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Literary Theories

Myth, Ecology, and Posthuman Survival: Environmental Consciousness and Geological Agency in The Broken Earth Trilogy

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Abstract: Contemporary climate fiction increasingly turns toward speculative forms to imagine ecological collapse, environmental injustice, and nonhuman agency in ways that realist fiction often cannot adequately contain. Among the most significant interventions in this field is The Broken Earth Trilogy, comprising The Fifth Season, The Obelisk Gate, and The Stone Sky, which reconceptualises apocalypse not merely as catastrophe, but as a historically produced ecological and political condition rooted in exploitation, extraction, and systems of domination. This article examines the trilogy through an interdisciplinary framework combining ecocriticism, myth criticism, posthuman theory, and environmental justice studies. It argues that Jemisin constructs an eco-mythic narrative in which geology emerges as an active agent, the human is radically decentred, and survival becomes dependent on relationality rather than mastery. By transforming the Earth from inert backdrop into sentient force, Jemisin challenges anthropocentric ontologies that have historically positioned nature as a resource, territory, and object of control. Simultaneously, the trilogy's representation of orogenes bodies capable of manipulating seismic energy functions as both a metaphor and a material critique of social oppression, ecological alienation, and biopolitical regulation. Through recurring archetypes of exile, sacrifice, descent, rebirth, and cosmic memory, The Broken Earth creates a mythic structure that links environmental crisis with histories of violence and imagines new modes of coexistence grounded in interdependence. Ultimately, this study contends that Jemisin's trilogy offers one of contemporary literature's most compelling visions of ecological consciousness by fusing speculative world-building with radical environmental ethics.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, Environmental Justice, Mythology, Climate Fiction, Geological Agency, Anthropocene.

Introduction

Recent literary responses to climate change increasingly employ speculative and fantastic forms to imagine ecological crisis at planetary scales. Realist fiction often struggles to represent environmental collapse because the climate crisis unfolds across deep time, distributed causality, and complex networks of human and nonhuman entanglement. Climate fiction, therefore, has emerged as a crucial imaginative mode through which writers explore extinction, survival, ecological grief, and planetary ethics.

Within this field, *The Broken Earth Trilogy* occupies a singular position. Jemisin's trilogy refuses conventional apocalyptic narratives centered on heroic restoration, scientific mastery, or human exceptionalism. Instead, it imagines a world in which ecological catastrophe is cyclical, geology is sentient, and survival depends upon recognising interdependence rather than enforcing domination. Through its depiction of the Stillness a continent shaped by catastrophic Seasons, the trilogy foregrounds environmental instability not as accidental disaster but as the historical consequence of exploitation and violence.

This article argues that Jemisin creates an ecological mythology that fuses environmental justice, mythic archetype, and posthuman becoming into a radical critique of anthropocentrism. Nature in the trilogy is neither a passive landscape nor a romantic sanctuary; it is an active force, wounded subject, and agent of transformation. Human identity is destabilised through encounters with stone, seismic power, and planetary memory, producing forms of relational existence that exceed liberal humanist notions of autonomy.

Ecological Crisis and Climate Fiction

Climate fiction often represents environmental collapse through dystopian futurity, portraying devastated landscapes, scarcity, migration, and social fragmentation. Yet much cli-fi remains implicitly anthropocentric: catastrophe threatens "human civilization," and ecological systems become meaningful primarily insofar as they affect human life.

Jemisin fundamentally reverses this perspective. In *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*, ecological collapse is not a backdrop but a narrative centre. Ashfall, tectonic violence, poisoned ecosystems, and climatic instability constitute everyday reality. Communities organise themselves around survival protocols food storage, migration patterns, and social regulation revealing civilization itself as adaptation to environmental precarity.

However, the trilogy moves beyond climate anxiety toward ecological ontology. Earth is not merely a setting but an active presence. Geological systems possess agency, memory, and resistance. Ancient extraction has wounded the planet, and the recurring Seasons function as symptoms of planetary trauma. This vision aligns with contemporary ecological theory that challenges distinctions between living and non-living matter, emphasizing dynamic agency distributed across ecosystems, material processes, and planetary systems. By portraying geology as an animate force, Jemisin extends ecological thought beyond biology into lithic consciousness; stone, heat, pressure, and seismic movement become active participants in narrative reality. Ecology is therefore geological, historical, and political.

Mythic Structures in The Broken Earth Trilogy

One of the trilogy's most powerful dimensions is its mythic architecture. Beneath its speculative world-building lies a structure shaped by archetypes of exile, descent, sacrifice, apocalypse, and renewal.

Exile and the Wounded Journey

Essun's narrative follows the archetypal pattern of exile. Her journey begins in profound rupture: the murder of her son, the abduction of her daughter, and the destruction of domestic stability. Forced into movement across a collapsing world, she becomes both wandering survivor and wounded seeker.

