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Resisting and Empowering as a Result of Hybridized Identity Formation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract: This article employs Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories to analyze resistance and hybridized identity formation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). It examines the characters' rejection of colonial mimicry and forced assimilation within the third space, exploring how Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and unhomeliness manifest as consequences of colonization. The article highlights how the pursuit of cultural hybridity can paradoxically lead to displacement, while Mbue's novel critiques environmental injustices and the cultural marginalization of the colonized, underscoring the appropriation of ancestral landscapes vital to African identity. Through theoretical and textual analysis, this article identifies diverse forms of cultural and identity-based resistance. The female protagonist, developing a hybridized identity through migration, leads a movement against colonial exploitation. Indigenous characters also resist, reclaiming their homeland. The novel powerfully depicts characters shaped by colonial dynamics, offering insights into postcolonial identity and resistance. This paper contributes to understanding how individuals navigate and resist oppressive colonial structures, fostering new forms of cultural expression and belonging within their ancestral lands. The article also emphasizes the critical role of reclaiming cultural heritage and identity in challenging external domination and asserting self-determination in the face of historical exploitation.

Keywords: Hybridity; Mimicry; Resistance; Third Space; Unhomeliness.

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1. Introduction

Imbolo Mbue, a Cameroonian-American novelist, has established herself as a significant voice in contemporary literature, particularly noted for her profound exploration of themes such as migration, displacement, and social injustice. Her debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), garnered critical acclaim and paved the way for her subsequent work. Mbue's second novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, published in 2021, represents a strategic advancement in her literary project, delving deeper into the intricate complexities of postcolonialism, hybrid identity, and cultural resistance within an African setting. Set in the fictional village of Kosawa, the novel powerfully narrates the community's struggle against the American oil corporation, Castella. Mbue masterfully depicts the devastating legacy of colonialism, endemic political corruption, and environmental exploitation, thereby highlighting the Kosawa community's fight to preserve its land, cultural heritage, and collective identity.

How Beautiful We Were transcends a localized narrative to serve as a potent reflection of a broader historical context, where the enduring impacts of colonialism continue to shape social, political, and cultural structures across nations. Within this framework, the character of Thula—a young woman who migrates to America and later leads her community's resistance—embodies the multifaceted challenges of navigating unhomeliness, ambivalence, and the intricate process of identity reconstruction in the postcolonial era. Through her characters' experiences, Mbue vividly illustrates how the scars of colonialism persist long after formal independence, profoundly influencing individual lives and communal struggles for agency and self-definition.

This article undertakes a comprehensive analysis of *How Beautiful We Were*, focusing specifically on its depiction of colonialism and its lasting effects on both individual and collective identities. Our primary objective is to examine how characters negotiate and resist the cultural hierarchies imposed by colonial powers, while simultaneously striving to safeguard their indigenous values and traditions. Employing Homi Bhabha's influential postcolonial theoretical framework—particularly his concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, the third space, and unhomeliness—this article investigates how Mbue's characters reclaim agency within environments profoundly shaped by displacement and cultural interference. Furthermore, the study highlights the inextricable link between postcolonial conditions and the migrant experience, demonstrating how the formation of a hybrid identity, despite its inherent challenges, emerges as a crucial source of empowerment and resistance.

Considering the burgeoning scholarship on postcolonial literature and the increasing scholarly interest in representations of cultural resistance in contemporary works, a significant research gap exists concerning a holistic analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* through the specific lens of Homi Bhabha's theories. While previous studies have often focused on the novel's environmental themes or its broader narrative of resistance, fewer scholarly works have concentrated on a structured analysis of hybrid identity formation as a dynamic site of resistance, utilizing Bhabha's key conceptual tools. This article aims to fill this gap by arguing that Mbue's novel offers a complex and multifaceted portrayal of postcolonial identity, wherein characters are not merely passive victims of colonial circumstances but active agents in shaping their own meaning and identity.

