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Intergenerational Trauma and the Immigrant Experience in Imbolo Mbue's How Beautiful We Were

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Abstract
This paper is an exploration of intergenerational trauma and immigrant identity in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through Rob Nixon's 'slow violence' and Homi Bhabha's 'thirdspace.' The novel depicts the environmental destruction of Kosawan village by Western oil companies, creating cascading trauma that extends beyond immediate ecological damage to profound psychological wounds transmitted across generations through contaminated resources and destroyed traditional life. This devastation forces migration to the West—the very region whose corporate interests caused their suffering—creating a cyclical violence where perpetrators become destinations for victims. Nixon's slow violence framework illuminates how environmental destruction generates accumulating intergenerational trauma, while Bhabha's thirdspace concept reveals how immigrant characters navigate between African heritage and American assimilation while carrying inherited wounds of environmental racism and corporate exploitation. Through textual analysis, this study demonstrates how Mbue's work challenges individualistic trauma narratives, presenting intergenerational trauma as both product of slow violence and catalyst for collective resistance, ultimately contributing to literature that centres community-based healing practices over Western-centric approaches to trauma recovery.

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1. Introduction

A harrowing portrait of environmental and psychological ruin at the hands of Pexton, "a casually sociopathic corporation" whose relentless exploitation of Kosawa leaves behind generations of trauma, as it steamrolls their lives in its pursuit of profit – the core of Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (Akkad). The novel centres on the devastating environmental destruction of the fictional Kosawan village by an American oil company, illustrating how corporate extraction creates cascading forms of trauma that extend far beyond immediate ecological damage. This paper examines the intersection of intergenerational trauma and immigrant identity in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through the theoretical frameworks of Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and Homi Bhabha's concept of "thirdspace." Nixon's theory of slow violence—the gradual, often invisible forms of structural and environmental harm that disproportionately affect marginalized communities—provides a critical lens for understanding how environmental destruction generates profound psychological wounds that accumulate and transmit across generations. The contamination of water sources, poisoning of soil, and destruction of traditional ways of life create a form of trauma that is both deeply personal and collectively experienced, fundamentally altering the fabric of community life and cultural identity. This environmental devastation subsequently forces displacement and migration, as characters must abandon their ravaged homeland to seek survival in the West—the very region whose corporate interests initiated their suffering. The cyclical nature of this violence becomes apparent as those responsible for the destruction also become the destination for its victims.

Simultaneously, this analysis employs Bhabha's notion of thirdspace—the hybrid cultural zone that emerges from the collision of colonizer and colonized cultures—to illuminate the complex positioning of immigrant characters who navigate between their African heritage and American assimilation. The paper argues that Mbue's characters inhabit a liminal space where traditional healing practices, communal memory, and ancestral wisdom intersect with Western therapeutic models and individualistic frameworks for processing trauma. Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates how *How Beautiful We Were* reveals the inadequacy of conventional trauma narratives that focus primarily on individual recovery, instead presenting intergenerational trauma as both a product of slow violence and a catalyst for collective resistance. The immigrant experience in the novel becomes a site where characters must negotiate not only their own displacement but also the inherited wounds of environmental racism, corporate exploitation, and cultural erasure that preceded their migration.

The paper concludes that Mbue's work contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges Western-centric approaches to trauma recovery by centring community-based healing practices and recognizing the ongoing nature of colonial violence in contemporary global contexts. By situating intergenerational trauma within the framework of slow violence and thirdspace, this analysis reveals how the immigrant experience becomes both a continuation of historical violence and a potential space for transformative healing.

