



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

EANSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.1863>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

15 April 2024

Keywords:

Character,
Agency,
Bakhtin.

This paper interrogates how authors deploy characters to represent ecological consciousness. The paper draws illustrations from Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* and Hellon Habila's *Oil on Water* to examine how agency is dramatized through characterization. The paper explores character agency within the subversive space of Bakhtin's carnival laughter to represent their ecological consciousness. To ground the paper into an analytical perspective, the discussion identifies and discusses the distinct characterizations the two texts' authors employ to represent the characters' ecological consciousness. The article argues that the writers of the chosen texts effectively use characterisation to create compelling ecological narratives that teach about the need to address environmental degradation. Additionally, the discussion reveals how the two writers depict ecological awareness via the characteristics of carnival shown by the characters. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that characters have a crucial role in delivering sermons about the gruesome consequences of environmental degradation. As a result, the components of carnival, such as craziness, clowns, and heroic characterizations, are used to undermine and challenge the impact of environmental degradation.

APA CITATION

Mwaga, R., Mutie, S. & Gaita, M. (2024). Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 163-174. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.1863>

CHICAGO CITATION

Mwaga, Robert, Stephen Mutie and Murimi Gaita. 2024. "Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 7 (1), 163-174. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.1863>.

HARVARD CITATION

Mwaga, R., Mutie, S. & Gaita, M. (2024) "Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(1), pp. 163-174. doi: 10.37284/eajass.7.1.1863.

IEEE CITATION

R., Mwaga, S., Mutie & M., Gaita "Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila". *EAJASS*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 163-174, Apr. 2024.

MLA CITATION

Mwaga, Robert, Stephen Mutie & Murimi Gaita. "Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, no. 1, Apr. 2024, pp. 163-174, doi:10.37284/eajass.7.1.1863.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the elements of carnival and character eco-consciousness as illustrated in the following texts; *How Beautiful We Were* and *Oil on Water*. The central premise is that the element of carnival in ecology involves the liberation of dominant hierarchies through the moment of temporariness in unofficial discourse or carnival space that helps break down hierarchies, liberating force that shapes ecological consciousness. Therefore, the spirit of Carnival in reading eco-narratives can be understood as the fragmentation of discourse to reinforce the “alternative voices” that seek to address environmental damage. In this regard, the elements of carnival like chaos, madness, and humour are used to deconstruct character eco-consciousness in the two texts under study. The following characters are considered Konga, Jakani & Sakani and Zaq are analysed to reveal their ecological sensibility in addressing damage caused to the environment carnivalesque signifiers of madness, humour, and grotesque.

Agency of Madman

Konga is a character at the epicentre of Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* against the environmental attrition that faces the village of Kosawa. The narrator describes Konga as a man who operates from the margins of society and is given the name “madman”, since he is considered an outcast in his community. In “Representations of Madness in Contemporary Black Literature”, Susan Yearwood opines that the mad character is an individual who is constructed to disassociate himself from the comforts of society and explicitly “relinquishes a sense of himself to the point that he becomes a “Wildman” (Yearwood, 2005).

From the above quote, madness can be interpreted as the trait of social inadequacy polarised by society's cultural beliefs. Therefore, it's arguable that the author character trait of madness is a form of othering which is reversely used to agitate for consciousness Konga distances himself from the comforts of society and uses his mad antics to rebel against the forces of environmental attrition.

The author also deploys him to challenge the Pexton oil merchants who have ravaged the lives of the people of Kosawa through decades-long environmental pollution. The author uses Konga’s lunacy to protest the grotesque nature of ecological degradation, where he emerges as a clown who stands up against the dominant and authoritative oppression of the Pexton oil company.

Madness is constructed to highlight how oppression has disoriented and disadvantaged humanity in multiple ways. Stephen Mutie in “Labelling and Othering: (Re) Engaging Wangari Maathai’s Madwoman Tag in *Unbowed: A Memoir* avers that madness in environmental protest serves as the confluence of intersecting identity makers (4). Mutie discusses Wangari Maathai as a madwoman who,

For example, in Unbowed, Maathai’s “madwoman” tag arises from being too educated, successful, and talented (2007, 146). The accusation of madness levelled against her intersects with other identity markers, overlapping and resulting in a complex convergence of oppression. According to her detractors, the madwoman tag that intersects with her education made her a headstrong, uncontrollable woman. However, through this very intersection, Maathai recognises the overlapping nature of injustices happening to Wanjiku (the Kenyan poor) and the earth and identifies how they are interconnected. This knowledge births an inclusive version of environmentalism that simultaneously advocates for justice for all people and the planet (Mutie, 2022).