Unlike classical heroic journeys rooted in conquest or glory, Essun's exile is marked by grief, rage, maternal endurance, and moral ambiguity. Her movement across devastated landscapes resembles underworld descent a confrontation not only with external danger but with buried histories, suppressed identities, and inherited trauma. This transforms exile from individual quest into collective historical memory.

Apocalypse as Cyclical Myth

Apocalypse in traditional myth often signifies divine judgment followed by renewal. Jemisin radically revises this form. In the *Stillness*, apocalypse is cyclical rather than singular. Seasons recur repeatedly, embedding catastrophe into cultural memory and social structure.

This cyclical temporality resembles ancient cosmologies in which destruction and regeneration are interconnected phases of cosmic order. Yet Jemisin politicizes this mythic cycle: catastrophe emerges not from divine will but from historical exploitation planetary violence inflicted through extraction, domination, and technological arrogance. Apocalypse thus becomes consequence rather than destiny.

Sacred Memory and Planetary Myth

Hoà's revelations across the trilogy construct a sacred history that functions as cosmological myth. Through ancestral memory, readers encounter humanity's ancient violence against Earth and the transformation of beings into stone-eating entities suspended between minerality and consciousness. This mythic deep history gives the trilogy epic scale. Geological time becomes sacred time; memory becomes sedimented within matter itself. Stone stores history. Landscapes preserve trauma. Planetary consciousness exceeds human chronology. In this framework, myth is an ecological archive.

Geological Agency and Ecocritical Consciousness

A central innovation of Jemisin's trilogy lies in its representation of geology as an active force rather than inert matter. Traditional Western thought often imagines stone as a lifeless object, a passive material awaiting human use. Jemisin overturns this assumption. Stone remembers, responds, transforms, and acts. Geological processes are not background mechanisms but narrative agencies.

The Earth itself is wounded subjectivity. It carries memory of exploitation and expresses that memory through rupture, instability, and violence. Tectonic force becomes planetary speech.

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This radically decenters the human. Humanity is no longer the master observer of nature but one participant within vast material networks that exceed control or comprehension. Human life depends on forces it neither created nor commands. Ecological consciousness in the trilogy therefore emerges through humility: recognition that existence is contingent, relational, and materially embedded in planetary systems.

Orogeny, Power, and Environmental Justice

A crucial dimension of *The Broken Earth Trilogy* lies in its articulation of ecological power through bodies marked for regulation, fear, and exploitation. Orogenes individuals capable of sensing and manipulating seismic, thermal, and kinetic energy occupy a paradoxical social position: they are indispensable to civilization's survival, yet are systematically oppressed by that very civilization. Their bodies are simultaneously feared as dangerous, instrumentalised as resources, and disciplined through institutional violence. In this contradiction, Jemisin offers a profound meditation on environmental justice by linking ecological agency with social marginalization.

The Fulcrum, ostensibly a training institution for orogenes, operates as a mechanism of biopolitical control. Orogenic children are removed from familial life, renamed, conditioned, monitored, and transformed into state property. Their abilities are harnessed for infrastructural stability, preventing earthquakes, regulating thermal imbalance, and maintaining fragile social order, yet they are denied autonomy, dignity, and humanity. This dynamic mirrors the logic of extractive modernity: systems of power depend upon exploited labour while simultaneously rendering that labour disposable. Just as dominant cultures treat ecosystems as inexhaustible resources, the Fulcrum treats orogenic bodies as technologies of survival rather than subjects with agency.

Jemisin's critique extends beyond metaphor into structural analysis of environmental inequality. Environmental justice scholarship emphasizes that ecological harm is rarely evenly distributed; rather, marginalized communities disproportionately bear the burdens of pollution, displacement, climate vulnerability, and resource extraction. In *the Stillness*, the violence of Seasons is likewise mediated through hierarchy. Survival infrastructures privilege certain groups, while others remain expendable. Communities are organised according to usefulness, reproductive value, and capacity to contribute to social continuity. Difference becomes justification for exclusion.

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Orogenes occupy the intersection of ecological intimacy and political vulnerability. Because they embody Earth's force, they become sites upon which society projects fear of instability itself. Their oppression reveals a broader cultural desire to control what cannot ultimately be controlled planetary agency. This resonates strongly with histories of racialised oppression, caste exclusion, and colonial extraction, where both land and marginalized bodies are rendered objects of management, discipline, and exploitation.

Essun's life illustrates this environmental injustice in deeply intimate terms. She survives by concealing her identity, suppressing power, and negotiating social hostility. Her body becomes an archive of trauma, fear, discipline, rage, and resistance. Yet through this embodied history, Jemisin transforms victimhood into agency. Essun's ecological power is not merely a destructive force; it becomes a possibility for planetary negotiation, ethical choice, and systemic transformation.

Environmental justice in the trilogy thus moves beyond distributive fairness toward ontological recognition: justice requires acknowledging the agency of those human and nonhuman historically treated as resources.

Posthuman Bodies and Hybrid Subjectivity

If environmental justice exposes structures of domination, Jemisin's posthuman imagination offers alternative modes of being. The trilogy consistently destabilises boundaries between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, organism and geology. Subjectivity becomes distributed, relational, and materially hybrid.

