, Pexton destroys Kosawa's environment. Through its acts, there is a proven manifestation of hatred towards Kosawa's inhabitants. According to the narrator, Pexton's Officials have no compassion for Kosawa's people, for they do not comply with their obligation. The passage below exemplifies their careless attitude:

By the time our fathers came of age, around when Pexton began drilling its third well, it had become clear to everyone in Kosawa that the only way to partake in the oil wealth was to work, the supervisor told them that there were no jobs (...) Our fathers had no one in Bézam to speak up and schemes for them to get the coveted jobs, so they had continued hunting and fishing before spills covered the big river, just like their fathers before them. (Mbue, 2022, 74)

Because of the broken promise of Pexton's Officials, Kosawa's villagers adopt a particular way of being towards them. Their lack of regard gives rise to hatred in Kosawa. Thus, the inhabitants call for their unconditional leave. Indeed, analyzing the figure of alterity, Alain Perusset avers that the instances that make up the figure of alterity are the very situations of life, those to which we are or are not capable of adjusting easily or moderately certain efforts. For that reason, there is a need for different types of being: On the one hand, personalities based on the ability to adapt to situations, to ways of being independent of practical themes; on the other hand, what we call for the moment lifestyle, i.e. ways of being characteristic of practical situations.¹ Plainly,

¹ "Les instances qui font figure d'altérité sont les situations même de vie, celles auxquelles on est, ou non, capables de ajuster, facilement ou moyennant certains efforts. Pour cette raison, il y a bien nécessaire de distinguer deux types de manières d'être: les

personnalités fondées sur des aptitudes à s'adapter aux situations, à savoir des manières d'être indépendantes des thématiques pratiques; d'autres part, ce que nous appellerons pour l'instant styles de vie, à savoir des

the contemptuous “look” of Pexton’s Officials jeopardizes their relationship with Kosawa’s people. With time, the degree of hatred worsens as depicted in the ensuing excerpt: “We hated how, whenever a pipeline spilt 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” (Mbue, 2022, 74). This paragraph describes the Westerners’ policy of controlling the ex-colonies wealth. That policy of exploitation influences Kosawa’s inhabitants and environment.

Both bodies are things. To scrutinize them, let us proceed as Martin Heidegger: What is a thing?² This study will provide an answer to that question, but first, it is necessary to reconsider some of the critical works already achieved on Mbue’s literary vision. In “Environmental Apocalypse in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*: An Ecocritical Study,” Robi Andika shows that the depletion of resources is catastrophic for both human beings and nature. Andika’s study focuses on the case of Kosawa, an ecology whose natural resources are exploited by an American company. To Andika, that activity creates a “*natural imbalance*” (Mbue, 2023, 51). In the same vein, Gautam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty provide an article titled “Extraction and Environmental Injustices: (De)colonial Practices Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*,” in which they highlight decolonial practices. The first is the hostage-taking of Pexton’s Officials; the second is the rebellion of Kosawa’s youth against Pexton officials. According to both critics, “Pexton and government are neither concerned about the environmental toxicities nor about the erosion of lives. This realization prompts their act of epistemic disobedience” (Andika, 2023, 1358).

Furthermore, in their critical study of characters, Syahuruni Jumaid and various others show how

involved Mbue’s female characters are. Those researchers define various levels of struggle, namely the personal, family and community levels. The case of Thula in *How Beautiful We Were* is significant. Thula appropriates Western education and fights the devastating imperialism, which impoverishes and kills her people. Her actions ascertain that women participate in the decolonization struggle. In her book, *Perdre le sud. Décoloniser la solidarité mondiale*, Maïka Sondarjee points out the importance of women’s struggle as follows: “Most feminists, calling themselves decolonialists, but they are also militant for the destruction of international development organizations” (Sondarjee, 2020, 26). Beyond the prominent role played by Mbue’s female characters, it is worth noting that other critics focused on Kosawa’s environmental catastrophe. For example, Robert Mwaga, Stephen Mutie and Murimi Gaita delve into two novels (*How Beautiful We Were* & *Oil on Water*). To them, some of the characters in both novels are strongly opposed to the destruction of their respective environments. To that end, they take revolutionary action to preserve their environment and wealth. They also point out that the purpose of those actions is to free the ex-colonies from Western control.

