

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND JUSTICE: A STUDY OF NK JEMISIN'S *THE FIFTH SEASON*

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ABSTRACT

Environmental Racism started with white supremacy culture that felt entitled to the violently installed political economy of growth. This growth requires colonial expansion on other people's land where exploitation of native people and the earth takes place. Environmental Racism becomes visible when marginalized poor people are deprived of their basic human rights of clean and green surroundings and they are forced to live in a society that undermines their health. A trend of migrating for eco-social safety away from extraction sites is also observed but they are also running into border racist policies of the west and of their nation-state as well. Contemporary science fantasy fiction literature has also started taking this issue as a central theme. The research aims to demonstrate how environmental racism and justice are depicted in literature, for which I have chosen science fantasy fiction, particularly *The Fifth Season* by NK Jemisin, book one of *The Broken Earth Trilogy*.

Keywords: Environmental Racism, Environmental Justice, Ecology, Science Fantasy

In the fantastical world, realist rules do alter themselves regarding time, body, ability, and others. Nalo Hopkinson is of the view that fantasy fiction can disorient anything: politics, culture, race, sex, sexuality, gender, and power. It allows one to think outside the box. It is the "particular hallmark" of fantasy fiction. Contemporary Science Fantasy Fiction must be developed to analyse subordinated groups' social position with real effects of race, class, and sexuality and fantasy fiction have the potential for giving answers to these questions.

Global South contribute least to Environment degradation but they are more exposed to all-natural calamities, global warming and the damage caused by Environment degradation. Rich countries often adopt the strategy of exporting trash from their nations to poor nations, proving their NIMBY mentality. This is the new form of imperialism to keep the Global South destitute for the West's benefit. Environmental Justice Movement was actually a reaction to all these discriminatory environmental practices like toxic dumping, chemical disposal, groundwater contamination and faulty waste practices and how it affects people of colour, and low-income workers. The environmental activism led by people of colour gave voice to the marginalized people and popularized the term "Environmental Racism". Women activists like Joan Sharp, Lois Gibbs, Greta Thunberg, Wangari Matthai, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patekar and Marilyn Waring played significant roles in it.

Recent trends in the transformation towards a sustainable society, as a response to the number of persistent problems, confronted by contemporary modern societies are generally technical and not considered under the ambit of social. Even mainstream practitioners do not acknowledge environmental justice and environmental racism in their sustainability works. The

rights of the socially and economically marginalised are not recognised. In addition to it, the rights of the earth are ignored.

However, contemporary writings, especially fantasy fiction and science fiction have started taking up the issues of ecological crisis. The fifth season also explored the issues related to ecology and issues related to the rights of the earth through a lens of racial injustice and ecological injustice. The novel poses multiple questions. The prime question a reader is thrown is how should we live in a climate-changed world. How humans should think about Earth itself? The paper tends to analyse how Earth could be made unbroken again through integrity, humility and renewal. In 2015, a group of scientists, capitalists and environmentalists at the Oakland-based Breakthrough Institute released what they called the Eco-Modernist Manifesto. Transition thinkers often don't ask what sort of world they are hoping to make, beyond feeding large, growing populations, or providing abundant energy without depleting resources and polluting ecosystems. The ecological modernization movement exemplifies this kind of thinking. The scientists, capitalists and the environmentalist present at the declared in the Eco-Modernist Manifesto declared:

“A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world”

The Breakthrough Institute realised that by intensifying many 'human activities — particularly farming, energy extraction, forestry, and settlement — so that they use less land and interfere less with the natural world is the key to decoupling human development from environmental impacts'. Critically, ecological science fiction can also enable readers to begin questioning key assumptions, values, and choices inherent in the organization of a society, whether existing or imaginary.

The Fifth Season, book one of The Broken Earth trilogy by NK Jemisin makes the reader contemplates what happens when a planet is threatened by environmental catastrophe and a free citizen develops special powers to resist because the planet has excessive seismic activity. This is exactly what we are facing in our present world as Jemisin puts it "a year without a summer". People suddenly try to learn tactics for their survival, they start believing that they are unable to grow food, and they don't see the sun. In a nutshell, people in this fantasy fiction started living under extreme structural disaster. “Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall; Death is the fifth and master of all.”

