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An Analysis of N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

Genre is a way of categorizing literature based on common themes and characteristics. N.

K. Jemisin creates a genre of her own by combining a neo-slave narrative that is set in a fantastical world she builds in the novel *The Fifth Season*. The unfamiliar world of a fantasy novel defamiliarizes the reader from their own world which then forces the reader to reflect on their own world. Coupling the fantasy genre with the neo-slave narrative genre strengthens the analogies Jemisin makes to American culture.

Although *The Fifth Season* is not advertised as a neo-slave narrative, it certainly fits the genre. A major aspect of a neo-slave narrative is that the author has never lived in or been enslaved in their life time, but of course can see the haunting effects slavery has had on our post-enslavement American culture because they are black. The author also uses their knowledge of slavery and its lasting effects by referencing and mirroring slave narratives, most notably, Frederick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*, to write a new, as the name suggests, slave narrative. Neo-slave narratives are written to give social commentary on black life in American culture as well as a voice to the enslaved who were so oppressed by the American culture and government of the time that they lacked the resources and skills to write their own story. With these defining components, Jemisin writes a neo-slave narrative within the fantasy genre to create a more dynamic, stronger parallel to what African American life is like. The unfamiliar but parallel world of orogenes and stills to black and white Americans enables

the reader to question this world's society as an outsider and therefore reflect on their own, in this case America's, society. It is important to view *The Fifth Season* as a part of the neo-slave narrative genre, and almost impossible to not think of it as a part of the genre, because of the important analyses of race in America Jemisin makes.

The principal characteristic of Jemisin's protagonist is a sense of other which is an important motif of neo-slave narratives. It becomes clear to Essun (who's character I will be referring to as Essun from here on out despite her multiple name changes) that she is an other when her mother forces her to live in a barn and is then sold to the Fulcrum. Essun's mother tells the Guardian Schaffa, "She can't have gotten out. My husband checked all the barn locks himself" (Jemisin, 26). Not only does Essun experience being othered as a young girl by her family, but also as an adult by the community in which she lives in. "... With your former neighbors' stares sliding over you like rancid oil" (54). This extreme othering from her so-called community instills a sense of self hatred and fear inside of Essun, and presumably other orogenes, that leads her to want to pass as a still, or non-orogene. Here, Jemisin is creating a metaphor to how race in America is defined based on a person's skin color looking either white or black when there are plenty of people who do not fit the binary because they are of mixed racial descent. "Mother said, hidden everything, pretended to be a child when she was really a monster, that was what monsters *did*..." (31). The fact that Essun is able to pass as a still, notably as both a child and an adult, is similar to how a light-skinned black person can pass as white. Thus, proving that the binary of the Stillness' culture is actually a spectrum and therefore race in American culture is not as clear cut as it is in theory. This metaphor of how race others

people and the binary of race is flawed in both the world Jemisin creates as well as in America is explored through the genre of fantasy and is furthered by the neo-slave narrative genre.

Kinship amongst fellow othered people in neo and non-neo-slave narratives is a crucial theme that is explored and examined. For instance, in *The Fifth Season* the only time Essun is not othered and is fully accepted by those around her is when she is on the island of pirates that praise their orogenes rather than discriminating against them like the rest of the Stillness. “They don’t kill the roggas, here. They put them in *charge*. And they’re really, really, glad to see us” (296). The island is so accepting and grant so much freedom to orogenes that Essun feels open enough to explore her sexuality. “They can’t stand having sex with each other directly, but vicariously it’s amazing” (372). This was not the first time Essun was amongst similarly othered people because she was surrounded by other orogenes at the Fulcrum. Essun comments, “She likes this. It makes her feel like she’s part of something” (191). But she was not fully accepted by even her own kind. “... She is one of the grits who sit alone at an empty table” (195). She was still caste out from her community despite being fully immersed in it. The theme and facets of kinship Jemisin examined in her novel further supports that *The Fifth Season* can be categorized as a neo-slave narrative.

Another way this novel fits the neo-slave narrative genre is that the main character, and other orogenes, are enslaved by the Fulcrum. Although Jemisin never directly writes that the Fulcrum is enslaving the orogenes, it becomes clear as young Essun explores the Fulcrum grounds late at night. “Free Hour is after the main working hours for the building, so it’s not as busy as it must be during the day, but whenever Damaya wanders this place, she notices that many of the offices are still lit with candles...” (300). The orogenes that were taken to the

Fulcrum as children are forced to work for the Fulcrum for the rest of their lives and some are even bred within the Fulcrum, like cattle. "... *Your assignment is to produce a child within a year with this man*" (69). There is also no mention of the orogenes getting paid for their work, other than getting their room and board paid for by the Fulcrum, and their freedom is limited by the Guardians constantly overseeing them. Although the Fulcrum's control of orogenes is not completely parallel to enslavement in America, it is definitely comparable. One of the most canon neo-slave narratives, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison revolves around the main character murdering her baby out of fear that her baby would be captured and enslaved (which Morrison based on a real mother that murdered her child). Remarkably similar to *Beloved*, Essun kills the baby that her and Alabaster have together just before a Guardian from the Fulcrum captures him (442). In this case, the Guardians are representative of fugitive slave catchers that are looking to return lost property. Jemisin's rhetorical choice to add the murder of Essun's own child was no coincidence. She chose to have the main character kill her own child in order to reflect the graveness of the situation - that, in Essun's eyes, death is preferred to enslavement. Here, Jemisin is making a more direct correlation of *The Fifth Season* to the neo-slave narrative genre through her fantastical world.

A self-policing society is a major part of neo-slave narratives and *The Fifth Season*. In neo-slave narratives, an example of a self-policing aspect of society is the role of fugitive slave catchers which are parallel to Guardians in *The Fifth Season*. A society becomes self-policing when a cultural stigma is internalized and acted out by those who have power. Fugitive slave catchers' very existence is proof that self-policing is a result of stigmatization that has been internalized because they are choosing to follow the law despite its obvious flaws. A

self-policing society also creates constant surveillance due to the stigma causing fear to be internalized and therefore unclear who does and does not believe in the stigma. In Jemisin's world, the orogenes self-police themselves due to the Guardians instilling fear inside of them. When Schaffa is breaking Essun's hand, she thinks to herself, "It hurts. He knows it hurts. But he does not stop" (97). Stone Lore also create a self-policing society because they are the ancient morals and codes that are used as the basis of this world's culture. Similar to America's government during the enslavement era, the Fulcrum controls and censors these tablets. Tablet Two of the Stone Lore says "... those who would take the earth too closely unto themselves. They are not masters of themselves; allow them no mastery of others" (331). The Stone Lore is defining orogenes as being less than so that they are not given power over stills. Analogous to Stone Lore is America's laws during enslavement times when the law defined enslaved people as mere property in order to socially oppress them. Essun, like the protagonist in a neo-slave narrative, learns that law does not equal morality. "That we're not human is just the lie they tell themselves so they don't have to feel bad about how they treat us" (354). Alabaster explains here that the law knows it is not morally sound so the lawmakers have to lie to themselves about the humanity of the orogenes. This analogy drawn in an unfamiliar world demands that the reader analyze this concept within the context of the *The Fifth Season* and then apply their analysis to American culture.

Without viewing N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* as a neo-slave narrative many thought provoking and unsettling aspects of her novel can be easily glazed over. By pairing together the neo-slave narrative and fantasy genre, Jemisin is able to exceed the intentions that either genre aims for on its own which begs for a higher level of analysis from the reader.

Work Cited

Jemisin, N. K. *The Fifth Season*. Orbit, 2015.