Along the same line, Uchenna Ohagwam and Queen Albert provide a critical study on Imbolo Mbue, which deals with the crises caused by oil extraction. According to them, “in Mbue’s novel, the prolonged occupation of the Pexton oil company in Kosawa destroys the local ecological system and relegates the Indigenous people of the village to the status of marginali(z)ed anomalies” (Ohagwam & Albert, 2024, 200). In the same connection, Arunava Misra, another critic of Mbue, produces an article titled “Environmental Degradation: A Case Study of Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*” in which

manières d’être caractéristiques de situations pratiques” (Perusset 2023, 204).

² *Qu’est-ce qu’une chose?* (1971)

he shows the cruel scope of Pexton's activities. According to Misra's analysis, Pexton's carelessness is the cause of ecological and health tragedies in Kosawa:

As shown in the novel How Beautiful We Were, as a result of drinking contaminated water, villages are getting sick and children are dying and also, they are unable to cultivate their land because of oil pipeline leakage but the African government will also be harmed. (Misra, 2024, 499)

Plainly, Misra's approach helps to reveal that Mbue's novel is anchored in the evils that destroy the ex-colonies located in sub-Saharan Africa. Those societies are so exploited that their populations languish in extreme poverty. Through the prism of fiction, Mbue launches a cry of alarm whose aesthetic scope is to urge local Officials to be more responsible and well-intentioned towards their people.

As one can see, due to the reduced volume of this study, the preceding review of literature is non-comprehensive. Nevertheless, it provides significant results: on the one hand, it presents Mbue's fiction as a catalyst, for it urges the ex-colonized societies such as Kosawa to make a patriotic uprising. This means a firm commitment of Kosawa's citizens to expressing their unwavering love for their ancestral land (appropriation of their ancestral heritage) and unconditional rejection of any policy of submission to the imperialist power. The review also reveals that in its quest for autonomy, Kosawa relies on its female figures, such as Thula, whose clairvoyant vision appears in Mbue's novelistic space as a compass. She guides

her fellow citizens to give up violence at the expense of non-violence as a tool for decolonial struggle. She urges them to assimilate imperialist values, such as education in order to effectively fight against dominant practices through media denunciations.

As detailed above, this review of literature provides conclusive and tangible results that inexorably contribute to advancing research on Mbue's fiction. Despite that contributory feature, it should be noted that the critical studies addressed in this review have neither examined the structure of the novel under study, the semantic axis, the bodies (Kosawa's inhabitants & environment), nor the narrative transformations. Obviously, the current work aims at filling that gap. Thus, to carry out such a task, the use of narrative semiotics as a methodological tool will be helpful; the role of such a method in a scientific work is demonstrative, comparative and explanatory. The choice of textual values, such as "narrative event,"³ bodies, and narrative transformations is therefore advantageous. The purpose is to look into the depth levels on which this study is based. Thus, on the semantic axis, the analysis of the narrative event will help to identify the respective states of the bodies at level S' (overt content) and at level S (inverted content).

The notion of status is relevant, for there is a dynamic process taking place between S & S' levels. On the semantic axis, the bodies as depicted at level S are not the same at level S'. There are necessarily transformations of state. To Joseph Courtés, as a succession [of events], the narrative has a temporal dimension: the behaviours that are displayed in it maintain between them relations of anteriority and posteriority⁴. In other words, there is

³ According to Tilmann Köppe, "a narrative event is an event that is reported by means of a narrative. Although this answer is too simple not to be true, it is not the whole story. As is often noted in narratology and elsewhere, by making an event part of the content of a narrative, one

"transforms" the event in a specific manner" (Köppe, 2014, 101).

⁴ "En tant que succession [d'événements], le récit possède une dimension temporelle : les comportements qui y sont étalés entretiennent entre eux des relations d'antériorité et de postériorité" (Courtés, 1976, 97).

interconnectedness between the different states. To Nicole Everaert-Desmedt, the semantic axis is part of a temporal succession. Levels S & S' respectively correspond to exposition and resolution, and the transition from one to another occurs at a period of time (T)⁵. The task assigned to semiotic practice in the current study is therefore to look into all transformations, disclosing their different types. Between levels S & S', bodies (Kosawa's inhabitants & environment) undergo profound alteration at varied narrative levels.

