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Worlds in Ruin: Ecocriticism and Climate Narratives in N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*

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Abstract: Through the lens of ecocriticism, this paper examines N. K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth trilogy, exploring how the narrative constructs and critiques relationships between ecological catastrophe, power, and identity. Analyzing the trilogy's world building, character dynamics, and narrative structure, this study reveals how Jemisin reimagines environmental degradation as a systemic issue intertwined with social oppression and cultural resilience. By centering geological and climatic forces as narrative agents, Jemisin challenges anthropocentric paradigms and models alternative modes of human-earth coexistence. This research contributes to ecocriticism and climate narrative studies, highlighting speculative fiction's capacity to interrogate environmental injustice and imagine regenerative futures.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, climate narrative, environmental justice, speculative fiction, N.K. Jemisin, anthropocentrism, hyper objects, slow violence

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Introduction

In recent years, climate change has not only become a political and scientific discourse but also a literary one. Fiction increasingly grapples with ecological collapse, environmental injustice, and the human response to planetary crisis. N. K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth trilogy, composed of The Fifth Season (2015), The Obelisk Gate (2016), and The Stone Sky (2017), stands as a defining work of speculative fiction that centers climate apocalypse not merely as backdrop but as an active agent shaping narrative, culture, and identity. This research explores how Jemisin employs the tools of ecocriticism and climate narrative—transforming the speculative into social critique—to interrogate human relationships with land, power, and survival. Specifically, the trilogy reimagines a world in which ecological catastrophe is systemic, culturally embedded, and intensely personal, thus challenging readers to reconsider how environmental degradation intersects with oppression, resilience, and transformation.

Ecocriticism, broadly defined, studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism asks not only how literature represents nature but how it participates in understanding environmental problems and human responsibilities toward the Earth (Glotfelty xviii). Key to this approach is the notion that narratives shape perception; stories inform beliefs about nature, agency, and belonging. Similarly, climate narratives—stories that grapple directly with climactic change—expand ecocriticism by incorporating temporal scales of environmental change and acknowledging the planetary stakes of human actions. As scholar Rob Nixon writes, climate change demands an ethical imagination capable of perceiving slow violence, deep time, and interconnected systems of harm (Nixon 3). In this light, The Broken Earth trilogy invites an ecocritical reading that highlights how worldbuilding, character development, and thematic arcs reflect ecological complexity and critique systems of domination.

Jemisin constructs a world known as the Stillness, a supercontinent wracked by constant seismic and climate instability. In the Stillness, "seasons" are catastrophic, multi-decadal events that destroy civilizations, reshape landscapes, and devastate communities. These events are not natural disasters in isolation but are culturally mediated and politically managed. Orogenes, individuals with the ability to manipulate geological forces, are both feared and exploited as mechanisms for survival and control. Through this worldbuilding, Jemisin makes ecological disaster a structural force that compels societies to adapt or face extinction.

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Ecocritical theory emphasizes that nature in literature is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in narrative (Buell 12). In Jemisin's trilogy, geological and climatic forces are narrative drivers. The land itself functions as character: it moves, it reacts, and it demands respect. This aligns with Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects"—entities so massively distributed in time and space that they elude easy understanding, such as climate change (Morton 2). Just as hyperobjects challenge human perception of causality and scale, the recurring seasons in the trilogy destabilize human agency and foreground the environment as an irresolvable force that characters must negotiate with rather than dominate.

The Broken Earth engages with climate not only as an environmental phenomenon but as a site of violence and oppression. The trilogy's central conflict revolves around the fear and control of orogenes. Trained in the Fulcrum, a totalizing institution, orogenes are simultaneously necessary for planetary regulation and subjected to brutal prejudice and containment. This dynamic parallels real-world environmental injustice, where marginalized communities often bear disproportionate burdens of ecological harm while contributing least to the causes of climate change.

Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence"—the gradual, often invisible, ecological and social harm that accrues over time—echoes through the treatment of orogenes (Nixon 2). Their pain, labor, and deaths are systemic, spread across generations and largely unnoticed by those insulated from disaster. The Stillness's caste system, which segregates orogenes and legitimizes their exploitation, mirrors racial and class hierarchies that exacerbate vulnerability to environmental crises in our world. By making ecological catastrophe inseparable from sociopolitical structures, Jemisin frames environmental degradation as deeply entangled with human systems of power, not an external or neutral force.

