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Oil as a Trope in the Literary Construction of the African Postcolonial Nation-State in Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland* and Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract

This article examines oil as a trope in Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012) and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). These two texts are used comparatively to demonstrate how the petro-trope functions across both autobiographical travel writing and fictionalized narrative. It proceeds from the argument that oil in these texts is not merely a thematic backdrop but a recurrent figurative device through which the nation is imagined, indicted and reimagined. Drawing on postcolonial theories of the nation as narration, petrocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, and guided by a qualitative, interpretive design that combines close reading with thematic analysis, the study advances three claims. First, in Saro-Wiwa's generically hybrid travelogue, oil operates as a trope of spectacle and deferred wealth, so that the nation appears as a mirage, flashy on the surface but crumbling within. Second, in Mbue's novel, oil operates as a trope of curse and dispossession. Mbue uses magical realism to allow the oil-bearing community of Kosawa to emerge as a counter-nation whose spiritual cosmology resists the rationalities of both corporate institutions and the state. Third, read together, the texts narrate the petro-state as a betrayal of the independence promise, in which sovereignty is hollowed out by the alliance of political elites and foreign capital. The article concludes that oil, as trope, reconfigures nation-building from a story of development into a story of dispossession and witness, and that literary form is itself a political response to petro-modernity.

Keywords*:* Oil, Trope, Petrofiction, Postcolonial Nation-State, Nation-Building, Magical Realism, Niger Delta, Travel Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Few commodities have shaped the imaginative and political life of postcolonial nations, especially in Africa, as profoundly as petroleum has shaped Nigeria's. Commercial quantities of crude oil were discovered at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta in 1956, four years before political independence, and within a generation oil had displaced agriculture as the principal source of Nigerian foreign exchange and state revenue (Karl, 1997; Watts, 2004). The promise that accompanied this discovery was the promise of the postcolonial state itself: that sovereignty would be converted into prosperity. The history that followed has been widely read as the story of an unkept promise, an instance of what political economists call the resource curse, in which abundant natural wealth coincides with weak institutions, authoritarian rule and widespread poverty (Auty, 1993; Karl, 1997; Ross, 1999). Yet oil is not only an economic and political fact. It is also a cultural and narrative one, an organising presence in the stories that postcolonial societies tell about who they are, what they have lost and what they might yet become.

It is this narrative and figurative dimension of oil that this article takes as its object. In an essay that has become foundational to the field, Ghosh (1992) observed that the novel, the literary form most closely associated with modernity, had remarkably little to say about the oil encounter that did so much to produce the modern world. He proposed the term *petrofiction* for the body of writing that had taken up the task. In the decades since, the field has changed considerably. Scholars of petrocultures argue that oil is a pervasive social relation and a cultural formation, not merely a substance that is extracted and sold (Huber, 2013; LeMenager, 2014; Szeman, 2017), and writers across the global South have increasingly made petroleum the central figure of their fiction and non-fiction. Among African writers this turn is especially marked in narratives of the Niger Delta, where the 1995 execution of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders made oil an international emblem of corporate and state violence (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Nixon, 2011).

This article reads two recent works through that history: Noo Saro-Wiwa's travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012) and Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The two texts differ markedly in genre, setting and mode. Saro-Wiwa, the daughter of the executed Ken Saro-Wiwa, writes a first-person, non-fictional account of a journey through the Nigeria she had resisted visiting as a child in Surrey. Mbue, a Cameroonian-born novelist, writes a collectively narrated fiction about a fictional African village, Kosawa, whose land, water and children are poisoned by the operations of an American oil company, Pexton. What unites the works is the structural position oil occupies within each. In both, oil is not an incidental detail of setting but a figure, a turn of language and imagination, through which the postcolonial nation-state is brought into view and judged.

Statement of the Problem

Criticism of the two works has tended to proceed along separate lines. Looking for Transwonderland has been examined as diasporic travel writing and a narrative of homecoming, return and the negotiation of identity. Pressley-Sanon (2018), for instance, reads Saro-Wiwa's work as a memoir and travel narrative that explores the complexities of diasporic return under the shadow of personal and political trauma. Similarly, Zhong (2023) examines the relationship between homecoming, trauma and diasporic identity, arguing that the narrator's return to Nigeria reactivates rather than simply resolves the traumas associated with her family history. By contrast, How Beautiful We Were has attracted significant attention from environmental and postcolonial ecocritical perspectives. Gasztold (2022) examines the novel through the framework of environmental neocolonialism, focusing on the ecological

damage, social disruption and economic injustice produced by oil extraction. Xausa (2023), in turn, offers a postcolonial ecocritical reading that foregrounds environmental degradation, intergenerational justice and the resistance of the novel's young protagonists. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the way oil functions across these very different texts as a shared tropological device in the literary construction of the postcolonial nation-state, or to how the choice of form, whether the hybrid travelogue or the magical realist novel, mediates that construction. This article addresses this gap. Its central problem is how oil, as a trope, shapes the narration of the nation-state in non-fictional and fictional African writing, and with what political and ethical consequences.