This means on the semantic axis, various transformations or conversions occur; they are organized in a progressive sequence. The semiotic interpretation of those textual values is innovative, for through its rigorous and immanent feature, it makes accessible all the signifying practices in Mbue's text. Unlike existing critical studies on Mbue's fiction, the use of narrative semiotics meets a concrete requirement: that of taking into account new fields of investigation. Without, however, addressing the issues of *graphic devices*, *configuration or motifs*, this study will help to scrutinize two lines of research: "Narrative structure" and "narrative transformations".

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

This section first discusses the "event represented" in *How Beautiful We Were*, then digs into the narrative transformations. Before proceeding with that analysis, it is relevant to disclose what narrative is and what it is not. Scrutinizing the issue of narrative in *Dictionnaire d'analyse du discours* (2002), both Patrick Charaudeau and Dominique Maingueneau maintain that for there to be a

narrative, there must first be the representation of a temporal succession of actions. Then, a more or less remarkable transformation of certain initial properties of the actants must be achieved or fail, and finally, a plot must structure and give meaning to that succession of actions and events in time.⁶ Clearly, those critics provide three fundamental criteria to have a narrative. The first criterion is that an "event" is to be orally or graphically articulated by a *narrating-subject*. The second criterion is that the event must take place over time and embody a number of actions whose succession must give rise to one or more transformations. The third criterion is related to the sequence of "episodes". In her book titled *Sémiotique du récit* (2007), Nicole Everaert-Desmedt avers that an episode is a fragment of the text, which constitutes a narrative in itself (and therefore is composed of a transformation) and is integrated as part of an overall narrative.⁷ Put differently, in literature, a narrative is an entity, which contains several complex features; the simplest one resides in one of Everaert-Desmedt's theses. To her, a narrative can be defined as the representation of an event. This means the existence of a narrative is only possible on condition that there is first an "event" that should be represented. In other words, there can be no narrative without an "event". Similarly, Ignasi Ribó maintains that

Narratives are semiotic representations, that is, they are made of material signs (written or spoken words, moving or still images, etc.), which convey or stand for meanings that need to be decoded or interpreted by the receiver. Narratives prevent a sequence of events (actions, happenings, incidents, etc.) in a

⁵ "L'axe sémantique s'inscrit dans une succession temporelle. Les articulations S & S' correspondent aux situations initiale et finale, et le passage de l'une à l'autre se produit à un moment (T)" (Everaert-Desmedt, 2007, 16).

⁶ "Pour qu'il y ait récit, il faut d'abord la représentation d'une succession temporelle d'actions, il faut ensuite qu'une transformation plus ou moins importante de

certaines propriétés initiales des actants soit réalisée ou échoue, il faut enfin qu'une mise en intrigue structure et donne sens à cette succession d'actions et d'événements dans le temps" (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002, 484).

⁷ "L'épisode est un fragment de texte qui constitue un récit en soi (donc qui contient une transformation) et qui intégré comme élément d'un récit global" (Everaert-Desmedt, 2007, 22).

common structure or organi(z)ed whole. (Ribó, 2018, 2)

In fiction, the novelist can create a series of events anchored in a given period of time and place and materialize them through a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator's voice. The choice of the type of narrator is substantial, for it contributes to characterizing the point of view from which the event is narrated. In *How Beautiful We Were*, there are eleven first-person micro-narratives (FPMN). In the first and eleventh micro-narratives (MN₁ & MN₂), the narrative voice is produced by the personal pronoun "we". In both MN₁ and MN₂, the narrators are therefore homodiegetic. In other words, they are the object and subject of their own discourse. If we consider them as the two endpoints {MN₁...; MN₂}, we can include the other micro-narratives (MN_n) between them. They alternate, i.e. the ones corresponding to odd numbers are narrated with the first-person plural pronoun (FPPP) "we" and the others corresponding to even numbers are narrated with the first-person singular pronoun (FPSP) "I". Better still, Mbue's novel embodies various narrative voices. Examining Mbue's narrative, Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty assert:

The narrative is told from the perspective of various family members of the protagonist, Thula Nangi – her mother Saleh, grandmother Yaya, uncle Bongo, and brother Juba. Each of these chapters is interspersed with a chapter from 'The Children', which refers to Thula and her friends, and spans the years as they grow up. (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023, 128)

Besides, Mbue's narrative also incorporates Thula's letters, silencing the major narrator and giving voice to another homodiegetic narrator, as illustrated in the textual clues below:

Letter 1: *About the Great City she: I find it hard New York and Kosawa exist on the same earth and that I've been in both of and lived such*

different lives (...). I will always be one of us, Thula (Mbue, 2022, 205).