This article thus contends that *How Beautiful We Were* portrays hybridized identity formation as a dynamic site of resistance, illustrating how characters navigate ambivalence, unhomeliness, and cultural fragmentation to challenge colonial domination and assert their collective agency. This study seeks not only to deepen the understanding of Mbue's novel but also to provide fresh insights into postcolonial theories and their application in the analysis of contemporary literature.

2. Literature Review

This article critically examines Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* through the theoretical framework of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. While numerous scholars have explored Mbue's work, and a significant body of literature exists on Bhabha's concepts, a synthesized analysis that deeply interrogates the intersection of their ideas within Mbue's narrative remains an area ripe for further exploration. This review synthesizes key scholarly contributions, drawing on specific articles and books, to establish the current understanding and identify the specific gap this research aims to fill.

Scholarly analyses of *How Beautiful We Were* frequently highlight its potent critique of environmental injustice and neocolonial exploitation. Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty, in their article "Extraction and Environmental Injustices: (De)colonial Practices in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*" (2023), underscore Mbue's discourse, arguing for the mapping of environmental injustices alongside other structural inequalities, including neocolonialism's racial, economic, and epistemic manifestations (125). This perspective is echoed by Brygida Gasztold in "Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice" (2022), who emphasizes how the novel's depiction of colonial extractivism resonates with contemporary issues of resource allocation and its lasting impact on Indigenous communities. Musaib Junejo and Tania Shabir Shaikh provide a

practical eco-critical study in “A Postcolonial Eco-Critical Study of *How Beautiful We Were*” (2021), detailing how oil corporations exploit resources, pollute land, and foster economic inequality within the narrative (67). Tanimomo Oluseun Adekunmi, in *Contemporary African Novels as Narratives of the World Risk Society* (2021), further contextualizes Mbue within the tradition of African novels, noting her focus on underclass characters and a realist portrayal of social conditions (168).

Beyond environmental themes, critics have also engaged with the novel’s exploration of agency and resistance. Mwaga et al., in their article “Dramatization of Agency and Ecological Consciousness in *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue and *Oil on Water* by Hellon Habila” (2024), analyze how Mbue, through “clownish characterization,” creates a satirical space where ecological consciousness is amplified by proxy characters challenging authority (171). Biama et al. in “A Voice of Resistance and Activism” (2022) highlight Mbue’s strategic use of various resistance approaches to combat environmental degradation and promote restoration, positioning her as a crucial voice for African communities facing ecological crises.

Interwoven with these themes, the concept of identity and cultural negotiation is also a significant point of analysis, often drawing implicitly or explicitly from postcolonial theory. Shabrang and Tajik, in “Facilitating the Process of Integration to Host Culture for Female Immigrants through Hybridized Identities in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*” (2024), while analyzing Mohsin Hamid’s work, offer insights relevant to Mbue’s narrative by suggesting that migrant identity shifts occur not just physically but profoundly within the symbolic and psychological being (27).

Homi K. Bhabha’s foundational concepts, particularly hybridity, mimicry, and the third space, offer a powerful lens for understanding these complex dynamics. Homi K. Bhabha himself, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), sought to define hybridity not as a simple assimilation, but as a generative space that offers the colonized potential for agency and legitimacy beyond the colonial condition. However, the application and nuanced understanding of these concepts in relation to contemporary postcolonial narratives, particularly those addressing environmental concerns, are still evolving. Brill Shouma Amrulloh, in “Cultural Identities on Hybridity and Mimicry in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*” (2014), cautions that in hybridity, older identities are not easily erased but are deeply influenced by new cultural formations (4). Dehdari, Darabi, and Sepehrmanesh, in “A Study of the Notion of Bhabhasque’s Hybridity” (2013), further stress the centrality of hybridity, exploring its interaction with related concepts like the “third space,” ambivalence, and mimicry in postcolonial discourse (135).

