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Nature's Fury: The Role of Environmental Elements in N.K. Jemisin's

The Fifth Season

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Abstract

N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* reimagines environmental catastrophe as a powerful medium for examining systemic oppression, identity, and resilience within speculative fiction. While existing scholarship has primarily focused on the novel's Afrofuturist dimensions, racial politics, and world-building, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the symbolic function of environmental forces as interconnected representations of power, existential threat, and transformative agency. Employing a qualitative textual analysis informed by ecocritical theory and close reading, this study investigates how geological instability, seismic activity, and the sentient Earth shape both the narrative structure and the lived experiences of the Orogenes. The analysis demonstrates that environmental elements operate beyond mere setting; they function as metaphors for institutional violence, ecological imbalance, and the persistent marginalization of vulnerable communities. Simultaneously, these same forces become instruments of resistance and renewal, enabling the Orogenes to reclaim agency and challenge oppressive social systems. By examining the interconnected relationship between environmental catastrophe and social injustice, this paper argues that Jemisin redefines ecological disruption as a political and ethical discourse on survival, transformation, and collective resilience. The study contributes to contemporary scholarship on ecocriticism, climate fiction, and speculative literature by highlighting how *The Fifth Season* employs environmental symbolism to interrogate structures of domination while envisioning possibilities for social and ecological renewal.

Keywords; N.K. Jemisin; *The Fifth Season*; Ecocriticism; Climate Fiction; Environmental Humanities; Oppression; Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Nora K. Jemisin is an American author of science-fiction, fantasy short stories and novels. She often explores issues such as racism, cultural conflict and family relationships in her work. In 2016, Jemisin became the first Black writer to win a Hugo Award for the best novel and she went on to win the award for the next two books in the trilogy, making her the first Black author to win three consecutive Hugo Awards (2016-18) for best novels. Her novel *The Fifth Season* is a seminal work in the fantasy genre, pre-eminent for its exploration of subject matters such as survival, oppression, and identity. Published in 2015, it is the first book in 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, which has garnered significant critical acclaim. The story is set in a world known as the Stillness, where seismic instability is a constant threat, and follows three women with extraordinary abilities known as the Orogenes. These characters navigate a society that both fears and exploits them, highlighting the dynamics of power and oppression. The novel's narrative structure, which shifts between multiple perspectives and timelines, adds depth and complexity to the storytelling, making it a compelling read for those who are concerned about resilience and resistance. The exploration of identity is central to *The Fifth Season*, as the characters grapple with their roles in a society that seeks to define and control them. This is particularly evident in the character of Essun, who experiences life as an orogene in various stages, from childhood to adulthood, providing a broader perspective on the fragmented civilization of the Stillness.

Through Essun's journey, Jemisin crafts a nuanced allegory for living with a marginalized identity, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and resistance. The novel's themes are not only relevant to the fantasy genre but also resonate with contemporary issues such as climate change and social justice, making it a powerful commentary on the human condition (TFS).

Despite the extensive research on *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin, there are several areas that remain underexplored or not fully addressed. One significant research gap is the deeper analysis of how the novel's unique blend of geological and magical elements influence its exploration of social justice. In synthesizing the ideas and impact of *The Fifth Season*, it is clear that N.K. Jemisin's work extends beyond the fantasy genre in order to address pressing social and environmental issues. The novel's exploration of survival, power, and identity resonates with readers by offering a nuanced portrayal of marginalized experiences and the importance of resistance and self-acceptance. The innovative narrative structure and the use of multiple perspectives enhance the storytelling, making it a compelling read for those interested in complex, thought-provoking fiction genres. As a writer, Jemisin continues to influence the speculative fictional landscape with her powerful narratives and a commitment to the social commentary, cementing her place as a leading author in contemporary fantasy fiction. 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, starting with *The Fifth Season*, serves as a testament to her skill in crafting and compelling stories that resonate deeply with the readers and challenge societal norms. The novel has explored various themes and literary devices. One significant area of study is its use as an allegory for racial domination and oppression, highlighting the intricate and nuanced portrayal of marginalized groups, where scholars have also examined the novel's blending of science fiction and fantasy genres, challenged traditional genre boundaries and offered new perspectives on social justice and futurity (*Extrapolation*). Additionally, *The Fifth Season* has been analysed for its exploration of identity and relationships, emphasizing how personal connections shape individual identities. The novel's unique world-building, which incorporates geological magical and environmental themes, has been praised for its complexity and relevance to contemporary issues like climate change. Academic courses and theses have further explored these themes, often situating *The Fifth Season* within broader discussions of 'Afrofuturism' and speculative fiction (*Extrapolation*). Overall, research on *The Fifth Season* underscores its significance in contemporary speculative fiction and its