Letter 2: *She'd done better in her classes than she had hoped. Then she said: Remember that meeting I told you I was going to attend in my last letter? The one in a place called Village? My friend was right, nothing about the place reminded me of Kosawa, but I cannot tell you how much the meeting energized me (...). I'll always be one of us, Thula. (Mbue, 2022, 206-214)*

Letter 3: *Thula agreed, writing: Yes, if we are to be conquered, let it be because we never fought. Our fathers, brothers, uncles, friends – what did they die for? They died so that we could live peacefully in Kosawa, and if not us, then at the generation (...). I'll always be one of us, Thula. (Mbue, 2022, 213-214)*

The first-person singular pronoun (*I*) used in those letters refers to Thula; this externalizes her experience in American society. The three extracts displayed above are narrowly linked to a *reported speech*; however, in reality, they function as hypertexts. Their use interrupts the major narrative voice, allowing another one to emerge. The discursive hybridity, which is generated, destabilizes the narrative authority. Here, the resonant (echoing) voice is not the one of the narrator, but that of Thula. Indeed, she is a scholarship recipient in the United States. She writes to members of her community to reaffirm her cultural loyalty and express her urgent concern for a solution to Kosawa's difficulties. Indeed, quoting Jean Clément in their critical study on hypertextuality, Jean-Michel Salaün and Christian Vandendorpe aver that narrative hypertextuality is indissolubly both an intellectual and enunciative technology, which breaks with the linearity of

discourse, introduces ruptures, provides disorder and game in the activities of writing and reading.⁸

Obviously, hypertextuality is a narrative device whose use favours the occurrence of disjunction in the narrative weave. An attentive look at the novel *How Beautiful We Were* helps to disclose its maverick feature, which, in the eyes of the conservatives, transgresses the classical norms or principles by challenging the linearity of Mbue's narrative. However, literary critics consider it as a mark of renewal, which symbolizes, on the one hand, the rejection of traditions and on the other hand, the expression of freedom. In terms of events, the novel under investigation represents the abusive and illegal exploitation of Kosawa's natural resources. To look into that "event", the use of the semantic axis proposed by Nicole Everaert-Desmedt will be helpful:



This axis has a double pole: the former, called (S), constitutes the exposition and the latter, called (S'), epitomizes the resolution. With regard to the issue of "bodies", Mbue's novel depicts Kosawa's inhabitants and ecosystem. Both "bodily entities" are victimized. In Kosawa, the environment is polluted. Consequently, the entire ecosystem is destroyed and there are countless deaths. The two passages below corroborate the drama affecting Kosawa's "bodily entities":

Do you know how many children we've buried? A father shouted. His name was Lusaka—he had buried two sons (...). Two years had passed since Wambi died, but we thought about him

(Mbue, 2022, 7)/I lie on my back and stare into the darkness. I think about how the air and water of Kosawa progressed from dirty to deadly. (Mbue, 2022, 32)

In line with the above semantic axis, the resolution of Mbue's narrative is "death". According to the *Everaert-Desmedt* approach, to define the structure of a narrative, one has to observe its resolution; only this controls the exposition.⁹ More importantly, due to the death of Kosawa's villagers and the destruction of its ecosystem, one can puzzle over the causes of such a tragedy. Thus, Everaert-Desmedt believes that the exposition must represent at least one feature in common and one feature different from the resolution.¹⁰ In *How Beautiful We Were*, the exposition is displayed as follows:

Mama and Papa cautioning me never to go near the big river is my first memory of life. Without their warning, how could I have known that rivers were not ordinarily covered with oil and toxic waste? Without our parents' stories about their childhoods in a clean Kosawa, their days spent swimming in rivers that ran clear, how would my friends and I have known that the sporadic smokings that enveloped the village and left our eyes watery and noses runny weren't ordinary occurrence in the lives of other children our age? (Mbue, 2022, 28)

