Journal of Integrated Studies

Article

The Power of Language, Naming, and Metaphors in Affecting Thoughts and Behaviours: Identity Politics at Work in N.K. Jemisin's Novel *The Fifth Season*

Kelsey Mullen (Santiago)

Abstract

This essay examines N. K. Jemisin's The Fifth Season through a philosophically postmodern lens, focusing on how the novel employs language, naming, and metaphor to critique systemic racism and sexism in North American society. It argues that Jemisin's use of speculative fiction allows her to embed themes of identity politics and structural oppression within a richly imagined world, offering readers a unique and accessible entry point into discussions of marginalization. Drawing on theories of naming, social identity, and the attitude–behaviour relationship, this analysis demonstrates how the novel invites reflection and potentially fosters empathy among readers who may not have previously encountered these issues directly. By presenting societal critiques through metaphor rather than overt commentary, The Fifth Season becomes a powerful vehicle for challenging dominant narratives and influencing both attitudes and behaviours related to race, gender, and power.

The Power of Language, Naming, and Metaphors in Affecting Thoughts and Behaviours: Identity Politics at Work in N.K. Jemisin's Novel The Fifth Season

Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder. –Rumi

This essay offers a critique of N. K. Jemisin's novel *The Fifth Season* through a philosophically postmodern lens. I argue that the novel's premise and characters function as a compelling metaphor for the marginalization of individuals in North American society based on race and gender. Furthermore, I contend—an argument I will define, explore, and support in the following pages—that Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* invites readers of all racial, gender, and socioeconomic identities, whether directly affected by systemic inequities or not, to reflect on the realities and consequences of racism and sexism, as well as the pervasiveness of existing power structures within contemporary society.

Importantly, Jemisin accomplishes this without making racial and gender-based metaphors the overt or primary focus of her narrative. Instead, she embeds these themes within a richly constructed fictional world, allowing them to emerge through metaphor rather than direct commentary. By doing so, she presents complex societal issues in a manner that is more accessible and less confrontational, thereby engaging a wider and more diverse readership. I argue that this strategy enhances the novel's impact, as it invites readers to arrive at their own insights and interpretations regarding issues of race, gender, and structural power dynamics. Beyond being an award-winning and engaging work of fiction, *The Fifth Season* also serves as a powerful tool for fostering understanding—potentially even empathy—among readers who may not have previously encountered or considered these forms of systemic oppression. In this way, the novel may contribute to shifts in attitudes and, consequently, in individual and collective behaviours.

When I state that I am critiquing this novel from a philosophically postmodern perspective, I refer to the definition of postmodernism provided by Steven Seidman: "The terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' refer to broad social and cultural patterns or sensibilities that can be analytically distinguished for the purpose of highlighting social trends" (Seidman, 1994, p. 2). In this essay, I apply the term *postmodern* to refer to broad social and cultural patterns concerning naming, identity politics, and the preservation of existing power structures that enable and sustain racism and sexism in North American society. These same cultural patterns are mirrored—and therefore

brought into question—through the naming practices and social dynamics presented in Jemisin's novel *The Fifth Season*.

To examine the representations of racism and sexism in this novel, it is necessary to first define these cultural concepts as they will be applied throughout this essay. My working understanding of racism is relatively straightforward: it refers to an individual being perceived and treated differently—specifically, unfairly—based on a racial difference from the person enacting that treatment. This definition functions on an individual level but extends beyond that when applied to broader societal structures. When such thinking and behaviour are adopted by a significant portion of a population, racism moves beyond individual prejudice and manifests in systemic ways. As Fredrickson (2002) explains, "racism as I conceive it is not merely an attitude or set of beliefs; it also expresses itself in the practices, institutions, and structures that a sense of deep difference justifies or validates" (p. 6). I believe that racism functions in this manner both within North American society and in the fictional world Jemisin presents, operating on a large scale to establish and sustain society's dominant prejudicial norms.

