

Social Justice in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*: A Marxist Perspective

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Abstract—This research delineates the specific manifestations of social injustice within the novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) and provides a theoretical analysis of these phenomena through a Marxist lens. The writer uses a qualitative descriptive analysis method. Data collection was conducted through careful reading, note-taking, and identification of dialogues and narrative sections that reflect social justice issues, which were then analyzed using Karl Marx's theory. The results of this study reveal that the novel depicts a widespread "metabolic rift" in which Pexton prioritizes capital accumulation over the environmental and biological sustainability of the villagers. This study also shows the radicalization of the oppressed class as they transition from seeking restorative justice to using retributive revolutionary violence. Ultimately, this study concludes that the struggle ended with the total physical and cultural eradication of the village of Kosawa, validating the Marxist critique that capitalist expansion requires the destruction of indigenous social orders to serve the needs of the global market.

Index Terms—social justice, Marxism, Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Literature is a form of expression of society" often begins discussions of literature and society (Wellek & Warren, 1956, p. 95). This reflects how literature reveals society's happenings and its various characters (Arafah et al., 2024a). This belief shows how literary works have a social mission in social reality (Arafah et al., 2023a). Literature's relationship with society appears in how authors describe their social backgrounds, making it a record of recent and past events

(Sunyoto et al., 2022; Yudith et al., 2024; Yudith et al., 2023). Literature connects to reality as a product of personal expression with artistic presentation that helps readers follow the storyline (Arafah et al., 2024b; Lestari et al., 2025; Malawat et al., 2026; Tang et al., 2025). Language styles help authors present aesthetic work to impact people's perceptions and thoughts (Baa et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2023b). Readers may gain more profound understanding or misunderstand what authors try to convey (Iksora et al., 2022).

Literature offers more than entertainment; it enables readers to deeply understand phenomena (Abbas et al., 2020a). Literature relates to other aspects and should be understood implicitly to grasp meaning (Asri et al., 2023; Kuswanti et al., 2023). Cultural aspects appear in most literary works, depicting a group's locality (Arafah et al., 2026b). Culture connects to society and is vital for human life (Takwa et al., 2024a). Positive cultural values convey moral messages guiding life and preserving heritage (Manugeran et al., 2023; Takwa et al., 2025; Arifin et al., 2022). Neglecting cultural heritage (Takwa et al., 2025; Takwa et al., 2024b), environmental crises (Abbas et al., 2024), or excessive internet use (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a; Arafah et al., 2023c) are common modernisation issues. These issues might persist without improvement efforts. Thus, presenting social phenomena through literature can raise awareness. Authors create literature from imagination, feelings, experiences, and thoughts. Literature is defined as written art by specific authors (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019a). Authors' works derive from their minds and interpretation (Arafah et al., 2024c). Novels often reflect reality and are society's records (Abbas et al., 2020b).

Literature engages in academia to improve learners' reading through integration in lessons (Anggrawan et al., 2019; Arafah et al., 2025; Kaharuddin et al., 2023). Learners identify how authors express ideas through free writing, despite hurdles (Suparti et al., 2025; Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Mardiana et al., 2023). Educational materials are provided via textbooks, printed, and online forms (Arafah et al., 2023d; Taqdir, 2025; Taqdir et al., 2026). Modern classrooms use electronic devices, AI, and mobile applications (Kaharuddin et al., 2024; Idhan et al., 2026), and technology-integrated pedagogical frameworks to support learning, writing development, and engagement, including in rural contexts (Usman et al., 2024). Online engagement is rising, making digital media a key information source (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b; Arafah et al., 2026a; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023). However, younger generations' informal language risks harming standard norms (Hasjim et al., 2026). Presenting literary works in education aims to shape characters. Positive values in literary works reflect local wisdom as life guidance (Arafah et al., 2025). Locality helps reshape human aspects by adapting to changes (Takwa et al., 2026b). Some communities preserve beliefs despite modernisation, others struggle (Effendy et al., 2025). Literature offers cultural knowledge and societal issues, as language and symbolic expression preserve identity, transmit values, and represent cultural meanings in community life (Takwa et al., 2026a).