Imbolo Mbue

Imbolo Mbue is a Cameroonian-American author best known for her acclaimed debut novel Behold the Dreamers (2016), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was selected for Oprah's Book Club. Born in Limbe, Cameroon, Mbue immigrated to the United States as a teenager and later earned degrees from Rutgers University and Columbia University. Her writing explores themes of immigration, the American Dream, and the intersection of African and American cultures through deeply human stories. *Behold the Dreamers* follows a Cameroonian immigrant family working for a wealthy Wall Street executive during the 2008 financial crisis, examining class, race, and the complexities of pursuing prosperity in America. Mbue's second novel, How Beautiful We Were (2021), shifts focus to her homeland, telling the story of a fictional African village fighting against an American oil company's environmental destruction. Her work has been praised for its empathetic portrayal of characters caught between worlds and its nuanced examination of global inequality and environmental justice.

How Beautiful We Were

Set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, *How Beautiful We Were* follows the community's struggle against an American oil company, Pexton, whose drilling operations have devastated the land – poisoning the air, water, and soil, and causing illness and death, especially among children. The story is told through multiple perspectives, including a rotating "we" voice that represents the village children, and the singular voice of Thula, a young girl who becomes the central figure of the resistance. After her father and other villagers mysteriously disappear following a protest, Thula grows up determined to fight back. She eventually travels to the U.S. for education and returns to lead a revolutionary movement against the corporate and government powers responsible for her village's suffering.

The novel explores themes of environmental injustice, colonial exploitation, resistance, sacrifice, and the personal toll of political activism. It is both a sweeping family saga and a political parable. Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* has been chosen as the subject of this research paper because it powerfully depicts generational trauma and the immigrant experience through the lens of a fictional African village, Kosawa, ravaged by environmental and colonial exploitation. The novel traces the struggles of a community fighting against corporate greed, political corruption, and displacement, revealing how trauma reverberates across generations, shaping identity, memory, and resistance. By focusing on the interconnected lives of Kosawa's inhabitants – particularly the children who later migrate to the West – Mbue illuminates the psychological and cultural toll of systemic oppression, as well as the diasporic alienation faced by those who leave their homeland. This research paper analyses Mbue's portrayal of inherited suffering and the complexities of the immigrant experience, arguing that the novel serves as a poignant critique of global capitalism while offering a narrative of resilience and collective healing. Through its multi-layered storytelling, *How Beautiful We Were* provides a compelling framework for examining how literature engages with historical injustice and its enduring impact on marginalized communities. The novel meticulously examines how the actions of an American oil company, Pexton, and the complicity of the corrupt government inflict not only ecological devastation but also deep-seated psychological wounds that reverberate across generations. The trauma experienced by the elders, who witness the destruction of their land and the disintegration of their traditional way of life, becomes embedded in the collective consciousness of Kosawa, shaping the identities and experiences of subsequent generations.

Theoretical Framework – Understanding Trauma and Slow Violence

Trauma studies began to take shape in the 1990s, initially drawing on Freudian theory to create a framework in which trauma is seen as an overwhelming experience that pushes language to its limits and even disrupts meaning entirely. This early view portrayed traumatic suffering as something that cannot truly be expressed. However, a more diverse perspective soon emerged, arguing that the inability to speak about trauma is just one possible reaction – not the defining characteristic – of such experiences. The original idea that trauma breaks down language, fractures the self, and destabilizes meaning helped define the field and still influences current discussions, even as newer models challenge and expand upon it (Balaev 360).

However, soon, trauma studies emerged prominently through scholars like Cathy Caruth, who portrayed trauma as a deeply disruptive event that fragments consciousness and defies linguistic expression. According to this early model, traumatic experiences are so overwhelming that they cannot be processed or narrated in conventional ways, instead lingering in the psyche as unresolved and haunting memories. Caruth's approach, influenced by Freud and Lacan, emphasizes how trauma is not directly experienced at the time it occurs, but returns later in disruptive ways – what she calls "belatedness" (Caruth 92). This model highlights

trauma's persistent absence from coherent memory and narrative, suggesting that both individual and collective traumas are only accessible through indirect, fractured forms of representation. Caruth further integrates neuroscience, drawing on Bessel van der Kolk's findings about trauma's effects on brain function, particularly how it disrupts the ability to encode experiences into language. Ultimately, this theory proposes that trauma cannot be fully assimilated into memory or identity, affecting both personal and historical consciousness. It argues for a universal, transhistorical quality of trauma, where the suffering of one generation can shape the psychological experience of another (Balaev 365).