Mutie’s construction of madness in agitating for environmentalism is based on the idea that Wangari Maathai label as a “madwoman” is a way of suppressing her efforts to voice out evils done on the environment. The notion of her being called “mad” severs her identity and is meant to tame her desire for change. From the above quote the characterization of madness acts as subtle strategy which is relatable to the identity construction of Konga as a madman that seeks to challenge the Pexton oil company. Madness is thus a temporary shift of hierarchies where the lowly placed

madman (Konga), a minority in Kosawa challenges the status quo in a comic space that underlines the urge to restore order through “madness”. Additionally, Mutie is of the idea that the prism of Wangari’s labelling as a mad opens up the vortex of reading environmentalism, the label of madness attached to her, and (re)uses it as a tag with some degree of privilege.” (1).

As described by the narrator, Konga’s ecological agency in protesting against the pilferage of the environment is seen when he emerges at the village meeting with determination never seen before;

Before us all stood a never-before-seen version of our village madman. As if all authority on earth belonged to him, Konga barked at the Pexton men, told them to sit down, hadn’t they heard him, were their ears so full of wax that sound couldn’t penetrate it? The meeting wasn’t over, it was just beginning. The Leader, maddened by Konga’s audacity, and running short on the decorum he’d brought from Bézam, reciprocated the bark, asking how to dare a madman speak to him, Pexton’s representative, in that manner. Konga chuckled, before responding that he had the right to speak to anyone any way he liked, an answer that prompted the Leader to turn to Woja Beki and demand to know why Woja Beki was standing there like an idiot, tolerating this insolent fool. Konga cleared his throat everything in it and spat out what we imagined was a glob of dark yellow phlegm between the Leader’s feet (Mbue, 2022, p. 10).

In the madman’s image, Konga kidnaps the Pexton driver, confiscates the car keys, and arrives at the meeting to confront the perpetrators of environmental pollution whose oil drilling activities have poisoned Kosawa. As Kosawa custom dictates that touching a crazy would result in death, Konga’s reputation as the village lunatic simultaneously isolates him. It provides communal solidarity, as women take turns preparing his meals. Therefore, Konga represents what Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* terms as “A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to

the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects”. (Nixon, 2011) Nixon’s rendition of discussing environmental attrition is depicted through the picaresque of mad Konga who resists the global conglomerate seeking to displace his people. His madness engages the excesses of the foreign powers who continually rob Kosawa of its natural resources. The author deploys the mad trope to counter-construct the penance for his ancestor’s transgression, he is thought to be seized by an evil entity; his sickness exempts him from community obligations.

Being forbidden and still being provided care for is a paradox that details Konga’s uniqueness in the community of Kosawa. Konga operates within the boundaries of the Otherized minority, who were raised to mock the higher authority represented by Pexton oil activities. In a crude humour Konga, the village madman challenges the impunity of global oil merchants responsible for the destruction of the neo-colonial state of Kosawa. As argued by Nehama Aschkenasy in “Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnavalesque in a Biblical Tale”;

The carnivalesque spirit, therefore, is a form of popular, “low” humour that celebrates the anarchic and grotesque elements of authority and of humanity in general and encourages the temporary “crossing of boundaries” where the town fool is crowned, the higher classes are mocked, and the differences between people are flattened as their shared humanity, the body becomes the subject of crude humour (Aschkenasy, 2007).

Konga’s characterization as an outcast and labelled as a madman in the novel is used to raise the critical concern of environmental pollution by the Pexton oil company. Although he seldom appears, he is deployed as the catalyst for the plot, giving him a mysterious, sage-like quality. His first acknowledgement as a key member of the Kosawa community is when he attends the village meeting where deliberations are held with the Pexton representatives.

Although his choice to take on the Pexton employees by snatching their car keys is seen as irrational or insane, he articulates his reasoning

well, suggesting that he is either less insane than the locals believe or that the town deserved somebody crazy to launch its revolt. The madness in Konga thus is a satirical character and operates in the carnival spirit of Bakhtinian laughter. As a madman, Konga is treated with contempt since madness is associated with evil atonement. However, in this brief cameo that Konga is introduced in the novel and his interactions with the people of Kosawa, he emerges as an inspiration to the villagers who seek to negotiate with the Pexton representatives on environmental degradation.