Literary works often raise social justice issues. Social theory studies scientific perspectives on social life, including themes related to how societies develop and change, social behaviour, power structures, class, gender, ethnicity, modernity, civilisation, revolution and utopia. Justice is the first virtue in social structures, so ineffective laws and institutions must be changed (Rawls, 1971; Taqdir et al., 2025). Karl Marx contended that the elimination of human oppression and exploitation leads to the existence of justice. This aligns with Wood's analysis showing that for Marx, true justice means transcending class exploitation. This view contributes to justice debates by advocating the elimination of bourgeoisie-proletariat differences (Wood, 2004). This transition replaces private profit with public welfare, ensuring social institutions prioritise human needs over capital accumulation (Husami, 1978).

Society is a cooperative system where individuals share benefits and face conflicts over resources (Rawls, 1971). Individual social content is shaped by various associations (Jaelani et al., 2024). The principle of social justice fairly establishes rights and obligations and determines benefit distribution (Rawls, 1971). This concept of justice fosters mutual respect among citizens, enabling peaceful coexistence despite differences (Rawls, 1971). Justice ensures all humans have basic rights, with social and economic equality legitimate only if benefiting everyone (Rawls, 1971). Social conflict often arises between bourgeoisie and proletariat classes (Fitriyah et al., 2024). This injustice has affected societies for centuries, controlling groups based on class, race, and ethnicity (Arifuddin et al., 2024).

Imbolo Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), explores social justice and injustice through the struggles of Kosawa Village residents (Golomb et al., 2021). Exploitation by American oil company Pexton harmed the environment and residents, who received no fair compensation. Officials, meant to protect community rights, colluded with Pexton for profits while villagers lived in poverty without proper education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The villagers unite, conducting protests and advocacy to achieve justice and media attention. They pursue legal channels to sue the company and government, despite intimidation. The novel emphasizes education and awareness of rights, teaching younger generations about environmental protection and citizenship. Through this struggle, the author portrays the community's resilience against challenges, prompting readers to reflect on social issues and pursue change (Mbue, 2021).

The suffering described in the novel refers to Marx's concept of Surplus Value, where capitalist profits result from exploiting lower classes (Marx, 1867). By refusing to invest in clean infrastructure, Pexton reduces costs to maximise surplus value from the land and people. This creates alienation, where villagers are estranged from their environment. When labour objects – land and water – are contaminated, workers become estranged from their livelihood and identity (Marx, 1959). This exploitation connects to society's superstructure – the political and legal institutions emerging from the economic base (Marx, 1859). In Kosawa, the corrupt government acts as a bourgeois committee, using violence to protect foreign companies and manipulating ideology to normalise oppression. However, this conflict changed when class consciousness emerged (Marx, 1847).

This study uses Marxist theory to analyze social injustice in Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). Previous studies, such as “Social Justice in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina Novel (1878): Marxist Perspective”, used Marx's theory to analyze social justice in 19th-century Russia (Widyawati, 2018). The research, “The Struggle for Equality: Social Class Portrayed in Solomon Northup's 12 Years a Slave: A Marxist Analysis”, explores the relationship between whites and blacks and the lower class's (blacks) struggle for equality (Nurhajjah et al., 2023). Another Marxist study, “An Analysis of Social Justice in War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy”, illustrates conflict due to social class between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the novel's characters (Azizah, 2024). This study's significance lies in environmental damage and corporate neocolonialism in African fiction. It fills a gap by focusing on how multinational oil companies' exploitation causes the metabolic rift and eradication of indigenous communities. Unlike previous studies ending with justice's triumph, this study highlights the tragic reality of radicalization and systemic failure within a Marxist framework. Therefore, this study is important and worthy of discussion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature is a social product connected to society (Mare et al., 2025). It mirrors complex relationships between power, inequality, and conflict shaping human conditions (Jamiluddin et al., 2026; Mutmainnah et al., 2022). Literature critiques human conditions (Rano et al., 2026). Thus, a theoretical framework is crucial to explain systems of oppression and resistance in social justice literature (Aini et al., 2026). Karl Marx's framework offers a strong perspective on inequality and how the dominant class controls marginalized communities, among other approaches for analyzing social justice in literature (Sarangi & Pattnaik, 2020).