Rob Nixon defines slow violence as a gradual, often invisible form of harm that unfolds over extended periods and across wide spaces. Unlike immediate or dramatic acts of violence, it is cumulative and delayed, making it harder to recognize and respond to. This type of violence is embedded in processes like climate change, pollution, deforestation, and the lingering effects of war—environmental crises whose full consequences only surface over decades. Because slow violence lacks spectacle and is temporally diffuse, it poses serious challenges to representation, awareness, and action. The following excerpt makes it abundantly lucid.

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all… a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. … Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory. (Nixon 3)

This notion closely aligns with the concept of generational trauma, where the psychological and physical impacts of violence or injustice are not confined to a single moment or generation but are inherited and felt long after the initial event. Just as slow violence causes environmental and bodily harm that accumulates over time, generational trauma reflects a delayed and enduring psychic injury—one that is often unrecognized but deeply embedded in memory, behaviour, and identity. Both concepts emphasize the unseen, enduring consequences of violence and the difficulty of making such long-term harm visible or actionable in the present.

Slow Violence Perpetuating Intergenerational Trauma

This research paper examines how the novel's formal and thematic strategies—its nonlinear temporality, ecological imagery, and insistence on communal memory—challenge the invisibility of slow violence, transforming its deferred calamities into a site of political and ethical reckoning while also weaving in the resulting generational trauma wreaked by the Pexton corporation. At the very outset of the novel, the "readers are already plunged into cycles of trauma" by deliberate environmental destruction caused by the American oil company. (Basu 82). However, it must be re-iterated that novel's narrative technique of polyphonic narration in the first person provide an unfiltered access to the trauma experienced by the children and people of Kosawa:

The global phenomenon of the subjugation of the disadvantaged is a pitiable story, rendered skillfully, in *How Beautiful We Were* by three generations of first-person narrators. They are Yaya, the grandmother; Sahel, the mother; Thula, the central character (initially a child but later a grown lady); Thula's brother, Juba; and the omnibus narrator identified as Children. This technical experimentation by Mbue with multiple narrators enables the reader to get a wider perspective of happenings in the novel from eclectic sources and strengthens the book, artistically (Ehanire 108).

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* offers a searing portrayal of slow violence—a concept theorized by Rob Nixon to describe the gradual, attritional destruction wrought by environmental degradation, corporate exploitation, and neocolonialism. Unlike spectacular or instantaneous acts of violence, the harm inflicted upon the fictional village of Kosawa unfolds incrementally, its catastrophic consequences dispersed across time and space (2). The toxic legacy of Pexton Oil's operations—contaminated water, poisoned soil, and the insidious erosion of health and livelihood—epitomizes Nixon's framework, in which violence operates "out of sight," evading immediate recognition and resistance. By narrating the "long dyings" of Kosawa's people and ecosystem, Mbue confronts the representational challenges inherent in depicting slow violence, rendering visible what systemic power seeks to obscure.

The novel's multigenerational structure mirrors the temporal sprawl of slow violence, illustrating how trauma accumulates across decades. The children of Kosawa inherit not only the physical scars of pollution but also the protracted struggle for justice—a struggle often marginalized in dominant historical narratives. Mbue's use of polyphonic narration amplifies this tension, weaving together communal testimony and individual memory to counter the erasure of slow violence's casualties. In doing so, the novel resists the discounting of human and ecological suffering, a process Nixon identifies as central to the logic of neoliberal exploitation. Even Nixon echoes these concerns – "This is a crucial challenge if we are to generate any sustained understanding of the transnational, intergenerational fallout from slow violence. The task of thinking on such a geographical scale—let alone a temporal one—can seem overwhelming" (38).

