

How Beautiful We Were: Postcolonial Reflections on Eco-Colonialism in Nepal's Tiger Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) uncovers the tragedy of how corporate greed, economic exploitation, and land grabbing by the power have ruined the expectations of the indigenous people and placed them in severe environmental injustice. This paper has adopted the novel's narrative in relation to post-colonial environmental justice with the experiences of local people in and around Bardiya National Park and the tiger conservation activities in Nepal's Terai. Mbue's representation of Kosawa, where state-sanctioned environmental progress is the result of power, dispossession, clarifies how conservation violence echoes colonial violence in the ways and to the extent that its enclosures ancestral lands, damages of people's lives, and renders locals voiceless. Examining the Nepali media reports, and policy documents, the paper seeks to explore the Nepali communities living near to the Nationalpark, the rise in human-tiger conflict due to the increasing tiger populations, and the unequal systems of compensation and accountability that govern loss and death. The paper also examines how Nepal's celebrated tiger conservation success has led to increased social suffering, especially among local community and economically disadvantaged people. The article concludes by calling for a shift toward conservation grounded in environmental justice which recognizes indigenous rights, values local knowledge, and places community safety at the center of conservation practice.

Keywords: Tiger, Kosawa, locals, Nepal, colonialism, environment

INTRODUCTION

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* imparts the story of Kosawa, a fictional village in Africa, and its dire fight against a powerful oil company backed by a corrupt government. At its heart, the novel discovers what happens when local land is treated as a resource to be drained rather than a home to be protected. With such tension makes it a shockingly useful mirror for looking at what scholars in the field of environment started to call "green colonialism" in today's conservation world.

In Kosawa, the ground itself becomes contaminated. People's rights are ignored, crushed beneath what the company sells as progress, but what really amounts to greed dressed up in the language of development. Reading Mbue's fiction alongside real-world events doesn't feel like a stretch, rather it feels almost uncomfortably apt.

This paper takes that fictional lens and turns it toward Nepal, specifically toward the WWF-backed tiger conservation programs operating in Nepal. Along with this, this also seeks to explore what those programs have meant for the local community. The parallels that we find are hard to ignore. Where Kosawa's villagers faced bulldozers and soldiers in the name of economic growth, the local community faced eviction and

violence in the name of saving tigers. Nepal's conservation record is, on the surface, a genuine success story — tiger numbers are up, and the country has received international praise for it. But beneath that headline lies something more troubling: a model of fortress conservation that keeps people out of their own ancestral lands, escalates human-wildlife conflict, and relies on a kind of militarized enforcement that echoes colonial-era dispossession more than it does environmental stewardship. Drawing on investigative reporting, Nepali news sources, NGO, documentation, and environmental justice frameworks, this article argues that WWF's influence in the region has too often tipped the scales toward wildlife at the expense of Indigenous lives. The power imbalances involved aren't accidental, they reflect deeper postcolonial dynamics that conservation movements have been slow to reckon with. What's needed, this piece contends, is an approach that stops treating people and nature as competing interests and starts recognizing that lasting conservation is only possible when the communities closest to the land have a real say in protecting it.

FICTIONAL EXTRACTIVISM AND REAL GREEN COLONIALISM

The story is set in a fictional African nation where an American oil Company, Pexton, destroys the ecology of the Kasawa. In the novel, it shows a process of global coloniality that is being created where the transnational capital and a collaborating state come together to steal land, plunder nature and suppress local resistance (Velu & Velu, 2024). The Kosawans observe the oil spill and the toxic fumes with poisoned water and the officials taking the blood of villagers instead of oil. More importantly, the extractive enterprise is based on state-corporate violence. When the villagers protest or seek justice, the soldiers of the regime swoop down, the place had become like the earth drank the blood of people due to the invasion of military men (Novel citation). Pexton promises empty vows of clean-up and restitution that are not quite kept, just like the pledges to the dispossessed of the real world. The hemispheric, generational narrative of Mbue reveals how the neocolonial power and the violence towards local resistance is intertwined with the environmental exploitation. The resonance of these themes is heard in the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples who live on the land of conservation areas where the land is taken away in the name of a so-called greater good.

