

## Plantationocene Systems and Communal Disruptions in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy: An EcoGothic Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*N.K. Jemisin's critically acclaimed Broken Earth trilogy examines life in a post-apocalyptic alternate universe after a planet is cracked, bleeding and about to die. The trilogy does not seek to redeem the earth or a fractured environment. Rather, the novels demonstrate the ways in which characters develop, dissolve and mutually destroy or support each other. Jemisin's conception of nature is unique and almost antithetical to human survival, but the roots of this destruction go deep. The fractured economies and governments within this post-apocalyptic universe paint a haunting picture of a world whose geopolitics are affected by the nature it has despoiled and disintegrated. The trilogy is a fitting fable for a planet in which climate change has affected endangered species, ecosystems and world economics. I apply a postcolonial ecoGothic lens to the analysis of the Broken Earth trilogy. This postcolonial ecoGothic approach will be married to a consideration of Jason C Moore's unveiling of the Capitocene through the lens of Donna Haraway's and Anna Tsing's positioning of a Plantationocene to look at patterns of power and domination. This paper is particularly concerned with the ways in which these patterns are related to the condition of societies living under siege and the ways in which these societies mimic patterns of colonial domination. The proposed outcome of this analysis will be to strip the layers of the Broken Earth trilogy to unearth what the narrative reveals about the environmental travails and geopolitical dissolutions that haunt our existences in what has been dubbed the Anthropocene.*

*Keywords: Anthropocene; ecoGothic, Plantationocene; postcolonial Gothic; Capitocene*

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, I contend that Jemisin's work falls into the category of what I have dubbed the postcolonial ecoGothic (Harris Satkunanathan, 2019) even though it is a trilogy of fantasy fiction set in an alternate universe. The *Broken Earth* trilogy contains the same fractured markers of loss, and of the recreation of narratives through a literal splitting of an ur-narrative through three personas. This splitting operates to reconstruct both personal and collective histories of the world pre-and-post Stillness and is reflective of the postcolonial condition. More specifically I read it in a distillation of the post-colonial condition in Anna Tsing's and Donna Haraway's model of the Plantationocene in which the postcolonial individual and community must struggle not just against dominant narratives about how the world is shaped in order to assert individual and collective autonomy, but against the threat posed by environmental destruction. The struggle requires an understanding of how the separations and alienation caused by plantation systems engender multiple monstrosities. I read this struggle in a selected analysis of the three novels of NK Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy.

Our world is fraught with not just a global pandemic but by ecological disaster with erratic weather changes and climate change that has been summarily denied by more than one world government while others struggle to ratify treaties and to institute procedures for mitigating a widespread damage. For instance, in 2021, the United Nations Climate Change Summit (COP26) was held in Glasgow”. Mitchell Lennan and Elisa Morgera (2022), in a roundup of the summit in relation to the importance to global oceans write that the COP26 pact explicitly refers to the limiting of “global warming to 1.5 °C”, reducing “global greenhouse gas emissions” and reducing global carbon dioxide levels (2022, p.142). Nevertheless, not all countries have signed these pacts. Many tensions and crosshairs exist; not all nations are equally compliant or are able to be equally compliant. These widespread tensions and societal disruptions are part and parcel of the age of what has been named the age of the Anthropocene. The “Anthropocene” comes from two words “*anthropo*, for “man,” and *cene*, for “new””. Jason C Moore (2015) makes an important point that we should be looking beyond the Anthropocene to the sociopolitical ramifications of the Capitalocene. Furthermore, Haraway notes that the “Anthropocene is more a boundary event than an epoch” and that there are several discontinuities that need to be addressed, particularly in relation to humanity and the ways in which we can “replenish refuge” (p.160).