contributions to ongoing discussions about social justice, identity, and environmental stewardship.

The thesis statement explores how N.K. Jemisin uses environmental elements in *The Fifth Season* to represent broader themes of power, oppression and resilience. Specifically, it argues that the natural forces like earthquakes and seismic activity are used symbolically to reflect the harsh societal structures that govern the lives of the Orogenes, a marginalized group in the novel. These environmental forces are not just background elements but are central to the novel's commentary on how power can be used to control and suppress. At the same time, they also serve as metaphors for strength and potential within the oppressed community to resist and transform their reality. The thesis also states that Jemisin's use of natural disasters and energy manipulation highlights both, the existential threats posed by systematic injustice and the possibility for change and renewal in the face of it. Ultimately, the environmental imagery in the novel serves a dual purpose, first, as exposing the destructiveness of oppressive systems and second, illuminating the resilience of those forced to survive within them. Through this lens, the novel becomes not just a work of fantasy but powerful critique of real-world social inequalities. In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin constructs a world constantly on the edge of environmental collapse, where seismic events are not only natural phenomena but are also central to the novel's allegory for social and political oppression. The Stillness, ironically named, is a continent rife with geological instability, and this volatility forms the backdrop for a deeply stratified society. Jemisin employs these environmental catastrophes as literary devices to symbolise systemic injustice and power imbalances. The natural disasters that devastate the land are mirrored in the institutionalised control over the Orogenes, individuals capable of manipulating seismic energy. Through this parallel, Jemisin critiques real world systems that suppress and exploit marginalised groups. As she writes, "This is the way a world ends. Not with whimper, but with a 'shake'", introducing the reader to a reality where the literal shaking of the world signifies deeper societal tremors (TFS 7). The earth itself becomes a metaphor for human systems; unstable, oppressive, and primed for collapse. In portraying the environment as both a physical and a symbolic force, Jemisin explores how destruction and control are interconnected in both nature and society. Her use of geological instability is not just world-building but a sophisticated reflection of how power operates, how it breaks and how it might be eventually reclaimed.

Central to Jemisin's exploration of systemic oppression is the Fulcrum, an institution designed to train and tightly regulate the Orogenes. Ostensibly a place of education, the Fulcrum is in reality a mechanism of control, where the Orogenes are not nurtured but disciplined and their every move is surveilled by the Guardians, who can nullify their abilities with a single touch. Jemisin's portrayal of the Fulcrum echoes the oppressive nature of real-world institutions that claim to "civilise" the marginalised groups. The environment plays a dual role here, as the very powers that the Orogenes possess, that is, the control over earthquakes are treated with fear and disdain, reflecting societal anxiety towards those who hold power outside of dominant structures. "They tell us we're dangerous, but its them who made us this way" laments Damaya, a young Orogene being trained in the Fulcrum (*TFS 122*). This line encapsulates the irony of institutional oppression: the systems that cause suffering then punish the those who suffer. By linking the Orogenes' abilities to seismic forces, Jemisin draws a parallel between natural and social disruption, showing how both are controlled to maintain the status quo. The Fulcrum thus becomes a metaphorical dam holding back the natural energy of both the earth and its people, hinting at the inevitable break when pressure becomes too great to contain. While seismic activity is initially portrayed as a destructive force, Jemisin gradually reclaims it as a symbol of resistance and resilience. The Orogenes' power to cause or prevent earthquakes is not inherently dangerous; rather, it is the way society responds to that power that creates conflict. This recontextualization is significant of what is feared and suppressed which can also be the source of liberation. Jemisin underscores this point through the character of Syenite, who learns to embrace her powers despite the trauma inflicted by the Fulcrum. In a pivotal moment, Syenite unleashes a massive seismic event to destroy a corrupt community, stating, "I did this. I made this happen. This is what they taught me to do" (*TFS 294*). Her act is one of both destruction and reclamation as she asserts agency in a world that has denied it. Through such scenes, Jemisin demonstrates that environmental upheaval, though catastrophic can also clear the ground for something new. The metaphor is clear just as the earth must break to transform, so must the social systems. By aligning seismic activity with the characters' emotional and political awakenings, Jemisin suggests that true change requires both rupture and release. The novel's recurring environmental disasters, referred to as 'The Fifth Season', underscore the fragility of a society built on systemic inequality. These seasons are periods of extreme geologic disruption that throw the Stillness into chaos,