Sexism, for the purposes of this essay, can be defined in a parallel way. It similarly begins with individual unfair treatment based on perceived difference, but the relevant point of discrimination shifts from race to sex or gender. In both cases, the core mechanism of systemic oppression remains the same: a perceived difference is used to rationalize inequality and exclusion across personal, institutional, and societal levels.

Having clarified these terms, it is now important for me to acknowledge the two central perspectives and backgrounds present in this essay before going any further with my critique. First, I will acknowledge that as a White female born and raised in Western Canada, I have not directly experienced racism in my life. That does not exclude me from my ability to bear witness to it and its effects on those around me, nor does it mean I have no indirect experience with it. That being said, for the purpose of this essay, I will maintain a purely academic viewpoint of the issue. It is my intent to focus solely on the metaphors for racism used in *The Fifth Season* and their power

within the context of the larger story to potentially instigate a change in attitudes, and thus behaviours, in previously uninformed or unaffected populations. This singular focus on a purely academic critique is true also of my arguments surrounding the metaphors for sexism in this novel, even though sexism is an issue which has impacted me directly, repeatedly, throughout my life. This is not an opinion piece based on my individual experiences and private perspectives, it is an opinion piece based on arguable facts and theories from reputable sources that extend beyond my personal thoughts and feelings on the issues.

The personal thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences that do influence this essay are those of the author of *The Fifth Season*, N. K. Jemisin. While she is widely recognized as an award-winning novelist, she is also a Black woman, a trained psychologist, and a political blogger residing in the United States. This multifaceted background enables her to craft powerful and nuanced metaphors that explore sexism, racism, and the maintenance of power structures within North American society. Her perspective equips her to create stories that transport readers beyond their everyday realities while simultaneously reflecting those realities back to them in compelling and thought-provoking ways.

This deliberate and intelligent design encourages readers to draw their own connections between fiction and reality; they are guided rather than overtly directed. Moreover, *The Fifth Season* is not Jemisin's first work to explore such themes—she is well known for weaving subtle yet incisive critiques of systemic oppression throughout her fiction. As Novik (2015) notes, "N. K. Jemisin's intricate and extraordinary world-building starts with oppression: Her universes begin by asking who is oppressing whom, what they are gaining, [and] what they fear" (para. 1).

It is evident to anyone familiar with Jemisin's work that she skillfully harnesses the power of language not only to construct worlds and characters, but also to instill ideas in the minds of her readers—particularly through naming and the construction of role identities. This is significant; there is inherent power in language, and especially in naming. One scholar who supports this perspective is Derek Alderman, a professor and department head in geography at the University

of Tennessee. His research focuses on public memory, race, heritage tourism, social justice, critical place-name studies, and the American South. Much of Alderman's work explores the histories, commemorative activism, and place-making efforts of African Americans as they assert civil rights, claim space in the public sphere, and exercise the power to remember the past and reshape cultural landscapes on their own terms. Alderman (1988) asserts that "naming is a noteworthy cultural practice not only because of its ability to create a sense of continuity over time but also through its capacity for changing and challenging lines of identity" (p. 195).

In society, we ascribe meaning and value to titles and names. For example, salaries are often linked to job titles and classifications, individual and corporate identities are shaped around names, and naming practices are used to express respect—or lack thereof—toward others. The significance of naming is evident not only in North American society but globally, as names shape expectations of individuals, define their status within social hierarchies, and influence the extent of their power and control. In short, naming aligns closely with the development of role identities within a group, a concept supported by Burke (2008), who notes that identity formation is tied to social status and structure (p. 75).

Titles such as *parent* or *boss*, for example, carry implicit responsibilities, denote positions of authority within specific structures (e.g., the family unit or workplace), and demand a corresponding level of respect from others within those environments. However, these role identities shift across contexts. A person who is a parent at home may simultaneously hold other roles—such as employee, child, or leader—within different social settings. Their influence and social standing may fluctuate accordingly. Yet, race, gender, and other physical traits remain constant across these spaces. These aspects of identity do not adapt based on context and continue to shape how individuals are perceived in every setting.