Concomitantly, I read aspects of the Plantationocene in Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) and construct a postcolonial ecoGothic Plantationocene model of analysis while also considering aspects of the Capitlocene from which these different constructions of the `scenes are modelled. The *Broken Earth* trilogy is a multiple award-winning triplet of books set in an alternate universe after the world has already broken, is summarily destroyed, and reshaped into a dystopia in which Seasons cause societies to crumble and the atmosphere to become unlivable. This creates a fraught ecosystem within the novels, and a world in which resources are scarce. The conditions in the novels are of societies in siege, at war with nature, distrusting it and commodifying and enslaving the gifted humans known as “orogenes” who are able to tap into the Earth’s power. I read in the fraught power-relationships in the *Broken Earth* trilogy an analogy to the ways in which capitalistic systems continue to enslave the earth and humanity by creating ultimately self-defeating loops based on defensive strategies for survival rather than opportunities for ecologically sustainable change. The climate found in the *Broken Earth* trilogy runs the gamut from arid deserts to tropical conditions. The challenges faced by the communities (comms) in these books run parallel to the challenges faced by the peoples of the Global South in this age of climate emergency. Jemisin foregrounds these concerns with sensitivity and a brutal incisiveness. In so doing, she underscores the strengths and fallacies of human nature in the formation of communities and the creation of outcasts in a post-apocalyptic society. The nature of the trauma, enslavement and abuse in the novel speak back to the various types of slavery and exploitation experienced by different peoples on this planet, from indigenous populations to those of the African diaspora. An important consideration is how a Plantationocene perspective maps upon Jemisin's novel(s). The state of siege and suspicion, the idea that the seasons go in cycles, actually are important to consider from a Plantationocene context -- the roggas are a resource, literally strapped into chairs for the uncontrollable ones -- and this is a fitting parable for the ways in which capitalism victimizes earth and imperialism/supremacism victimizes humans. The remedy therefore has to be for both planet and individual/community. I expound upon the problem in my postcolonial ecoGothic analysis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE BROKEN EARTH TRILOGY AND PRIOR RESEARCH ON THE NOVELS

In the *Broken Earth* trilogy, the planet has been completely transformed by an angry Earth, reacting against geological damages against it by the Syl Anagist empire, a planet-spanning government who sought to subjugate the earth (*The Stone Sky*). In the wake of this planetary destruction, communities or “comms” that come together out of need, establishing power relationships and structures that simultaneously protect some while quarantining and ostracizing others. It is a familiar trope in dystopian fiction, but Jemisin makes these tropes her own by not positing a narrative of redemption. Rather, she situates a bleak narrative of indictment of humanity within the novels, and the events of the societal collapse are explicated in *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate* while the root of the planetary-wide destruction over thousands of years is revealed in *The Stone Sky*. A great amount of the motivating action in the trilogy stems from the equatorial center of the planet that is experiencing the Stillness, for instance (*Fifth Season*, p.9) but by the third book it is revealed that the destructive cycle of Fifth Seasons occurs because of a disruption of planetary gravity which led to the moon being flung out of orbit.

Liptak (2017) writes that “Jemisin sets up a fantasy world unlike any other that I’ve read, blending together fantasy and science fiction in this far-future Earth” (par. 4). Liptak observes that the magical system of the novels are “based around the forces of geology: indeed, the name orogene comes from the word orogeny, the process of mountain-building” (par.4). Geology is therefore baked into the process of the novel and while this is not necessarily intended to be intentionally Anthropocenic, and would appear to be ripe for a reading from various branches of Anthropocenic discourse, for example Jenna Kamrass Morvay’s (2021) application of Haraway’s Chthulucene model upon the *Broken Earth* trilogy, which Kamrass deems a “spatiotemporal location in which all beings are interconnected with each other” and reads this in relation to the ways in which dominant discourses elide people on the margins. Kamrass Morvay’s pedagogical perspective is a valuable consideration because there is much to be gleaned and learned from the *Broken Earth* novels. While Haraway’s solution is in part related to her construction of a “Chthulucene”, for the purposes of this article I narrow my lens to the related concept of the Plantationocene which Haraway worked on alongside Tsing. I focus on the Plantationocene particularly because it underscores the fraught relations that exist in worlds where systems of domination and exploitation are in place, and I am deeply interested in Tsing’s urgent work in relation to plantation systems, as will be discussed in my conceptual framework.

In relation to societal concerns, Alastair Iles (2019) considers the ways in which “racial and social subordination” are complicit in the destruction of the environment (p.27). These considerations however I feel are best suited examined through a combination of two lenses. Firstly, what Moore categorises as the Capitlocene is relevant because those contexts and concerns may be seen in the fraught power relations in the novels, particularly in the way the orogenes are commodified. Even though the communities (comms) in the novels are not operating through a capitalistic model, several of its characteristics may be observed. Secondly, through a consideration of Tsing’s and Haraway’s construction of the Plantationocene which feeds into the colonial power domination structures responsible for the hierarchies of race and of class in the Global South and beyond. These power structures have been reconfigured in the *Broken Earth* books through the hierarchies of both the Sanzed and Syl Anagist empires.