As a madman, Konga is less important to the villagers until he surprisingly sows the seed of revolution in Kosawa. His orthodox means of holding hostage the three officials of Pexton and their driver is opposed by the people of Kosawa. Still, either way, he doesn't relent in rebelling against the dilapidated state of Kosawa that results from decades of environmental pollution.

Konga is painted as the lead champion of ecological consciousness by his schemed actions that shock his village mates and who against the treatment of the villagers who despise him as the village madman, leads his fellow villagers in seeking redress for the ecological damage done to their village. Konga's madness leads him to operate in a world of his own; as Mbue implores in the text, his madness is the starting point to rallying and addressing the environmental attrition caused by the Pexton oil company on Kosawa.

Agency of the Clowns

Jakani and Sakani are portrayed as mediums with special powers within the community of Kosawa. The twins use their powers in mystery and are cultural knowledge carriers of the traditions of Kosawa that are used to lead the community on the preservation of the environment. They are seen as a conduit between the spirit and the human world and are not required to adhere to the same cultural customs, such as marriage, as the rest of society. The twins' existence is intertwined deeply with the spiritual world and the natural environment. For instance, their birth and early

childhood are described as a mystery which is imperative to their uniqueness to the community of Kosawa. They are personified as characters with a deep connection with the environment.

One of our grandfathers, told us the twin' mother had been in labour for a week, moaning in pain so loudly for seven nights that no one in Kosawa had been able to sleep, not even the insects and birds and animals, all of whom began chirping and tweeting and bleating and barking and oinking collectively every night, their sounds growing wider until the labouring woman's screams crescendoed to a peak, at which point the twins came out, looking like average babies except for one closed eye apiece and large heads with a patch of gray hair of their chins. Another of our grandfathers told us that, back when he was a little boy, he used to play hiding and seeking with the twins until Jakani began seeing playmates no one else could see and finding things no one had hidden, and Sakani started healing his playmates' cuts and scrapes with leaves he dashed into the forest to find chanting healings prayers (Mbue, 2021, p. 65).

The passage above traces the ecological sensibility of the twins from the onset of their lives. It describes how the twins have a spiritual connection with Mother Nature. For the two, the environment is a sacred shrine where healing of the body and soul happens. Jakani and Sakani believe that the physical environment and the human world should exist harmoniously. The turbulent birth that resulted in them is an allegory of the ecological disaster happening to Kosawa. The author uses grotesque realism that portrays an image of the exaggerated childbirth of the twins to highlight the universal importance of the environment to human and animal worlds.

Donelle Dreese in "Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literature", "argues against the hierarchy that has divided humans and nature and promotes a biocentric viewpoint that recognizes the need for a mutually beneficial connection for a sustainable ecosystem" (Dreese, 2002). The twins therefore show the symbiotic importance of the natural environment and humankind existing mutually,

whereby herbal medicine and spiritual centres are located in the forest. Jakani and Sakani unique lives embellish a spiritual way of life that places Mother Nature as the refuge for mankind.

The twins are instrumental in fighting the war against Pexton's destruction of Kosawa. The twins use their mystic powers to serve and protect the community of Kosawa against its enemies. Using their spiritual gifts of erasing memories of their victims the twins detain the Pexton employees in their hut a move described by the narrator as dangerous,

Much of the men of Kosawa recognized the danger the twins' hut posed, there was no better place for them to go to prepare for a potential confrontation with soldiers. It is unlikely that, in those hours after the village meeting, some of our fathers cowered when the twins told them to enter the hut, while the rest of them urged the frightened ones to stand tall and be men. Or maybe Jakani chanted a solo that made everyone file in like ants marching at their leader. (67)

In the above excerpt, Jakani and his brother display their immense authority over the Pexton captives and fellow villagers in leading the fight against the oppressive forces that have destroyed the flora and fauna of Kosawa. The comical scene where the outcast twins in Kosawa take over and command everyone into submission radiates a temporary shift in hierarchies in the fight against environmental degradation in Kosawa. The twins use their spiritual charms to wage a war on Pexton on behalf of Kosawa. As explained by the narrator, the exercise of tapping into the brains of the Pexton men is a cultural tool for countering those deemed as enemies of the community which necessitates a tough action, in this regard the twins' mystic powers are used to punish the Pexton injustices,

Jakani had reached into the men's brains and turned off their memories. He must have restarted them only when the men were safe from his hut after they'd only left the confines of where the spirit and human worlds intersect. If they'd known what the twins were doing to them, our fathers

wouldn't have complained, knowing that everything they did was good for Kosawa. They would have been thankful that, briefly shutting down their consciousness, Jakani had protected them from coming face to face with the spirit, an experience no mortal survives (68).

