

The role of fluidity: Exploring culture and identity in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

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Abstract: The paper applies Fluidity theory, a theoretical framework that explores marginalized identity and power dynamics in a society riddled with cultural resistance, hostility and oppression in N.K. Jemisin's novel *The Fifth Season*. The concept of fluidity in general refers to the flexible and adoptable nature of the residents. The paper aims to shed light on how marginalized group - Orogenes and communities survive in the oppressive system. The novel is set in a dreary and geologically unstable world of the Stillness where marginalized groups – particularly Orogenes reside. Orogenes are individuals who have the ability to manipulate seismic events but systematically oppressed by their own society. The society dehumanizes, exploits, and controls orogenes. Through the Orogenes' experiences, the novel delves into themes of trauma, resilience, and survival within oppressive systems. This paper also examines the brutality of the society and its dominance over Orogenes through intersections of oppression, resistance and identity. Thus, Fluidity theory analyses Jemisin's portrayal of power structures and marginalized community's struggle and resilience. The endearing feature of the survival instinct and the modality adapted by the people to resist oppressive force are underscored.

Keywords: fluidity, marginalized, identity, resilience, hierarchy, seismic power

Introduction

Nora K. Jemisin is a contemporary African American writer. She is a celebrated science fiction and fantasy writer known for her thought-provoking narratives. Her writings explore themes such as identity, oppression, resilience, racism, and cultural issues. She is the first-ever African American to receive the HUGO award three times in a row from 2016 to 2018 for her "The Broken Earth Trilogy".

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The Fifth Season was published in 2015, which received the HUGO Award and made Jemisin the first African American writer to be awarded. This novel explores climatic changes, environmental issues, gender, racism, suppression and identity. Jemisin's novels are critically acclaimed by many critics for her narratives and intricate world-building. This novel is set in a land called the 'Stillness', which always encounters constant movement, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions and acid rainfalls.

This paper majorly focuses on themes such as identity, dehumanization, oppression and power through the study of marginalized group of orogenes. Orogenes are humans with super power to quell and destroy a mountain in seconds, yet they are feared and subjugated. Through their struggles, Jemisin reflects the real-world histories of oppression, marginalisation, suppression and social exclusion faced by African Americans. In an interview, Jemisin says "this novel is, in a lot of ways, my processing the systemic racism that I live and see." (Wagner 2016) These words are more evident that the author herself has personally experienced racism and oppression, shaping the themes and narratives within her work. Like orogenes, African Americans are also forced to adopt and feared when uncontrolled. Their identity is shaped by fear, and prejudice.

By employing Fluidity, a theoretical approach, this paper analyses orogenes, cultural and power dynamics in this novel. It helps in studying the orogenes and communities which break the systemic suppression and builds resilience. The fluidity encompasses various types, including *cultural fluidity* and *fluid identity*. Cultural fluidity refers to the ability of adaptability and surviving nature. Fluid identity, on the other hand, challenges the traditional notion of fixed identity of a person.

In *The Fifth Season*, characters like Damaya, Syenite and Essun (orogenes) represent different identities of the same person, who is forced to change her identity and culture due to societal pressure. The land, ironically called Stillness, is anything but still, but the land is always in constant movement and it is frequently experiencing widespread natural disasters. The people on the land form communities by adapting their culture and developing strong survival instincts. Through cultural fluidity and fluid identity, the paper examines the communities and characters in the novel depicting their adapting and survival nature against systemic oppression and natural disasters. It

studies the fluidity of the characters portraying identity as dynamic, multifaceted and influenced by their experiences and surroundings.

Cultural fluidity

Cultural fluidity means a seamless engagement with cultures to adapt and integrate multiple cultural ideas and morals. Jubilado (2010), provides the most insightful definition on cultural fluidity, “any given community, adaptation, assimilation and reinvention contribute to cultural change which is always a gradual, complex and continuous process” (Jubilado 2010, 89). This theory challenges the traditional concept of culture being fixed, uniform and static. Rather, cultural fluidity theory is more dynamic and shaped by historical, social and political factors.