In the Nepalese context of the preserved areas, conservation has sometimes played a role of green colonialism - the practice whereby biodiversity conservation action by state agencies, as was the case with Nepal, WWF, supersedes the rights and knowledge of the local communities. The logic of this conservation is the same as the logic of Mbue, the novel: the mighty make decisions about the local population, which they frequently enforce through violence, and all the time in the name of a worthy cause. In fact, the discourse of tiger conservation can conceal an extractive, but not oil, agenda, of rights and dignity, which can be referred to as extractive environmentalism. According to Stephen Corry (2015) of Survival International, the big conservation NGOs used to think about Indigenous inhabitants as the barrier to wilderness, just as it was the case in the colonial age. These attitudes have justified the forceful expelling of local communities in African and Asian parks in the name of nature conservation. It has become, critics say, a new kind of imperialism, green in its declared intent, but colonial in its practice (International, 2019)

These dynamics can be explained through postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental justice theory. Some researchers such as Rob Nixon have described slow violence as the latent, cumulative damage of environmental policies on poor people (Nixon, 2011). The conservation violence is seen in decades of fear in the buffer zone areas, as their eviction and impoverishment occurred slowly under legal pretenses of tiger management. Of common interest to both the colonial and postcolonial conservation is the fortress conservation model which perceives the local presence as a menace and approves militarized exclusion (International, 2019). This model is parallel to the picture of an unholy alliance of an all-powerful project, whether it is an oil project or a conservation project and state power that Mbue describes. In both cases, the voice of the local communities, even their own stories, are marginalized.

HUMAN–WILDLIFE CONFLICT: TIGERS AND THE HUMAN COST

Nepal is now internationally known due to its success in the conservation of the Royal Bengal tiger. By 2022, Nepal almost doubled its tiger count of approximately 121 in 2009 to 235 or above, reaching it earlier than the global targets of the 2010 St. Petersburg Tiger Summit (WWF, 2022). The top gems of this initiative have been Chitwan and Bardiya National Parks, which now boast 128 and 87 tigers respectively as of the 2021 census (WWF, 2022). Nonetheless, this conservation success has been extremely costly to the local people who co-exist with these top predators. Since tigers are recovering and dispersing, human tiger conflict cases are on the rise, with fatal results in many cases. These encounters place the locals and Indigenous groups that live in the buffer zones in the front lines of the encounters - literally in some cases, struggling to protect their lives against the wildlife that their government is so eager to protect.

This has been particularly worrying in Bardiya where “tigers have killed at least 23 people between 2019 and 2022,” turning nearby villages into what locals grimly call death zones after dark (Neupane, 2022). Aash Bahadur Bote is a 26-year-old man who was mauled and killed by a tiger as he fished in the Rapti River of Bardia National Park in July 2023 (Republica, 2023). His demise was not the end of the tragedy: as he could not cope with trauma, his young wife committed suicide three months later, and two children were left without parents. Lamented his dead father, The tiger slew my son and the sorrowful daughter-in-law slew herself. These instances demonstrate that the human toll of conservation is much greater than direct deaths and includes psychological trauma, family breakdown, and blighted futures of the survivors. It is understandable that a justice-sensitive conservation model should be able to offer significant assistance to the families of the victims (Nicolai et al., 2026). Nepal has a scheme of wildlife damage compensation; but it has a very worrying legal anomaly. In the existing laws, the compensation is awarded at around USD 8,000 (NPR 1,000,000) only to families of those who are killed or severely injured either in buffer zones or beyond the park boundaries (Paudel, 2024). Park officials have recognized this legal inconsistency and have expressed remorse but insist that they are under the law at hand (Republica, 2023). To local people, the policy is seen as an outrage, and it diminishes the issue of government help to a grieving family to the exact geographic position of a tiger assault.

POSTCOLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: RETHINKING CONSERVATION

The similarity between the narrative developed by Kosawa and the case of Terai conservation in Nepal demonstrates a larger concern because environmental justice has to be brought into focus as to how we imagine and practice conservation in postcolonial cultures. “Postcolonial environmental justice” asks that we not only safeguard the ecosystem, but also the dynamic of power and historical injustices that accompany that safeguarding (Williams & Mawdsley, 2006). Regarding the case of Nepal, it needs to be realized that conservation was founded on an unequal basis, one that considered indigenous people to be disposable and that this heritage is still influential in the conflicts of this day. What could a decolonized, fair conservation be like?

It would drop the stronghold mentality. It would not exclude nature and isolate people but will incorporate the knowledge, needs, and stewardship practices of Indigenous communities. This is in line with an emerging international literature: in many cases, Indigenous-managed areas achieve equal or superior biodiversity results, compared to stringent protected areas (Survival International, 2019). Their sacred groves and taboos against overharvesting and their personal knowledge of the way tigers behave are not barriers to conservation, but might become its most vocal advocates, should they have the power to do so. An inclusive model would legally acknowledge the rights of the local community in the buffer zones and provide them with an overriding authority in the management of the same along with a share in the income generated by the tourism activities

that do not go through them (Survival International, 2019). It would imply a shift of viewing locals as squatters to viewing them as elders in safeguarding their own land.