Jemisin decided to base this story on "stonelore". The stonelore technique allows the reader how people behave with one another in such circumstances.

Certain principles of environmental justice assure the sacredness of mother earth and tend to show the inclusivity of all species, showing all species in an interconnected web of life. This demands ecological unity. However, the book also posits the nurturing nature, but not 'mother earth' but rather 'father earth'. It is a new perspective showing the demonic features of nature. Jemisin admits that she likes to 'mess' with people's expectations about social and political relationships when it comes to politics of environmental justice and environmental racism.

Environmental justice calls for the protection of the universe from all sorts of extraction, nuclear testing and contamination and other maligned activities. One such example can be taken of covid19, when the particulate matter present in the air was increasing the risk of lives, the most vulnerable were the subordinated, poor and marginalized people who were at risk of life as they were denied access to health care facilities.

Intersectionality plays a very important role in defining the interconnection between gender, race, sexuality, and the environment in which we live. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to trickle down the approach to social justice who recognize the actual problem to target groups, within their target groups how marginalized fall from the cracks, for instance, a black woman, who is black as well as woman— a double discrimination. She brought to light that many social justice problems like sexism, racism, and ableism ate overlapping creating multiple levels of social justice because she believes a problem not named, can't be solved.

The novel *The Fifth Season* is set in a time a few thousand years in future which takes place on a planet similar to earth. The planet has a single supercontinent called the 'Stillness'. The planet faces catastrophic climate change which the inhabitants recognise as the Fifth Season. In the prologue section of the novel, it is revealed that the existing state of Stillness is sad. The society of Stillness is divided into many categories as per their powers and dominance over others. Orogenes are the most powerful among them and can control energy especially temperature. In the beginning section, we come to know that an orogene laments the oppression of his race. He then uses his enormous power to fracture the entire continent across its length, threatening to cause the worst Fifth Season in recorded history. The story follows three female orogenes: Essun, Damaya, and Syenite across the Stillness from different periods. The other communities living in the Stillness are Geomests, Stone eaters, Guardians, Equatorials, and Midlatters. People are also divided into subcastes such as 'innovators', 'bredders', 'strongbacks', 'leaderships', and 'stroneback'.

The book *Fifth Season* opens with a devastating event, whence the earth broke and so the narrative into three: Damaya, Seyenite and Essun. It is later revealed that all three are the same woman at different point of time. The novel's turning point comes when the reader finds that Alabaster's return with the fifth season is actually an effort to provide justice to the unjust world.

In the opening of the novel a powerful orogene, wailing the sad state of her race and the oppression caused to them is seen. Such racial oppression is inspired from realistic world. Flint water tank crisis is one such example among the myriad others. Flint water tank crisis started in 2014 is a textbook case of environmental racism where the groundwater was contaminated with high levels of lead and coagulation of specific types of diseases causing bacteria. A hundred thousand residents were exposed to certain ailments resulting reduction in intellectual functioning and IQ (mental disability), and an increased chance of Alzheimer's disease. It happened all because the state wanted to save a buck neglecting the rights of poor people. Dr Robert Bullard, a leading environmental justice advocate noted the race-based oppression in it. He says,

"Racism trumps class even middle-income African American are more likely to live in more polluted neighbourhoods."

To conclude, it can be said that *The Fifth Season* pictures the cataclysmic world and makes the reader think about what it would be like to live in such a world, especially where there is no centralised governance. Jemisin herself described 'Stillness' as a society shaped by its environment and shaped by the disastrous events that happened in past. In an interview, Jemisin says, "I think the distinction that matters is that the Stillness is not post-apocalyptic. This isn't what happens after normal goes away; the Seasons are their normal. So basically it's a society of preppers whose paranoia and obsessiveness is actually justified" (Cunningham, 2017). The Broken Earth series demonstrates why we should desperately want to avoid transgressing the threshold at which vicious climate synergies begin.

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