UNPACKING AND INTERROGATING THE ANTHROPOCENE

Joseph Stromberg (2013) writes that according to the “International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS)” which is “the professional organization in charge of defining Earth’s time scale, we are officially in the Holocene (“entirely recent”) epoch, which began 11,700 years ago after the last major ice age”. However, Stromberg avers that various experts feel that the label is outdated. It is clear that human activity has created lasting impact on the planet. Environmental destruction has led to the compromising of ecosystems and mass extinctions. Human activity has impacted the core of the earth because of nuclear testing, fracking and deep drilling. The Anthropocene discourse is by no means unproblematic. As Andrew M. Baur has astutely observed, the term “Anthropocene” elides the social inequities that happen amongst human populations and seems to suggest that the impact of humans upon the planet started towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (according to scholars aligned with Crutzen) or with the invention of the nuclear bomb. Andrew M. Baur and Erle C. Ellis (2018) write that while the “Anthropocene has rightly called attention to a suite of grave global environmental consequences related to human activities”, the various points of emphasis deployed by scholars have “reoriented the concept in multiple directions, many of which work at cross-purposes from each other” (p.209). Baur and Ellis also note that the construction of the Anthropocene risks “downplaying the many nonhuman materials, things, and organisms that people are entangled with” (p. 212). Within the context of the struggle most postcolonial nations and communities have in asserting economic autonomy but also preserving the lands of their ancestors, the Anthropocene will therefore need to be reframed and re-situated to consider the toxic after-effects of a colonial plantation system, which Shanthini Pillai (2004) refers to as a plantocracy.

Mentz (2019) writes that the dating of the Anthropocene is essentially manufactured and in fact nostalgic. He espouses a more pluralistic look at it, which is in tandem with what Moore does with the Capitocene. From a postcolonial perspective this decimation has been part and parcel of colonisation as well, and that predates the Industrial Revolution. It is therefore important to realise that humans have been having an impact on the planet for a very long time.

Tsing (2012) asserts that the Anthropocene is a time of “contaminated diversity” and that the time has come to consider ways to collaborate together in order to work out how to create a “liveable earth” (p.95). This manner of viewing the exigencies of the Anthropocene and the communities that strive to survive in ecological disruption is coined the “slow disturbance” by Tsing, who reiterates that, “we need to tell the histories in which diversity emerges—that is, acknowledge its lively, and thus, contaminated forms”, adding that diversity “is created in collaborative synergies” (p. 95). Tsing is referring to the collaborations between indigenous people and migrants (settlers), which may contribute to patches of “biocultural diversity” (p.95). But of course along the way, as this article seeks to unpack, the legacies of colonial disempowerments and disruptions must be considered – and this is relevant in the study of the *Broken Earth* trilogy.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### INTERROGATING ANTHROPOCENE: CAPITOCENE AND PLANTATIONOCENE CONTEXTS

There are many works of post-apocalyptic and disaster fiction which deal with the nervous conditions in which we live. Scholars have named the current period as the Anthropocene but there have also been many offshoots to this conception of an era of huge human activity and geological unrest. Scholars have contended that the term Anthropocene and all that it implies is oversimplified and does not fully encompass the pressure points of domination and capitalism which underscore most planetary activity. Moore (2015), who created the term Capitocene and who has actively debated and discussed its consideration, draws an important connection between the capitalistic society in which humanity inhabits and the ecological dire straits of the planet at present. Moore (2015) argues that humanity occupies a “set of vectors – propelling the “Great Acceleration” – which threaten planetary crisis”. Moore (2015) observes that the Anthropocene “makes for an easy story,” primarily because it fails to “challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production” (p.173). Moore notes that because the Anthropocene discourse is framed in this way, “it does not ask us to think about these relations at all” (p.173). This is the reason why it is important to frame power relations of this epoch as the Capitocene. The conditions of Capitocene may be read in the difficult power relations and hierarchies that evolved from the great geological and ecological disasters in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, which underscores the ways in which many societies and people were othered and victimized in the ensuing chaos. It is this human equation in climate disasters that is important to consider. But it is also important to consider the ways in which the working force, those who toil and labour for the powerful elite remain commodified even in new structures of society. This consideration is part and parcel of the Plantationocene. While the Capitocene is an important concept to use in reading and unpacking the often-problematic discourses of the Anthropocene, the Plantationocene allows for postcolonial scholars to unpack the ways in which the plantation systems which often come hand in hand with colonialism have contributed to the destruction of our natural environment and the hastening of a climate crisis.