Objectives and Research Questions

The study pursues three objectives:

1. To establish how oil operates as a trope in Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland* and Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*.
2. To examine how each text uses that trope to represent the postcolonial nation-state, its institutions, its promises and its failures.
3. To evaluate how the formal strategies of each text, namely generic hybridity in the travelogue and magical realism in the novel, extend or complicate the figurative work that oil performs.

These objectives are guided by three research questions:

1. How is oil figured in each text?
2. What kind of nation-state does the figure of oil produce?
3. How does literary form mediate the political critique that the trope carries?

Argument of the Article

The article argues that oil in these texts is best understood as a trope of the unfulfilled postcolonial nation. In Saro-Wiwa's travelogue, oil is figured as spectacle and as wealth burned away, producing a nation that exists chiefly as an illusion of development. In Mbue's novel, oil is figured as curse and poison, producing a nation in which the state is an instrument of foreign capital and in which the oil-bearing community must imagine itself as a counter-nation in order to survive. Despite their differences, both authors narrate the petro-state as a betrayal of the independence promise, and both turn to formal hybridity as a means of registering a reality that conventional reportage or conventional realism cannot fully contain. The argument is therefore not simply that oil is present in these texts, but that it organises their imagination of the nation.

Significance, Scope and Structure

The significance of the study is threefold. It contributes to petrofiction scholarship by extending the discussion beyond the novel to a non-fictional travelogue. It contributes to scholarship on postcolonial nation-building by showing how literary texts supply a counter-archive to official narratives of development. And it contributes to African literary studies by placing a Nigerian travel narrative and a novel with an unnamed African setting in comparative conversation. The scope is limited to the two primary texts. Section 2 sets out the theoretical approach, Section

3 considers postcolonial nation-building, Section 4 describes the methodology, Section 5 presents and discusses the findings, and Section 6 concludes.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The article draws on a composite framework that brings together three bodies of theory: postcolonial theories of the nation as narration, petrocriticism and the political ecology of oil, and postcolonial ecocriticism, including theories of magical realism. Oil in the two texts is at once an economic substance, a political relation, an ecological force and a figure of speech, and no single theory accounts for all four.

The Nation as Narration

Postcolonial theory begins from the proposition that nations are made as much by narrative as by institutions. Anderson (2006) defines the nation as an imagined political community, imagined because its members will never meet most of their fellow members yet carry in their minds the image of their communion, and he shows how forms such as the novel and the newspaper furnish the sense of simultaneity on which that imagining depends. Bhabha (1990) extends this insight by treating the nation as a narrative strategy marked by ambivalence, in which the pedagogical story of a unified people is perpetually disturbed by the performative voices of those who live at its margins. Said (1993) likewise insists that the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from emerging, is central to both imperial domination and anti-colonial resistance. These accounts direct attention to the stories that a petro-state tells about itself and to the counter-narratives that writers produce.

Alongside this narratological tradition stands a materialist one that interrogates the social basis of the postcolonial nation. Fanon (1961/1963) warned that national consciousness, unless it deepens into social and political consciousness, degenerates into the self-interest of a national middle class that inherits the colonial apparatus without transforming it and that acts as an intermediary for foreign capital rather than as an agent of national development. Mbembe (2001) similarly describes the postcolony as a regime of power marked by excess, spectacle and the grotesque, in which the state's authority is staged and exhibited as much as it is exercised. Achebe's (1983) diagnosis of Nigeria's trouble as a failure of leadership belongs to the same lineage. Such accounts help explain how oil, as rent, strengthens the intermediary and spectacular character of the postcolonial state.

Petrocriticism and the Political Ecology of Oil

Petrocriticism supplies the second pillar of the framework. Following Ghosh's (1992) intervention, scholars have argued that petroleum is a cultural as well as an economic formation. LeMenager (2014) speaks of petroleum culture to describe the habits, affects and imaginaries that oil makes possible, and Szeman (2017) argues that energy regimes shape the forms of social life and thought available to those who live within them. Huber (2013) treats oil as a social relation embedded in capitalist structures of property and labour, while Mitchell (2011) shows that the material properties of oil altered the possibilities of democratic politics.

Studies of petro-states supply the political counterpart of these cultural accounts. Karl (1997) demonstrates that oil booms tend to produce states that are dependent on rent, indifferent to taxation and therefore weakly accountable to their citizens. Coronil (1997), writing on Venezuela, shows how oil rents allow the state to appear as a magician, conjuring development

and modernity from the subsoil and thereby disguising the labour and the social relations on which it actually rests. Apter (2005) reads the Nigerian oil boom as an economy of spectacle, in which the state staged national culture on a grand scale at the moment when oil money appeared limitless. Watts (2004) shows how, in the Niger Delta, oil-producing communities are governed through the overlapping authority of the state and the oil companies, a configuration that generates both dispossession and violent conflict. Taken together, these accounts suggest why oil is so susceptible to figurative treatment. Its wealth appears detached from labour, its violence is displaced from the sites of consumption, and its benefits are staged as spectacle while its costs are borne by those who live nearest to the wells.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Slow Violence and Magical Realism

The third pillar is postcolonial ecocriticism, which insists that colonial and neo-colonial domination is inseparable from the domination of nature and that environmental harm is distributed along lines of race, class and geography (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence is especially pertinent. It names a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed and attritional destruction dispersed across time and space and therefore rarely recognised as violence at all (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Nixon's treatment of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni shows how writers and activists attempt to make such violence visible and narratable.

