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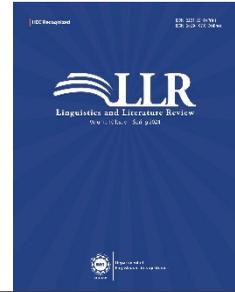
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# From ‘Palm Fields to Palm Oil’: Call for Environmental Justice in *How Beautiful We Were*

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## Abstract

Ecology and literature hold immense importance at the heart of critical scholarship within the broader corpus of Environmental Humanities because they open up new lines of critical inquiry and foster critical consciousness among both the masses and academia at large. This paper demonstrates the way *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) portrays the African village named Kosawa, where the indigenous African farmers and their families were jeopardized by having their indigenous natural resources exploited. This study analyzes how the palm trees serve as a cultural heritage for the farmers in the remote village, which was barred from the outer world. However, they still cherished the indigenous resources to make a harmonious relationship with nature, which is analyzed by the theoretical insight of Cultural Ecology by Q.Mark Sutton. The study also addresses that the colonial powers of the West have marginalized the ecological landscape and the familial fabric of the poor peasants, and the female farmers suffered subjugation and oppression at the hands of the glossy illusions that the West has impinged on their minds in the spurious ambiance of development. I analyze that the poor peasants pleaded and utilized their natural indigenous resources for the higher officials, but their voices were muffled and reduced to invisibility. My study is the emblem of the call for environmental justice from the periphery of the crunched remote region of Africa, where African farmers were grappling with diseases, exploitation of resources, and female oppression.

**Keywords:** African village, cultural ecology, environmental justice, rural ecofeminism

## Introduction

“For all human beings, wherever we were born or grew up, the environment fostered our values, nurtured our bodies, and developed our religions. It defined who we are and how we see ourselves” (Caminero -Santangelo,

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[2014](#), p.45)

The above quote has been extracted from the book titled *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice*, by Byron Caminero- Santangelo and it quintessentially captures the essence of the discussion of this essay. Ecology has immense importance at the heart of the debate of the human and non-human world. The binary of the human and nonhuman world has been dismantled. The tangible impact of the non-human world, especially plants and trees, is profusely synergized in the culture of different regions in different substantial manifestations where nature is enmeshed in the social, cultural, and religious festivals. It dismantles the sensational stereotypical notion that nature is just a passive background. I argue that nature is not in the periphery, rather it is in the 'center' of human ecology and serves as a 'melting pot' of human emotions, and cultural and religious traditions in different cultures from ancient to postmodern times. I also argue that the environmental demand for justice coming from the outskirts of African villages—areas enriched by palm fields—reflects the fact that local communities have been stripped of their indigenous resources. Their suffering has been intensified by being rendered invisible, disconnected from their land and social bonds.

To substantiate the present debate, I have selected the fiction from the Global South, titled "How Beautiful We Were" ([2022](#)), written by Imbolo Mbue. This novel shows the 'planetary consciousness' because it has been written by an American writer who illustrates that the region of Africa has an eco-cosmopolitan appeal for the writers of other regions. The novel focuses on the region of a remote African Island named Kosawa. Taking inspiration from David Harvey's idea that nature, culture, geography, and environment are strongly interwoven together, I argue that African people take pride in their culture and geography, which has strong emotional, empirical, and religious resonance and reflects the environmental history of the African people. The environmental history of Africa indicates that palm fields have tangible importance in the socio-economic fabric of the African people (Watkins, [2015](#), p.14). The anthropocene narrative that exists in the novel invites the debate of spectral haunting, where horror is not created by the supernatural entities but by the capitalist approach (Blazan, [2021](#), p.154)

At the heart of this ecological debate, this paper will demonstrate that *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the African village named Kosawa, where the rural farmers, including men and women, were jeopardized by their palm

field resources, which were a source of cultural heritage for them. They were the people who took pride in their indigenous fresh fruits and vegetables, which were marred by the Pexton oil company. To probe this textual engagement, the theoretical insight from *Cultural Ecology* by Mark Q. Sutton will help us understand how religious and cultural practices of the African rural farmers are enmeshed in their cultural icon of ‘palm fields’.