While existing scholarship effectively identifies the environmental critiques and themes of resistance and identity in *How Beautiful We Were*, and critically engages with Bhabha's theoretical contributions, there remains a distinct need for a study that synthesizes these elements by specifically applying Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space to analyze the multifaceted nature of agency and resistance within the context of postcolonial environmental exploitation in Mbue's novel. Many studies analyze these themes separately, or engage with Bhabha's theory in a more general sense. This research aims to bridge this gap by demonstrating how the very negotiation of hybridized identities, influenced by neocolonial environmental practices, shapes the forms and possibilities of resistance available to the characters in *How Beautiful We Were*, thereby offering a more granular understanding of Mbue's powerful narrative through a dedicated postcolonial theoretical lens.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article employs Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical framework to critically analyze Imbolo Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. While Bhabha's work offers a rich vocabulary for understanding the complexities of colonial and postcolonial encounters, this research will specifically focus on the interrelated concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space as analytical tools to explore the formation and negotiation of identity, agency, and resistance within the novel's specific context of environmental exploitation and neocolonialism. These concepts have been chosen for their particular relevance in understanding how marginalized communities, like the citizens of Kosawa, navigate imposed structures and assert their presence.

Bhabha, in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), posits that cultural encounters are rarely pure but result in a "cultural mixed-ness" (Huddart 4) that gives rise to hybridity. This research will analyze how the characters in *How Beautiful We Were* exhibit hybridized identities, caught between traditional Kosawan ways and the encroaching Western influence represented by the oil company. We will examine how this suspension between cultures, as Bhabha describes, can be "mobilized through a passage through a Third Space" (*Location of Culture* 36), suggesting that this liminal space is not merely a point of confusion but a potential site for agency.

The concept of mimicry, which Bhabha describes as a "twofold strategy" that creates similarities between the colonizer and the colonized to facilitate control (*Location of Culture* 70), will be a crucial lens. This study will investigate instances of mimicry in the novel, exploring whether characters' imitations of the colonizer's behaviors represent a form of conscious resistance, a strategy to subvert power structures, or an attempt at

assimilation that ultimately highlights the colonizer's inherent contradictions. As Bhabha notes, mimicry's effectiveness is often undermined by its inherent "almost the same, but not quite" nature, which can reveal the colonizer's anxieties and the constructedness of their authority (*Location of Culture* 75).

Crucially, this article will examine how the negotiation of hybridity and mimicry leads to the formation of Third Space. For Bhabha, the Third Space is an emergent, interstitial site where colonial discourse is disrupted and new meanings are produced. In *How Beautiful We Were*, we will analyze how characters, particularly through their collective actions and forms of resistance against the oil company, create and occupy such a space. This space will be explored not just as a psychological or cultural construct, but as a narrative terrain where Kosawans can articulate their grievances, forge new solidarities, and assert agency against the hegemonic forces.

While concepts such as stereotype, ambivalence, and unhomeliness are significant in Bhabha's broader work, they will be integrated into the analysis of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space rather than being treated as separate foci. For instance, the stereotype of the "degenerate type" (*Location of Culture* 70) often fuels the dynamics of mimicry and the need for a Third Space to resist such imposed identities. Similarly, the inherent ambivalence of colonial encounters and the feeling of unhomeliness for those displaced or dispossessed will be understood as the conditions that drive the formation and contestation of hybridized identities within the Third Space.

This article employs Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space as analytical tools to examine identity formation, agency, and resistance in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, focusing on the novel's context of environmental exploitation and neocolonialism. Rather than merely defining Bhabha's terms, this framework will actively analyze how characters negotiate their identities within the "mixed-ness" of cultural encounters (Huddart 4) and how acts of mimicry, often characterized by their "almost the same, but not quite" nature (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 75), serve as a complex strategy that can blur into resistance and expose colonial discourse's inconsistencies. The research will investigate how these dynamics coalesce in the Third Space, an interstitial site where Kosawan characters can forge new meanings, articulate grievances, and assert agency against hegemonic forces, moving beyond imposed stereotypes and feelings of unhomeliness to create a narrative terrain for collective action and self-definition. This focused application will guide an in-depth analysis of specific characters, narrative discourse, and symbolic representations within the novel, transforming theoretical concepts into active instruments for understanding Mbue's portrayal of postcolonial struggles.