Magical realism offers a formal counterpart to these concerns. Zamora and Faris (1995) describe it as a mode in which the realistic and the magical coexist without hierarchy, and Faris (1995) identifies its characteristic features as an irreducible element of magic, a richly detailed phenomenal world, unsettling doubts in the reader, the merging of different realms, and disruptions of received ideas of time, space and identity. In a study of Nigerian writing, Wenzel (2006) proposes that magical realism, or what he calls petro-magic-realism, is a fitting mode for representing the fetishism of oil, since oil's wealth appears to materialise without human labour while its toxicity works invisibly on bodies and landscapes. The mode thus lets writers hold together the material and spiritual dimensions of petro-violence.

Oil as Trope: A Working Conceptualisation

A trope, in the standard definition, is a word or phrase used in a figurative rather than a literal sense (Abrams & Harpham, 2015), but the term also names a recurrent pattern of figuration that organises a body of writing. This study uses the term in the latter sense. Oil is read as a trope when it recurs as a figure that carries meaning beyond its literal reference, standing for something else: wealth, illusion, corruption, contamination, sovereignty, betrayal or the nation itself. Three registers of the trope are distinguished for analytical purposes. In the allegorical register, oil stands for the nation and its fortunes, an operation reminiscent of what Jameson (1986) called national allegory.[1] In the temporal register, oil organises the narration of history, dividing a before from an after, whether the before of the pre-oil community or the before of the independence promise. In the epistemological register, oil conditions what can be seen and known, so that its effects are either rendered invisible, as in the logic of slow violence, or made hypervisible through spectacle and flare. These registers guide the analysis in Section 5.

[1] Ahmad (1992) objects that such a model overgeneralises about the literatures of the global South, which cautions against treating allegory as a universal rule. The debate is not resolved here: the allegorical register is used as a reading tool, and Section 5.3 returns to the point.

Postcolonial Nation-Building and the Politics of Oil

Nation-building refers to the post-independence project of constructing an integrated polity, a shared civic identity and a functioning developmental state out of territories whose boundaries were drawn by imperial administrators rather than by the peoples who inhabit them. In the African context this project was freighted with expectation. Independence leaders promised that political sovereignty would deliver material progress and cultural dignity, and nationalist literature of the period often cast the nation as a collective hero emerging from colonial humiliation (Boehmer, 2005). Chatterjee (1993) reminds us, however, that anti-colonial nationalism was never simply a derivative of European models. It drew on an inner domain of language, custom and spiritual life that colonial power had not fully penetrated, and it was from this domain that claims of national distinctiveness were fashioned. The tension between a modernising state and the communal resources of the so-called inner domain is one of the structuring tensions of postcolonial nation-building, and it is a tension that oil intensifies.

The Nigerian case illustrates the point sharply. The country was created through the amalgamation of northern and southern protectorates in 1914 and entered independence in 1960 as a federation of large and unevenly resourced regions. Within seven years it was engulfed in a civil war in which control over oil-bearing territory was a significant stake. As oil came to dominate public revenue, the central government became the custodian of a rent that did not depend on the productive labour or the taxation of its citizens, and political struggle shifted from the production of wealth to the distribution of rent (Karl, 1997; Watts, 2004). Such revenue encouraged what Fanon (1961/1963) had already diagnosed as the characteristic vice of the postcolonial middle class: personal enrichment and the performance of modernity in place of social transformation.

Nowhere has the contradiction between the oil-rich state and the oil-bearing community been clearer than in the Niger Delta. The Ogoni, whose land has been extensively exploited since the late 1950s, mobilised in the early 1990s around a charter of rights that demanded a fair share of oil revenue, environmental remediation and political autonomy. Their movement, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, argued that the region had been plundered and polluted while its inhabitants remained poor (K. Saro-Wiwa, 1992). The state's response culminated in the executions of 1995, an event that, as Human Rights Watch (1999) documented, was embedded in a wider pattern of repression of oil-producing communities. The Ogoni case dramatized that the petro-state does not merely neglect the communities that sit atop its wealth but can treat them as obstacles to the flow of revenue.

The pattern is not confined to Nigeria. Across the Gulf of Guinea, oil exploitation has been accompanied by the concentration of rent in ruling elites, the entanglement of governments with multinational companies, and the marginalisation of host communities (Bassey, 2012; Watts, 2004). Mbue's decision to leave the country of her novel unnamed invites readers to treat Kosawa as a figure for oil communities across the continent. Literature has a distinctive role in such a context. Where official nation-building narratives speak of development, unity and progress, literary texts can supply a counter-archive that records what those narratives omit, and they can reimagine the nation on different terms.