Sutton and Anderson’s book *Introduction to Cultural Ecology* deals with the idea of Cultural Ecology that is included within the wider field of Anthropology. I have selected this critical concept because it captures the study of all human beings in their environment from ancient, remote, medieval, modern, and postmodern, to the people living in remote, volatile territories (Sutton & Anderson, [2020](#), p.1). Sutton contends that indigenous local people have tangible, epistemological knowledge about their land. They contend that “many traditional societies do not hold the view that people are separate from nature and that they are somehow 'ecologists' living in harmony with their environment (Sutton & Anderson, [2020](#), p. 2). They also voice the empirical appeal by saying that local traditional people can be trusted to take care of their resources, not out of fuzzy-minded love for Mother Earth but out of solid, hardheaded, good sense, often shored up by traditional religion and morality (Sutton & Anderson, [2020](#), p.2). My selected novel also quintessentially captures the benchmark theoretical tenets in full essence with a special focus on the alarming ecological catastrophe fostered by the colonial powers in their richly cultural land of palm fields.

It is pertinent to mention that the idea of *Distributive Environmental Justice* by Andrew Dobson in his book titled *Justice and the Environment: Conceptions of Environmental Sustainability and Theories of Distributive Justice* is also the cornerstone debate of my essay. My analysis is also guided by the theoretical underpinning of *Ecofeminism* by Carolyn E. Sach in her book *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment* which delineates female oppression because of gender, class, and nature.

It is important to have a comprehensive literary snapshot of the environmental history of Africa to strengthen the overarching debate of my paper. The environment itself is the social document where the cultural history and values are embedded in multifaceted forms (Carruthers, [2004](#), p. 380). Crosby reminds us that human beings are biological entities and their relationship with other species is inevitable (Beinart, [2000](#), p. 269). The

region of Africa has always been associated with wilderness. Unlike America, it is not associated with a “garden” (Caminero- Santangelo, [2014](#), p. 16). The dilemma is that the African wilderness has not been given any intrinsic value, but the raw material has been transformed and taken to maximum benefit for the sake of development. The image of Africa and its indigenous people have been perceived with malicious eyes, and the place is associated with “dark star” as if “there was nothing of home” (Caminero-Santangelo, [2014](#), p. 22). Furthermore, the efforts of African female farmers cannot be ignored, which reflect their environmental struggles and oppression at the hands of glossy developmental models proposed by the West. Females are the more active participants who most often “gather fuel wood, collect water, and harvest edible plants” (Guha, [2014](#), p. 108). In Africa, they represent a large percentage of small-scale farmers, and “the poorest of the poor are typically rural women” (Watts, [1991](#), p.125). They have to walk miles to fetch water (Caminero-Santangelo, [2014](#), p.45). Moreover, their environmental history is rich in the sense that Africans brought culture, music, folklore, religion, dress, and the knowledge of plants with them. They make different types of dresses from the bark of trees, which is the harbinger of their cultural expression. For instance, in Jamaica, slave women used bark cloth and bark lace as accessories to their headscarves. Emphatically speaking, this rich tapestry of nature is closely interwoven from their physical, cognitive, and empirical outlook in different activities (Buckridge, [2003](#), p. 62). Female farmers in Africa are also famous for harvesting the root crop of Cassava, which needs extremely hard labor.

The significance of my essay can be navigated in our Pakistani context, where different plants and trees have different significant cultural and symbolic values in the true spirit that elucidate that nature is an active agent, and this intertwined affinity cannot be detached from the social fabric of any society. I argue that the different regions of Pakistan are famous for their plants, fruits, and trees, which have cultural resonance for their people. For instance: apples in Parachinar, grapes in Peshawar, melons in Lakki Marwat, pine Trees in Abbottabad, Apple in North Waziristan, peaches in Swat, blackberry in Mohmand, plum in Murree, mangoes in Mailsi, cherry trees in Ziarat, walnut in Upper Dir. Interestingly, there is a small village in KPK where a plant named ‘Nehra’ is used to cure evil eyes. People burn its dry leaves and take the smoke to treat the patients with evil eyes. Juniper trees were planted in ancient countries to protect the house from malicious men. Moreover, a necklace named ‘Lawangin’ is famous in true spirit in the social

relationships in the Pashtoon areas of KPK, Balochistan, and Afghanistan. It is very popular in the Southern areas of Balochistan and Ziarat. Lawangin is a handmade necklace made of threads, and clove is used for its further embellishment. Clove, which we use in spices serves as a piece of art, culture, and a token of love in Ziarat.