serving as both, plot devices and metaphors for societal breakdown. Each Fifth Season exposes the underlying instability of the world, much like social upheaval reveals the cracks in unjust systems. Jemisin writes, "A Season is always a lie.... The truth is, the world is always ending", emphasizing that the collapse is not sudden but continuous like a slow unravelling hidden beneath the surface of the earth (*TFS 45*). This idea resonates with the real-world persistence of inequality and the myth of societal stability as the Fifth Season do not create oppression; rather expose it. Communities that survive are often those that adapt and resist hierarchical structures, suggesting that resilience lies not in maintaining order but in embracing change. Jemisin's apocalyptic settings thus serve a dual purpose: firstly to heighten narrative tension and to critique the illusion of permanence in unjust societies, and secondly, the cyclical nature of the seasons also suggests that collapse is inevitable when societies ignore the imbalance at their core. In portraying apocalypse as both literal and metaphorical, Jemisin calls for reckoning not just with nature, but also with the systems which are built by humans. Orogenes, with their unique connection to the earth's power, symbolize more than marginalization as they represent potential for transformation. Their ability to reshape landscapes parallels their capacity to reshape society. Despite the oppression they face, the Orogenes possess a strength that is both feared and needed. Essun, the novel's central character, embodies this duality. After years of hiding her identity, she ultimately embraces her power to protect her daughter and fight back against systemic control. Jemisin describes her in a moment of defiance: "You're not just a weapon. You're the end and the beginning" (*TFS 357*). This declaration reframes the Orogene's identity not as a curse, but as a force of renewal. The transformation from victim to agent of change is at heart of the novel's message as the Orogenes are not just mere survivors; they're catalysts and their connection with the earth symbolises a deeper connection to the cycles of destruction and rebirth, making them uniquely positioned to break and rebuild the world. Through them, Jemisin argues that those most oppressed often hold the greatest power to envision and enact change. The narrative arc of the Orogenes thus becomes a story of reclaiming identity, rewriting fate, and reshaping the world through both means; literally and metaphorically. In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin masterfully intertwines environmental and societal themes to illustrate the destructive nature of systemic oppression and the redemptive power of resilience, by using seismic activity and environmental cataclysms as central metaphors; she constructs a world where nature reflects human injustice and resistance. The geological forces that threaten to destroy

the Stillness also carry the potential for renewal, just as the oppressed characters in the story discover the strength to challenge their fate. Jemisin's use of the environment transcends simple allegory as it becomes an active force within the narrative, shaping characters arcs, societal structures, and thematic depth. "Some worlds are built on the backs of broken things", she writes, reminding the readers that power often relies on the suppression of the others (*TFS 14*). Yet, through the stories of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun, Jemisin offers hope that even in a world which is meant to break them, people can rise, adapt and transform. In this way, *The Fifth Season* is not just a tale of survival in a dying world, instead it is a call to recognise the cracks in our own selves and to find the courage to reshape them.