As described in the above quote, the move to erase the memory and make the employees docile is an act of laughter used to tame the perpetrators of environmental pollution that causes chaos in Kosawa. The narrator explains that the mythical powers of the twins have cause a temporarily shift that brings together all people in Kosawa and Jakani and Sakani who seen as clowns take charge. The world is turned upside down, and the elitists' global capitalists represented by Pexton are triumphed upon by the lowly placed village mediums who use magic to construct a surreal world when the oppressed rise to challenge the oppressor. The people of Kosawa reverie the power of the spiritual world as explained in the account of the twin's hut;

Though we'd never seen anything inside the hut, some of us had heard noises coming from it- the growl of animals interwoven with the rumble of thunder; babies singing a folk song; pots and pans banging over the sound of people laughing; a woman in labour begging the foetus never to come out; a man passing musical gas. When we told these things to our friends and cousins in other villages, they refused to believe us- their villages had mediums and medicine men but no version of the twins- but we believed each other, foe we knew, that the twins were capable of deeds many deem impossible (Mbue, 2021,64).

Jakani and Sakani are characters defined with hyperbolicism and exaggerations that draw parallels with the carnivalesque element of grotesque. The imagery used to illustrate their hut shows the excessive profanity of ecological disaster and symbolizes the state of Kosawa under the deluge of Pexton oil pollution. The ugly environment the twins live in is a fable that captures the pandemonium of the ecological devastation that claims Kosawa's prosperity. Neglected by their government whose leader is referred to as "His

Excellency”, the people of Kosawa turn to village clowns who’s live at the periphery of the societal hierarchy for guidance in dealing with the captured Pexton employees.

Agency of the “Drunk Journalist”

Hellon Habila deploys Zaq as a character suffering from alcoholism, a veteran journalist, and a risk-taker who implores the idea of trekking down the Niger River to pursue kidnapped Isabel Floode. Zaq is a chaotic character whose professional life has nipped after losing his job. As captured by the author, Zaq drunk characterisation is used to foreground the problematic lives of the people of the Niger Delta. Drunkenness is symbolic of the proliferation of the Niger Delta whereby Zaq represents the polluted Niger Delta. He is the guide and mentor to Rufus whom they have a close inter-character relationship that highlights the deep problems that permeate the Niger Delta. Zaq has noble intentions, but his methods are dubious, and he has little control over his addictions and impulses. Within the chaotic life of Zaq, we see the metaphor of bodily destruction that nods to the carnivalesque signifiers of grotesque and chaos. At the spectre of carnival, physical functioning is ritual because the internal world transforms input from the exterior world and vice versa. For instance, let's consider the episode when Zaq indulges in drinking and afterward pukes out;

We left. Zaq looked as if he were about to throw up, his face was sweaty and he raised the bottle to his lips many times before the alertness returned to his eyes. We often stopped to rest, and the river grew narrower each time we set out again. Soon we were in a dense mangrove swamp; the water underneath us had turned foul and sulfurous; insects rose from the surface in swarms to settle in a mobile cloud above us, biting our arms faces, and ears. The boy and the old man appeared to be oblivious to the insects; they kept their eyes narrowed, focussed on burrowing the boat through the gnarled, hanging roots that grew out of the water like proboscises gasping for air. The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and in

front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with Oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots (Habilla 2010, p. 5).