I contend that the small black spicy food item which we call ‘clove’, has substantial empirical, cultural, and emotional resonance for the people of Ziarat. Not only this, even specific days have been marked with cultural ecology that raises the collective environmental consciousness of communities. For instance, May 21 is celebrated as an International Tea Day to raise the consumption of tea in every part of the globe to raise the eco-cosmopolitan appeal for the masses. All the aforementioned discussions amplify the aesthetic, critical, and empirical appeal of the present essay, which has been done in the context of the African island.

### Literature Review

The term ‘ecology’ has different aesthetic, empirical, and theoretical orientations in the arena of Environmental Humanities. One of the branches of this eco-critical scholarship is ‘Cultural Ecology’, which shows the strong connection of human beings with their natural landscape that serves as a token of cultural reverence for them in various spectrums. Different regions and cultures have associated different aesthetic and repellent meanings with the non-human world, especially plants and trees. In an article titled *Our Human Plant Connection* the authors illuminate the ubiquitous role of plants in art, movies, and poetry (Clary & Wandersee, [2011](#), p. 35). For instance, in Philadelphia, different plant sculptures are being made (Clary & Wandersee, [2011](#), p. 36). Similarly, fig has been used in positive and negative connotations in different cultures. In northern Eastern India, figs have been considered a symbol of demons and evil. However, in Southern China, wild fig is considered sacred, and it is used for collective rituals, and the cutting of fig is a taboo. In Tanzania, figs are sacred and are used to resolve family conflicts. Furthermore, it is used to cure heart illness in Zaire (Wilson et al., [2013](#), p.462). Interestingly, figs are planted and serve as sacred plants at the burial sites of the former kings in Rawanda (Wilson et al., [2013](#), p. 460). Similarly, fenugreek has immense importance in Yemeni culture for treating different ailments, including ulcers and pulmonary infections (Naïm, [1999](#), p. 148).

The article titled *Placing Plants in Territory* captures the postmodern sizzling and contested debate between Palestine and Israel. Trees have become the source of national discourse for both countries. For instance, Palestinians take pride in olive trees, and Israel takes pride in the pine trees. Olive trees serve as a symbol of peace, culture, and stability for Palestinian farmers at large. The destruction of olive trees in the war means erasure of their land and culture, and Palestinians have great veneration for this plant (Sarafa, [2004](#), p.13). Hence, plants are used to establish territory in the fractured charged world (Besky & Padwe, [2016](#), p.1 6). In addition to this, the blue tulip flower is considered sacred in Egyptian culture. It is considered a symbol of life (Kandeler & Ullrich, [2009](#), p. 2641). Emphatically speaking, plants also serve as a powerful embodiment and give structure to our cultural and political values. For instance, Queen Elizabeth II had an immense love for flowers, and she connected the past with the present. In the coronation ceremony, flowers served as a powerful embodiment of the unity and heritage of the United Kingdom (De Carvalho et al., [2012](#), p 317).

Most of the plants have been considered to have feminist traits, and it is discussed in the article titled *The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations With the Water Lily*. The critic Luce Irigaray believes that the water lily is a feminist plant because we can learn the element of collective effort from the behavior of this plant, which lives in the form of clusters. This plant has been vilified in the past for its ability to be passive and immobile, but now the anthropocentric interpretations have been changed (Gibson & Gagliano, [2017](#), p. 126).

Different projects related to plants have been introduced and practiced in the true spirit to combat 'plant blindness' at an academic level. The term 'plant blindness' refers to 'failure to Appreciate the importance of plants, and for this, the Pet Plant Project was introduced, where students grew seeds of different plants and monitored the continuous development of the plants to foster sympathy and love for them (Krosnick, [2018](#), p. 339).