REPRESENTATION OF OPPRESSIVE SOCIETAL STRUCTURES

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through systemic marginalization and control over the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. The society of the Stillness is built upon a rigid caste system that dehumanizes those with the ability to manipulate seismic energy, branding them as dangerous and in need of containment. This institutionalized fear is enforced through mechanisms like the Fulcrum, where the Orogenes are trained under harsh, authoritarian conditions which are meant to suppress their individuality and ensure obedience. The Guardians, who oversee them, use violence and psychological manipulation to keep them in check, symbolizing how institutions maintain dominance through coercion rather than support. Jemisin illustrates this dehumanization clearly when she writes, "They're tools... not people. They're for use", echoing the language of slavery and exploitation (*TFS 66*). This perspective strips Orogenes of agency, reducing them to instruments of the state. Additionally, the use of "nodes"—Orogenes who are drugged and immobilized to prevent seismic disasters reveals the extent to which the society commodifies and abuses marginalized bodies for the greater good of the elite. The society's survival literally depends on the suppression of those it deems dangerous, reflecting the paradox of relying on yet vilifying marginalized communities. Through this depiction, Jemisin critiques real-world systems where power is maintained by denying freedom and humanity to those deemed as "other." The novel doesn't just present oppression as a theme, instead it comparatively builds it into the very structure of its world, making it impossible to separate natural disaster from social injustice. By doing so, Jemisin exposes how deeply inequality is embedded in

societal frameworks, and how those frameworks can only persist through violence, fear, and control. The Stillness becomes a mirror, showing how systemic oppression fractures both people and the world they inhabit.

Strict Control on the Orogenes

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control on the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Nowhere is this control more apparent than in the Fulcrum, an institution that claims to educate but in truth exists to dominate and weaponize the Orogenes. The Fulcrum trains the Orogenes not for self-liberation, but for submission, discipline, and utility. Damaya, one of the novel's main characters, experiences this firsthand as a child when she is taken from her home and indoctrinated into the Fulcrum system. She is subjected to brutal lessons, harsh punishments, and constant surveillance. The Fulcrum's aim is not to nurture her powers, but to make her controllable. As Jemisin writes, "You'll be broken down. Rebuilt. Perfected. That's what we do here" (*TFS 104*). This language mirrors the ideologies of institutions that seek to erase identity in favor of conformity, such as residential schools, prisons, and colonizing educational systems. According to indigenous scientific literacies, "The Fulcrum reflects how societies impose scientific literacy through discipline and fear rather than empowerment, turning knowledge into a tool of oppression" (Dillon 15). The Guardians, especially function as enforcers of this oppressive system, controlling Orogenes through both physical threat and psychological domination. Their ability to nullify Orogene powers with a touch is symbolic of how systemic power suppresses rebellion. As stated in the interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment, "The Fulcrum's structure mimics contemporary institutions of control that condition marginalized people into compliance while stripping them of agency" (Ruder 290). Through the Fulcrum, Jemisin critiques how societal systems often manipulate, exploit, and dehumanize those with potential for transformative change and instead of fostering growth, these institutions seek control, presenting a chilling allegory for real-world oppression masked as order.

The Seasons as Symbolism

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control of Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. One of the most striking ways Jemisin explores this theme is through the recurring environmental disasters known as 'The Fifth

Season,' which symbolize the cyclical nature of societal collapse and human suffering under systems of inequality. These seasons are commonly referred as periods of catastrophic seismic activity which are not some random natural events but are deeply tied to the social and political dynamics of the Stillness. As Jemisin states, "The world has ended before... This is the way the world ends. For the last time", emphasizing the repetition and inevitability of these disasters (*TFS* 7). The metaphor suggests that systemic oppression leads to inevitable collapse, just as tectonic pressures eventually releases earthquakes. As stated by the interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment, "The Fifth Seasons function as both ecological and social metaphors, where the collapse of ecosystems parallels the collapse of unjust power systems" (Ruder 290). Each season reveals how the elite hoard resources, abandon the vulnerable, and enforce violent hierarchies to survive, further deepening inequality. Communities like comms rely on rigid survivalist doctrine, such as "stone lore," which legitimizes exclusion and reinforces fear of difference, particularly of the Orogenes. As the science fiction studies argues that "the seasons expose the inherent instability of a society dependent on exploitation, suggesting that these apocalyptic events are not just background chaos but narrative tools for critiquing systemic dysfunction" (Tucker 449). Through the symbolism of the seasons, Jemisin warns that any society built on oppression is inherently unsustainable. The land itself rebels, mirroring the repressed power of the Orogenes and the inevitability of revolutionary change. In making environmental disaster both literal and metaphorical, Jemisin positions nature as an active agent in challenging and ultimately dismantling systems of control.