This research thus employs a qualitative textual analysis framework to critically examine Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. The methodology moves beyond interpretive summary by utilizing a close reading approach, systematically analyzing the novel's narrative, characters, symbols, and language to identify instances reflecting cultural interaction, identity negotiation, and resistance. Specifically, character portrayals (e.g., Neka, Deming), narrative discourse, and symbolic representation will be scrutinized. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space are operationalized as core analytical tools: hybridity will dissect the merging of traditional and colonizer cultures, mimicry will explore its dual function as assimilation and resistance, and the Third Space will serve as the conceptual site for analyzing emergent identities and solidarities, thereby moving beyond mere description to active dissection.

This methodological approach is distinct from interpretation, clearly outlining the analytical procedures before presenting findings. Consequently, the research questions are refined to align with this methodology: How do the narrative discourse and character portrayals in *How Beautiful We Were* illustrate the complexities of cultural hybridity in the face of colonization and migration? In what ways does mimicry, as depicted through character actions and dialogue, function as both a strategy of assimilation and a form of subtle resistance against colonial hegemony? How does the concept of the Third Space help to understand the emergence of new identities, solidarities, and forms of agency among characters navigating the intersections of tradition and imposed Western influence? To what extent do the characters' engagements with these Bhabhaian concepts contribute to their transformation into agents of resistance against colonial forces within the novel? This detailed methodology ensures a rigorous, transparent, and analytically driven application of Bhabha's theories to the novel.

4. Analysis

4.1. *Conquered Identity Notwithstanding Resistance*

Indigenous individuals undergo cultural catastrophe in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. Not only does the oil corporation disturb the entire social fabric by creating inequality that divides Kosawa, but it also makes people of Kosawa be cut off from the roots and become alien to ancestral language and culture, and religion. Thula, the female protagonist, and her friends try to maintain their culture. The effort to implement the enforced culture cannot be denied. Yaya, Thula's grandmother, even recalls that European masters from the West wanted to impose their Westernized worldviews along with their value system, language, and religion in Kosawa. "They came to tell us about their Spirit. They said their Spirit would bring us out of the darkness we didn't know we

were living in" (Mbue 207). In the process of colonization, the effort is also to teach the language and religion to spread colonialism. "If we closed our eyes and said some words in prayer, the man said, their Spirit would become our Spirit. After we died, instead of joining our ancestors in the fire and burning with them for an everlasting night...." (Mbue 208). For people in Kosawa, their land was a manifestation of their roots, culture, and identity. As a result, indigenous people attempt to change the situation by dialogue, negotiation, common ground, acquiring knowledge, and finally fighting, which reflects their wrath. They are encouraged and supported to fight by Thula in the letter they receive from her to believe even if they lose, "What is most important is that they fought...They speak to us in the language of destruction. Let's speak it to them too, since it's what they understand" (Mbue 202-203), so she sends them money for guns, encouraging them to break and burn Pexton's property. They take various resistance approaches to fight against environmental degradation, such as media, education, revolution, and age mates, among others, including bombing Western corporations' development-driven projects, breaking oil pipelines, kidnapping human and environmental resources, and infrastructure damage. There is a sense of "civil disobedience within the discipline of civility" which Bhabha considers as the "signs of spectacular resistance" (*Location of Culture* 121). Resistance is presented in many forms. Beyond the violent or non-violent binary, resistance is expressed by the colonized through demands for equality and freedom, religious opposition, economic and labor organization, mass protest, and armed and war. In colonialization, the resistance of indigenous societies against the hegemonic system can be witnessed. "When it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire... As soon as I desire, I ask to be considered" (Fanon 218).

The villagers take resistance as a tool to fight the oil company and the government. In different parts of the novel, different types of resistance against colonialism are highlighted. The first paragraph of the book announces that resistance is required, referring to the catastrophe and death that have been wrought upon Kosawa. The child narrator says: "We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting – liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil. We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers..." (Mbue 3).