I argue that not only do plants have symbolic and cultural value in different cultures and regions, but animals also have different symbolic meanings in different countries that elevate the ideological, emotional, political, and social underpinning of any community. For instance, Koreans considered tigers a symbol of resistance and protection in the times of Japanese colonial rule. They have given different cultural meanings to tigers,

including trickster, divine, and protective. Hence, this human-tiger relationship has a greater empirical affinity for Korean people in true spirit. Similarly, crocodiles serve as cultural icons in Africa and the Middle East (Weinreich, [2015](#), p. 211). In Denmark, the Little Mermaid is the official image in mass culture (Mortensen, [2008](#), p. 437). However, different insects, especially honey bees, have been used as a modern battlefield technique. Jerry Bromensenk traces the use of honey bees as “micro sensor technology” and military scientists called it “six-legged soldiers” (Kosek, [2010](#), p. 656). It highlights how minute insects have a colossal impact in a racially charged, bitter ambiance, and it further connects us to the overarching debate that nature is ubiquitous in every social sphere of our lives.

Ostracizing farmers from their lands in the different volatile islands is also crucial at the heart of the present discussion. Native farmers suffered terribly at the hands of colonial powers and became the victims of ‘spatial injustice’ where they were deprived of their indigenous land, which is the harbinger of fruits and vegetables. The article titled *The End of Hawaii’s Plantations: Back to the Future* voiced the concern that the Hawaii people take pride in their sugar and pineapple plantations, but because of the colonial rule, they were deprived of their land and jobs. Thus, crumbling economy marred the cultural lifestyle of Hawaii people which is symbolically associated with sugar and pineapple plantations (Boyd, [1996](#), p. 96).

It is crucial to mention that Ecofeminism also has paramount significance because it shows nature and women in connection to the natural landscape and how they were ‘marginalized’ in the past. This very theoretical underpinning has different shades of contours, and one of them is called Vegetarian Ecofeminism. This has been articulated by various critics and scholars in the past, like Carol Adams, Norma Benny, Lynda Birke, Jim Mason, and Deborah Slicer. This idea voices the concern that vegetarians are the people who translate their sympathy for animals into their dietary choices. Human sympathy for non-human animals cannot be brushed aside and should be given equal importance (p. 126). Animals have been killed and hunted brutally in the past. In this regard, Vegetarian Eco feminists believe that human beings develop sympathy for non-human animals, and there is another section of society, including people of color, gays, and lesbians, who have been ‘hunted’ and marginalized. The eco-critic

David Hume believed that sympathy provides knowledge for environmental ethics. Different derogatory terms have been associated with the marginalized strata of society, like 'cow', 'old bat', and 'bird-brain', associated with females. The cultural feminist Aviva Cantor identified that derogatory linguistic expressions have been used for the marginalized section. For instance, the Nazis equated Jews with vermin. Blacks have been called 'coons' and 'jungle bunnies' (Gaard, [2002](#), p. 126). In a nutshell, this woman-animals-nature association is traced poetically in Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978), a work of radical feminism that greatly influenced the radical and vegetarian branches of ecofeminism (Gaard, [2002](#), p. 126).

Ecofeminism is not just a theoretical concept, but academic writings illustrate it as an environmental movement that has happened in the past in various regions. Women's campaigns in the South and North show their vulnerability to environmental problems. Female decision making in terms of the environment has been cornered. The article titled *Ecofeminist Movements from the North to the South* by Aneel Salman gives an inspiring glimpse of Ecofeminist movements: Green Belt movement in Kenya started by Wangari Maathai where women planted trees as part of soil conservation, Greening of Harlem initiated by Bernadette Cozart, a gardener who transformed garbage-strewn lots into flower gardens, Sister River Performance ritual performed by Japanese women who placed rice, seeds, oil in their pillowcases and floated that artwork in the Kama river. The article vociferously illustrates that women were called 'hysterical wives in this process of an active environmental campaign by different people to muffle their voices (Salman & Iqbal, [2007](#), p.858). Chipko movement in northwest India is also crucial in amplifying the role of the Indian females who clung to the Chipko trees to save them from the capitalist designs, and the critic Vandana Shiva asserted that these poor rural females have considered nature to be indispensable, synonymous to their life (Salman & Iqbal, [2007](#), p. 859). In Bangladesh, females consider trees to be more reliable as compared to their sons. The article voices this as: "Do sons look after their mothers? No. It is the trees which are more reliable than sons" (Salman & Iqbal, [2007](#), p. 859). Farida Akhter's *Women and Trees* has recorded the interviews of rural Bangladeshi women who have attached more sentimental value to trees as compared to their sons. In the rural areas of Pakistan, Sindhi rural women worked under the scorching heat of the sun for organic farming and picking cotton. The working environment of the

cotton pickers is full of poisonous pesticides, which affect their health. It also highlights the environmental injustice faced by marginalized communities and reflects the concept of the ‘environmentalist of the poor,’ a term coined by Rob Nixon to describe how underprivileged people, especially rural women, bear the greatest burden of environmental degradation (Salman & Iqbal, [2007](#), p.861).