Spoken through the voice of Yaya, the village elder, this passage encapsulates the devastating hindsight of a generation deceived by corporate diplomacy and state complicity. Her reflection – "Why wouldn't we be excited when the truth was so artfully withheld?" – lays bare the calculated manipulation at the heart of Pexton's arrival, where hope was not just misplaced, but manufactured by omission. Yaya's lament is steeped in the grief of generational foresight, recognizing too late that the contamination would not only destroy their present, but quietly seed the suffering of their "children's children." Her words echo the core of slow violence, where destruction is incremental and veiled, and of generational trauma, where the burden of exploitation is inherited long after the perpetrators have vanished. Through Yaya, Mbue gives voice to the sorrow of survival and the knowledge that what was once hope has become legacy—of illness, loss, and unspoken betrayal (Mbue 199).

The collective voice of the children captures the

radicalization of a generation born into devastation, their innocence eroded by years of unaddressed violence and betrayal. The actions they recount—burning machinery, threatening laborers, and exacting retribution—reflect the deep internalization of trauma and the shift from passive suffering to militant resistance. Their refusal to show mercy reveals how grief and anger have curdled into dehumanization, a psychological scar born from watching their own childhoods destroyed by corporate indifference. What once was a community of children dreaming of "splendid lives" becomes a force of rebellion shaped by generational rage, seeking justice through destruction. This descent into violence illustrates the tragic cycle that slow violence and systemic exploitation breed: when institutions fail, even children learn to wield machetes, not just as weapons, but as tools of narrative agency—proclaiming, at last, that they will no longer be invisible (Mbue 224).

In the final harrowing moments, narrated through the collective voice of the children, Mbue lays bare the enduring trauma of resistance and loss. The public display of the Five's bodies "so that passersby could take pictures in their minds"—is a state-sanctioned act of psychological violence, intended not only to punish but to embed fear into communal memory. But it is the absence of Thula's body that becomes the most haunting symbol of unresolved grief. Her disappearance fractures not just the narrative, but the children's ability to mourn and comprehend what has been lost. "Thula, Thula. Thula never answered" (Mbue 308). This repetition becomes a traumatic refrain, echoing Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as a wound that resists closure and resists language – "the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension" (6).

The children's voices are now saturated with ambiguity, loss, and inherited pain. Thula's vanishing acts as a metaphor for the way trauma circulates—unspeakable, ungraspable, yet ever-present—carried not only by memory but by those left behind. Even the twins, Bamako and Cotonou, children turned mystics, are caught between roles of agency and helplessness. Their revelation of the child in Thula's womb transforms personal trauma into a legacy yet to be born, a future already marked by grief. In this moment, Mbue powerfully conveys how generational trauma is not only passed down through stories and silences, but also through bodies that are missing, voices that are unanswered, and futures that mourn before they begin.

The novel's central conflict revolves around the activities of a foreign oil company, whose reckless drilling poisons the land, water, and air. The result is not an instant catastrophe but a cumulative environmental collapse: children die from toxic water, crops fail, and entire ways of life erode slowly. This fits Nixon's model of attritional violence, which resists visibility and therefore accountability. This kind of violence—dispersed across time—makes it difficult for the villagers to mobilize international outrage or even gain the attention of their own government. The harm is ongoing but unspectacular, and thus denied the urgency typically associated with acts of violence. Yet it is this very slowness, this daily erosion of life, that ensures the trauma becomes embedded into the psychic and cultural fabric of the community.

The following excerpt from *How Beautiful We Were*—depicting a night of communal joy under a "brilliant and self-assured" moon, where villagers momentarily transcend their suffering through laughter and shared ecstasy—serves as a poignant narrative counterpoint to the novel's overarching theme of slow violence.

I can't forget one night in particular when we were in the village square, having a good time with our friends, the moon brilliant and self-assured, the sky jam-packed with stars, everyone passing around dried ecstatic mushrooms rolled up in plantain leaves, smoking and laughing louder as we got higher, bliss almost as good as a woman's thighs—a visitor would have thought we'd never heard the name Pexton. (Mbue 94).