Two figures will recur in the analysis. The first is the nation as mirage, an image of development that is glittering yet empty at its core, which Saro-Wiwa's travelogue develops through its reflection on spectacle and decay. The second is the community as counter-nation, an alternative polity founded on memory, ritual and a spiritual relation to the land, which

Mbue's novel constructs in response to the violence of the petro-state. Both figures are products of the trope of oil, and both testify to the failure of nation-building as promised at independence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to textual analysis. It treats the primary works as literary and cultural artefacts and reads them through the postcolonial, petrocritical and postcolonial ecocritical framework established in Section 2.

Corpus and Sampling

The corpus comprises Noo Saro-Wiwa's **Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012) and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were** (2021). The texts were selected purposively because they represent African postcolonial settings in which oil is a sustained political and figurative presence, while offering a productive generic contrast between autobiographical travel writing and fiction. The analysis focuses on passages in which oil and related images, including flares, spills, polluted landscapes and promises of prosperity, shape representations of the nation, the state, corporations and local communities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis combines close reading with thematic analysis. Recurrent images, narrative strategies and representations of power, community and resistance were identified across the texts and interpreted in relation to the three registers of the oil trope outlined in Section 2.4. The resulting themes organise the discussion in Section 5. Interpretive claims are supported by page-referenced textual evidence and considered through the article's intersecting theoretical perspectives. As the study relies exclusively on published texts and involves no human participants, its ethical responsibilities concern accurate quotation, acknowledgement of sources and careful treatment of representations of historical violence. The comparison is limited to two English-language works and does not claim to represent the full range of African petro-narratives; it attends instead to the distinct ways their different forms mediate related figurative and political concerns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines oil as a trope in **Looking for Transwonderland** and **How Beautiful We Were** followed by comparison between the two. The discussion is organised around the recurring images, formal strategies and political concerns identified through close reading.

Oil as Trope in *Looking for Transwonderland*

The Travelogue as Petro-Narrative: Hybrid Form and the Unstable Nation

The presence, exploitation and politics of petroleum in Saro-Wiwa's text qualify it as a petro-narrative. Saro-Wiwa reflects on how oil relates to wealth and how its mismanagement intersects with daily life, politics, identity and the environment, and, as a travel writer passing through oil-producing regions, she documents oil's pervasive influence at first hand. The

travelogue thus functions both as a personal narrative and as a critical commentary on Nigeria's oil economy, especially as it affects the Niger Delta.

The mode through which the commentary is delivered is notable. Saro-Wiwa presents travel prose as a vehicle for factual information about real events and actual people, but she does so by blending several subgenres of non-fiction: memoir, essay and documentary writing. The memoir strand is evident when she recalls her childhood reluctance to visit Nigeria, describing how, as a teenager, she had to be virtually escorted onto the flight and regarded two months in her "unglamorous, godforsaken motherland" as punishment (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 6). The essayistic strand emerges when she reflects on the divergent meanings of home. Her parents, she writes, believed that without their country they were nothing, and her mother habitually called their Surrey residence the "house" while reserving the word "home" for Nigeria (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 8). The documentary strand, finally, is visible in her descriptions of the Nigerian landscape and of social and historical sites. She can write that nothing is more beautiful than a rainforest in the morning mist, with sunlight shot through the towering trees (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 227), and she turns the same observational attention to Nollywood and to the slave-trade port of Badagry.

The hybridity of the form is itself an argument about the nation. Bhabha's (1990) distinction between the pedagogical and the performative accounts of the nation is helpful here. A conventional travelogue tends towards the pedagogical, presenting a coherent country for the consumption of the reader. Saro-Wiwa's text refuses that coherence. By moving between intimate recollection, analytical essay and reportage, it enacts the instability of a nation that is felt differently at the level of family memory, public history and daily encounter. The form is therefore not a neutral container but a figure for a nation that lacks a single, stable narrative.

Flares, Wealth and the Paradox of the Petro-Nation

The most arresting image in the travelogue's account of the Niger Delta is the gas flare. As the narrator travels towards Bane village, she observes that above the flat green acres "the sky's ashen murk became dotted with bright orange oil flares" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 227). The sentence sets a pastoral expanse against an industrial fire, and the juxtaposition prepares the reflection that follows, in which the image is translated into economic critique:

My father used to point out the flares in disgust, bemoaning their environmental impact . . . The oil companies burn off excess gas, which is a by-product of oil extraction. With the correct (though very expensive) infrastructure, the gas could be captured and exported at huge profit, but instead it's burned away to pollute the skies; our wealth going up in flames. (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 227)

The flare operates here in all three registers of the trope identified in Section 2.4. In the epistemological register, it makes visible a form of environmental harm that would otherwise be dispersed and gradual, converting what Nixon (2011) calls slow violence into a spectacle that the traveller cannot avoid seeing. In the temporal register, it connects the narrator to her father's earlier act of seeing, so that the flare becomes a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge and resistance across generations. In the allegorical register, the phrase "our wealth going up in flames" compresses ecological waste and fiscal waste into a single image, and the possessive "our" insists that the burned gas belongs to the nation even as the nation is denied its benefit. Whereas Coronil's (1997) magical state conjures development from oil, Saro-Wiwa's flare incinerates it. The image thus inverts the founding promise of the petro-state, which is that oil will light the way to progress.