The third critical trope of my essay is Environmental Justice, and it can be seen in myriad spectrums where the injustices can be seen in the form of race, class, poverty, etc. Ursula Heise has coined the term “eco-cosmopolitanism,” meaning that every individual and community must have environmental consciousness so that it can make the collective struggle for environmental justice (Pak, [2016](#), p.137). It paves the way for environmental racism, which can be seen especially in Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean countries. The toxic waste material gets dumped by Western countries in Africa because Africa is considered an unused space (Kunnie, [2013](#), p. 431). Similarly, the Amazon forests, which are considered as “lungs of the planet” because of excessive vegetation, have been destroyed by neoliberal capitalists. Different regions of Africa have become the locus of mercenary-minded capitalists who show the environmental injustice in terms of land, economy, natural resources, and hunger. In Kenya, Maasai Mara is a wild animal park that benefits the government but does not pay attention to the poor caretakers of the park (Kunnie, [2013](#), p. 433). It strongly illuminates gender oppression and cultural decay. Furthermore, female gender oppression can be seen in Malaga Island, where females worked in resorts and hotels doing washing and mending clothes of the mainlanders and were forcefully evicted from their indigenous island. Previously, they used to cherish their natural resources, but the state has destroyed the island and erased the indigenous people from their natural, harmonious environment (Pedersen, [2019](#), p.137). In a similar vein, the Pacific Islands suffered from the food regime at the hands of the state.

Neoliberal agricultural policies are being endorsed where food sovereignty has been shifted away from Indigenous communities to a market-driven culture (Plahe et al., [2013](#), p. 311). Last but not least, there is the environmental justice movement in South Africa (Caminero-Santangelo, [2014](#), p. 5).

## Theoretical Framework

This research is an attempt to understand the critical notion of *Cultural Ecology* which is the overarching debate of my essay and is strongly intertwined with the textual matrix of my selected novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) which is set in an African village. Cultural Ecology comes within the wider discipline of Anthropology. There are different contours of ecology viz: human ecology, political ecology, human biological ecology but my essay aims to bring into limelight cultural ecology which deals with the discussion of how culture is used by people to adapt to their environment (2-3). Amidst myriad theorists, I have selected Marc Q. Sutton and E.N Anderson and they voiced their ideas in their book titled *Introduction to Cultural Ecology* (2020) for my discussion because they talk about the trope of food scarcity that resonates with the textual engagement.

My discussion is also guided by the idea of *Distributive Environmental Justice* by Andrew Dobson in his book titled *Justice and the Environment: Conceptions of Environmental Sustainability and Theories of Distributive Justice*. The theory contends that the pristine form of ecological landscape and resources is for all human beings irrespective of difference based on elevated and crunched geographical territories so the benefit from the ecological landscape and the things that are attached to human beings for their survival must have social justice. Moreover, ecological collapse is also distributed evenly between capitalists and the poor. This critical underpinning resonates with the textual engagement of my selected novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) where the indigenous African farmer families were jeopardized with their natural resources especially palm fields, depriving them of clean water and plunging them into various mysterious diseases. I argue that the novel contains the call for distributive environmental justice in terms of their natural resources but their voices get muffled by the capitalist nefarious designs of the American company called Pexton.

At the heart of this rich tapestry of critical orientation, my analysis is also guided by the theoretical underpinning of *Ecofeminism* by Carolyn E. Sach in her book *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment*. I have selected this theorist to make the discussion more cogent because it portrays the dilemma of the rural women who worked in the fields and their symbiotic relationship with nature. The selected novel also encapsulates the same theoretical harmony where African rural females are suffering in various spectrums. It shows the multiplicity of their experiences

in terms of gender, class, and race imbued with oppression.