The above passage reveals the symbolic destruction of the body and its carnivalization to project environmental damage as carried out by human kind. In the Bakhtinian thrust, the image of Zaq throwing out presents the premise of food or alcohol as an equivalent of man's greed; the reckless actions of subduing the earth through oil exploitation. The letting out of filthy vomit draws to the carnival theatre in Middle Ages where the bodily excrement appropriates the contaminated Niger River that Zaq navigates to highlight the vile destruction. Zaq's body is equalled to the polluted land that displays decay. As Bakhtin avers, the acts of the body ponder that;

This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecating, and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing) as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body - all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old or new body. In all these events the beginning and ending of life are closely linked and interwoven, (Bakhtin, 1984)

The grotesque element mentioned by Bakhtin ridicules the apertures of worldly features such as the natural environment. Bakhtinian reversal of bodily functions such as the mouth excreting (vomiting) instead of taking food in, presents the image of the reversal of twists in nature. Zaq's image of vomiting as they ride down the polluted Niger River symbolically points to the authors' attempt to protest against environmental destruction through the subversion of the body's function (Zaq's mouth). Zaq, like all the people who are pushed into peril by hidden powers, takes Rufus on a wild goose hunt for Mrs. Floode which doesn't bear any tangible fruits. Zaq's attempt to convince Rufus to pursue the kidnapping story highlights his conviction to address the environmental chaos that has decimated the people. For instance, in the opening chapter, we

get the following dialogue between the two characters (Zaq and Rufus);

His shirt was wet under the arms and at the back. He was still fighting the sudden fever that had dogged him since we left Port Harcourt, and the more his health had deteriorated, the more he had taken to philosophizing over almost anything; a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water, a gathering of rain clouds in the clear sky. But I was glad his mind was still capable of philosophizing. The farther we ventured into the forest, the more I found myself turning to him with questions (Habilla, 2010).

The above passage elaborates on how Zaq's journalism is a way of shaking up the establishment and exposing the real damage behind oil activities. In his conversation the author uses Zaq journalistic inquest into environmental pollution by oil companies he tries to illuminate the extent of damage that ravages the Niger Delta.

The children have suffered the most under the exploitative Pexton oil company in Kosawa for generations. For instance, Sarada Balagopalan, in "On the Banality of Attrition in the Lives of Chronically Marginalized Children", argues that children face structural Violence which disrupts the lives of entire populations (3), Similarly in *How Beautiful We Were* specifically in chapter three, the children recount the pleasant atmosphere under which Kosawa thrived. The people were satisfied with their lives despite having little material wealth. Their requirements were supplied by their primitive shelters, which lacked any contemporary technology. Neighbours' looked out for one another. The environment was pleasant for the children to play in together. This is captured when they narrate;

Some of our parents weren't born when Pexton first arrived, back when the valley contained only Kosawa and footpaths lined with trees around which animals frolicked and birds sang. "Rest assured that we won't be here for long," the government men came out of their huts with open mouths and hands

on hips to see the strangers who'd appeared in their village. Even after a detailed explanation of the mission, our people still couldn't understand why the oil-seeking men couldn't plant palm trees and make palm oil if it was the Oil they wanted (Balagopalan, 2023).

The children question the oil activities in Kosawa and its colonial past. As a key voice in the novel, the children narrate the dwindling state of Kosawa which was once an environmental paradise where flora and fauna flourished. The children's perspective helps in capturing the state of affairs in Kosawa which shows their heightened agency in governance and environmental affairs. The Children serve the purpose of a "Greek chorus" by providing interpretations of the happenings and moving the plot forward. They also provide light on aspects of the community's cultural environment and highlight the striking contrasts between that milieu and the one inhabited by the officials of Pexton and those from the wider world.

The children are used to juxtapose and contrast the Pexton representatives' depravity and inability to empathize with Kosawa, despite Pexton claiming to care strongly for their children. The collective narrator claims, "We were children, like their children, and we wanted them to understand that" (5). Six of its eleven chapters' titles are voiced as the children to highlight the plight. The children take turns narrating every other chapter in this book. As the story progresses, it becomes more and more evident that when the text refers to "the children," it relates mainly to Thula and the seven other students who accompanied her to school in Lokunja. There are instances when the voices of the youngsters are provided by other youngsters of Thula's age group. Apart from Thula, neither of these children has a name, and they seldom exhibit distinctive qualities nor go through unique life experiences. After some time, the seven students in the class are reduced to five males serving as Thula's companions and anti-heroes. They often look up to Thula's beliefs and behave in a manner that other characters find objectionable in the name of justice.