The personal and the national are knotted together here. The narrator's father, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was executed for protesting the devastation caused by oil companies in the Niger Delta, and the flare is therefore also a family inheritance. She later confesses that Nigeria, for all its sapphire rivers, weddings and apes, could not seduce her fully, since all roads snaked back to corruption, "the rottenness my father fought against and the cause he died for" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 227). The admission links the travelogue to the petro-narrative tradition: oil is not merely a commodity but a force that has shaped her family's destiny and underlies national dysfunction. The journey is thus a search not only for geographic understanding but for emotional and political truth.

Ogoniland and the State as Squanderer

The travelogue's treatment of Ogoniland extends the argument by tracing a temporal rupture that oil introduces into the life of a community. Writing of her father's people, Saro-Wiwa notes:

Our ethnic group, the Ogoni, have relied on the Delta for fishing and farming for centuries, but ever since oil was discovered in 1956 and extracted primarily by Shell Oil, this fertile agricultural region has suffered oil spills and pollution from gas flares . . . A succession of corrupt governments squandered profits that should have developed the region economically. (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 6)

The date "1956" functions as a temporal hinge, dividing a centuries-old ecology of fishing and farming from an era of spills and flares. The passage then describes the double bind that follows: the Ogoni are unable to develop industrially, yet they struggle to cultivate their polluted land and to fish in rivers that are steadily emptying. What is significant for the construction of the nation-state is the agent named in the second sentence. The state does not appear as an absent or neglectful actor but as one that is present and complicit, a "succession of corrupt governments" that squandered the profits that should have developed the region. The petro-state in this account is not a failed provider but a predator, and its predation is cumulative. The reading is consistent with Watts's (2004) account of the Niger Delta as a space governed through the alliance of state and corporation (see also Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Transwonderland: Spectacle, Illusion and National Allegory

If the flare is the text's image of oil as waste, the titular amusement park is its image of oil as illusion. In a scene that links the fantasy of oil wealth to the reality of national disappointment, the narrator steps through a turnstile and is "confronted with a forlorn landscape of motionless machinery," where rides such as the "Chair-o-Plane," a roller coaster, dodgem cars and a Ferris wheel "stood rusting amid the tall grass" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 7). The park is built to promise pleasure and modernity, and what remains is rust and silence. It is a conspicuous example of the illusory form of anticipated change, and in the allegorical register it becomes a metaphor for Nigeria itself: flashy on the outside, crumbling within. Here the trope of oil works indirectly. The park is not an oil installation, but it is a monument to the kind of oil-financed aspiration that Apter (2005) describes as the spectacle of the oil boom, an aspiration that outlived the revenue that sustained it.

The same logic of seeming and neglect extends to the geography of oil beyond the Delta. Saro-Wiwa emphasises that the effects of oil are not centralised in the places where it is drilled, and that its influence is visible even in cities far from the wells. Her description of Lagos registers the contrasts of a petro-economy. The city's residential mansions lie "strategically

inconspicuous behind guarded security gates," while foreign banks, restaurants and galleries signal a place where "Nigeria dusts itself down and shakes hands with world commerce" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 38). Her satirical remark that Nigerians "love to transform every place into a giant market" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 27) conveys the energy of a society in which informal trade compensates for unreliable public provision, and shows humour working as an analytical device.

The visit to the former governor's hometown makes the critique most explicit. Reflecting on the achievements of the governor, Saro-Wiwa asks:

But what good had Odili really done for Ndoni? The town was still a quiet backwater: messy-haired women still sold fruit and groundnuts on the side of the spotless streets; the school building was a shabby confection of peeling yellow paint, and the pupils sat around in tatty uniforms. (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 271)

The rhetorical question, the juxtaposition of "spotless streets" and a "shabby" school, and the contrast between the official's prominence and the town's stagnation all enact the disparity between public wealth and public development. The comparison between opulence and neglect indicts the redistribution of oil rent through patronage rather than through institutions, which is precisely the intermediary logic Fanon (1961/1963) associated with the postcolonial elite. Even Nigeria's heritage is neglected: the Ikom monoliths stand in an unfenced field, "keeling helplessly towards the ground" (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 271), a figure for a nation that does not preserve its own memory.

"You'll Get Used to It": Petro-Numbness and the Psychic Costs of the Oil Economy

A final dimension of the trope concerns what oil does to the citizens who live with its consequences. Saro-Wiwa reports that people repeatedly told her, "You'll get used to it," and she judges that for her, getting used to the situation would mean capitulating to it (N. Saro-Wiwa, 2012, p. 292). The remark identifies a collective numbness that reinforces the petro-state's power by neutralising anger, the psychic counterpart of the slow violence that Nixon (2011) describes. The narrator's refusal of numbness, her insistence that it is not right to stop being angry about the state of Nigeria, rearticulates the legacy of her father's activism in the idiom of the travelogue. Anger becomes a civic virtue, and witness a form of political action. The travelogue therefore ends not with reconciliation but with an unresolved relation to the nation, a stance that reads as critical commitment rather than despair.