### Methodology

This research employs a multidisciplinary qualitative approach grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Ecology, Distributive Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism to critically analyze the novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2022). Central to this study is a detailed textual analysis of the novel's thematic elements, focusing on the depiction of environmental degradation and its socio-cultural impacts on an African village community. Drawing on Marc Q. Sutton and E.N. Anderson's *Introduction to Cultural Ecology* (2020), the research foregrounds cultural ecology to examine how the indigenous community adapts to and interacts with their natural environment, emphasizing the role of culture in environmental resilience and vulnerability. Complementing this, Andrew Dobson's theory of Distributive Environmental Justice, as articulated in *Justice and the Environment*, provides a critical lens to explore the inequitable distribution of environmental harms and benefits, highlighting the novel's portrayal of capitalist exploitation and its impact on indigenous livelihoods. Furthermore, Carolyn E. Sach's ecofeminist perspective from *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment* enriches the analysis by illuminating the gendered dimensions of environmental injustice, particularly the experiences of rural African women within the ecological and socio-economic crisis depicted in the text. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, the methodology enables a nuanced interpretation through textual analysis of the novel's engagement with environmental, social, and gendered issues, situating literary critique within broader anthropological and ethical debates. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between culture, environment, and power structures as represented in the novel.

### Textual Analysis

*How Beautiful We Were* (2022) by Imbolo Mbue is set in the region of the Global South, in an African village, Kosawa, where lush green palm fields are the source of cultural civilization and survival for the peasants. Despite being barred from the outer world because of its remoteness, the poor peasants take pride in the fresh fruits and vegetables and the serene air of their ecological landscape. I argue that the family can be called 'Ecosystem

people' because families function like ecosystems, where each member plays an interconnected role in maintaining balance, support, and well-being within their social and environmental surroundings. In the name of 'civilization' and 'prosperity', an American oil company named Pexton dispossessed the people of their land by taking most of the people to another area of a rubber plantation where people toiled very hard in the plantation.

My analysis of the novel is in the form of a socio-ecological critique, focusing on the intersection of human lives with the ecological landscape and the spatial injustice and oppression from the exploitation of the capitalists. The novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) is divided into different chapters with recurrent titles named 'Children', to envisage the repercussions of the Oil Company on the health of small children. The oil drilling machines have been installed with no proper logistics. The writer has portrayed the superstitious element of African folk that they initially considered disease as revenge from spirituality, but later on recognized the alluring yet nefarious neo-liberal designs in the name of the Green Revolution. The novel makes a strong contrast between 'full belly' and "empty belly" environmentalists as the character Woja, who belonged to Kosawa village, also helped Pexton Company in achieving their goals of extracting maximum resources and palm oil from the fields of this poor village. Unlike other villagers, he lived in a brick house, his sons wore expensive T-shirts, and they had proper purifying water machines so that they could access clean water. Interestingly, the American characters are named "Sweet One" and "Cute One" by the novelist, amplifying not only the glossy neo-liberal designs in the thematic texture of the novel but also linguistically highlighting the superficiality and commodification embedded in their identities through the use of diminutive and affectionate nicknames. "Kosawa villagers were considered as "disposable citizens" and objects because they were deprived of spatial and environmental justice, which was one of their epitomes of civilization and tender familial fabric. I contend that they become 'eco-refugees' (Guha, [2014](#), p.108) stripped of the basic environmental rights to water, food, and land.

I argue that the title of my selected novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, resonates with the critical underpinning of *Cultural Ecology* propounded by Sutton and Anderson in the sense that it recapitulates the historical ecology of the cultural heritage of African rural farmers who venerated palm trees. The theory also contends that the remote areas that are of interest lie at the

heart of Cultural Ecology (Sutton & Anderson, [2020](#), p.1). They take pride in their indigenous fruits and vegetables and are called “ecologists” living in harmony with the culture (Sutton & Anderson, [2020](#), p. 2).

I argue that the natural harmony was dismantled when Pexton, an Oil Company of America, installed their factory in the rich palm fields. The novel articulates as: “Pexton is a different sort of gardener; the soil is their flower (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 27). It portrays that the Oil Company has a strong dominance, and enjoys a locus position on the poor African villagers of Kosawa, and they try their utmost efforts to get the maximum resources from the village soil just to uplift themselves.