The significance of Marx's theory is in its historical importance and relevance for analyzing current social challenges. His theories on capitalism, class conflict, and exploitation offer an understanding of economic structures perpetuating social injustice, which are relevant for analyzing literary works on corporations and marginalized communities (Kenton, 2024). Marx (as cited in Huijbers, 1982) stated that this situation shackled workers who were not treated humanely, and it has persisted for centuries because the state and legal system serve capitalist owners. Marx's thinking was influenced by his life history reflecting the conditions of the time (Huijbers, 1982). Modern political philosophy sees the bourgeoisie and proletariat in a fundamental class conflict inherent in capitalism (Political Science Institute, 2024). Marx's view of social injustice is based on this class distinction, arguing that while workers create value through labor, they receive only a small percentage as wages.

Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie takes most surplus value, initiating class conflict (Political Science Institute, 2024). Understanding this struggle is crucial to today's societal challenges. Marx's critique helps explain economic and social differences. The bourgeoisie-proletariat relationship shows how these issues arose (Political Science Institute, 2024). Exploitation is central to Marx's critique of capitalism, arguing profits stem from worker exploitation (Samson, 2025). This surplus value shows capitalism's reliance on labor exploitation. Workers face injustice when unable to retain their labor's value (Shea, 2023). Literary works reflect real life, a mimesis of the universe (Abrams, 1971). Dialogues, characters, and novel parts reflect these issues (Purwaningsih et al., 2020). Art and literature connect scientific discourse with emotional resonance to promote environmental knowledge (Nabirye, 2024; Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019b).

Marx's analysis includes environmental degradation as capitalist exploitation beyond human exploitation (Suhadi et al., 2022). Capitalism exploits both the environment and humans for profit, which is linked to environmental justice issues (Foster, 2015). The metabolic rift theory shows that economic indicators overlook both environmental damage and human progress (Foster, 2015). Marx's theory advocates for revolutionary movements, arguing capitalism will fall due to proletariat exploitation. Working-class strength lies in uniting against capitalism (Marx & Engels, 2002), requiring class consciousness to form a unified revolutionary force. Understanding challenges to unjust social orders hinges on collective consciousness becoming organized action (Lukacs, 1971). Marx's justice concept, rooted in humanism, relates to his engagement with workers and entrepreneurs. In the novel, Pexton pressures Kosawa people for profit. Kosawa residents lack financial freedom as government power grows, serving bourgeois interests. Marx envisions an order free from alienation, exploitation, and state control. This framework aids in analyzing how works like *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) depict struggles against systemic injustice. Marx's theory examines how this novel portrays class struggle, exploitation, environmental degradation, and resistance movements.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method to analyse the issue of social justice in Imbolo Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The research aims to provide an understanding of what social justice ought to be. Karl Marx's critical theory is utilised to demonstrate the social injustices experienced by the people of Kosawa, such as economic exploitation, class struggle, environmental exploitation, and resistance movements.

This study utilises two types of data sources: primary and secondary. The primary source is the first edition of the novel *How Beautiful We Were*, published in 2021 by Random House in the United States, which serves as the main text for analysing social justice issues—specifically class conflict, the exploitation of natural resources and labour, economic equality, dominant ideologies, and environmental destruction. The secondary sources consist of scholarly articles, previous research such as theses related to the topics at hand, and Karl Marx's theories.