In postcolonial perspective, the conservation of Nepal could be interpreted as a copying of some of the colonial era practices such as the Ranas displacing locals to create hunting grounds to the kings, similar to the British colonial game reserves. The act of real decolonization would reverse the scheme of power: Indigenous people would have equal influence in the decision-making process in conservation governance as government representatives. This would symbolically mend the laceration of previous displacements. In practice, it would probably lead to more sustainable consequences. As an example, in some localities, mitigating human-wildlife conflict (via buffer crops, fences or rapid response teams) may be prioritized by local communities, a factor that in turn keeps conservation popular locally. Even the most well-invested conservation will be eventually put in check without local support as the Bardiya protests indicated.

Environmental justice also implies the consideration of the allocation of benefits and burdens. At this point local communities are disproportionately affected (loss of land access, threat of wildlife attacks, etc.) at the same time that the benefits (tiger recovery international prestige, etc.) are enjoyed elsewhere. A fair system would make sure that communities also see the tangible benefits: employment in park services, a substantial portion of tourism income would be spent in local health and education, and that in case of losses to wildlife, there would be some form of compensation (or even insurance schemes) to make sure that no family is destroyed by a tiger or an elephant attack. It can also look into innovative solutions such as community-managed ecotourism whereby the villagers are the hosts and guides of the tourists, hence the dynamic changes to active stakeholders and sufferers.

Finally, an overarching change is in narrative – from viewing conservation as an unquestionable good implemented by experts, to viewing it as a social process that must be continually negotiated with those whose lives are intertwined with the landscape. This is where literature such as *How Beautiful We Were* by Mbue and voices of affected communities come in to transform. They are a reminder that there is always more than one side to any green initiative: what appears beautiful and just on the other side of the road may hurt and be oppressive up to the ground. The concept of postcolonial studies calls upon us to pose the question: Who speaks? Who is heard?" The voice of the local community has long been muted or overlooked in the conservation story of Nepal. And now, in strife and boldness, it is lifting itself. It is our duty to listen, as academics, as activists, as global citizens, to make sure their story is told, as Mbue writes, even though it will not make our mouths happy to say it. It is only through coming to terms with these discomforting realities that we can proceed to reconciliation between conservation and social justice.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A HARMONIOUS FUTURE FOR PEOPLE AND TIGERS

The people of Mbue, who are the villagers in Kosawa, finally come to a breaking point of extractive oppression and the story of their land is a sad one, and that of resistance. We are at the crossroads of tiger country in Nepal where the course need not be so fateful. The warning signposts tipped by *How Beautiful We Were* have helped clarify the stakes: when conservation continues to be a top-down project that excludes Indigenous people, it will only result in injustice and struggle a sort of green authoritarianism that bears little resemblance to the kind of corporate exploitation it is meant to fight. But with stakeholders seriously implementing postcolonial and environmental justice concepts, conservation can be re-imagined as a force of healing past injustices and empowering those who know the land best.

Nature as perceived by the local community is not something far away and unreachable, but a part of the family, or its neighbor, they call tigers their neighbors, even their grandfathers in folklore. To pay tribute to

that worldview, conservationists need to leave behind the still existing belief that conserving the tiger is to subdue the locals. Rather it implies sharing the locals as the co-saviors of the tiger. And, after all, it was Indigenous stewardship that conserved the forests prior to the existence of any imposed program or WWF program. The tribal people being displaced are often the very ones that are the best allies of the environment, as one commentary on Survival International pointed out. The key to the future of the iconic wildlife of Nepal lies in restoring that relationship between the locals and nature.

In a moment of the climax of the novel of Mbue, the people decide that they must tell this story, however painful. Similarly, locals suffering and their courage in nearby the national park should be read and reread - in scholarly journals, in policymaking circles, in classrooms until they bring about a real transformation. These tales cut through the polished facade of conservation success with the truth of shattered lives, thus forcing us to redefine success. Success should not just imply more tigers in the forest but less widows in the village; not just government medals, but native communities living dignified lives.

To sum up, *How Beautiful We Were* is a timbering literary reflection of the conservation terrain in Nepal. It demonstrates that environmental struggles are human struggles, after all, of equity, voice and justice. Green colonialism in the Terai is the creation of the past, yet it does not have to rule the future. Nepal can learn to live with its wildlife, without exploiting its people and Indigenous populations by learning the lessons of the past and by listening to those who are most impacted. This would be an example of the spirit of environmental justice in a postcolonial world: a world where tigers and local community can coexist, where the beauty of the forest is not measured by its ecological values but by the welfare of the entire community that lives within it. We may be able to tell the conservation story of Nepal at last in that future not only as beautiful in the number of tigers that are running freely, but as right and beautiful in the way it was able to reconcile the needs of people who have always claimed as their own the tigers they are now watching.

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