Agency of the Children

Among the children in *How Beautiful We Were*, Thula is the lead protagonist. She is a strong and determined woman, rising to prominence as a leader in the fight for Kosawa's freedom. Thula is a little girl who comes of age to carry the burden of Kosawa's destiny, forcing her to battle against the tyrannical rule of the unnamed leader called "His Excellency". It may be utopian to assume that a young lady like Thula might overturn a corrupt American firm like Pexton. Still, as the leading voice of the children, Thula represents the voiceless and oppressed majority who suffer the brunt of environmental attrition. Thula's conviction on the need to tackle attrition is shown when she calls upon fellow children to join in the fight against Pexton,

There was no better time to start biting Pexton than now. Kosawa was in danger of becoming uninhabitable. We were about to start getting married, after which children would follow—how could we allow our children to suffer like we once did? If we tried something and failed, wouldn't it be better to one day tell the children that we'd done everything within our capacity? (Mbue 2021).

Imbolo Mbue uses Thula as the dynamic narrator who strives to fight against the dual exploitation of the corrupt government and the Pexton oil company. Thula's tumultuous life is filled with changes in governance and environmental agency. She is one of the main characters used in the novel to illustrate the ambivalent nature of the climate change crisis. For a moment she addresses her fellow children as adults to reinforce the point of protecting Kosawa's ecosystem. Her line of thought is that if the continued environmental destruction is not addressed then the society of Kosawa would cease to exist.

Thula dreams of fully liberating the people of Kosawa from the drilling operations of the American oil corporation Pexton that pollutes the village's water supply. Her life is intertwined as an activist and teacher who fights for the preservation and restoration of the environment as described by the children: "One angry woman did everything, and she failed" (343).

Thula's storyline depicts the narrator's fantasy to fight for the people of Kosawa. It can be interpreted as the ironic account of a young girl who seems too concerned about the effects of oil pollution in her village of Kosawa leads to her tragic end. However, her motivation leads her to pursue higher education in the United States, where she interacts with other protesters and broadens her understanding of Kosawa's situation.

Her entire life has been shaped by tragedy, and she has inherited her family's unhappiness in the face of wrongdoing. Thula is helpless against the powerful Pexton and the corrupt government in Bezam who collude to oppress and destroy the lives of the people in Kosawa. Her story of struggle to thrive in the polluted Kosawa can be alluded to in the opening remarks of the novel which predicts the dark times that befall Kosawa; "WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead." (1)

She finds fulfilment in her mission to set Kosawa free and would much rather be working toward this goal than spending time with her lover. For her part, Thula seems to be brimming over with naivety or crazy hope, which she needs to keep fighting but which others dismiss out of hand. The villagers often dismiss her opinions as frivolous because she is a woman and has never been married.

In the end, Thula returns to Africa, where she works as a teacher and leads enormous demonstrations against the corrupted regime that allows Pexton to continue polluting the environment and spreading illness among the populace. Thula spends her entire adult life participating in nonviolent protests to effect change, yet ultimately, she is generally unsuccessful.

The government ignores her plea which is good news for her students in Bezam since she can continue to lecture them on the evils of

bureaucratic corruption without fear of reprisal. After her tragic death in a blast, Thula's name acquires a new significance, and the unborn child she was carrying is considered a potential redeemer. Her notoriety is evidence of the power of her optimism and optimism about change.

ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE AND OIL ON WATER

Characters in *How Beautiful Were* and *Oil on Water* show distinct traits that represent their desire to address environmental attrition in the fictional narratives. The central premise is that character eco-consciousness is the spirited desire to agitate for ecological sensibility and the punishment for those responsible for environmental destruction. Eco-critics argue that the presentation of the body of the eco-fiction novel is to portray the artistic imagination of how characters and their stories construct the realities of humanity and nature. In this, regard Lawrence Buell *et. al* in "Literature and Environment" points out that, "across these various subfields of research, ecocriticism has sought to investigate how particular templates of storytelling and image-making shape humans' real-life interactions with the natural world in

ways that are historically and culturally distinctive" (Buell et al., 2011). The study theorises that the creative accounts of the two authors deploy characters who seek to tackle environmental attrition and can be interpreted in the carnivalesque signifiers of madness, grotesque, and parody as conveyors of dialogic imagination of eco-critical consciousness.

Through the projection of the clownish characterization the author establishes a parodic, satirical and temporary space where the serious ecological consciousness is highlighted through proxies who speak truth to power and topple the authoritative hierarchies behind the menace of environmental attrition. In *How Beautiful We Were*, Imbolo Mbue creates characters with traits like madness, humourist, and satirical accounts that help foreground their ecological consciousness in the carnivalesque essence. The

theorisation is that the traits of madness and clowns are used to dramatize the authors' ingenious desire to save Kosawa which is ravaged by environmental pollution that leads to the loss of lives and destruction of habitable land.