Tsing is the main proponent of Plantationocene thought. In a groundbreaking lecture in 2015 entitled “Earth Stalked By Man” which has since been published in an article (2016), she unpacked the failure of the study of the Anthropocene to understand the fissures and cross-currents of production and domination. Tsing writes that she has “thought of Anthropocene through the figure of the plantation”, qualifying that by this she means those “ecological simplifications in which living things are transformed into resources – futile assets – by removing them from their life-worlds” (2016, p.4). Tsing’s statement addresses what happens when living organisms that are part of plantation systems are alienated from their homes. As Tsing avers, “plantations are machines of replication that aim to disentangle species in the name of production” (2016, p.4). In a conversation with Tsing, moderated by Gregg Mittman, Haraway muses that there is a “way in which the Plantationocene forces attention to the growing of food and the plantation as a system of multispecies forced labor” (2019, p.5). Haraway continues by expounding on the dangers of a plantation system, stating that it “disrupts the generation times of all the players” by radically simplifying “the number of players” while setting up “for the vast proliferation of some and the removal of others (2019, p.5). More chillingly, the plantation system, “depends on forced human labor of some kind because if labor can escape, it will escape the plantation” (2019, p.5). This dialectic is very evident in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, which is why I have chosen to make the

Plantationocene the main aspect of Anthropocenic and Capitalocenic discourse that I am utilizing in the analysis of the novels.

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (2019) writes that Tsing's account of the Plantationocene reveals the "force of the plantation economy as one that disentangles people, land, flora, fauna, and biota from one another and from their existing life-worlds" (p.85). Dillon stresses that the "theft of land enacted by settler colonialism and the strategies of racialization refined by the plantation machine" become the main components "of a system aimed at large-scale disentanglement or uncommoning" (p.85). Therefore, one must acknowledge the ways in which societal hierarchy deeply connected to racialization has contributed to the decimation of natural environments via plantation systems.

While this article deploys the relatively recent construct of the Plantationocene, it is important to consider older research such as Pillai's (2004) compelling depiction of a plantocracy in Malayan plantations, seen as an "impenetrable colonial space" but which is actually a checkerboard with spaces of different kinds of power relations that are constantly part of a struggle, one which leaves the colonized impacted even after the colonizers have left. The damaging power relations within plantations impact many post-colonial nations. The struggle and crosscurrents within colonial plantations are part and parcel of what later became Tsing's work on the Plantationocene, which arose from her research on various plantation systems.

I feel the plantation system discussed in both Tsing's and Pillai's research represent crucial facets of the ways in which many socio-political structures in the previously colonized Global South may be read and its legacies of enslavement and exploitation have far-reaching consequences in the first world as well. The plantation then, and the enfolded systems had their role to play in global decimation of natural environments. As such, the plantation system which is also the colonial system of divide, conquer and exploit may be read in the systems of enslavement and exploitation in place in the *Broken Earth* trilogy. Since the Empire and capitalism work hand in hand, my postcolonial ecoGothic analysis deploys both concepts of Capitocene and Plantationocene, as together, they contribute to the loss and haunting encapsulated by the postcolonial Gothic.

#### POSTCOLONIAL ECOGOTHIC AND PLANTATIONOCENE

In one of the more definitive discussions on the postcolonial Gothic, David Punter and Glynnis Byron define it as being a "history written according to a certain logic: a logic of the phantom, the revenant, a logic of haunting" (p.56). This is because there is the element of rebuilding a society or history (or histories) after a culture or nation has had its trajectories intercepted by the scepter of colonialism. The process of rebuilding a society around what is considered a loss (of autonomy, or the chance to evolve on their own terms) is therefore a very postcolonial kind of Gothicism. But other aspects of the postcolonial Gothic include, in my opinion, interrogations with authority, with power relations and the many difficult aspects of reworking or reinterrogating history through an exploration of mishaps and elisions. This is not disharmonious with Gothic strategies which are inherently historical. Gina Wisker underscores this historical aspect when she writes that that postcolonial Gothic writings are in essence a reaction against "attempts to shackle the imagination" and that it "offers powerful, liberating, celebratory cultural critiques of, in particular, gendered and cultured oppression" (2007, p.149), further averring that postcolonial history is part and parcel of the configurations of the postcolonial Gothic.

EcoGothic is a subfield of Gothic Studies that asks important questions about the relationship between the body and the environment – branching off from Ecocriticism to consider

the uncanny and Otherness in nature. I find this field of study particularly well-suited for the interrogation of fantastic futuristic texts such as Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013), in the first collection to set down elements of the ecoGothic write that the Gothic is a form that is "well placed to capture" the anxieties that come about due to "climate change and environmental damage" which have been issues that have "helped shape the direction and application of ecocritical languages" (p.5). For Smith and Hughes (2013) the forest is not "an idyllic space" as represented by Mrs. Radcliffe but also gives way to a "darker, more sublime nature". Lisa Kroger (2013) writes in this collection the early novel "foreshadows an ecologically aware society, one in which the heroines are often depicted as sympathetic to their surroundings" and it does foreshadow but does not quite anticipate the postcolonial lineaments of the ecoGothic produced by women authors of colour.