In the novel *The Fifth Season*, the plot is set around the land Stillness. It is in constant motion and encounters widespread disasters. The novel depicts how the land, its culture and society are shaped and dominated by their history and political powers. The cataclysms that occurs in the novel are referred to as ‘seasons’, they could last for years and years causing famine and even death. As the title of the novel suggests, *The Fifth Season* focuses on the survival and adaptability of people and communities during this season. People join together forming a ‘community, creating a strong bond and resilience to withstand the disasters. Jemisin also pictures how violent and brutal the community can be, in order to protect and adapt themselves to survive.

On the land there are two cultural groups struggling to survive the marginalisation and disasters. One group consist of common people forming communities adopting themselves to survive all natural disasters. While the other comprises of orogenes, super-powered individuals, who have the power to quell and control all seismic events on the land. They form a cultural group living together under an intuition called the Fulcrum. These orogenes are marginalised and treated as an outcaste on the land by their people and community.

However, the communities are afraid of the orogenes because they believe the ‘Stonelore’ – a guide and law written by the ancestors to survive the fifth season. The lore describes orogenes as ‘the children of the Father Earth’, who are gifted with the superpower to control the land. Alabaster, an orogene states “they kill us because they’ve git Stonelore telling... we’re born evil-some kind of agent of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human” (Jemisin 2015, 124). These

lines show how orogenes are seen and treated, their struggle to survive by fluxing themselves against their communities. As orogenes are seen and classified as non-human beings, they are marginalized and oppressed by the community members, leading to a brutal act of violence against them.

Orogenes though born to a common human being they are found and force to leave their community. In some cases, they are killed by their parents and society brutally. Orogenes are not given any choice and have to survive without community. A 'commless' (a person without community) human on this land is hard to survive and are never allowed or accepted into other communities. These communities fear orogenes because an untrained new orogene's power can cause huge disasters quelling seismic events. This is the reason they are either killed or separated from their families permanently and sent to Fulcrum.

The members of the community on the land of Stillness are very protective and helpful. During or after a season ends they have to move in order to find a firm land to live and build houses for shelter. "The people of the Stillness live in a perpetual state of disaster preparedness. They've built walls and dug wells and put away food, and they can easily last five, ten, even, twenty-five years in a world without sun" (Jemisin 2015, 8). The above lines from the text exemplifies how these communities prepare themselves by collecting foods and other essential needs by storing them all in their houses to help them survive during famine. The members are very adaptive and resilient because they are always ready and prepared to withstand any disastrous events. They work together creating a strong bond among themselves.

Fulcrum is an institution where orogenes are brought and trained properly under the guidance of the guardian. When parents identify their children have the ability of orogeny they inform the fulcrum. An assigned guardian comes to take them to the institution. Orogenes are separated from their families to spend their entire life under the fulcrum. This institution may appear to be the best place for orogenes, providing shelter and training. However, the organisation is self-centered. Orogenes are trained to control their powers to handle seismic events that occur in and around the stillness. Yet, the fulcrum exploits them, treating orogenes as mere weapons. The narrative highlights the power dynamics and systemic oppression present in the fulcrum, which exercises control over orogenes.

Each orogene is assigned with a guardian, who takes complete responsibility over them. Guardians work for the fulcrum, who have the authority to control orogenes and have rights to kill them if they become too dangerous. The institution exploits, dehumanises and controls orogenes, who indoctrinate them from the very beginning that they are dangerous and powerful, both to society as well as to themselves. This creates a traumatic effect on individuals. Orogenes struggle both in their community and at the fulcrum.