The data collection process was conducted through several steps. First, the primary source—the novel itself—and secondary sources were carefully read to gain a thorough understanding of social justice issues. Second, the collected data were categorised based on Marxist theory, specifically focusing on class struggle, the exploitation of labour and natural resources, economic equality, dominant ideology, and environmental destruction. This stage allowed for a focused exploration of how capitalism drives systemic damage. Subsequently, the data were analysed using Karl Marx's theories to connect the conflicts in Kosawa to broader social and economic structures.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), Mbue presents the pervasive issue of environmental injustice, where the fundamental rights to health and a safe environment are violated by Pexton's greed and state complicity, transforming a once-thriving ecosystem into a toxic wasteland. The narrative establishes this degradation as intentional destruction, as it results from prioritising profit over human life. The following quote describes the ecological collapse that has occurred.

When the sky began to pour acid, and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. (Mbue, 2021, p. 3).

This excerpt shows how unregulated industrial activities contaminate essential survival elements: air, water, and soil. Kosawa has reached ecological imbalance, with natural resources no longer functioning healthily or sustainably (Andika, 2023). From a Marxist view, Kosawa's environmental destruction results from capitalism—specifically the Metabolic Rift—where Pexton, as the bourgeoisie, prioritizes capital over conditions necessary for life. Pexton's arrival signifies global capitalism's intrusion into a local ecosystem, viewing land as a resource for extraction, not a habitat. This scenario illustrates Marx's claim that capitalism exploits land and labor, prioritizing profit over viability. Kosawa's degradation results from capitalism minimizing costs to maximize surplus value. This injustice manifests in the villagers' psychological and physical toll, with the younger generation succumbing to the toxic environment.

When we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches. (Mbue, 2021, p. 3)

It describes the utter helplessness of the village children, who die one by one as a result of the pollution ravaging their community. The physical destruction of these children represents a sacrificial offering at the altar of corporate profit.

We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures. (Mbue, 2021, p. 5).

Lusaka's departed younger son...the dirty air had gotten stuck in his lungs. Slowly, the poison spread through his body and turned into something else. Before we knew it, Wambi was dead. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 7-8).

This represents a form of intentional violence where even breathing becomes a hazardous act, and the community is forced to witness the agonizing deaths of their family members. In a Marxist context, this is a deep alienation; they are cut off from their land and their own biological existence. The novel illustrates how the villagers are unable to escape this toxicity, as every essential resource has been contaminated.

The poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling. (Mbue, 2021, p. 5)

The ongoing toxicity demonstrates how Pexton extracts the earth's wealth while forcing the villagers to endure lethal poisons. The injustice lies in the villagers' inability to protect themselves, which effectively strips them of their rights and their future.

These events confirm that the villagers are victims of human rights violations. By making the villagers' homes uninhabitable and poisoning their biological systems, Pexton and the government are committing a slow-motion genocide.

It would soon be over, that we would all be well in no time. (Mbue, 2021, p. 3)

This narrative underscores the violations committed by the ruling class—Pexton and the government—who impose a cycle of disease upon the lower class to sustain economic profits. The villagers find themselves powerless to halt Pexton's operations, as the company and the state leverage economic and political power to maintain their presence and dominance in the region (Velu & Rajasekaran, 2024). This aligns with Marx's view that the state and the legal system often allow such conditions to persist because they function as organisations of power for the owners of capital.

How Beautiful We Were (2021) also depicts corporate exploitation and neocolonialism, characterising the relationship between the village of Kosawa, the national government, and Pexton as one of organised theft and dehumanisation. This is not merely a business transaction, but a structural erosion of the villagers' sovereignty, where foreign economic interests are prioritized over the community's rights through corrupt state mechanisms. The narrative identifies the beginning of this arrangement as a secret pact made without the knowledge or consent of the villagers, which can be described as a form of modern-day slavery.