This scene, in which the villagers' temporary euphoria makes them appear untouched by Pexton's exploitation, underscores one of Rob Nixon's central arguments: slow violence operates through "temporal erasure," its harms rendered invisible precisely because they are deferred, intermittent, or overshadowed by fleeting moments of normalcy. The passage captures what Nixon calls the "the representational challenges posed by slow violence" – how its gradual ravages are eclipsed by the immediacy of daily life, allowing perpetrators like Pexton to evade accountability (264).

The villagers' mushroom-induced bliss, described with sensual vitality ("bliss almost as good as a woman's thighs"), contrasts sharply with the insidious, somatic toll of Pexton's pollution—children dying of unexplained illnesses, crops withering, water turning toxic. This juxtaposition reveals the dialectic of visibility and invisibility that defines slow violence: the more Pexton's destruction disperses across time, the easier it is for outsiders (and even the villagers themselves, in moments of respite) to compartmentalize or forget it. The narrator's remark—"a visitor would have thought we'd never heard the name Pexton"—highlights the peril of such illusions, emphasizing how systemic violence thrives when its effects are not continuously witnessed.

Moreover, the scene's emphasis on communal joy as resistance is subversive. In a novel where trauma is inherited and ecological grief is collective, this momentary reprieve becomes an act of defiance against Pexton's attempts to reduce Kosawa's people to mere casualties. Yet the very need for such escapism also reflects the psychological toll of slow violence, which demands that the oppressed ration their energy for survival. By embedding this fleeting joy within a narrative of attritional loss, Mbue amplifies Nixon's critique: the

prolonged torture of slow violence are compounded by the theft not just of lives, but of the capacity to live outside the shadow of impending ruin. This excerpt thus crystallizes the novel's broader project: to disrupt the temporal and perceptual logics that enable slow violence. By juxtaposing visceral, embodied joy with the unseen corrosion of Kosawa, Mbue forces readers to confront what the "visitor" in the passage misses—the fragility of such moments, and the systems that make them exceptions rather than sustenance.

Ultimately, *How Beautiful We Were* functions as a literary intervention against the representational obstacles that hinder collective action. By centring the perspectives of the colonized and embedding ecological devastation within a narrative of resistance, Mbue compels readers to recognize slow violence not as an inevitable by-product of progress, but as a form of structural violence demanding urgent redress.

The Immigrant in the Third Space: Thula Navigating Hybridity and Power

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Thula's immigration experience can be productively examined through Homi Bhabha's notion

of the Third Space—a hybrid cultural site where identity is neither fixed nor purely oppositional, but constantly negotiated between dominant and marginalized discourses. As Thula leaves Kosawa for the United States, she enters a liminal space that disrupts binary conceptions of colonizer and colonized, insider and outsider. Her experience in America does not erase her Kosawan identity, nor does it fully assimilate her into Western norms. Instead, she inhabits a Third Space, where she begins to rearticulate her sense of self, her understanding of resistance, and the tools with which she might challenge imperial structures like Pexton.

Within this hybrid space, Thula becomes a mediator—her identity and activism shaped by both her roots in Kosawa and her exposure to Western political and intellectual frameworks. This in-betweenness grants her a strategic position of enunciation, enabling her to forge new forms of political agency that neither replicate traditional modes of resistance nor fully subscribe to Western liberal ideals. Bhabha argues that cultural translation in the Third Space allows for subversive reinscriptions of authority; in Thula's case, her education abroad becomes not a sign of co-optation but a weaponized hybridity—a way to speak back to global systems of exploitation using the tools of the global elite.

Yet this space is also fraught. Thula's hybridity distances her from parts of her community, especially those who view her strategies as impractical or foreign. The ambivalence of the Third Space, as Bhabha suggests, is that while it allows for innovation and subversion, it also risks alienation and misunderstanding. Thula's return to Kosawa thus reveals the complexities of hybrid identity: she is not wholly embraced as a local, nor dismissed as an outsider, but seen as someone who inhabits multiple cultural logics simultaneously.