In the novel, the protagonist, Damaya, is forced to leave her family and is tortured by her guardian. Her parents discover that she possesses the power of orogeny and inform the fulcrum. Soon, a guardian arrives to her home to take her to the institution. Through this experience, Damaya realises the harsh reality of her society that wants to eliminate orogenes from their lives. On her way to the fulcrum her guardian breaks her hand. He says “orogenes have no right to say no...I will break every bone in your hand...if I deem it necessary” (Jemisin 2015, 99). Here, the guardian abuses Damaya using his power by oppressing her and justifies his action by articulating that it was to control her power. Not only Damaya but many orogenes in the novel endure suffering, marginalization and killed by their community and the guardian.

However, orogenes survive in the fulcrum by obeying their rules and regulations in order to live their lives. Ostracised by their communities, they face constant humiliation and subjugation throughout their lives. In this novel, Jemisin portrays their resilience, adaptation and strong will to resist oppression. Orogenes accept the transformation in their life adapting to new places, people and cultures. Zygmunt Bauman (1997, 92) points out the basic need for a community and an individual is identity and freedom, “Freedom, autonomy, independence – if they appear in their vocabulary at all – invariably come in the future tense. For them, to be free means not to have to wander around. To have a home and to be allowed to stay home”. In the land of Stillness, both the community and orogenes never experience their freedom and independence. They are forced to move out, adopt and accept their fate and life on the land.

In summary, Jemisin portrays the themes of oppression, marginalisation and othering through her writing in this novel. She highlights the tension between progress and exclusion. Progressing communities easily adapt and change their culture, while the excluded orogenes struggle to adjust and survive in a changing environment.

The communities exemplify resilience and strong bonds. The orogenes serve as a prime example of cultural fluidity and are prepared to change their cultural identity.

Fluid identity

Fluid Identity refers to the transformation of a person's identity due to social and self-distrust. It challenges the idea that identity is fixed and unchanging, referring that a person's identity can change and evolve over a period of time, shaped by their influence and experience. Identity for a person is very important which defines unique characters. In the novel, Damaya, Syenite and Essun are three different identities of a single woman having her own storyline narrating her struggles, experiences and suppression in the novel. She is forced to change her name and identity. She marginalised as she is an orogene. She is the prime example of fluidity in her identity. She has to alter her identity as a daughter, a member of the grit, and a mother.

The derogatory term 'rogga' used by the people of the Stillness serves as a tool to define, oppress and dehumanize orogenes. This shapes orogene's identities in ways that parallel the experiences of African Americans, who were forced to shift their identities imposed on them by white dominated power structures who labelled them as slaves and inferior. Their identity has been fluid not by choice, rather it has been shaped by the external force of control and discrimination. Similarly, the term 'rogga' term reinforces the idea that identity is not inherent but constructed by society to control and oppress. The identity shift of the protagonist Essun is fluid as it shifts based on the societal pressure, fear and the need for survival.

The protagonist, Damaya, a young girl lives with her family. As soon as, her parents discover her superpower, they lock her for days in their house, until a man from the fulcrum comes to take her. Damaya is separated from her family because of her powers which is uncontrollable and untrained which could lead to disastrous consequences. She feels lost and abandoned by her family when she is taken away by a stranger who calls himself as her guardian. Her parents show no remorse for her separation, seemingly unconcerned about sending their daughter forever.

On their way to fulcrum the guardian warns Damaya that she is a threat to herself and others because of her untrained power. He says "you are lightning, dangerous...conflagration that can destroy everything in its path" (Jemisin 2015, 95). The above line explains, the

guardian's cruelty in instilling the belief that her power is too dangerous. To test her self-control he intentionally breaks her hand uttering that she could be a threat to him if she fails to control herself. Damaya screams in pain and has to travel with the pain until they reach the fulcrum. It is a lesson taught by her guardian about the true reality of the organisation. It reminds her that she is a dangerous weapon alive on the Stillness.

In the fulcrum, Damaya is treated as a girt – girts are orogene children brought to the fulcrum for training. This institution is very strict with its rules and regulations. They punish and overrule orogenes physically and mentally during their training, when they become uncontrollable. They create an illusion that every orogene are not normal humans but dangerous monsters. The institution exploits and dehumanises orogenes in this novel.