The Reflection of Marginalisation

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control on the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. The marginalization of the Orogenes is evident in every aspect of their lives, from childhood isolation to adult exploitation. Feared for their seismic abilities and stripped of their humanity, the Orogenes are denied from their basic rights and dignity and are labelled as "rogga," a slur that dehumanizes them and reinforces social divisions. The author states that, "The hatred was taught. It's not natural", suggesting that this discrimination is a product of institutional indoctrination rather than instincts (*TFS* 95). The Orogenes are viewed as inherently dangerous, yet the society is paradoxically dependent on them to maintain geological stability. This contradiction mirrors real-world

dynamics where marginalized communities are often exploited for their labour or resources while simultaneously demonized. According to the indigenous scientific literacies, "The Orogenes embody the feared 'other' whose power must be controlled rather than understood", emphasizing how marginalization functions through fear and misinformation (Dillon 19). Characters like Essun, Syenite, and Damaya each face different facets of this marginalization—ranging from familial rejection to institutional abuse, highlighting the widespread nature of their oppression. The Fulcrum's control over the Orogenes is not just about training but also about erasing identity, autonomy, and connection. Ruder observes that, "This systematic suppression reflects a long legacy of societal mechanisms which are used to silence the marginalized" (Ruder 291). The Orogenes are not allowed to live freely, love openly, or even raise their own children without anyone's interference just as their very existence is politicized and feared. Through these depictions, Jemisin illustrates how marginalization fractures the individual and the community, reinforcing a violent status quo. The novel powerfully critiques how systems of power rely on othering and exclusion to maintain dominance, making the suffering of the Orogenes as a reflection of broader patterns of injustice.

ENVIRONMENTAL FORCES AS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through systemic marginalization and control over the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. One of the most potent ways this oppression is dramatized is through the environment itself, which functions not only as a backdrop for catastrophe but as an existential threat shaped by human failure and systemic inequality. The recurring seismic disasters, referred to as 'Fifth Season' are caused by massive tectonic shifts, volcanic eruptions, and climate disruption, symbolizing how nature responds violently to exploitation and imbalance. Jemisin's Stillness is a continent constantly teetering on the edge of collapse, and its society's oppressive structures are a direct response to this precarious environment. As the study indicates, "environmental cataclysm in Jemisin's work is never neutral, it is inseparable from the systems of exploitation and control that shape human relations" (Tucker 444). The Orogenes, who have the power to control these forces, are simultaneously feared and used, reflecting the paradoxical human relationship with nature: seeking control while fearing its autonomy. The environment in *The Fifth Season* is not

simply a passive threat, but an active force that both punishes and mirrors human cruelty. The author argues that this is a world that hates itself, pointing to a deeper existential dread; one in which human society is complicit in its own destruction (*TFS 14*). According to the journal article in the interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment, “the recurring environmental collapse illustrates how ecological devastation and systemic injustice are deeply intertwined” (Ruder 296). The existential threat posed by the Seasons is therefore not just geological but symbolic of the inevitable consequences of oppression and imbalance. In making the Earth itself a character in rebellion, Jemisin warns that when power is abused and ecosystems are exploited, destruction is not just possible—it is inevitable.