My conceptual framework for the paper is therefore a postcolonial ecoGothic framework primarily because the haunting sense of the loss of historicity found in postcolonial Gothic paradigms may be read in the work executed by the comms to rebuild themselves after a planetwide disaster. Community and the relationship between humans and Nature are an important aspect of the traditional Gothic, which, as Smith and Hughes have noted, share a common heritage with Romanticism, especially in relation to ecological considerations (p.1). Smith and Hughes write that while the origins of "ecoGothic can be traced back to Romanticism the growth in environmental awareness has become a significant development" (p.5). In fact, with the growing states of exigencies experienced by humanity, it is difficult to escape considerations and fears of the backlash from Nature due to widespread industrialization, deforestation, and the despoiling of natural resources. These themes are very Gothic themes – Gothic villains are seen as despoiling despots, and power relations that are inherent in Gothic texts within the contexts of domination and excess are also present with ecoGothic texts. The power relations are very much a part of how communities come together to protect themselves against their environment, named as "Evil Earth".

These power relations result in monstrous decisions made by the protagonists, which parallel those made in Alaya Dawn Johnson's Spirit Binders series which I write as having "layers upon layers of coded privilege" (Harris Satkunanathan, 2019, p. 532). Monstrosity then, is connected to the ways in which plantation systems exploit and render abject those whom they are exploiting. This is why my plantationocene reading is connected to the postcolonial ecoGothic, a term which I coined in my analysis of Johnson's novels (2019, p. 528). Botting and Spooner (2015) observe that to distinguish "monstrosity and subjectivity" implies "a distinction of interiority and externality" which is defined by "outside forms and forces" (p.2). Botting and Spooner further assert that these monsters are often "cast out from human society or made monstrous by their own inhumane norms and practices" (2015, p.2). Nevertheless, in plantation systems as enunciated out by Pillai (2004) and Tsing (2016), the fractured relationships between individuals, their natural environments and their communities can often engender monstrosity.

I distinguish postcolonial ecoGothic analysis from general ecoGothic analysis primarily because there is an additional layer of liminality of fractured narratives due to fractured historicities. For instance, the *Broken Earth* trilogy has boldly structured itself on fractured narratives through the deployment of a three-person narrative in *The Fifth Season* only to reveal that the reader is viewing the same person through the eyes of an unspecified narrator, and this unspecified narrator is revealed in *The Obelisk Gate* as Hoa, the stone-eater she adopts and befriends. In *The Stone Sky*, Hoa reveals that he is the reason for the breaking of the world – and

why it happened. Therefore, the idea of multiple wrongs, complicity and monstrosity heighten the ecoGothic elements of the text.

Jemisin's *Broken Earth* novels reveal a complicated relationship between the female protagonist and a fractured nature, one which is immediate and fraught. The complicated relationship is incrementally proportional to the darker lineaments of nature and the powers that nature imbues upon the protagonists. These powers represent not a lighter shade of the Burkean sublime, but a darker, more visceral and more painful concentration of the sublime. Therefore, there is a strong element of abjection within the texts, with the framing of earth as Evil, and as containing an inimical relationship with humanity. With the Earth itself thrust as abject and the communities living upon him (for Earth is gendered as masculine in the texts) forever on guard against his onslaught, Jemisin has constructed a fitting fable for our times, with the cost of humanity (and capitalism) working against the Earth.

## DISCUSSION

### DEFENSIVE COMMUNITIES IN THE *BROKEN EARTH* TRILOGY

My analysis of the *Broken Earth* trilogy is focused on the manifestations of a system of the exploitation of individuals with the ability to communicate with the earth and to use the powers within the earth, the obelisks and the satellites. These individuals are divided into the orogenes, the stills (born with latent power that could not be used but could be tapped), and the Guardians, who are also connected to the orogene bloodlines, but altered so that they would be used to oversee, guard and control the orogenes. This power relationship can be connected to those of slave-masters, or overseers of indentured servants in colonial systems of power in which those of the same race are taken by those in power to control their brethren. These feed into Plantationocene systems of domination which harvest the powers of the earth while also exploiting certain classes of humans. After the breaking of the world in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, humanity on the planet of Jemisin's devising are broken into "comms" which have their own internal hierarchies. A lot of their beliefs and governances are based on a kind of siege mentality – and one which views the orogenes as threats. Orogenes are depicted as having powers over the Earth which is considered as evil, and they are therefore ostracized. It is into this general climate that the narrative introduces the readers to Essun in *The Fifth Season*. It is a deceptive narrative, beginning with trauma. Essun reveals that her son, the "almost three years old" Uche, was beaten to death by his father, her husband Jija (p.10). Essun is not from this northern town of Tirimo, but moved there to be with her husband (p.15), who kills their son when it is revealed that "a three-year-old has the power to start shakes a thousand miles away in Yumenes" (p.23). This underscores the fact that orogenes, and those who have a kind of communion with an inimical Earth are seen to be suspect, and are feared, Othered.