Oil as Trope in *How Beautiful We Were*

Poison, Omen and the Logic of the Curse

Mbue's novel opens its account of Kosawa with an image of environmental ruin that is simultaneously realistic and mythic. The villagers recall that when "the sky began to pour acid and the rivers begun [sic] to turn green," they "should have known our land would soon be dead" (Mbue, 2021, p. 5). The language of observation, which records acid rain and green rivers, is fused with a tone of foreboding that borders on the supernatural. This double register lays the groundwork for the novel's combination of petrofiction and magical realism.

The villagers' first encounter with oil is narrated in the same way. In the account of the explosion of an oil well at Gardens, the narrators describe how their parents first interpreted the soot-filled sky as an omen:

The year my age-mates and I were born . . . an oil well exploded in Gardens. Our parents and grandparents told us that the explosion sent crude and smoke higher than the trees. It filled the air with soot, a sight everyone thought it was an omen, never having seen the likes of it before. By our sixth year of life, though, after our parents had come to know the fullness of the curse that came from living on land beneath which oil sat, they'd realized that what they saw that day was no omen . . . (Mbue, 2021, p. 3)

The passage fuses the empirical and the supernatural into a single register. The omen is displaced by the recognition of a "broken oil-wellhead," a materialist explanation, yet the vocabulary of curse persists, so that the physical cause and the metaphysical meaning are not alternatives but aspects of one continuous experience. Oil is thus a curse in a double sense: literally toxic, and experienced as cosmic disorder. The narrative captures how the community experiences the slow violence of petro-capitalism, not as two parallel explanations existing side by side, but as a single reality in which contamination and cosmic imbalance cannot be separated.

The Living Land and the Spiritual Violation of Oil

The novel's most pervasive magical realist technique is its rendering of the land as a living, conscious entity. The villagers speak of land, water and sky as beings capable of suffering and response. Kosawa is recalled as a village where "the sky sang thunderous songs in the dry season, songs that made us wrap our legs around our siblings in fright and in delight" (Mbue, 2021, p. 360). The anthropomorphism is not offered as metaphorical embellishment but as an expression of a spiritual worldview in which nature has genuine life.

The same worldview informs the narrators' observation that any "snatchers" who walked past Kosawa "would have seen nothing of its huts or its inhabitants; they would have seen only the trees and shrubs" (Mbue, 2021, p. 222). This lens deepens the reading of oil extraction. If the land is a living being, then drilling is not merely environmental damage but a spiritual violation, and the pollution of rivers and air is an injury to a body that is also kin. The novel thereby displaces the language of externalities with the language of sacrilege. Wenzel (2006) argues that magical realism suits the representation of oil because oil's wealth appears to materialise without labour, in the manner of a fetish. Mbue's novel complicates this proposition. The magic in her text belongs not to the commodity but to the community and its land, and the false magic of oil, the promise that prosperity will flow without cost, is exposed as a lie. The novel's features of magical realism, namely the distortion of time, the blending of worlds, the presentation of magical elements as normal and the grounding in a realistic setting, are consistent with Faris's (1995) account of the mode, and they enhance rather than detract from the novel's realism.

Ancestors, Konga and the Ethics of Resistance

Culturally, the novel binds Kosawa to ancestral spirits and unseen forces that shape the villagers' decisions, rituals and sense of justice. These beliefs constitute a second layer of magical realism in the text, standing in direct opposition to the rational, capitalist logic of the oil company. They surface in moments of theological questioning, as when Yaya asks, "Why couldn't the Spirit have shown them mercy in the absence of sacrifice?" (Mbue, 2021, p. 222), and in moments of collective interpretation. When a child dies of an oil-related illness, an elder laments that the Spirit has sent Konga to tell the village to fight and, acknowledging that Konga is a madman, adds, "Perhaps madness is what we all need" (Mbue, 2021, p. 22). Madness,

conventionally dismissed by rationalist discourse, is reclaimed as prophetic insight, and the decision to resist is framed as a spiritual summons rather than a calculated political strategy.

The same logic governs the oath that the families swear after they hold the Pexton men hostage. They swear on the umbilical-cord bundle that the government will never learn of the act, and the narrator declares that "The government would never find out from any of us, that much was certain [sic] we had sworn an unbreakable oath" (Mbue, 2021, p. 122). A spiritual object rather than a legal one enforces secrecy, and the villagers believe that breaking the oath would take away their strength. Chatterjee's (1993) argument that anticolonial nationalism asserted its sovereignty first in an inner, spiritual domain illuminates the scene. The oath is an act of counter-sovereignty, in which a community constitutes itself as a polity by means of its own binding rituals and in explicit opposition to the legal order of the state. In this way the villagers resist colonial rationality and corporate logic. Pexton's officials dismiss their spirituality as ignorance, yet within the narrative it embodies wisdom, dignity and cultural continuity, and asserts that memory and justice exist beyond legal systems and corporate accountability.