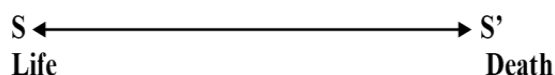
Perspicuously, the exposition described in this excerpt is the "purity of life in Kosawa". Here, neither Kosawa's inhabitants, nor its vegetation, nor its air, nor its water, nor its land is damaged. In other words, before the arrival of Pexton's Officials in Kosawa, the "forms of life" were pure and genuine. "Bodily entities" used to enjoy vitality, thus

⁸ "[L'hypertextualité narrative est] indissolublement une technologie à la fois intellectuelle et énonciative qui rompt avec la linéarité du discours, introduit des ruptures, produit du désordre et du jeu dans les activités d'écriture et de lecture" (In Salaün & Vandendorpe, 2004, 11).

⁹ "Pour définir la structure d'un récit, l'on doit observer sa situation finale, car c'est elle qui commande la situation initiale" (Everaert-Desmedt 2007, 20).

¹⁰ "La situation initiale doit présenter au moins un trait commun et un trait différent de la situation finale" (Everaert-Desmedt, 2007, 20).

postulating quietness or restfulness. On the figurative level, we have Kosawa's inhabitants on the one hand, and its ecosystem on the other – both are “beautiful” or “elegant”. On the abstract level, we have both “life” and “death”. Those terms (life & death) are significant in Mbue's novel, for they maintain an oppositional relationship. A close look at the structure of Mbue's narrative reveals that the “overt content” is “death”, and the “inverted content” is the “purity of life”. Indeed, Kosawa's inhabitants and ecosystem undergo damage because of Pexton's oil extraction; those details can be summarized as follows:



Through the above semantic axis, one can infer that the difficulties of Kosawa's inhabitants are linked to the deprived policies of local elected Officials. Their lack of nationalism contributes to the emergence of neo-colonialist practices, with tragic consequences. The title of Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* is noteworthy at this level, for it embodies two values: one is explicit and the other is implicit. The former is “ugliness” and the latter is “elegance”. Indeed, this title includes both the resolution and exposition: “beautiful” refers to “life” and “ugliness” epitomizes “death”.

To put it briefly, the preceding section defined Mbue's narrative and structure; as far as the following one is concerned, it will deal with the transformations.

NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

The purpose of this step is to decipher the transformations, which occur in the narrative under consideration. Mbue's novel depicts the abusive and illegal exploitation of Kosawa's natural resources. In line with that representation, varied types of

transformation can be noted. Due to Pexton's oil activities, Kosawa's water is polluted; it is no longer healthy and has become undrinkable. As one moves forward, the situation of the ecosystem worsens, thus becoming a source of concern for Kosawa's people. The paragraph below describes that transformation:

We should have known the end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn't want us to know? When we began to wobble and snapping like feeble little branches. (Mbue, 2022, 3)

The rhetorical questions contained in this excerpt disclose the sense of regret that Kosawa's inhabitants begrudge. In essence, Pexton's oil extraction damages the environment, bringing about unprecedented ecological crises. This passage decries the non-respect of environmental policies. Indeed, that ecological transformation threatens Kosawa's agricultural activities because the land is subject to considerable alteration. The excerpt that follows is illustrative of that destruction: “Weeks later, a new spill turned into a fire that ravaged the farms of six families, forcing mothers to search [sic] for new land deep in the forest, a trek that left many with little strength for toiling” (Mbue, 2022, 33). Examining the issue of narrative transformation, Everaert-Desmedt asserts that a text can present several transformations¹¹. There are, for example, “hierarchical transformations”, “successive transformations,” and “independent transformations”.