Three decades before, in Bezam, on a date we'll never know, at a meeting where none of us was present, our government had given us to Pexton. Handed on a sheet of paper, our land and waters to them. (Mbue, 2021, p. 11)

The relationship between Kosawa, the government, and Pexton exemplifies the Marxist concept of neocolonial exploitation, where the state colludes with Pexton to oppress the villagers. This case serves as a clear instance of primitive accumulation, in which the inhabitants are stripped of their means of subsistence to pave the way for capitalist enterprise.

One of our fathers asked if Pexton could, in the meantime, send us clean water...The Leader shook his head...Pexton was not in the business of providing water. (Mbue, 2021, p. 9)

In this passage, the exploitation is characterised by Pexton extracting immense wealth (oil) while refusing to provide the villagers with the basic necessity of clean water. Marxists refer to such situations as the extraction of surplus value, where the generated wealth belongs entirely to the corporation, leaving the inhabitants with a toxic environment.

They could do anything to us, because they owned us. (Mbue, 2021, p. 11)

Pexton isn't acting alone. They only have power over us because our government gave them power over us. (Mbue, 2021, p. 277)

We would have had choice but to accept that we were now theirs. (Mbue, 2021, p. 11)

Based on Thula's observations, Pexton possesses power because the government has granted it to them, illustrating how the state and capitalists are intertwined to maintain dominance over marginalised communities. The villagers are forced to accept the reality that they do not belong to themselves but to the corporation, depicting the total alienation and dispossession inherent in neocolonial capitalism. This confirms Marx's argument that the chaos of market competition and the drive for increased profits inevitably lead to acts of exploitation.

A system of brutal political repression is also depicted in this novel, where state apparatuses do not act as protectors but as enforcers of violence for corporate interests, using lethal force to crush any resistance against Pexton. The following excerpt clearly demonstrates how the military serves as an instrument of collective punishment.

The soldiers won't care that this was the work of one madman. They'll put bullets inside all of us, down to the smallest child. (Mbue, 2021, p. 19)

According to Marx's theory, the state utilizes the military and police to suppress the proletariat and protect the rights of the bourgeoisie. This reflects the understanding that the state views the working class not as citizens to be protected, but as obstacles to the stability of capitalist production.

How fast those bullets came. (Mbue, 2021, p. 129)

Feeling like little trees that did not deserve to grow. Feeling mothers through their backs. Felling fathers as they attempted to save their families. Five children. Four women. Five men. (Mbue, 2021, p. 180)

The massacre represents class warfare; when the villagers attempt to disrupt the production process or challenge Pexton's authority, the state responds with violence to restore order for the sake of profit.

The judges concluded that the accused did what they did in an attempt to extort money from the Pexton Corporation...all those who seek to hurt the republic must be made to pay a price. (Mbue, 2021, p. 189)

The state apparatuses serve only the interests of the 'republic'—a reference to Pexton—treating the villagers as obstacles to be cleared away like small trees. This indiscriminate killing of men, women, and children is carried out to preserve the class structure by instilling terror and eliminating those who dare to rebel against the economic status quo. The government's justification—claiming the villagers were attempting to extort Pexton when they were merely fighting for their lives—further validates the state's brutal oppression.

A sad and complicated change happens in the search for justice as the villagers, who first wanted to heal and hold accountable, start to depend on violent revenge instead. Their resistance, once driven by a desire to force the oppressor to acknowledge their humanity and halt environmental destruction, transforms into the deliberate infliction of slow physical pain—a grim attempt to show Pexton's workers exactly what their company has done to them.

I'll take them to see the graves of my sons who died from their poison. I'll show them the grave of my child we've buried, and they'll count the graves so that they'll know the number and never forget it. Then we'll keep them prisoner, and I'll guard them until their employer stops killing us. (Mbue, 2021, p. 23)

The evolution of the villagers' resistance from negotiation to violence reflects the Marxist view of class struggle escalating into revolution. As Marx posited, the opposing interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are irreconcilable within a capitalist system; this inevitably leads the oppressed to realise that peaceful appeals to the ruling class are merely an exercise in futility.

