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DELINEATING THE UNCHARTED WORLD IN N.K JEMISIN'S SCIENCE FICTION-
THE BROKEN EARTH TRILOGY

Dr. SHINY MENDONCE¹, SINDHU NAIR²

¹Asst.Prof. P.G Department of English, St.Thomas College, Bhilai , Chhattisgarh

Email – kuhoo5992@gmail.com

²Ph.D Research Scholar, Indira Kala Sangit Vishwavidyalaya, Khairagarh, Chhattisgarh

Email- kuhoo5992@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Science Fiction has emerged as highly popular and distinctive literary art form of twenty – first century. Unlike other genres, Science Fiction has the ability to predict future with scientific reasoning and shift us from real to the imaginative world. N .K Jemisin is a leading name in the field of Sci-Fi fiction. She presents a foresight of what would happen in future. Jemisin's fantasy- The Broken Earth Trilogy is concerned with the life of man on earth, his dominance over the environment in which he live and his views about universe. This paper is an attempt to explore the urgent concerns of humanity about future .The Trilogy speculates the apocalyptic visions, the destruction of the world and the annihilation of the human race. The fiction also analyses the harm humans can cause to their planet by their reckless scientific experiments and their neglect of the environment. Focus is also on the effects of racial and gender discrimination in the Trilogy. The intersectionality theory helps to understand the experiences of populations situated within multiple systems of oppression.

Keywords – Science fiction, apocalyptic vision, racial and gender discrimination, Intersectionality theory

Science fiction, along with the fast growing climate fiction genre explores the different ways to configure human societies through environmental and resource issues. Elyce Rae Helford argues “Science Fiction is about the future, new options and new ways of thinking”(131). Nora Keita Jemisin, better known by her pen name N.K Jemisin is an African-American science fiction and fantasy writer. Jemisin's novel the ‘Fifth season’, which is the first book of the trilogy, ‘The Broken Earth’ won the Hugo Award for best novel, making her the first African-American writer to win a Hugo Award in that category. It's sequel, ‘The Obelisk Gate’ and ‘The Stone Sky’ also won the Hugo Award for best novel in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

Jemisin sets up a world of fantasy by blending science fiction and fantasy together in far future earth which is different from the one in which we live today. A world imagined in a far future, post-apocalyptic world wracked with periodic disasters called ‘Seasons’, triggered by periods of catastrophic events like storms, famine, volcanic eruptions and so on having their apocalyptic moments, progressing as climate change over

longer periods of time. Nature as an entity of exceptional value is ruined or lost because of climate change, ultimately human life has become horrible and difficult to cope with. Though 'The Fifth Season' is a work of speculative fiction, it depicts the society struggling with the real-world problems of oppression and hierarchy. Jemisin, in her novel, describes the racial groups that comprise Orogenes who can draw incredible magical power from earth's crust, their ability to control the seismic movement and utilizing the kinetic and thermal power makes them both useful as well as dangerous. They are so powerful that in an impulse of uncontrollable rage they hold the immense capacity to wipe out the whole human race from the universe. The 'Guardians' are an ancient order of humans with supernatural abilities whose sole task is to manage and control Orogenes. They control an organization called 'Fulcrum', that trains Orogenes to use their abilities in a productive way. 'Guardian' are the only people who can negate Orogenes' power to protect the world from them, even if that means killing them. Orogenes are given brutal training in Fulcrum to control their power and to use it to quell earthquakes and other seismic activities to hold off the start of apocalyptic seasons. Orogenes are subjective to discrimination that echoes the racial oppression experienced by any of numerous racial and ethnic groups that have been enslaved across human history. They are widely hated and feared, and many are murdered by small-town mobs when their powers are discovered in childhood. If they are not killed by their family or community, they are given to a Guardian, to be trained. After being trained they are given rings to wear on their fingers that denote their rank at fulcrum, ten-ring being the highest of the rank.

Jemisin's protagonist is a brown-skinned woman, Essun, who lives in a world where non-white characters are discriminated. Jemisin builds around a social caste system that highlights an intersectional model of society in which the protagonist experiences various degrees of oppression and privilege as a woman and an Orogene when living under different names during earlier phases of her life which serves to foreground, how the same individual is effectively molded in different identities in the context of different social and intersectional frameworks. A leading thinker and scholar in the field of critical Race Theory, Kimberle Crenshaw defines "intersectionality as a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people or social problems as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages"(148)

In 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', Crenshaw showcases, how members of identity categories in America are discriminated against and have unequal access to resources. At the same time, they have turned these categories into sources of strength, community, and intellectual development. She wants to look at how different "dimensions" of identity intersect, or influence one another. A woman of color experiences both racism and sexism, for instance;