Mbue's novel highlights successive transformations. Indeed, due to Pexton's oil extraction in Kosawa the “bodies” belonging to the

¹¹ “Un texte peut présenter plusieurs transformations. Nous distinguons différents cas, d'après les rapports

qui relient les transformations entre elles” (Everaert-Desmedt, 2007, 21).

natural environment have undergone considerable change. The utterances that follow, show how dynamic those transformations are: “I lie on my back and stare into the darkness. I think about how the hair and water of Kosawa progressed from dirty to deadly” (Mbue, 2022, 32). The first transformation gives rise to a second, which is as significant as the first. A close glance at the narrative under investigation helps to realize that the alteration of “bodies”, such as “water” and “air” has a negative impact on the health of Kosawa’s inhabitants. Among the victims, there are many children; the rate of infant mortality is high; and that health crisis shakes all social strata. Thus, Kosawa’s villagers demand that an appropriate and efficient solution be found. One of Kosawa’s disgusted parents beseeches Pexton’s Officials as follows:

Please, you must do something, one of our aunts cried to the leader; her baby limp in her arms. It was the poison – the baby was too pure for the filth in the village well’s water, the toxins that had seeped into it from Pexton’s field. One of our fathers asked if the Pexton could in the meantime send us clean water at least for the youngest children. The leader shook his head; he’d heard this question before. (Mbue, 2022, 9)

Clearly, the toxin produced by Pexton’s oil extraction pollutes the well’s water and causes coughing. According to one of Mbue’s narrators, that disease is highly contagious and provokes death. Children contract it from each other. More serious still, it spreads from one family to another. What also makes that disease strange is the lack of medicine to combat it. Accordingly, no Kosawa’s villager is safe from that threat. The ensuing textual

clues illustrate the climate of disquiet, prevailing in Kosawa:

We worried for our entire families, though the disease preferred the body of children. We feared the first person to catch it in our huts would pass it on to someone else, and before our entire family would contract it and die, one after another, or maybe all at once, but most likely one after another, from the oldest to the youngest, which case we might be the last to die after we’d buried everyone. Our anxieties kept us awake at night. (Mbue, 2022, 8)

Plainly, the “bodies” of Kosawa’s people are depleted. In his book, *Corps transfigures. Stratifications de l’imaginaire des sexes/genres*, Alice Pechriggl shows how the effort of the body is exhausting: We know, or at least sportsmen know, that physical effort, when taken to the extreme limits of bodily strength, comes up against exasperation several times, and then definitively, as a result of the pain finally caused by this overexertion of strength, and which will overcome the strongest *thumos*. However, the exasperation caused by the effort of thinking, which must be reduced by endurance in the exercise of dialectic, is not caused by physical pain as such.¹² In other words, Kosawa’s people feel exasperated by their inability to find an efficient solution to their crisis.

Faced with the denigrating rhetoric of Pexton’s Officials, the inhabitants are worried. Using discursive strategies, such as prolepsis, Mbue’s novel depicts a bleak picture of the future of Kosawa’s inhabitants. The disease, caused by water and air pollution, threatens the survival of Kosawa’s villagers. Indeed, as pictured by one of Mbue’s narrators, Pexton is highly decried by Kosawa’s

¹² “Nous savons, ou du moins les sportifs le savent, que l’effort corporel, Lorsque nous le menons à l’extrême des limites de la force corporelle, se heurte plusieurs fois, puis définitivement, à l’exaspération qui résulte des douleurs que cause finalement ce surmenage des forces

et qui vaincra le plus fort *thumos*. L’exaspération face à l’effort de penser, cette exaspération qu’il s’agira de faire reculer par l’endurance dans l’exercice de la dialectique, n’a pourtant pas comme cause des douleurs physiques à proprement parler” (Pechriggl, 2000, 27).

inhabitants. Even the corrupt inhabitants, who allowed Pexton's Officials to set up their project, are henceforth aware of the danger they face. That awareness brings about a transformation on a restricted basis, i.e. within families – parents forbid their children to play with water. The behaviour of Kosawa's inhabitants changes, for one becomes a potential danger for the other. Accordingly, the issue of hospitality suffers a blow; there is tension in Kosawa – the young villagers show no respect for Pexton's Officials. They are perceived as demonic beings.