The World of Stillness and its Climatic Changes

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control over the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. The world of Stillness itself functions as a stark reflection of recurring climate change, illustrating how ecological instability is both, a natural and a socially constructed crisis. The Stillness is marked by cyclical, apocalyptic environmental events known as ‘Fifth Seasons’ that destroy ecosystems, collapse civilizations, and reset social orders. These recurring disasters mirror real-world climate change, which is likewise increasingly catastrophic and deeply influenced by human systems of inequality. In her novel, she writes, “It’s not just the earth that is angry. It’s us. We are the earth”, positioning human suffering and environmental destruction as inextricably linked (*TFS 320*). The elite in the Stillness, particularly those in power within the Fulcrum and comms, hoard resources and enact violent policies of exclusion to survive each season, reflecting how climate crises in our own world disproportionately impact marginalized communities while the privileged adapt or escape. According to Sarah Ruder, Jemisin’s portrayal of the environmental collapse foregrounds the sociopolitical dimensions of ecological disaster, where the most vulnerable populations are rendered expendable (Ruder 289). The Stone Lore, supposedly ancient wisdom; reinforces fatalistic attitudes about these events, discouraging meaningful change and institutionalizing survivalism over justice. In his article, Tucker observes that “Jemisin’s cyclical disasters act as narrative critiques of climate denialism and environmental negligence” (Tucker 450). The Stillness, therefore, becomes a living metaphor for how climate change reflects and exacerbates societal fractures. By creating a world where natural disaster and social oppression

are fundamentally entwined, Jemisin challenges readers to recognize the real-world consequences of environmental neglect, especially when that neglect is structured by systems of privilege, fear, and control.

The World of Stillness and its Climatic Changes

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control on the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Paradoxically, the Orogenes are those most feared and oppressed and are also the only ones capable of mitigating the existential threats facing the world of the Stillness. Their ability to control seismic activity, quell earthquakes, and redirect volcanic energy positions them not as destroyers, as the society frames them, but as essential to the planet’s survival. The author emphasizes this contradiction when she writes, “Orogenes are the only reason this world hasn’t ended a thousand times already” (*TFS 202*). By weaponizing and controlling the Orogenes through institutions like the Fulcrum, society attempts to manage environmental threats while suppressing the very people who can provide solutions. This reflects how, in the real world, marginalized voices—particularly Indigenous, Black, and other historically excluded communities are often silenced despite possessing crucial environmental and communal knowledge. The article on interdisciplinary studies notes that “The Orogenes represent both the feared ‘other’ and the potential for ecological restoration,” challenging the dominant narrative of threat with one of healing and transformation (Ruder 293). Their powers symbolize humanity’s ability to live in balance with the earth, rather than dominate it. However, true mitigation can only occur when Orogenes act on their own terms, as seen in Essun’s ultimate defiance of the system that tries to control her. The science fiction studies argues that “Jemisin envisions survival not through dominance but through a radical reimagining of power—where those marginalized by society reclaim their agency and reshape the world” (Tucker 453). Thus, the Orogenes symbolize the potential for sustainable change, suggesting that the key to surviving these existential threats lies not in suppression but in empowering those who have long been silenced.

Earth as a Sentient

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control on the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Central to this dynamic is the Earth itself, which Jemisin reimagines as a

sentient, a conscious entity in ongoing conflict with humanity. Unlike typical depictions of nature as a passive backdrop, Jemisin's Earth is a character with agency and emotion, retaliating against human exploitation. The repeated seismic catastrophes, also known as 'The Fifth Seasons' are not some random natural disasters but acts of resistance by a wounded planet. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the Earth has been scarred by millennia of human extraction and violence, particularly the theft and imprisonment of powerful beings like the moon. Jemisin writes, "The Earth hates us. That's why it keeps trying to kill us", directly articulating the animosity between the planet and its inhabitants (*TFS* 316). This portrayal critiques the anthropocentric worldview that places humans above nature, exposing the consequences of treating the planet as an object rather than a living force. In his article on Afrofuturism, the researcher argues that Jemisin's sentient Earth "reverses traditional power hierarchies, positioning nature as the oppressed-turned-avenger" (Ruder 297). The Orogenes, as beings who can communicate with and influence the Earth, represent a potential bridge between humanity and the planet, but only if society chooses understanding over control. The journal of science fiction studies notes that this conflict "underscores the novel's environmental message: that survival requires harmony with nature, not dominance over it" (Tucker 455). By granting the Earth consciousness and purpose, Jemisin reframes environmental catastrophe as a dialogue—a cry for justice from a planet pushed beyond its limits. This sentient Earth becomes both a metaphor for resistance and a literal force demanding reckoning, mirroring the broader struggle between oppressive systems and the voices they suppress.