Bhabha states that "I am convinced that in the language of political economy it is legitimate to represent the relations of exploitation and domination in the discursive division between the First and Third World..." (*Location of Culture* 20). Despite all resistance, the situation is getting worse. Ultimately, their homeland and soil are destroyed on account of exploitation. Clean and pure water of the big river that their

ancestors used to swim in, changed into a dirty and toxic place. Their culture, language, and religion are haunted by colonizers. "They do not speak our language to their children. They speak to them only in English. They do not recognize our Spirit, a rejection that surely makes our ancestors weep. They go to churches..." (Mbue 339). Their home, their land, means a lot to them and was inherited from their ancestors. It was, in fact, a symbol of their union identity, which was ruined as the government decided to burn Kosawa and their land on account of contamination, and their huts, land, and "ancestors' pride" turned into ashes. In the process of colonization, one of the biggest efforts is to teach the language and religion, and culture to spread colonialism. Thus, Kosawa undergoes a cultural and identity crisis, which was enforced by colonizers. "They had already begun digging a new well in what used to be our village square.... They had already uprooted what was left of the mango tree under which we had played" (Mbue 335-338). We can witness the colonizer's endeavor to enforce its own culture. They face another form of resistance, though. While colonizers are attempting to promote their religion, they are faced with humiliation: "You should have seen how hard my father and the other men of Kosawa laughed after that meeting" (Mbue 208). This cultural suppression leads to hybridity, as Ashcroft et al. claim that,

Hybridity occurs in post-colonial societies both as a result of conscious moments of cultural suppression, as when the colonial power invades to consolidate political and economic control, or when settler invaders dispossess indigenous peoples and force them to 'assimilate' to new social patterns. (Ashcroft et al. 183)

Hence, the colonizer's effort to impose assimilation is evident. In this selected novel, Mbue (2021) ends the book with the point that the children who were victims of contamination of corporations and suffered the effects of poisoned air and water by corporate companies, are now working in these companies in Europe and America, and they use oil for their cars. "Do they think about it? About the children who will suffer as we once did, just so they can have all the oil they want?" (Mbue 339). Now those children who long suffered from exploiting oil could own cars and forget Kosawa. "They do not speak our language to their children. They speak to them only in English. They do not recognize our Spirit, a rejection that surely makes our ancestors weep. They go to churches..." (Mbue 339). The next generation, who were supposed to carry their ancestors' identities, are imitating Western identity as a result of being conquered by the colonizers.

4.2. Resistance to Mimicry and Stereotypes

In post-colonialism, stereotype constructs borders. Since one vital concept in Bhabha's theoretical framework is the stereotype that the colonizer portrays the colonized as stupid, indolent, and unstable, even though they can be superior. The goal of the colonizer is to "construct the colonized as a population of degenerate types", so that they can rationalize their behavior away from justice and build the basis of the racial system in conjunction with a degrading view of the marginalized population (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 70). Sadly, sometimes the colonized are stereotyped by people in the same social group. According to post-colonialism, inferiority is mostly accepted by the colonized. Konga, who was stereotyped as a madman, was the first revolutionary person who rebelled against the colonizers. "As if all authority on earth belonged to him, Konga barked at the Pexton man" (Mbue 12). Nevertheless, mostly racial and cultural stereotypes are resisted by the colonized. The colonized have always been stereotyped as inferior and other by the colonizer. Although Pexton pretended to evoke civilization, regarding all pledges given by the government, the air was getting more contaminated. Thus, ignoring their pledges unveils the corruption and lack of civilization of the colonizers. Moreover, people from Kosawa who were stereotyped as savage and uncivilized kept their promise not to take any action to protest. "In that time we did nothing to hurt Pexton. Oil spilled on our land and we did nothing. Our children coughed and we did nothing... We had given Pexton our word. We kept it" (Mbue 251). Thus, it violates the racial stereotypes against the colonized. For Bhabha (1994), it is a strategy to demonstrate the ambivalent identity of the colonizer and the colonized. In his third article, "The Other Question", Bhabha contends that "an understanding of the processes of subjectification" can be "made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse" (67).