The tenet of distributive environmental justice is that resources must be allocated equally among the rich and poor, and the harmful impact of anything must also be mitigated without any social stratification. Dobson argues that: We all live in the same biosphere, said the gospel, breathing the same thin layer of air, and eating food grown in the same soil. Our water is drawn from the same aquifers, and acid rain falls on the estates of the rich as forcefully as on the ghettos of the poor (Dobson, [1998](#), p. 19). However, I argue that African villagers, especially children, suffered from a strange sort of disease because of the installation of the oil company. They suffered from a raspy cough. The novel delineates this phenomenon as: “Sporadic smokiness enveloped the village and left our eyes watery and noses runny” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 27). It vociferously delineates that not only did children suffer terribly, but it also ravaged the entire serene environment of the village. This textual phenomenon not only brings into the limelight the precarious situation of Kosawa village of Africa but also synergizes with the empirical reality of our postmodern times.

Sutton and Anderson ([2020](#)) contended that “traditional people can be trusted to take care of their resources—not out of fuzzy-minded love for Mother Earth but out of solid, hardheaded, good sense, often shored up by traditional religion and morality” (p. 2). The novel shows the past and present condition of their veneration of indigenous resources. In the past, they prepared different meals from their pristine land and enjoyed the festivity of it on special days. For instance, the mothers used to prepare special meals with green leaves, mushrooms, palm oil, yam, bushmeat, and rice. “The meals are made from ingredients both pure and adulterated” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 48). Moreover, the novel also captures that the indigenous food items, including fish and palm trees, have been blatantly spoiled by the

oil company in the name of the Green Revolution. C. Paul Verghese observes that 'food is a primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man and it is one of the major themes in this novel. Mike Davis (2002) has called it "climates of hunger" because it shows instability between ecological landscape and the neo-liberal designs of the capitalists making the poor peasants vulnerable to famine and disaster. The novel reflects this: "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 our forest. Our air turned heavy" (Mbue, 2022, p. 30). I contend that the serenity of the landscape, which these African people used to take pride in, was jeopardized by noise pollution coupled with myriad diseases disrupting the serene environment of the village where the population is meager. These people considered themselves 'ethnocentric', placing culture superior over any other thing (Sutton & Anderson, 2020, p. 5), but they became the victims of exploitation of their Indigenous land and suffered from skin diseases (Mbue, 2022, p. 30).

The indigenous people pleaded strongly to the Western capitalists to replace the pipelines, which were out of order, creating seepage in soil, air, water, and even food, but their voices were muffled by saying that they could boil water to have clean water. Distributive environmental justice emphasizes that marginalized people should be treated equally; however, I argue that African rural villagers have faced severe water problems because their wells have been polluted by oil contamination "All those wells breathing poison on us every day" (Mbue, 2022, p. 34). On the contrary, the officials of the Pexton Company used to drink clean water from the dispensers by giving a fabricated message to the locals that the oil pipelines were fine. They considered the issue of the indigenous people trivial, and the novel delineates as follows: "The district officer told him that the pipelines are fine, that occasional leaks and spills mean nothing" (Mbue, 2022, p. 35). Dobson, in his theory of *Distributive Environmental Justice*, contends that "Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things" (Dobson, 1998, p. 237). However, the novel vividly portrays the social stratification based on power, class, and gender. The village representative named Woja was also involved with the officials of the Pexton, and the boundaries are rigid in terms of the consumption of resources. The harmony and the utility of the

sources cannot be cascaded in the behavior, actions, and lifestyle of the high class and the villagers. For instance, Woja used to live in a brick house, his sons used to wear American T-shirts, and they were given access to “bottled water” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 36). He brought a purifying machine to drink clean water and deprived the local farmers (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 68). On the contrary, the poor villagers have lost their appetite because of the colossal exploitation and the deprivation of necessities just to satiate their imperialist designs. The novel manifests as: “Our appetites disappear before us. What sort of news should we prepare ourselves for?” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 41). It also reflects the food scarcity because their food has been turned into garbage due to oil. The novel illustrates this alarming situation: “The food in my mouth turns to garbage. Palm oil from my food dripping down my fingers” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 50). This vociferously illuminates the calamity of the Oil Company that it is transforming naturally available food into gothic food devoid of nutrition.