OROGENES POTENTIAL FOR RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control over the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Yet within this framework of exploitation, the Orogenes also embody profound potential for resilience and transformation. Despite being feared, abused, and controlled, they possess a deep inner strength and the extraordinary ability to alter their environment, not only as a tool of survival but as a force for change. Characters like Essun, Syenite, and Damaya reflect different stages of this journey, each navigating trauma while slowly reclaiming agency. As Jemisin writes, "The power to move the earth is the power to remake the world", suggesting that the Orogenic ability symbolizes the possibility of revolution and

renewal (*TFS* 385). This transformative potential is not limited to physical survival but it also extends to emotional and communal healing. "The Orogenes reclaim identity and agency through their atonement with the earth," forging connections that defy the systems meant to isolate them (Dillon 22). Their capacity to endure generations of systemic violence and still envision alternative futures marks them as symbols of hope in an otherwise collapsing world. Through Orogenes, Jemisin critiques the systems that fear difference while also showing how that very difference contains the seeds of transformation. Their resilience becomes an act of defiance, and their potential for change mirrors the possibility of societal rebirth—if power is reimagined and shared.

Orogenes as an Embodiment

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control of the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Yet within this landscape of subjugation, the Orogenes emerge as powerful embodiments of resilience and transformation. Despite being labelled as dangerous "other," subjected to control by the Fulcrum, and feared by the society, the Orogenes continually resist the forces that attempt to define and limit them. Characters such as Damaya, Syenite, and Essun navigate severe trauma, yet they adapt, survive, and evolve as each stage of their life reveal a deepening strength rooted in their identity and power. Jemisin quotes that "Survival doesn't mean rightness. I know that now", underscoring how resilience is not just endurance, but the capacity to reflect, resist, and ultimately transform one's circumstances (*TFS* 96). This transformation is not solely personal; it challenges societal structures and suggests the possibility of rebuilding. As stated in the journal article of *ISLE*, "The Orogenes' connection to the living earth allows them to transcend their marginalization, becoming agents of change rather than mere subjects of control" (Ruder 295). Their ability to harness the power of the Earth parallels their emotional and psychological transformation, positioning them as catalysts for both ecological and societal renewal. Researchers also observe that the Orogenes reflect "a regenerative force that challenges the systems which sought to destroy them", further emphasizing their symbolic role as transformative agents (Dillon 23). Essun's arc, in particular, illustrates the shift from survival to empowerment, culminating in a radical act of planetary change. Through the Orogenes, Jemisin asserts that those who are most oppressed can also be the most transformative, turning suffering into strength and marginalization into revolution.

Capability of the Orogenes in Protecting their Planet

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control of the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. Despite being vilified by society, the Orogenes possess a unique and essential capability: the power to protect and stabilize the planet. Through their seismic abilities, they can calm earthquakes, contain volcanic eruptions, and prevent the environmental catastrophes that trigger the deadly ‘Fifth Seasons’. Yet instead of being valued as planetary guardians, they are exploited by the Fulcrum and feared by the population. Jemisin highlights this tragic irony through the character of Alabaster, who warns, “We’re the ones keeping it all from falling apart. They don’t even see it” (*TFS* 185). Rather than honouring his role, the society reduces Orogenes to tools—controllable, disposable, and expendable. According to the interdisciplinary studies on literature and environment journal article, “The Orogenes are portrayed as ecological stewards whose powers could serve as a bridge to sustainability, were they allowed to act autonomously” (Ruder 290). Their deep connection to the Earth’s energy grants them a sensitivity that could be harnessed for balance and healing, not just destruction. The researchers further observe that the Orogenes embody “a reciprocal relationship with the environment, rooted in knowledge and care rather than conquest” (Dillon 25). Essun, as she evolves throughout the novel, begins to reclaim this role, ultimately embracing her power not just to survive but to reshape the future. In doing so, she envisions a world where the Earth is not feared or subdued, but understood. By presenting the Orogenes as capable of planetary protection, Jemisin critiques the societal fear of difference and proposes an alternative model of coexistence—one rooted in empathy, power-sharing, and environmental responsibility.