"an intersectional approach therefore must analyze her experiences in terms of both race and sex, not just one or the other"(Crenshaw,1243)

Essun, Damaya and Syenite is one character in different guise at different stages of life. Damaya is a young Orogene who has been sent to the Fulcrum by her parents, when they discovered she is an Orogene. A Guardian called Schaffa comes to take her away. We are introduced to a young woman called Syenite, who is being trained at the Fulcrum. Syenite is a rising Orogene in the Fulcrum, who is forcibly sent on a mission with Alabaster, the most powerful living Orogene with a ten ring, with an underlying purpose to conceive a child with him. On the way, Alabaster shows her one of the node stations that the Fulcrum has positioned around the Stillness, the only existing continent. There are Orogenes at each node whose job is to constantly quell small earthquakes that could endanger the continent. Alabaster reveals the reality, that the Orogenes in the nodes have all been mutilated and lobotomized from an early age, to allow them to quell quakes by instinct but subjecting them to constant agony and suffering. Alabaster reveals that many of the Orogenes in the nodes are his offspring, possessing the same strength he has, and yet there are almost no other at his level in the Fulcrum. Syenite is horrified by the discovery. Essun is introduced as a middle-aged woman, living in a small southern community named Tirimo with her two young children. Secretly, she is an Orogene, her children have orogenic abilities as well, which often manifest themselves subconsciously, requiring Essun to constantly work to avoid their discovery. One day, she arrives home to find her young son has been beaten to death by her husband after being discovered his orogenic abilities.

Racism, here, is also posited on account of the region where people live. Fleras & Elliott, defines racism “as power focuses attention on the primacy of structures, ideologies, and practices in the racialized distribution of resources and responsibilities in society”(112) This power is expressed at the level of dominant/marginalized interaction, buttressed by a coherent system of ideas and ideals, and embedded within institutional frameworks.

The inhabitants of equatorial regions of the Stillness, tend to be dark skinned and are more advanced than those polar folks from the Arctic and the Antarctic. It is grounded in reality and is relevant to many real life current events of global climate change and institutionalized racism. In Harriet A. Washington’s, “A terrible thing to waste – environmental racism and it’s assault on the American mind”, assess the damage that “environmental poisoning”(78), has on communities of colour. She argues that the area where marginalized people live, environmental toxins were much more prevalent, deteriorating the brains, health and future of Black and native American children. Like Washington, Jemisin brought forth the dangers of marginalization, enslavement or oppression which could be experienced through the lens of her character’s perspective of racial and ecological injustice. Both central characters of the trilogy are females, Essun, an Orogene and Nassun, her estranged and dangerous pre- adolescent daughter. Neither of them believed in peaceful coexistence and universal harmony. From contemporary perspective, both are war-criminals, though only one intends to destroy human civilization.

The first novel in the trilogy introduces the world where Essun sets out in search of her daughter, The Obelisk Gate tears it all down as the ‘Season’ hits and Jemisin goes full apocalyptic. Jemisin’s Seasons aren’t just a climate change but a massive apocalyptic events that last for generations, reshaping the world and its inhabitants. In the novel, magic and spiritual powers absorbs the misfits of the surroundings but eventually succumbs to an eco- disaster. Essun learns that the season was not natural but was deliberately created by her former partner Alabaster. The power of the earth is wielded as a weapon in the hands of Orogenes. The powerful Orogene Alabaster has used his power to tear a blazing rift across the continent and thus creating the so called ‘Fifth Season’ and humanity faces extinction.

In the Prologue of ‘Fifth Season’ an extraordinarily powerful orogene discusses the sad state of the world and laments the oppression of his race. He then uses his enormous power to fracture the entire continent along its length threatening to cause the worst fifth season in recorded history. (11)

There are also fascinating revelations in ‘The Stone Sky’, that the earth is a living consciousness, furious with humanity’s attempts to control it. Earth blames humanity for the loss of its moon. At present the people are living in a world where the moon has gone into an irregular orbit which affects the global weather systems of earth leading to an imbalance in nature. Essun learns from Alabaster that he was not trying to end the world by creating the rift in the continent that touched off the Season, instead, he was taking the first step in curing the problem. He explains how in past people used a system of obelisks as a power source. A problem with the obelisks caused the moon to be thrown out of orbit, angering Father Earth who has hated the Orogenes, who created the obelisk system ever since. The obelisks still exist and Alabaster has learned that this network, along with energy from the rift, can be used to draw the moon back into orbit, putting an end to the Seasons. Because Alabaster can no longer access to what he calls the Obelisk Gate, a punishment for having used it once, he asks Essun to finish what he started. The two of them begin to piece together how the Fifth Season began. Essun also begins understanding the potential role of the obelisks in ending the periods of winter that threaten to make humans extinct.