Thula's journey from Kosawa to the United States and back again positions her squarely within Bhabha's Third Space, a liminal zone that challenges dominant narratives of identity and power. As Bhabha writes, this Third Space is "the other space of symbolic representation… bar and bearer of difference," a space that unsettles colonial authority precisely because it cannot be fixed or fully known (101). Thula's presence in this space—neither fully Western nor wholly Kosawan—embodies a kind of epistemological threat to both the global capitalist structures she resists and the traditionalist expectations of her own community.

In the paranoid logic of colonial discourse, the space occupied by the 'Other' is projected as an "idee fixe: the despot, the barbarian, the threat to order." But Thula destabilizes this projection. She is not the helpless victim colonial powers expect, nor the chaotic revolutionary they fear. Her strategic activism, cultivated through education in the imperial center, unsettles the binary oppositions upon which colonial authority relies. Thula, inhabiting Bhabha's "bar and bearer of difference," exposes how resistance from within the Third Space cannot be contained by the paranoid imaginaries of power—she speaks the language of the oppressor, but not in submission; she occupies Western institutions, but only to dismantle their global consequences (101). This hybrid position, however, is marked by anxiety and precarity. Thula's attempt to mediate between Kosawa and the West reveals how the Third Space is not a place of comfort but of continual dislocation. Her voice is heard in American activist circles, but rarely understood; her return to Kosawa is greeted with admiration, but also suspicion. In both contexts, she remains a figure of difference, never fully integrated. And yet, it is precisely this "empty third space," feared by dominant structures for its unpredictability, that gives Thula the capacity to resist. She becomes not the despot or barbarian of colonial fantasy, but a rearticulated subjectivity that carries the potential for radical political change.

In Mbue's narrative, Thula's immigration is not simply a movement across geography, but an entry into the symbolic battleground of the Third Space, where identity is reconstituted and power is troubled. Her hybridity is not a weakness to be overcome, but a force that renders colonial structures anxious and incomplete, always vulnerable to the voice that cannot be fully predicted or controlled. Through Thula, Mbue illustrates how the Third Space is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a lived, often painful negotiation of identity, memory, and power. Thula's immigration becomes a site of cultural translation, one that unsettles fixed boundaries and opens up new—if uncertain—possibilities for collective resistance.

Conclusion

Ron Charles's review captures the novel's searing indictment of Western exploitation, framing it as part of "the old pattern of the West clawing through Africa, scraping away its resources, despoiling its land and murdering its people"—a cycle sustained by avarice, militarized coercion, and the myth of racial hierarchy. Yet what distinguishes Mbue's work, as Charles observes, is her ability to render this systemic violence "wrenchingly fresh" through a narrative that fuses the granularity of historical witness with the moral urgency of parable. By doing so, the novel transcends mere critique, demanding not only recognition of colonial and neocolonial crimes but also a confrontation with their enduring legacies.

In conclusion, *How Beautiful We Were* presents a nuanced exploration of how generational trauma and the immigrant experience intersect within postcolonial and environmental frameworks. The novel illustrates how slow violence, perpetuated by corporate and governmental neglect, produces a legacy of psychological and cultural trauma that reverberates across generations. Thula's trajectory—from a grieving child in Kosawa to an educated activist in America—embodies the complexities of the immigrant subject, who inhabits a liminal space between belonging and estrangement. Through Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, Thula's experience reveals how hybrid identities can become sites of resistance, yet are also fraught with alienation and ideological tension. Mbue ultimately underscores that the scars of exploitation are not only etched into land and bodies, but into memory and identity—persisting long after the visible signs of violence have faded. The novel demands a reconsideration of how we define trauma, complicity, and healing in a globalized world shaped by both historical injustice and the enduring power of narrative.

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