How Beautiful We Were illustrates how racial stereotypes have an enormous influence upon the colonized's life that results in the label of otherness for the colonized. From one point of view, they blame colonizers for being dishonorable and cruel. From the other point of view, they actively cultivate the created stereotypes by the colonizers and attempt to mimic their cultures, norms, and identities. In this novel, the idea of development has become the sharpest weapon for colonizers to give a justification for the exploitation of the indigenous people's land. Boehmer (1995) has defined colonialism as "the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and attempts to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands" (8). Due to the stereotype of a lack of development in some countries, colonizers, on the pretext of building

development, invade some regions. This never-ending stereotype causes many challenges for indigenous people who endeavor to mount a fierce resistance. They are obligated to avoid resistance by means of labelling violence and savage attack. This deplorable condition gives rise to ultimate separation or death for the colonized and protesters.

Another foremost Bhabhaian concept in this novel is mimicry, through which the colonized tends to undermine the self-confidence and stability of the colonizer's identity. Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation. A complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which appropriates the other as it visualizes power. (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" 86). Mimicry can challenge one's identity as the colonized tends to imitate the colonizer's identity and culture. There was a strong resistance to mimicry by Thula and her friends, though. Mimicry seemed ridiculous to Thula. "She laughed hard when one of them read to her an essay about why every country ought to be like America"(Mbue 328).

Mimicry seemed ridiculous to Thula. "She laughed hard when one of them read to her an essay about why every country ought to be like America"(Mbue 328). Sometimes the process of mimicry is imposed by the colonizers. People in Kosawa say,

They forced their Spirit upon the weak-minded and built a church in Lokunja, not because we had any use for it but because they wanted us to believe that our spirit was evil, our ways immoral. If they were to make us a part of their world, we had to integrate into our lives the principles by which they lived. (Mbue 212)

Kadafa (2012), in her study of the contamination of the rivers of the Niger Delta because of oil exploration, contends that "Rivers don't just provide water, but they are a sacred source of civilization" (41). The toxification of the river deprives the people not only of the water but also of the deep-rooted civilization and culture that thrived on its banks. Hence, the colonized get the feeling that their culture is aimed at destruction, and it leads them to mimicry of the colonizer's culture. Mimicry is supposed to be a means of servitude and inferiority, and according to Bhabha (1994), mimicry "represents an ironic compromise" and is a strategy that illustrates the "desire for a reformed, recognizable other" (126).

Mimicry is the commitment of the colonized to the image presented by the colonizer and does not create an identity or difference for the colonized. Mimicry is shown as one of the most inevitable and effective strategies of power in colonialism. In the mimicry process, the colonized imitates the values and culture of people in the dominant group

and seeks to access the power of those people. As Thula, who in the host culture seeks a way to rescue her homeland through mimicry. For many people, mimicry might also give rise to a lack of identity, since they forget their roots. Homi Bhabha (1994) in *The Location of Culture* states that,

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity efforts. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (112)

Generally, in this selected novel, characters resist mimicking colonizers' identity and culture and try to maintain their homeland, which is a symbol of their union identity.

4.3. Imposed Hybridity and Unhomeliness in the Third Space

Hybridity in post-colonial societies takes place either the time the colonized society is consciously culturally suppressed, just like the colonialist's attack on the colonized society for political and economic control, or like when indigenous people are obliged to keep to host values and patterns. It gives rise to a hybridized identity, which is formed with the help of race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. Bhabha states that "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects." ("Of Mimicry and Man"112). In this novel, by the destruction of the colonized's homeland, which symbolizes their identity, the colonizer obligates the colonized to form a new identity that is a result of a hybridized space. The process of colonization makes them experience hybridity in their own home. Children were obliged to learn the English language; they were taught new values. This state created a hybridized space, which gives rise to a hybridized identity. However, their love for the country outweighs the injected values by the colonizers. Bongo, one of the heroes who was killed owing to saving his homeland, says, "My love for the language wasn't enough to convince me to leave Kosawa" (Mbue 107). On the other side, Thula, as an immigrant, takes advantage of the Third Space. "Every day I learn new things. I don't know how but I'm convinced this knowledge I'm acquiring will do something for our country" (Mbue, 164). Indigenous people who were living in peace turned into fighters under the strain of the colony. "When he took the guns out of his bag, our mouths dropped open in awe...How glorious it felt to be powerful" (Mbue 278-279). In the third space, a hybridized identity was formed, which converts them into people far away from what they used to be. According to Hall (2019) in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora,"