Damaya is forced to change her name, her identity as Syenite, which is followed for every orogene in the organisation. It makes them forget their true identity and also their family members. Syenite suffers a lot to survive in the fulcrum at the beginning. She states “friends do not exist. The fulcrum is not a school. Girts are not children. Orogenes are not people. Weapons have no need of friends” (Ibid, 297). The above lines define the harsh reality that exists in the fulcrum and all orogenes had to endure sufferings and pain to survive in the fulcrum.

Syenite after a great struggle and fight against her guardian, escapes changing her identity as Essun. She enters a community called Tirimo, creating a family in the village. She is married to Jija and has two children. However, after ten years of her happy marriage life, her husband discovers her true identity and learns that their children are also born orogenes. Essun had concealed her true self to live a better life, but her newfound peace does not last long. Jija kills his own son brutally and leaves the village with their daughter. Essun finds herself lost again, returning to her starting point of her journey - losing her family.

Essun walks out of her community to find her husband and her only daughter, Nassun. Her village soon comes to know about her identity and tries to kill her. But she manages to escape using her orogeny. Now Essun is in a run to find and save her daughter from her husband. As she steps out of her village, she reminds herself “you could become someone new, maybe. You’ve done that before; it’s surprisingly easy. A new name, a new focus” (Ibid, 172). From the above lines it is evident that Essun is a person of fluid identity who can easily change

her identity to survive. Now she is forced to change herself for the sake of her daughter.

Damaya, Syenite and Essun are the three stages of a woman who struggles hard to understand and accept her power and identity. She faces numerous hardships in her life from her young age trying to discover her selfhood. The fulcrum ruined her life. Essun attempts to build a better life but her husband destroys everything she has worked for.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 83) defines fluid identity as “identities seem fixed and solid only when seen, in a flash, from outside... from the inside of one’s own biographical experience appears fragile, vulnerable and constantly torn apart”. As Bauman states, in this novel, the protagonist has to struggle and fight against all odds to survive on the land. Her pain and loss can never be compromised. She is powerful and intelligent but she is also a human being with basic feelings and emotions. Through the analysis of the protagonist in this novel, she is forced to change her identity but all she wanted is to create and live a happy family life.

Conclusion

N.K. Jemisin in her novel *The Fifth Season* explores the themes of marginalisation, suppression, identity, survival, and dehumanization. This novel challenges the traditional idea and understanding that culture and identity are fixed and unchanging. This paper highlights the experiences of the marginalized and their struggle for survival against an oppressive system, such as the community and the Fulcrum. By intertwining the themes of cultural fluidity and fluid identity, Jemisin not only critiques historical injustices but also posits a pertinent question of who defines identity and why? In the novel, the journey of Orogenes and Essun highlights their resilience of marginalized groups in reclaiming their rights, which is similar to the plight of the African Americans who resisted and fought against the oppressive system to reclaim their identities in the face of racism.

The cultural fluidity mainly focuses on the solidarity and understanding within the community as well as the brutality and violence against orogenes. The communities in the novel have a rigid ideology and belief system against orogenes which leads to marginalisation and othering. The fluid identity theory highlights the protagonist’s identity, struggle and sacrifices due to the external force of oppression. At the beginning, marginalisation of Damaya illustrates

the cultural pressure and suppression of her community, then her identity changes into Syenite which is driven by compulsion and acceptance. Later, her transformation as Essun is a mode of protecting herself and her yearning to live a peaceful life without any oppression. Her strong will and adaptability reveal her stubborn nature and determination to confront challenges.

Damaya's multiple fluid change in her identity depicts her struggle and agony that lead her to question her true self. By analysing the novel through the lens of cultural fluidity and fluid identity, by examining culture and characters the researcher presents that identity is not fixed but fluid, emphasises how important identity is for a person, which provides them with the confidence, strong will, independence and freedom to fight and stand for justice.

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