Amidst the ecological texture of the novel, it quintessentially captures the rhetorical mode because the novel delineates the profound suffering of the African female farmers. They were deprived of their husbands and were forced to cook lavish items for the people of Pexton by using their poultry farms. Borrowing the term “Feminist Empiricism” by Sandra Harding, I contend that the efforts of rural women are invisible in the documentation of the patriarchal world. Sach contends in her theory of Ecofeminism situating the marginalized role of the females that they have to work hard not only with the natural environment for the sustenance of the resources but also bear the loss of their husbands who were taken away by the capitalists so that they may work in other plantations too (Sachs, [1996](#), p. 5). Sach said: “Rural women's standpoints may be preferable because such women are 'subjugated', they experience extremely oppressive conditions as a result of the gender divisions of labor in rural areas and the patriarchal conditions” (p. 19). The novel also voices this concern in an emphatic manner that they were doubly subjugated. They were forced to prepare dishes for the higher officials of Pexton from their indigenous resources, which were already meager because of colossal damage to fields. I argue that these lavish indigenous food items were presented to the higher officials so that they could negotiate their needs with them and exchange their environmental concerns, but it ended in futility (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 77). The novel voices this as: “Upon getting the names of our potential benefactors, a delegation will travel to Bezam with gifts of smoke bush meat and dried spices and yams,

bottles of palm oil, and eggs from our fattest hen” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 77). This delineates that the owners of Pexton Oil Company were successful not only in accumulating resources from the land but also in sabotaging the domestic space of poor village people.

### Conclusion

I argue that the call for environmental justice has idiosyncratic contours, which can be seen in various forms that elucidate the hard work of African male farmers with higher officials. Firstly, they sacrificed their indigenous food resources, and their wives made lavish food items for the higher officials. Secondly, the poor people had to travel a lot to meet the representatives in their offices. Thirdly, their concerns were heard with a trivial intention and glamoured by taking many pictures on camera just to ensure that their concerns would be addressed. Kosawa village became visible to the world at large, and the problems would get fixed to stop innumerable ecological catastrophes (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 102). Essentially speaking, the officials visited the Kosawa village to scrutinize the issues by visiting the graves of the young children, and the disorientation of the whole ecological landscape, and took pictures to present a glossy image to the world that they have humanitarian and compassionate designs for these crunched African farmers (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 18). Ironically, the novel articulates the fabricated picture of the mental outlook of the higher officials by saying, “American man and woman gave our children books and sweets that tasted like honey” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 118). On the contrary, “The government is not made up of people with souls and hearts of flesh” (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 138). It shows a lack of compassion for the indigenous villagers who struggled hard to make themselves adaptable to the natural resources. Fourthly, the suffering of the females at the heart of this ecological catastrophe cannot be overlooked, which synergizes with all the critical underpinnings in different contours. The females in the Kosawa village lost their husbands because they were forced to work in rubber plantations, and because of the toxic working environment, they lost their lives (Mbue, [2022](#), p. 190). The rural African farmers lamented that they have just one regret in their lives, that they couldn't get a chance to smile more in their lives. They thought that life captures inherent beauty in their surrounding landscape, but it got overwhelmed by multifaceted catastrophes.

Environmental Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationships between humans and the environment through humanities and

social science perspectives. It emphasizes that understanding and addressing environmental challenges requires more than scientific or technical solutions, it involves examining cultural values, ethics, history, narratives, and social justice dimensions connected to ecological issues.

In terms of policy, Environmental Humanities highlight the need for policies that incorporate these broader cultural, ethical, and historical contexts. It seeks to bring coherence among various actors and institutions involved in environmental issues by integrating diverse knowledge and addressing fragmentation in efforts to achieve environmental justice and sustainability. This includes attending to marginalized communities and recognizing how cultural frameworks shape environmental perceptions and actions.

Furthermore, environmental governance plays a pivotal role in bringing smooth coherence regarding climate change and fostering deep ecological thought not only in the cognitive landscape of policymakers but also the masses (Falkner, [2013](#), p. 330).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Data availability is not applicable as no new data has been created.

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