None of Kosawa's villagers trusts the Pexton's Officials; their contempt towards Kosawa's population is openly decried without the slightest restraint. For instance, Konga, Kosawa's so-called madman, ridicules Pexton's Officials. Chief Woja Beki and his people are powerless to stop him from accomplishing his disrespectful plan. On the contrary, the young villagers express their internal satisfaction by showing solidarity with Konga. In essence, Kosawa's villagers are exasperated by the early death of their children; they consider Pexton's Officials as being responsible for their misfortune. The homodiegetic narrator describes the tension prevailing at one of the meetings with Pexton's officials as pointed out below:

We heard a voice telling us to remain seated, the meeting was not yet over, it was just beginning. (...) It was Konga, our village madman. (...) Never had we seen the Leader so stunned as when he turned to Woja Beki and asked what Konga wanted – why was a madman disrupting the end of the meeting? Never had we seen Woja Beki as devoid of words as when he turned to face Konga. Before us all stood a never-before-seen version of our village madman. As if all authority on earth belonged to him, Konga barked at the Pexton men, and told them to sit down, hadn't they heard him, were their ears so full of wax that sound couldn't penetrate them? The meeting wasn't over, it was just beginning. (Mbue, 2022, 11-12)

Obviously, Konga shatters the myth of the superiority of Pexton's Officials. His bravery is the starting point for the active struggle aiming to free Kosawa's people. Indeed, the period, which follows Konga's defying action, Kosawa's young people accentuate their demands. From submission, they turn to disobedience by publicly declining to carry out their Chief (Woja Beki) who orders them to expel Konga from the meeting place. The excerpt below exemplifies their restlessness:

The Leader, fatigued from railing to an unresponsive audience, paused and let out a deep sigh. He shook his head. He'd realized, it appeared, that he couldn't make us get the key from Konga and that there was nothing he could do to a madman in a dark village, a long way from Pexton's headquarters. We felt no sympathy for him – we had no capacity for that, occupied as we were in delighting in his despair. (Mbue, 2022, 17)

The disrespectful attitude described above can be explained by the tragic consequences of Pexton's oil extraction on Kosawa's population. Indeed, Konga's trajectory is particular in Mbue's novel; one of the narrators maintains that "[he] wasn't born a madman and that, hard as it might be to believe it now, he was once a proud handsome man" (Mbue, 2022, 15). Apparently, Konga is no longer seen as a lunatic, but rather as a catalyst for freedom. That is why Kosawa's youth leaves him to accomplish his challenging plan. The youth rather considers his action as self-defence. To comprehend the danger that Pexton's oil activities pose to the existence of Kosawa's inhabitants and its ecosystem, it is essential to consider the different transformations. Those changes vary from a lesser to a greater degree. The second transformation is generalized, giving rise to a third one. Pexton's Officials are indifferent and unwilling to find an appropriate, prompt solution to the suffering of Kosawa's inhabitants: "Pexton was not in a business of providing water, but out of concern for us he would talk to people at headquarters, they'd take our

request to the government office in charge of water supply and hear what they had to say” (Mbue, 2022, 9).

In reality, Kosawa is an ex-colony, meaning that its people are either ex-colonized or descendants of the colonized beings; their relationship with the West is never equal; it suffers from chronic injustice. Analyzing the social conditions of colonized subjects, Albert Memmi avows that the colonized being is not this, is not that. He is never considered positively; or if he is, the quality conceded is a psychological or ethical one¹³. To put it differently, the indifference of Pexton’s representatives irritates Kosawa’s folks; they express their discontent through demonstrations. The ensuing textual clues are illustrative of their anger:

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. (Mbue, 2022, 21-22)

Beyond Kosawa’s borders, Thula is another character who is involved enough; she blames Pexton’s Officials for their lack of humanism. Indeed, she openly exposes her fellow citizens’ suffering to the American public. To her, the immoral behaviour of Pexton’s Officials remains unknown to the Western world. By unveiling the ecological and humanitarian crisis undergone by her home society, she believes that the American political leaders could exert strong pressure on Pexton’s Officials to comply with the laws of the host society (Kosawa). Thula’s approach is more

formal and intellectual than that of his fellow citizens. After reading the book, *The Wretched of the Earths*, Thula acquires a Pan-Africanist vision; she started urging her fellow citizens to embark on an emancipatory struggle. In her letters, she urges her people to keep up their struggle and pressure vivid. Further, the textual clues below illustrate one of the major transformations in Mbue’s narrative. The physical appearance of Kosawa’s inhabitants is seriously affected by the pollution:

In the midst of all this, the gas flares got worse, the worse, the smoke blacker. For reasons we couldn’t understand, the smoke always blew in our direction, never in the direction of Gardens and the hilltop mansion of the American overseer. With every new oil spill or day of gas flares so savage our skin shriveled and we needed to shout to hear each other over the screaming flames. (Mbue, 2022, 33)

Due to that troublesome situation, Kosawa’s folks require the closure of Pexton’s oil extraction site. To them, this is the only reliable way to restore peace and quiet in their village. The scheme below summarizes the transformations that occurred in the Mbue’s narrative:

S → S’ → S’’ → S’’’

This scheme is composed of three interludes: [S; S’] refers to the first episode, [S; S’] epitomizes the second episode, and [S; S’’] embodies the third episode. In the first episode, the resolution is the contamination of Kosawa’s children and the exposition is the purity of life. At this level, the transformation is linked to the pollution of air and water. In the second episode, the resolution is apparent through the tension between Kosawa’s youth and Pexton’s Officials. The exposition is the

¹³ “Le [être] colonisé n’est pas ceci, n’est pas cela. Jamais il n’est considéré positivement ; ou s’il l’est, la qualité

conçédée relève d’un romanque psychologique ou éthique” (Memmi, 1972, 99).

purity of life. Here, the transformation is the awareness of Kosawa's residents. As to the third episode, the resolution is hatred for Pexton's Officials. The exposition is the purity of life. As far as the transformation is concerned, it is linked to the behaviour of Kosawa's young villagers; they no longer have any respect for the village hierarchy. Delving into the commitment of Kosawa's youth in his article titled "Extraction and Environmental Injustice: (De)colonial Practices in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*", Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty assert: "So, in one of the meetings with Pexton, Konga, the village madman, stages a rebellious move. Konga hides the car keys of Pexton representatives, following which, the village men show the courage to seize the representatives and take them as captives" (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023, 138). In the three episodes, the transformations are progressive.

CONCLUSION

This critical reflection on Imbolo's *How Beautiful We Were* contributed to deciphering the concept of "bodies". It addressed two main sections: "structure pattern" and "narrative transformation".

To analyze those points of interest, narrative semiotics played a substantial role; its principles provided a definitional approach to the concept of narrative. Thus, they revealed that Mbue's novel represents the abusive and illegal exploitation of the natural resources of Kosawa (ex-colony). That approach defined the structure of Mbue's novel; its discursive heterogeneity was regarded as one of the hallmarks of innovation. When interrogating the structure, the abstract and figurative features were considered. In this way, the oppositional relationship between "life" and "death" was further expounded. The former term was associated with the exposition and the second one with the resolution (denouement). From that structure, a parallel was drawn between the title *How Beautiful We Were* and the substance. What is more, that title contains both "resolution" and "exposition". The "overt content" is "ugliness" and the "inverted

content" is "elegance". "Ugliness" corresponds to "death" and "elegance" to "life".

In addition, the approach examined the narrative transformations that happened in Mbue's text. Three episodes were respectively scrutinized. In the first episode, the main transformation revealed is the pollution of Kosawa's air and water, leading to the contamination of the village's inhabitants. In the second episode, it is the awareness of Kosawa's young people that is perceived as a transformation. The awareness of Kosawa's inhabitants made possible a number of actions that call for improvement. That tension calls for overturned social authority and social in Mbue's novelistic universe. In the third episode, the apparent transformation was the rebellious behaviour of Kosawa's young people. They are no longer submissive, docile, and long to be free; this can be possible if they fulfil their agenda by freeing their land.

The use of narrative semiotics was advantageous, for its principles showed how the extraction of oil negatively influenced "bodies" (characters and ecosystem) in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. This critical reflection exposed Westerners' neocolonial practices in the ex-colonies. In terms of results, it contributed to unveiling the negative influence of oil extraction on Kosawa's inhabitants and ecosystem. While those results help to advance scientific research on Mbue's fiction, it should be noted that values such as the deconstruction process and decolonial techniques are innovative points of interest that need to be interrogated.

Funding Statement: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgements: Sincere gratitude to Kouadio Germain N'Guessan, Department of English, for his unconditional academic support.

Conflicts of Interest Statement: The author of the current article declares no conflict of interest.

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