Pexton's Lie: The State, the Company and the Betrayed Nation

The novel's indictment of the state is delivered most pointedly through its account of how drilling was first introduced. The child narrators recall that the government's representatives told the villagers that "civilization" and "prosperity" could not be explained in the villagers' language because the grandparents could not grasp what they had never witnessed. The officials then claimed that the villagers would pour libations to thank their ancestors and sing to the Spirit for having put oil under their land. The narrators conclude: "They believed Pexton's lie" (Mbue, 2021, pp. 72–73). The passage shows officials treating villagers as ignorant while appropriating their spiritual language to sell extraction. Developmental discourse becomes a tool of dispossession, and the state appears not as the representative of the nation but as the company's advance guard. The pattern confirms Fanon's (1961/1963) account of an intermediary elite that mediates foreign interests rather than building national autonomy.

The villagers learn the lesson well, and the community's political education is passed down as a form of inherited wariness. Sahel reflects on being lectured that no one in Kosawa should ever trust the government unless absolutely necessary, and that "we would need to grow eyes in the back of our necks; we should never think the government wants anything but our demise" (Mbue, 2021, p. 162). The vividness of the bodily image, eyes grown in the back of the neck, expresses a fully developed distrust of the state. The inclusion of oil in the novel is therefore deeply political. Oil discovery is depicted as the cause of exploitation by those in power, and oil wealth is shown to lead not to national prosperity but to elite corruption and foreign domination. The nation-state is hollowed out: it retains the symbols of sovereignty but exercises them on behalf of a foreign corporation, so that the nation divides into the state, allied against the people, and the community, the only remaining bearer of collective identity.

Oral Memory, Thula and the Nation to Come

The novel's counter-nation is sustained through oral transmission. The community's experiences are relayed from one generation to the next, and the elders' stories, which blend fact, myth and moral instruction, form a further magical realist layer. These oral histories serve as both record and resistance. In Anderson's (2006) account, print capitalism provided the medium through which the nation was imagined. Mbue's Kosawa offers an alternative

medium: the collective voice of the children, speaking as "we," and the oral narratives of the elders, which together imagine a community across time without recourse to the state.

Thula, the novel's central figure, listens to these tales and integrates them into her political ideology, showing that ancestral memory can shape future revolution. Her formation is saturated with spiritual language, as in the villagers' invocation, "We ask the Spirit to be with him," and the remembered counsel that she never forget how it feels to be a child when she grows up (Mbue, 2021, p. 43). Although her actions are grounded in realism, as she travels abroad to study and leads a movement, Thula is remembered in the village with a reverence akin to sainthood or prophecy and is seen as a symbol of mythic hope. The novel thereby elevates an individual's struggle to communal myth, a classic magical realist technique. Yet the hope is not uncomplicated. The narrators recall that their parents promised the Spirit's protection but that "their words brought us no comfort," since the Spirit had not protected the other children (Mbue, 2021, p. 8). Faith and the need for material protection stand in tension, and the novel's moral seriousness lies in refusing to resolve it.

Comparative Discussion: Spectacle and Curse

Placed side by side, the two texts reveal a pattern of divergence and convergence that sheds light on how oil constructs the postcolonial nation-state in literature. Table 2 summarises the principal points of comparison.

Table 2: Comparison of the Trope of Oil in the Two Texts

Dimension	***Looking for Transwonderland***	***How Beautiful We Were***
Genre and mode	Non-fictional travelogue blending memoir, essay and documentary	Fictional, collectively narrated novel employing magical realism
Dominant register of oil	Spectacle, waste and deferred wealth	Curse, poison and spiritual violation
Figure of the nation	The nation as mirage: glittering outside, crumbling within	The community as counter-nation set against a predatory state
Role of the state	Squanderer of oil rent and patron of elite display	Ally of the oil company and agent of dispossession
Form as response	Hybridity that enacts an unstable, contested nation	Magical realism that asserts an alternative cosmology and memory
Stance of witness	Refusal to "get used to it"; anger as civic virtue	Oath, oral memory and the mythic figure of Thula

The first divergence is perceptual. Saro-Wiwa's travelogue renders oil chiefly as visual excess: flares that redden the sky, mansions behind gates, an amusement park that has rusted into a ruin. The traveller is an observer, and the nation she observes is an arrangement of surfaces whose contradictions she reads. Mbue's novel, by contrast, renders oil chiefly as bodily and ecological toxicity: acid in the sky, green rivers, sick and dying children. Its narrators are not observers but victims, and the nation they portray is not a spectacle but an antagonist. These distinct perceptual regimes correspond to the two figures introduced in Section 3. In Saro-Wiwa's text, the nation is a mirage, glittering yet hollow. In Mbue's text, the official nation is an extractive apparatus, and what remains of the nation is the community that opposes it.