Connected to the system that was to a certain extent controlled by the hierarchies of the Sanzed empire are the "comms" within this desolate world. The "comms" or communities in the books were created after the Earth was shattered with old cities that were subsidiaries of a planet-encompassing city termed "deadcivs", when humans were divorced from what they call "Evil Earth", and live in animosity with their environments. This is an entirely different paradigm from other Ecologically themed texts in which humans are seen in adversity with Nature in a rather literal form. Jemisin extends the metaphor to examine the nature of humanity and community. The



tale occurs post-Stillness, when the earth has broken, a line that begins within the city of Yumenes (*Fifth Season*, p.7).

The earth is good at healing itself. This wound will scab over quickly in geologic terms, and then the cleansing ocean will follow its line to bisect the Stillness into two lands. Until this happens, however, the wound will fester with not only heat but gas and gritty, dark ash – enough to choke off the sky across most of the Stillness’s face within a few weeks. Plants everywhere will die, and the animals that depend on them will starve, and the animals that eat those will starve. (p .7)

This passage underscores the destruction and may be seen as a parallel to the slow way this planet and our planetary ecosystem recovers from human activity, but the systems within which the civilisations of the Stillness operate are very much mired in Plantationocene contexts, of exploitation of the labour of beings both powerful but considered to be lesser.

The ecoGothic contexts are clear because both of the main female characters are in essence—monstrous. They are monstrous because they have been made monstrous by the plantation system within these worlds. Essun was a young girl taken by the Fulcrum through a created race of Guardians who collect young orogenes to train. She was abused by Schaffa who breaks her hand to train her (*Fifth Season*, P.97), an act she later inflicts upon her own daughter (*Obelisk Gate*, p.153). Nassun, her daughter is also made monstrous not just through the actions of her mother but that of her father, Jija, who killed her baby brother, but is almost tender with her as he takes her on a journey to cure her (*Obelisk Gate* pp.114-115). Her fraught relationship with her father culminates in her killing him in self-defense (pp.388-389). The idea of the monstrous feminine then, is connected to the malevolence of an angry and “Evil Earth”, made mad by a moment of rupture that pushes the Moon out of orbit (*Stone Sky*, p.7). Plot-wise, the events of all three books neatly exemplify the principle of cause-and-effect, one that reveals the embedded systems of abuse and disempowerment and exploitation that leads to the pathos and the conflict experienced by the protagonists. Their relationship to nature is therefore a fraught one, that exemplifies the monstrous feminine which I read from a postcolonial ecoGothic context.

The *Broken Earth* trilogy consists of a trio of books that details the lives of the peoples of the world after a planet is broken, and of the power of the group of people known as orogenes who can manipulate the powers of the Earth. The world post-apocalypse is known as the “Stillness”. As *The Fifth Season* opens, a fracture is described by the text as a “line, roughly east-west and too straight...spanning the girth of the land’s equator” (*Fifth Season*, p.7). The line originates in one of the cities in the Stillness, Yumenes, and heralds the latest “Fifth Season” in the land. The protagonist is a woman named Essun. Her life intersects with that of Alabaster, a ten-ring orogene who was her mentor, her lover and occasionally her nemesis. Alabaster’s life journey is central to the Stillness, and he is a morally ambiguous character connected to what is known as the Evil Earth. Alabaster knows her in all of her different names and guises (Essun, Syenite, Damaya), and his power is denoted by the fact that he wears ten rings. The hierarchy of powers and talent amongst the orogenes of the Fulcrum is therefore delineated by how many rings they wear.

A Season is a time of ecological uncertainty due to disasters and the inhabitants of the planet have formed communities or “comms” to protect themselves against these disasters. The other characters of the books are all connected in one way or another to Essun in her multiple identities, which is revealed in multiple temporalities, moving between the different parts of Essun’s life, from the first time the orogenes discover her, till she reaches the apex of her power. Essun is a flawed heroic protagonist, and the characters around her are as flawed, determined to save themselves and their communities – at all costs. The first book, *The Fifth Season*, is told from a 2<sup>nd</sup> person point of view that moves into 3<sup>rd</sup> person. It is a unique narration that purports to tell

the story of three different people who are revealed to be Essun in the different stages of her life. Her life as a “rogga”, an orogene in the wild is one life, another narrative however reaches back to her childhood when she is claimed by a guardian and trained in the Fulcrum. The third life happens after she escapes from the Fulcrum and raises a family.