Keep the captives until they give us the names of men in Bezam who can help us. We want nothing else from them. Just names. After which we'll set them free. (Mbue, 2021, p. 88)

However, as time passed and failed negotiations yielded no change—while violence and ecological destruction continued unabated—the villagers began to demand violent retribution. The death of yet another child triggered this shift, driving a grieving father to ambush Pexton workers under the cover of night.

He killed them all. Shot the first in the head. The second man's bullet entered his chest before a scream could get off his tongue. The third man he shot in the back as he turned away. (Mbue, 2021, p. 304)

We executed them only to pass a bit of our pain along to our tormentors. (Mbue, 2021, p. 306)

The terror inflicted upon workers and soldiers shows the proletariat striking back at oppressors. This aligns with Marx's belief that the lower class unites to overthrow the system once aware of capitalism's lack of reciprocity. The novel highlights that the denial of justice compels the oppressed to pursue justice through violence. The shift from dialogue to physical pain illustrates the radicalization Marx predicted when the underclass reaches its limits. It confirms that in an exploitative system, violence becomes the only language oppressors understand.

How Beautiful We Were (2021) also illustrates how those in power weaponise the law to legitimise their destruction. This systemic failure is demonstrated through the sham trials and executions of the village leaders, known as 'the four,' and the rejection of the villagers' petitions by international courts.

We wish to inform you that the four accused were hanged to death earlier this week. The judges concluded that they did what they did in an attempt to extort money from the Pexton Corporation. (Mbue, 2021, p. 189)

The legal system's failure to protect the people of Kosawa illustrates the Marxist concept of the legal superstructure, wherein courts function not as neutral arbiters but as tools created by the economic base to serve the interests of the ruling class. The sham trials faced by the village leaders and the dismissal of their case by American courts demonstrate how legal institutions are designed to uphold property rights and corporate sovereignty over fundamental human rights.

American courts had to stay out of the matter and let the courts in our country decide...she said it would be unfortunate if we did not get justice in our country's court, but America had to respect other countries' boundaries. (Mbue, 2021, p. 343)

The American court's refusal to intervene based on jurisdictional limits highlights how international law protects the global flow of capital while fracturing the solidarity of the oppressed.

The people who owned those courts were the same people who had given our land to Pexton. (Mbue, 2021, p. 344)

The villagers realise that those who own the courts are the same parties who sold their land to Pexton. This reinforces Marx's idea that the state and its laws are merely a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie.

How Beautiful We Were (2021) also explores the struggle for gender justice, as the patriarchal structure in Kosawa devalues women's leadership and weaponises their bodies. Thula's rise as a revolutionary leader exposes the deep-seated misogyny within her village, where a woman's worth is measured solely by her reproductive capacity rather than her political intelligence.

Once, an elder asked her how many children she had. When she said none, he asked her when she intended to have them. When she said never, the men burst out laughing. (Mbue, 2021, p. 295)

We hoped that, with time, she'd find a husband, someone with whom she'd have a child so that she could become a real woman, because nothing could make her respectable besides motherhood and marriage. (Mbue, 2021, p. 308)

The struggle for gender justice in Kosawa can be analysed through the Marxist lens of double oppression, where women suffer from both the capitalist system and patriarchal social structures. Thula's rise as a female leader challenges traditional gender roles, which function similarly to a class structure. The marginalisation she faces from the village elders mirrors the bourgeoisie's marginalisation of the proletariat; just as workers are alienated from the means of production, women are alienated from their political agency.

Young women returned home with accounts of how their underwear was ripped off, their legs pried open by three or more soldiers – some women couldn't recall how many soldiers had mounted them. (Mbue, 2021, p. 306)

The sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers against the women of Kosawa functions as a brutal tactic of imperialist control, treating their bodies as territories under the oppressor's dominion. These events highlight the inseparable connection between the liberation of Kosovo and its women. Thula's leadership aligns with Marx's vision of overthrowing all forms of social stratification.