Fulcrum’s Representation of Transformation

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin portrays oppressive societal structures through the systemic marginalization and control of the Orogenes, using their treatment as a powerful metaphor for real-world systems of injustice. The Fulcrum, a powerful institution that regulates and disciplines the Orogenes, serves as a central representation of how oppressive systems attempt to transform and reframe marginalized identities for their own benefit. Rather than nurturing this Orogenic power, the Fulcrum molds it into a controllable, weaponized force, stripping Orogenes of autonomy under the guise of order and safety. As Jemisin notes through Damaya’s training, “The Fulcrum doesn’t

teach you how to be free. It teaches you how to be useful” (*TFS* 150). This transformation is not one of empowerment but of subjugation—reshaping identity through psychological manipulation, surveillance, and fear.

According to an article on Afrofuturism, “The Fulcrum reconfigures the Orogene’s body as an instrument of state control, hiding the potential for liberation under layers of institutional violence” (Ruder 291). The process of turning young Orogenes into “use-castes” echoes historical systems such as slavery, colonization, and forced assimilation, where the dominant power reconstructs marginalized identities to maintain control. Yet even within this rigid framework, Jemisin plants the seeds of rebellion, as characters like Syenite and Alabaster begin to reject the Fulcrum’s ideology, realizing that true transformation must come from reclaiming their own power and identity. The *Extrapolation* article argues that this inner awakening signifies “a counter-narrative to the imposed transformation, one rooted in ancestral strength and environmental communion” (Dillon 26). Ultimately, the Fulcrum symbolizes how institutions exploit and reframe the marginalized communities, but also how resistance can emerge within those very systems. By depicting the Orogenes’ struggle to redefine themselves outside the Fulcrum’s constraints, Jemisin highlights the enduring potential for radical transformation and self-liberation.

CONCLUSION

In *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin masterfully intertwines environmental forces with themes of power, oppression, and resilience to reflect the systemic injustices faced by the Orogenes. Through seismic metaphors and the manipulation of earth, Jemisin critiques societal hierarchies and institutional control while emphasizing the Orogenes’ potential to resist and transform their world (*TFS* 142). Scholars such as Ruder argue that this “ecological marginalization mirrors racialized oppression” (Ruder 291). Whereas, Dillon sees the Orogenes as “agents of planetary renewal” (Dillon 26). Ultimately, the novel challenges readers to rethink power structures and imagine resilience as a form of revolutionary, earthbound transformation.

Further research on *The Fifth Season* can explore the intersections of environmental justice and racial identity, particularly how Jemisin reimagines ecological catastrophe through a postcolonial lens. Scholars could also examine the role of gender and motherhood in the narrative, analysing how personal trauma intersects with systemic oppression. Additionally, the novel’s portrayal of Earth as a sentient, a

reactive force which inquires for philosophical and speculative instability into non-human agency and geocentric ethics. Comparative studies with other Afrofuturist or climate fiction texts may reveal broader patterns in speculative responses to climate change, resilience, and sociopolitical resistance in marginalized communities.

Exploring the themes of power, oppression, and resilience through environmental metaphors in *The Fifth Season* offers future researchers and readers a powerful lens to examine systemic injustice in both fictional and real-world contexts. By analysing how Jemisin intertwines seismic instability with social inequality, scholars can better understand the impact of environmental racism, colonialism, and structural violence. This topic also encourages readers to reflect on the potential for marginalized communities to reclaim agency and transform oppressive systems. Ultimately, it fosters critical thinking about climate justice, representation in literature, and the role of speculative fiction in imagining equitable futures.

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