In *The Obelisk Gate*, Essun’s story intersects with the story of her daughter, Nassun, a budding orogene who is brought away by her father (Essun’s husband, Jija), who has killed her baby brother. This is the beginning of Essun’s narrative and point of view in the novel, a bleak one that shows the inhumanity, fear and persecution rife in the comms during the Stillness, just as a Season is about to be declared (p.44). On the brink of being revealed as an orogene in the town (Tirimo) where she has settled with Jija in order to lead an ordinary life, she has to escape persecution and she has to find her daughter. Essun goes on a journey to track her daughter down and in the process meets old associates and Alabaster, her mentor-turned-lover. Nassun’s narrative takes place in the second book, *The Obelisk Gate*. Essun settles in a “comm” with a new community of orogenes who accept her, and with the stone-eaters who are of the Earth. The clashes between her own individual destiny and the needs of the comm are acute, mostly centred around her connection to Alabaster, who is slowly turning into stone. Nassun, on the other hand, is on the run with her father, Jija, who killed her baby brother. She eventually begins training as an orogene. Her life-path is very different from the life-path of her mother but both of their narratives intersect with decisions about the season and how to save the planet which undergoes period after period of environmental (ecological and geological) destruction.

More is revealed about the complex relationship between humans, the Gate, the Moon and what is known as Evil Earth in *The Stone Sky*. The ecological/seismic disasters are further underscored as well as the brutal nature of the “comms”. The fates of Essun, her daughter Nassun and other members of their comms intersect, as they seek to rewrite their destinies. My position is that these struggles may be connected to the struggles of humanity in the present day in a world beset by climate disaster, where individual destinies may be at odds with the communal need for survival. The root of the cycle of destruction, enslavement and exploitation can therefore be found in the Syl Anagist empire (*The Stone Sky*, p. 210). Keygan Sands (2021) observes of the Syl Anagist modus operandi that much like “many real indigenous peoples who were made out by colonizers to be subhuman, the dehumanization starts with the colonization of the Niess, a magically adept people” who were not viewed as human (Sands, 2021, p.184). Hoa, the stone-eater who is the narrator of all three books was one of these Niess and more importantly, he is the one who sets things into motion by defeating an experiment by the Syl Anagist that was using his people as batteries and slaves. Unfortunately, his reaction caused the Fifth Seasons by ricocheting the moon away from the earth (*Stone Sky*, pp.3-4). Therefore, a vicious cycle of enslavement and exploitation ultimately manifested in the two tortured protagonists of the novel: Essun and Nassun, both tortured, both abused and both ultimately powerful. They fracture the binaries of the Gothic heroine by embodying the monstrous heroine.

#### COMMODIFICATION AND SLAVERY: PLANTATIONOCENE CONTEXTS

Slavery is very much an overt theme in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, as may be seen in several statements and passages in *The Fifth Season*. Syenite realizes early on that “all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body” (p.348). This system that created the slavery of the orogenes to the service of the empire and to the Fulcrum, also created the defensive

communities of comms, as this is how humanity decided to survive the destruction of their own Earth caused by their own actions. The Sanzed comms started it by overcoming other comms.

On the Sanzed comms overpowering other comms, Alabaster says, that they “decided to work together, attacking the comms of any lesser races.” (p.417) After this, Alabaster adds with a curl of his lip that, “That’s when they started calling us ‘lesser races’ actually” (p.417). An imposed hierarchy of races heralds a system of slavery and subjugation as may be seen in the world after several waves of colonization by the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French and the British. The idea of one race being superior to the other leads to the exploitation of “lesser” races to harvest and extract riches from the earth. This is part and parcel of how the Plantationocene epoch of Earth connects to further exploitation and destruction of natural resources. Alabaster reiterates, as he explains the system to Syenite that a “rogga is not any man. Roggas have no right to get angry, to want justice, to protect what they love” (p.418). Again, this dehumanizing of orogenes and their offspring is a heart-rending symbol for what happened to inhabitants of the Global South under colonization and slavery.

Orogenes built the Fulcrum,” he says. She’s almost never heard him say orogene. “We did it under threat of genocide, and we used it to buckle a collar around our own necks, but we did it. We are the reason Old Sanze grew so powerful and lasted so long and why it still half-rules the world, even if no one will admit it. (p. 418)