hybridized or combined identities can be defined as “Those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). This transformation might give rise to a hybridized identity that suspends the migrant between two cultures and spaces, and according to Bhabha, they can “be mobilized through a passage through a third space” (*Location of Culture* 36). In this Third Space, the colonized strive to survive through hybridity, which does not create an original identity for the colonized but might contribute to a hybridized identity or lack of a well-formed identity for the colonized. They seem to be left in the space between both cultures, which is called the Third Space in Bhabha’s theory. “It is that third space...which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences” 55). He believes that cultural identity can be changed by the effect of the third space. In this view, when the migrant manages to deal with this space, it leads to creativity for immigrants. Whereas they cannot cope with this situation, the third space paves the way for hybridized identities. However, experiencing the Third Space in immigration is inevitable, and it will give rise to a hybridized identity. Thula does not accept oppression by the colonizers. Her mother emphasizes that Thula was not a girl to surrender. In spite of all hardship, she revived her identity. As her mother said, “She’s wanted what she’s wanted” (Mbue 153). Thula, who has left her home in the hope of building a democratic government for her country, is experiencing unhomeliness as her other immigrants are. “Some of my friends come from far away too and are as lost in this city as I am...” (Mbue 192). But it never stops her from following her goal and appearing as a strong woman. She also gets involved in a multicultural society with different cultures. She is so immersed in a plural society while maintaining her own culture. With respect to this fact, Moffat (2010) contends unhomeliness is “The greater...gap between a foreign place and one’s own home and culture, [that leads to] the greater the impression of discovery and exoticism” (2). Bhabha argues that the space between homely and unhomely is postcolonial, a space where one can see how one’s identity is a combination of the foreign and the familiar. Thula forms a strong identity through hybridity in an imposed third space.

6. Conclusion

This article explored how Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial concepts—hybridity, mimicry, resistance, the Third Space, and unhomeliness—are manifested in Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*, investigating how characters navigate the complexities of colonial imposition and cultural identity. The analysis has demonstrated that these theoretical

constructs offer a powerful framework for understanding the novel's narrative and thematic depth. Thula's journey, for instance, powerfully illustrates hybridity not as a mere mixing of cultures, but as a dynamic process of identity negotiation, leading her to experience unhomeliness while operating within the Third Space—a liminal zone where she forged agency to lead a revolutionary movement. The villagers' responses to the colonizers' imposed-culture further highlight the multifaceted nature of resistance, often intertwined with attempted mimicry, which, in the novel, proves to be a precarious strategy against overwhelming colonial power, ultimately leading to tragic, heroic ends for many.

While the colonizers sought to impose a singular identity and culture, the novel reveals that indigenous identity, though embattled, possesses a profound resilience. The eventual survival and adaptation of the next generation, marked by a form of mimicry of the American lifestyle, underscores the enduring and often detrimental legacy of colonization, even in its aftermath. This research contributes to the understanding of postcolonial literature by not only applying Bhabha's theories but also by showing how Mbue's narrative offers nuanced perspectives on these concepts, particularly in its depiction of the profound psychological and cultural impacts of colonization presented under the guise of development. Ultimately, *How Beautiful We Were* serves as a potent reminder of the catastrophic effects of colonialization and the enduring struggle for cultural self-preservation, offering new insights into the intricate interplay of Bhabhaian concepts within contemporary postcolonial narratives.

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