Jemisin's narrative technique further reinforces her ecological themes. The trilogy deploys non-linear timelines, multiple perspectives, and fragmented memories. The structure mimics ecological rhythms—periods of calm disrupted by sudden upheaval, cycles of decay and renewal, and overlapping histories that resist simplistic chronology. Like climate systems, the narrative refuses linear inevitability; it loops, echoes, and reframes events through different lenses. In The Fifth Season, for instance, three narrative strands eventually converge, revealing how individual and collective histories interlock across time and space. This narrative multiplicity resonates with the complex causality inherent in ecological systems. Systems theory, often invoked in ecocritical discourse, posits that environments are networks of interdependent relationships rather than linear chains of cause and effect. Jemisin's storytelling embodies this logic, inviting readers to perceive events not as isolated incidents but as interconnected phenomena shaped by memory, perception, and consequence.

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Crucial to Jemisin's project is the reconceptualization of the human–earth relationship away from domination and toward reciprocity. Traditional Western narratives have long portrayed nature as a resource to be conquered or controlled. In contrast, The Broken Earth suggests that survival requires empathy, cooperation, and a willingness to listen to non-human voices. Orogenes who learn to work with the earth rather than subjugate it often fare better than those who attempt forceful control. Syenite and Alabaster, central figures in The Fifth Season, exemplify this relational ethics. Their journey teaches them that brute force against the earth yields devastation, whereas understanding and responding to geological signals can avert catastrophe. This perspective aligns with indigenous cosmologies and eco-philosophies that view humans as participants in an animate landscape rather than sovereign masters. By weaving these relational ontologies into her narrative, Jemisin critiques anthropocentrism and models alternative modes of coexistence. It would be reductive to categorize The Broken Earth trilogy as purely dystopian. While the world of the Stillness is broken in literal and metaphorical ways, Jemisin also gestures toward hope—not as naive optimism, but as the ethical imperative to imagine and work toward regenerative futures. In The Stone Sky, characters confront pain, loss, and terrifying choices, yet they also demonstrate resilience, care, and transformation.

Ecocriticism increasingly emphasizes the importance of "hopeful realism"—a mode of environmental narrative that acknowledges crisis without capitulating to despair (Estok 65). By depicting characters who struggle, fail, adapt, and sometimes heal, Jemisin contributes to a literature of climate hope that neither trivializes the stakes of ecological collapse nor resigns itself to fatalism. The trilogy thus functions as both warning and invitation: warning of the consequences of environmental and social neglect; inviting readers to reimagine systems of knowledge, governance, and belonging.

Jemisin's prose itself enacts ecological philosophy. Her use of language—at once poetic, visceral, and urgent—immerses readers in sensory and emotional landscapes. The trilogy frequently describes natural processes not as distant phenomena but as embodied experience. Tremors are felt in muscle memory, winds in the grit on skin, seasons in the emotional weight of memory.

This stylistic choice reinforces the ethical dimension of environmental awareness: climate change is not an abstract data point but a lived reality. As Buell argues, ecocritical literature must cultivate attention to the material and moral dimensions of environment (Buell 19). Jemisin's narrative achieves this by insisting that readers feel the earth's movements as bodily and psychological events, collapsing boundaries between human interiority and external landscapes.

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Conclusion

N. K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth trilogy stands as a profound contribution to ecocritical literature and climate narrative. Through its rich worldbuilding, complex characters, and innovative narrative structure, the trilogy foregrounds ecological forces as active agents shaping culture, identity, and power. By entangling climate catastrophe with social injustice, Jemisin deepens our understanding of environmental harm as a systemic issue that intersects with race, class, and governance. Crucially, her work refuses easy binaries of hope and despair, instead offering narratives that acknowledge suffering while advocating for resilience, reciprocity, and ethical transformation. As the world confronts accelerating climate change, literature like The Broken Earth challenges us to rethink our assumptions about nature, power, and possibility. It is not simply a story of apocalypse but an invitation to cultivate new environmental imaginaries—ones that recognize the complexity of Earth systems and the urgency of justice. In doing so, Jemisin's trilogy exemplifies how speculative fiction can engage deeply with ecological crises, offering insights that are as imaginative as they are necessary.

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