Similarly in *Oil on Water*, the author deploys characters with animist traits which helps display a spirited concern regarding tackling environmental attrition in the text. The various characters' dispositions in *Oil on Water* elevate their status from ordinary and challenge the dominant spectre of oil pollution that bedevils the Niger Delta. Therefore, Hellon Habila creates characters with complex storylines wafted with an ecological message.

Habila story is set in the Niger Delta. It involves characters with eco-critical agencies who reveal the two worlds of Oil: wealthy barons taking what they want while polluting water, destroying communities, and massacring animals and plants, and those on the other side of the equation, who live in fear and lack clean water, healthy fish, and livestock. The discussion on the presentation of characterization and eco-sensibility is thus examined through the following categories; humourist, clownish and heroic characters.

Subverting Environmental Attrition through Heroic Characterisation

Some characters in the two novels show a spirited fight against environmental attrition through heroic actions that show ecological agency. In the carnivalesque lens, heroic characters seek to redeem their respective communities from the claws of environmental destructors. Heroic characters therefore subvert and turn upside nature and conceptualizes the stark nature of environmental realities. As observed by Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson in "Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*";

The novel might be envisioned as merely a dream, a fantasy, in which only the logic of the inside out applies. However, the protagonists soon realize that their road trip is real when representatives of the highway authorities appear to tell them the road is

impassable. The ultimate and last turn happens when the narrator is reborn after he is killed by a rockslide caused by Vegard. Hauge's »It's the Dream«³⁸ is now actually played out: time opens up, the mountain opens up, the dream finally opens to the genius loci of Western Norway. Apocalypse has metamorphosed into utopia or Western Norway; for the narrator, that is the same thing. In the carnivalesque universe of the novel, the apocalyptic end entails a new beginning (Thorunn, 2022)

In the above excerpt, the scholar argues that the body of an eco-fiction uses the logic of inversion to highlight the shift of normalcy and the environmental grotesque. In this carnival space, the study argues that characters' storylines construct accounts of heroism to subvert the dominant power structures that enable environmental attrition the study considers the following characters Thula Nangi and Rufus.

Rufus

All the action in *Oil on Water* occurs through the eyes of Rufus, the protagonist. He is a novice journalist looking for a breakthrough that would catapult him into the top tier of reporters and get the attention of his boss, the newspaper's Chairman. Since he is absent when his sister suffers the two greatest tragedies of her life; the scarification of her face in an oil fire and the abandonment by her husband John, Rufus is crafted as a liberating force that seeks to undermine the activities of the destructive environmental agents. As a scribe, his journalistic activities enable him to navigate both sides of the story; the people affected by pollution in the Niger Delta and those causing the pollution.

The author uses the character Rufus as a nondescript journalist who takes on powerful individuals melting out environmental destruction in the Niger Delta. Rufus is deployed by the author as a carnival character who interacts freely with the unlikeliest characters and emerges unscathed. It is through this free interaction and expressive freedom that he debases the officialdom decapitating the eco-system in the Niger Delta. The author taps into the subversive

power of Rufus' characterisation to illuminate the utter environmental destruction. Rufus has inherent eco-consciousness ingrained in his journalistic activities. Rufus uses his journalism skills to raise awareness about environmental pollution's effects and exposes the extent of damage by oil pollution. This elevates him to become an influential figure whose exploits as a journalist see him at the epicentre of a white woman Isabel Floode kidnapping. Assigned as a key negotiator by James Floode, the author uses Rufus to lampoon the officialdom upstaged by the carnival spectre and is in no position to negotiate and secure the freedom of the captured British woman. The construction of Rufus as an alternative voice restructures authority to address the plight of environmental attrition and its decimation of the people's social economic abilities.

He uses his professional expertise to highlight the extent of damage in the Niger Delta. Rufus challenges Floode the Oil executive who speaks negatively about the situation in Nigeria. James Floode, the face of the multinational oil industry, tries to impose the narrative that Nigeria's poverty and sad state falls squarely on the indigenous people.