The second divergence concerns form and its relation to knowledge. Saro-Wiwa's generic hybridity registers a nation that can only be known by shifting between registers, between intimate memory, essay and reportage. Mbue's magical realism registers a nation that can only be known through a cosmology that official rationality has dismissed. In both cases, form is a political choice, and each choice implies a critique of the epistemological limits of the dominant discourse. The travelogue contests the pedagogical nation of official development narratives with eyewitness testimony, and the novel contests corporate rationality with the knowledge held in the land and its ancestors. This finding qualifies Jameson's (1986) thesis that third-world texts are necessarily national allegories. Both texts do generate national allegory, but neither does so in a unitary or straightforward way. Saro-Wiwa's allegory is persistently disturbed by irony and personal ambivalence, while Mbue's allegory is fragmented into a community whose relation to the nation is one of refusal. The texts thus support Ahmad's (1992) view that postcolonial representations of the nation are plural and contested.

Beneath these divergences lie striking convergences. In both works the state is neither absent nor benevolent. It is present as squanderer and as ally of foreign capital, and the promise of oil wealth is exposed as a deception. In both, knowledge of the oil economy is inherited, in one case from a murdered father and in the other from elders and ancestors, so that the memory of resistance is intergenerational. And in both, the pressure of oil is met by a refusal of numbness. Saro-Wiwa refuses to get used to it, and the people of Kosawa refuse to forget. This shared refusal suggests that oil as trope does not only diagnose; it also generates an ethic of witness, in which narration against the grain of official silence is a form of political participation.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine oil as a trope in the literary construction of the African postcolonial nation-state in Noo Saro-Wiwa's Looking for Transwonderland and Imbolo Mbue's How Beautiful We Were. Guided by postcolonial theories of the nation as narration, petrocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, and employing a qualitative design that combined close reading with thematic analysis, the study demonstrates how oil shapes the representation of the postcolonial state, its relationship with citizens, and the contradictions underlying the promise of national development.

In Looking for Transwonderland, oil operates as a trope of spectacle and deferred wealth. The travelogue's hybrid blend of memoir, essay and documentary reflects the instability of a nation without a single, coherent narrative. Its central images, the gas flare, the abandoned amusement park and the neglected hometown of a former governor, construct the nation as a mirage of development. The burning flare, the corruption of successive governments and the numbness of citizens told they will "get used to it" reveal a petro-state that squanders national resources, deceives its citizens and normalises political failure. In How Beautiful We Were, by contrast, oil functions as a trope of curse and dispossession. Through magical realism, the land is rendered as a living being and the ancestors as active participants in communal decisions, making oil extraction a spiritual as well as an ecological violation. The alliance between the government and Pexton exposes the hollowness of the state's claim to represent the nation, while the villagers of Kosawa constitute a counter-nation through collective oaths, oral memory and the mythic figure of Thula.

Read comparatively, the two texts reveal that, despite their differences in genre, narrative perspective and literary form, both represent the petro-state as a betrayal of the promise of independence. The state appears as both squanderer of national wealth and collaborator with

foreign capital, while knowledge of the consequences of oil extraction is transmitted across generations. Against the violence, dispossession and political deception associated with the petro-state, both narratives register a refusal of numbness. Oil therefore transforms the story of nation-building from an account of anticipated development into one of dispossession, contested belonging and witness.

The significance of this representation extends beyond the exposure of political and economic failure. Oil in these texts is not merely a subject of literary representation but a trope that organises the imagination of the postcolonial nation. Whereas official narratives often present the nation as an achievement of the state, the oil trope exposes the persistent gaps between promise and delivery, spectacle and substance, and government and community. Literary form becomes the means through which these contradictions are made legible. Saro-Wiwa's hybrid travelogue transforms movement through the country into political testimony, while Mbue's magical realism draws on local belief to construct a counter-epistemology that challenges corporate and state rationalities. In both works, therefore, literary form is not simply an aesthetic choice; it is a political intervention through which the nation is questioned, remembered and reimagined.

The study further demonstrates that the oil trope performs an ethical function beyond diagnosing the failures of the postcolonial nation-state. By insisting that the stories of oil extraction, environmental destruction, social dispossession and political betrayal be told, Saro-Wiwa and Mbue resist the normalisation of violence and the erasure of affected communities. Their narratives preserve experiences that official accounts often marginalise, giving literary expression to the lives, losses and struggles concealed beneath the spectacle of national development. Literature thus becomes an act of witness: it records what power would rather leave unspoken, remembers what official narratives would rather forget, and gives voice to communities whose experiences are excluded from dominant accounts of the nation. In bearing witness, these writers do more than expose the fractured realities of the postcolonial state; they keep open the possibility of imagining a different nation, one grounded not in the promises of oil wealth but in justice, collective memory, environmental responsibility and the dignity of its people.

Recommendations for Further Research

Comparative studies might extend the analysis to other African petro-narratives, including works in African languages and in translation, to test whether the registers of the trope identified here recur. Gender-focused studies might examine how petro-narratives relate the extractive state to women's bodies and labour, and reception studies might ask how readers in oil-producing communities interpret such texts.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Declaration

The authors declare that no AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript

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