The power and gifts of the orogenes are both vilified and utilized by the ruling classes of the society which radiate outward into the newcoms. The Fulcrum becomes the birthing place for orogenes, and a place where coerced and enforced breeding occurs. The children born of orogene pairings are trained if gifted, if they do not possess the gift but have the sensitivity, they become Guardians whose job is to train the gifted, to control them, and where necessary, to abuse and terminate them. There are those who are born with power but are deformed or lacking in control. These are harnessed into machines as node maintainers where they live a partial life, with only brain activity but no bodily control. This horror story of what is endured by the node maintainers is a fitting parable for the ways in which capitalism commodifies lives of the disenfranchised, the working class for the profit and capital of the ruling classes,. From a postcolonial ecoGothic context, the body horror exemplified in these scenes are a fitting metaphor for the ways in which Global South and other postcolonial societies have been cannibalized by imperial forces for centuries while also stereotyped, demonized and exoticized. Shohreh Haji Mola Hosein and Faridah Pourgi (2020) explore the climate change issues in Jemisin's trilogy through the lens of Simon C. Estok's lens of ecophobia, positing than political hegemonies inter alia, create conditions leading to ecophobia and how "psychoneurotic impulses may result in domestic ferocity, murder, a sense of hatred, genocide and the demolition of the world". This distillation of ecophobia is helpful to read in relation to the very extreme power-relationships in the world of the Stillness, which lead to the torture of innocents in order to exploit their orogene gifts.

The main catastrophe in *The Fifth Season* is arguably the moment in which Syenite’s child Coru, dies. She does not want him to live, captured by the warder Schaffa, and turned into a slave. Many of Alabaster’s children had been born with unbridled power, only to be harnessed as node maintainers. And so Syenite harnesses her own power to end the child.

“Better that a child never have lived at all than live as a slave.  
Better that he die.  
Better that she die.”

(p. 441)

This tragic moment in the novel is reminiscent of the heart of the pain in one of the most seminal works of postcolonial Gothicism, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which again touches on the pain of motherhood within the bondage of slavery, which exemplifies the ways in which plantation-system domination leads to the creation of the monstrous feminine. This haunting and fraught (and flawed) motherhood is, for better or for worst the lynchpin of Essun's character in *The Fifth Season*. This tragedy is an exemplification of the Plantationocene contexts of this novel. The tragedy of Coru's death haunts Essun even as she grapples with the problems of motherhood that is made even more problematic in *The Obelisk Gate* when, through the point-of-view of her daughter, Nassun, we view how Essun herself became an abusive mother. The split in the narratives then, reveal a split in herself, as she is becoming-monstrous. In training Nassun to be an orogene, she repeats the techniques of force that Schaffa imposed upon her, a fact that Schaffa regrets once Nassun tells him about it.

"That was wrong," Schaffa says. His voice is so soft that she can barely hear it. She turns to look at him in surprise. He is staring at the ground, and there is a strange look on his face. Not the usual wandering, confused look that he gets sometimes. This is something he actually remembers, and his expression is...guilty? Rueful. Sad. "It's wrong to hurt someone you love, Nassun." (p .154)

Schaffa is on a redemption arc of his own which is accelerated discovers Nassun and her baby-killing father Jija as they seek to reach the comm that Schaffa has created to protect orogene, Found Moon. He is a Guardian who now regrets the harm he has done to others, he helps Nassun reach her potential while protecting her from her murderous father. In his reveries, it is evident that he is slowly realizing how he has been repeating patterns of abuse set into place to enslave the orogenes and divide human societies. Therefore, Schaffa's point of view sheds further light on the system of subjugation that is in effect an echo of the plantation systems on our own world, and how it makes monsters of us all.

## CONCLUSION

We live in a state of anxiety and emergency. The connections we make and the accountability we take for our actions upon this planet ultimately determines our fate. And this is part and parcel of the message found in the *Broken Earth* novels. The idea that bad things happen but then we move on, make other things, create communities that may mess up, may be cruel but they are still ours – is a very pragmatic and postcolonial vision of the future, one that is indeed become more and more relevant as we live in times in which environmental disasters happen on a daily basis, and human communities are impacted by such disasters even as we speak. It is the nature of how things go wrong that shines in this trilogy, and the ways in which communities and individuals cope with events when things go wrong, and how they fall apart. This lends an aspect of realism to the narrative, one which reflects our fears about what happens when societies collapse because of ecological disaster. However it is not devoid of hope either as Essun in all of her three identities finds friendship, community and love within a devastated landscape. In my opinion this is primarily because the current state of environmental anxieties experienced by populations around the world have reached a stage in which we very much have to imagine a future, whether it be bleak or optimistic. The connections made between the characters in all three of the novels resonate with urgency – no planetary disaster can be survived without communal effort. The relationship between humanity, community and the environment is inherent in the act of what Haraway has

dubbed “making kin” and is also inherent in the disruptions suggested by Tsing. The connection between community and nature may also be read in the ecoGothic. This is precisely the underpinnings behind the attempts to connect the postcolonial ecoGothic to the Plantationocene contexts interrogated in this article.

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