Rufus flags down Mr Floode's colonial mentality of subtle demonization of Africa as the narrator says, "Such great potential, you people could easily become the Japan of Africa, but the corruption is incredible" (73). Rufus responds to this dig by Mr Floode which embodies a self-righteous attitude by averring that the environmental destruction is solely orchestrated by oil barons in cahoots with the government. Rufus blurs the hierarchical structures to speak truth to the powers behind the environmental misery without flinching even though he is at the presence of a powerful and key player in the oil business. The young scribe describes the deplorable situation in the town of Junction. Coincidentally, he explicitly names the unholy alliance of the government and multinationals ganging up to decimate the natural environment in pursuit of monetary gains. He proceeds as follows;

I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish, and poisoning the farmlands. All they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good and that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry, and tired (104).

The above response from Rufus illuminates how he challenges the dominant narrative spewed to cover up environmental pollution. He counters this with the carnival essence of promulgating truth in a symbolic disruption that goes against the enablers of environmental attrition. Connected to his conviction, Rufus avers that the militancy, loss of environmental aura, and human suffering are caused by the inherent power structures profiteering from oil extraction while the Niger Delta undergoes ruin. Through Rufus's protagonist course in the novel, the author severs the normalcy of political and conglomerate power structures that combine to bleed the people and the environment. As recounted by the narrator,

One day, early in the morning, Chief Malabo called the whole village to a meeting. Of course, he had heard the murmurs from the young people, and the suspicious whispers from the old people, all wondering what it was he had been discussing with the oilmen and the politicians. Well, they had made an offer, they had offered to buy the whole village, and with the money—and yes, there was a lot of money, more money than any of them had ever imagined—and with the money they could relocate elsewhere and live a rich life. But Chief Malabo had said no, on behalf of the whole village he had said no. This was their ancestral land; this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried. They'd been born here, they'd grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked for anything (123).

His agency reminisces a carnival character who profanes the architects responsible for environmental attrition. As Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his world* describes authority in relation to the Middle Ages and the act of laughter;

... [I]n the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realised without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance. On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing patterns of things and reinforced them (Bakhtin, 1984).

Bakhtin's explanation of carnival spectacle as resistance to authoritative structures opines that characters represent the different roles that are swapped in the temporary space of the novel and that it helps us understand how dominant structures are upstaged. From the above argument, it is critical to examine how Rufus interaction with the militants whose activities in the Niger Delta contribute to environmental attrition in the rendition of the spectre of carnival as a show of eco-agency.

Rufus describes how the military sinks all the boats and causes them to lose their gear. They are bereft of their occupation, identity, and security in a single swift action. The military exercises its authority in this area so that it destroys everything in its path and prevents Rufus from proving his identity to the major, despite the fact that it was the major's actions that stripped Rufus of his identity in the first place (33). The climax of the military's violence is the incident in which the rogue military pours gasoline on its victims. It is both a symbolic and abhorrently brutal act that shows the bodily and environmental violence simultaneously being displayed by the author. Oil is depicted as an oxymoron that creates an image that fuses hell and heaven at the same time, it is

what divides the people in the area, and what devastates their environment to such an extent that they can no longer call their houses a home.

There is little control by citizens in the Niger Delta since their lives have been ruined by oil firms that, although promising wealth, abandon the populace as employment vanishes. Rufus's interactions with the photographer demonstrate the futility of striving to control one's destiny in this location. Rufus's success is like a pool ball that ricochets across the table. For instance, Rufus operates in a way that doesn't conform to the status quo. He vehemently exposes the brute force used by the military apparatus. Rufus shows his character dynamism in unfolding the environmental truths by using the personal power of journalism a gesture that resembles the role of carnival.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how the following characters: Konga, Thula Nangi, Jakani and Sakani, Rufus and Zaq are used to represent ecological consciousness as a critical response to tackling climate change's vagaries. The paper fronts the disruptive carnival laughter as a key element of protest in addressing environmental attrition in the twenty-first century. In this regard, the paper has established that characterization used by the authors of the selected texts vividly constructs ecological tales that educate on the need to address environmental attrition. Further on, the discussion revealed how the two authors represent ecological consciousness through the elements of carnival displayed by the characters. It is also noted that characters play a critical role in sermonizing on the gory effects of environmental attrition consequently, the elements of carnival specifically madness, clowns, and heroic characterisation are used to subvert environmental attrition. The paper emphasizes the importance of characterisation in fostering ecological sensibility and the need for human beings to reorient how they perceive the environment.

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