Thula's journey in the novel reflects a profound quest for educational justice and political revolution, grounded in the realisation that systemic ignorance is a root cause of oppression and that liberation requires both intellectual awakening and political restructuring. She evolves from a direct struggle for clean water into a broader ideological battle, understanding that her village's suffering is more complex—deeply rooted in a corrupt, neocolonial government.

I promised myself after the massacre that I would acquire knowledge and turn it into a machete that would destroy all those who treat us like vermin. (Mbue, 2021, p. 208)

Thula's persistence in pursuing an education demonstrates the transformation of false consciousness into revolutionary praxis. In Marxist theory, the ruling class maintains ideological control to keep the proletariat unaware of its oppression. Thula envisions her education as a 'machete' to cut through this ideology, leading the villagers to understand that their suffering is not mere misfortune, but a systemic injustice.

We'll roar until they give us back our dignity. Our voices will be the fire that will burn down every system of injustice, and from the ashes we will build a new nation. (Mbue, 2021, p. 313)

Thula's movement aims to dismantle the structures of natural resource and labor exploitation by seeking to overthrow the dictator and replace him with a pro-people system. This trajectory positions education as a tool of transformation—from passive suffering to active political struggle. Thula's evolution from a grieving girl into a revolutionary leader exemplifies the Marxist conviction that the working class must achieve class consciousness to overthrow the capitalist system. Her efforts to organise protests and challenge state decisions represent the practical application of Marx's critical theory.

The pinnacle of injustice in this novel is the absolute physical and cultural erasure of Kosawa—an act of annihilation sanctioned by the state to clear the land for unrestrained natural resource extraction. This state-ordered destruction exemplifies the ultimate justification for devastation in the name of capitalist profit.

His Excellency ordered Kosawa burned. What once were our huts became ashes. Our mothers' kitchens, ashes. Our barns and outhouses, ashes. Our ancestors' pride, ashes. (Mbue, 2021, p. 355)

Marx stated that capitalism demands a constant expansion of power and resources, even if it requires the violent removal of indigenous populations—a process known as primitive accumulation. The burning of the village and the displacement of its inhabitants are calculated acts designed to clear the land for unhindered oil extraction, prioritising profit over human life.

Nothing remained of Kosawa, except for what we kept in our hearts. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, winds of every kind came and blew away the ashes of what used to be our home. (Mbue, 2021, p. 355)

The government's order to incinerate Kosawa—claiming the site was too contaminated—serves as the cruelest possible justification for removing the proletariat. By physically erasing the village, the state directly eliminates the evidence of its own criminal negligence and collusion.

The scholarship was for our children only. There was no land left to fight for. Most of our children got the scholarships. They do not speak our language to their children. They speak to them only in English. (Mbue, 2021, pp. 358-359)

The scholarships provided by Pexton act as a tool to indoctrinate Kosawa's youth into the capitalist system, alienating them from their culture and language (Halil et al., 2024). These events underscore that their struggle ends in total erasure, where their identity and existence are liquidated to serve Pexton's needs. This narrative validates the Marxist critique that capitalism inevitably destroys traditional social structures and the environment in order to sustain growth. The survivors are left in a state of cultural extinction and identity crisis, marking a victory of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat in this specific struggle.

V. CONCLUSION

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue provides a vivid depiction of systemic social injustice, where the village of Kosawa suffers under the relentless corporate greed of Pexton. The tragic reality of Kosawa becomes even clearer when viewed through a Marxist perspective, revealing this conflict as a classic and brutal struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Mbue demonstrates that justice does not arise from merely pleading for the benevolence of the oppressor; rather, it is forged through self-awareness and the strength to stand and dismantle the capitalist system. The novel suggests that, in line with Marxist belief, the only way to break the chains of exploitation is through a conscious struggle to reclaim fundamental human rights and dignity.

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