This posthuman vision is most visible in the figure of the stone eater. Stone eaters occupy an uncanny ontological threshold: mineral yet conscious, ancient yet active, simultaneously familiar and radically alien. They resist categorical classification because they unsettle inherited assumptions about life itself. They are not simply transformed humans, nor are they inert objects animated by fantasy logic. Rather, they represent forms of consciousness embedded in mineral existence, life beyond anthropocentric definitions of biology.

Through stone eaters, Jemisin expands ecological imagination into lithic being. Consciousness is no longer confined to flesh. Memory persists across geological time. Agency circulates through mineral structures, energetic systems, and deep planetary histories. Existence becomes radically plural.

This decentering extends to human identity. Orogeny itself destabilises the liberal humanist subject, traditionally imagined as autonomous, rational, bounded, and sovereign. Orogenes are porous beings whose sensory and energetic capacities exceed bodily containment. They perceive subterranean movement, thermal currents, and seismic tensions. Their subjectivity is ecological, not enclosed within skin but extended into material networks.

Such relational embodiment aligns with posthuman theory's challenge to anthropocentric exceptionalism. Human beings are not separate from the environment; they are constituted through ongoing entanglement with ecosystems, infrastructures, matter, and planetary processes. Jemisin literalizes this entanglement. Bodies are geological. Emotion affects energy. Memory inhabits matter. Identity emerges relationally.

Nassun's arc intensifies this transformation. Positioned between inherited trauma and cosmic possibility, she embodies becoming rather than fixed identity. Her relationship to planetary power moves beyond domination toward intimate negotiation with forces larger than herself. She does not merely use Earth's energy; she enters into a relationship with it. This shift from mastery to reciprocity marks the ethical core of Jemisin's posthuman vision. Posthumanity in *The Broken Earth Trilogy* is therefore not technological transcendence. It is ecological humility, hybrid becoming, and relational existence within a vibrant material world.

Reimagining Survival: Toward Ecological Ethics

The trilogy's most radical intervention lies in its redefinition of survival. Conventional apocalyptic narratives often frame survival as competition; scarcity produces violence, hierarchy, and intensified control. Survival belongs to the strongest, smartest, or most ruthless. Jemisin rejects this paradigm.

In *The Stillness*, domination repeatedly produces catastrophe. Ancient technological extraction wounds the planet. Institutional violence reproduces trauma. Systems built on hierarchy generate instability rather than security. Mastery fails because it misunderstands the relationship itself.

What emerges instead is an ethics of interdependence. Survival requires communal memory, adaptive cooperation, ecological awareness, and recognition of shared vulnerability. Communities endure not by conquering instability but by learning to inhabit it collectively. Knowledge becomes a communal archive rather than private possession. Care becomes a survival strategy rather than a sentimental luxury. Essun's maternal journey embodies this ethical transformation. Her rage is vast, but so too is her capacity for relation. Her choices ultimately concern not revenge alone but future possibility, whether violence must endlessly reproduce itself or whether another mode of coexistence can emerge. Nassun carries this ethical horizon further. Positioned at the threshold of annihilation, she confronts the possibility of ending humanity altogether. Yet the trilogy does not resolve the crisis through a simple redemption narrative. Instead, it imagines reconciliation as difficult, contingent, and relational. Healing requires recognition of ancient harm inflicted upon Earth, upon bodies, upon collective memory.

Ecological ethics here is not purity politics, nor a nostalgic return to untouched nature. It is an acknowledgement of entanglement. Human flourishing cannot be imagined apart from planetary flourishing. Justice must include land, matter, memory, and more-than-human life. This is Jemisin's ecological consciousness: not stewardship from above, but coexistence from within.

Conclusion

The Broken Earth Trilogy stands as one of contemporary literature's most powerful reimaginings of ecological thought. By combining mythic archetype, environmental justice, and posthuman ontology, Jemisin constructs a narrative world in which Earth is an active force, history is a geological wound, and survival depends upon radical relationality.

This trilogy transforms apocalypse from a spectacular ending into a historical consequence; transforms ecology from a passive setting into dynamic agency; transforms humanity from a sovereign subject into a vulnerable participant within planetary systems. Through figures such as Essun, Nassun, and Hoa, Jemisin explores exile, sacrifice, transformation, and reconciliation as mythic patterns reshaped for the Anthropocene.

Most significantly, the trilogy insists that ecological crisis is inseparable from political violence. Extraction of land and exploitation of bodies emerge from the same logic of domination. Justice therefore cannot remain narrowly human-centred. It must become ecological, relational, and planetary.

In imagining sentient stone, wounded Earth, and hybrid futures, Jemisin offers not escapist fantasy but speculative ethics, a vision of coexistence grounded in humility, memory, and interdependence. In an era defined by climate anxiety and ecological precarity, such imagination is not merely literary innovation; it is an ethical necessity.

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