Through flashback, the story of Hoa is revealed, at present he is a stone eater. In the distant past, human technology, which seamlessly fuses advanced biotechnology and magic, has reached its pinnacle with the creation of the Obelisk Gate, a network of obelisks designed to tap the Earth’s magical essence to create an inexhaustible source of energy. To accomplish this, scientists have created a race of humans with exquisite sensitivity to magic based on the DNA of a race of people, the now-dominant culture defeated and subjugated. These “tuners” will control the Gate and tap the magic from Earth’s core. However, the night before the Gate is to be activated, the tuners discover the fate of the people of their genetic code, they are kept alive as

batteries, wired to the obelisks to charge them with magical energy, which in turn will give them eternal torment and suffering. The lead tuner, Hoa, decides to turn the Gate's energies back onto the city of Syl Anagist, destroying it rather than perpetuating this injustice. As he and his fellow tuners attempt to do so, the Earth itself takes control of the obelisks and tries to use them to melt the crust of the Earth, which will sterilize it of almost all life. Hoa and the other tuners manage to avert this catastrophe by preventing some of the obelisks from activating, at the expense of their physical bodies as a result of which they are all transformed into the first stone eaters, and the Moon is flung into a high elliptical orbit by the massive energies involved. Thus humanity is sent into a dark age, wracked by the Fifth Seasons.

Society both persecutes and exploits the Orogenes. On one hand, Orogenes are not legally human, and are often murdered as children when their powers manifest. On the other hand, the Orogenes recruited by the Fulcrum are used to serve the interests of the state. The Fulcrum selectively "breeds" Orogenes to produce ever more powerful children, lobotomizes the Orogenes they put to work as node maintainers, etc. The position of Orogenes is an extreme example of the social stratification that characterizes all societies. Syenite kills her son rather than allow it to suffer in the Fulcrum or be lobotomized for the node stations. Though Essun stands up for the Orogenes, they remain a group of people who have always been hated and mistrusted in the Stillness because of their mystical abilities. Contributing to the people's lack of respect for Orogenes is a proclamation made by the Yumenes leaders that Orogenes are not people. Because Orogenes are not considered useful members of any community, they are expected to kill themselves when a Season is declared. Nassun and Essun live in the time period of a world threatened by destructive volcanoes and earthquakes that touch off extended periods of winter known as Fifth Seasons. Essun and Nassun are Orogenes, people with the ability to still the quakes and stop the volcanoes. Despite their abilities to help their fellow citizens, the orogenes are hated. In her young life, eleven year old Nassun has suffered through her mother's cruel and insistent training intended to help the child control her use of orogeny. She has seen her brother killed by her father because he learned his toddler son was an Orogene. Nassun has realized her father's hatred for Orogenes is so strong that he can never see her as just a little girl again. Nassun must kill her father to keep him from murdering her. Nassun has the ability to use the Obelisk Gate to bring the moon back into alignment with the earth and stop the Fifth Season. Instead, she is being manipulated by Steel to use her opportunity to wipe out hatred once and for all by ending the world and all of its people. Knowing Nassun's intentions, Essun fights with Nassun for control of the Obelisk Gate, though using the gate will kill Essun. Nassun dislikes her mother because she never felt that she could please her. However, when she sees her mother sacrificing her life to save a planet of people who had hurt and hated her, Nassun takes a fresh look at what she is doing. She decides to carry out her mother's last wish and bring the moon back into alignment so that the world and its people can begin to live without the fear of Seasons.

Conclusion

The Broken Earth Trilogy is about who holds the power in this world and how society uses and profits of those that it marginalizes as well as the destruction that absolute power can mete out. At the end of the trilogy, the fate of the world balances on the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Jemisin ends by showing off a world, changed for the better by the characters' actions.

Science Fiction is thus seen as a literary form which is based on the fact of social change and generate new ideas that the entire society would need in the future. To quote the idea expressed by Robert Heinlein

Science fiction does have one superiority over all other forms of literature: it is the only branch of literature which even attempts to cope with the real problems of this fast and dangerous world ... In this complex world, science, the scientific method, and the consequences of the scientific method, are central to everything the human race is doing and to wherever we are going.

....Science fiction is the only form of fiction which takes into account this central force in our lives and futures (15).

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