This consistency is also evident in *The Fifth Season*. The characters who are physically marked as different—those who possess the trait known as orogeny—are marginalized by the dominant population. Even within their own sub-communities, which include leaders, parents, and children

occupying various social roles, their broader societal identity is reduced to a singular, defining physical difference. Regardless of their status within their group, they are perceived by the dominant society as "other," limited and judged solely on the basis of that trait.

Let me begin by providing a brief overview of the world Jemisin has created for this novel, as that sets the landscape, both literally and figuratively, for the grand metaphors used. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic Earth where the continents have been rocked by numerous earthquakes, tsunamis, and ash storms that one large, struggling land mass is now all that exists. This is important, as it provides the geographical limitations within which all of the characters live, amongst their peers, with virtually no escape. The largest of the social structures within this novel are all of the humans living on one small land mass together and surviving on limited resources. It becomes clear early on that this land mass and its majority population are a metaphor for North America, as it is made up of coastal populations, "midlatters" who farm and are highly religious (the "Bible Belt" in America), and large metropolis centers similar to those of Washington, New York, and Los Angeles, where the majority of the players in politics and power reside.

Within this population exists a group of individuals who are born with a distinct physical ability that sets them apart from the majority. This ability—referred to in the novel as "orogeny"—is a powerful and dangerous force that allows its holders to control seismic activity. Notably, this ability is entirely absent among the ruling class; if any individual within that class were discovered to possess it, they would be expelled immediately and without hesitation. Those who possess orogeny are known as "orogenes."

This distinction serves as one of the most potent metaphors in the novel. The orogenes represent a minority population defined by an innate physical difference—a difference that is feared, policed, and used to justify systemic oppression. Through this metaphor, Jemisin draws a direct parallel to the real-world marginalization of racialized and gendered individuals in North American society, illustrating how physical or perceived difference can be used to maintain deeply embedded social hierarchies.

Where does the term *orogene* originate? In geological terms, *orogeny* refers to the structural deformation of the Earth's crust, typically resulting from the interaction of tectonic plates. This definition is not unlike the physical power held by the orogenes in Jemisin's novel, who possess the ability to control seismic energy. In *The Fifth Season*, the ruling class adopts this scientific term as a label for a segment of the population born with this ability. However, the significance of the term lies not just in its literal meaning, but in the symbolic and social value ascribed to it by the ruling class and the broader population.

By naming this group *orogenes*, the dominant social order exercises linguistic control and reinforces its authority. The name functions as a tool of subjugation, stripping individuals of any identity beyond their physical difference. As Alderman (1988) explains, naming has historically served as a mechanism of domination: "consider the historical role that Whites played in naming enslaved Africans and how, even after emancipation, African-Americans assumed the last name of their slave owner because their names prior to enslavement no longer existed. Believing his name to have originated from White slave owners, civil rights leader Malcolm X rejected the moniker of 'Little.' Like many Black Muslims at the time, he chose 'X' to mark his unknown and stolen tribal name" (Alderman, 1988, p. 195). Similarly, in the novel, the act of renaming functions as an assertion of power. The term *orogene* becomes a marker of inferiority—an identity rooted in physical difference and used to justify social exclusion and dehumanization.

In the world of *The Fifth Season*, orogenes are ostracized, brutalized, chained, and exploited for the benefit of the ruling class and the population majority. They are treated not as individuals, but as tools—enslaved, bred, and controlled. Their lives are considered expendable, as long as others can continue to benefit from their abilities. Orogenes are not regarded as human beings, but rather as commodities—a narrative that serves as a powerful metaphor for both the historical enslavement of Africans in North America and the continued marginalization of Black communities by institutional power structures. Additionally, this metaphor extends to the commodification of women, whose bodies and sexuality are often exploited by corporations and media for profit.

Through this layered symbolism, Jemisin critiques multiple forms of systemic oppression, using language and naming as central mechanisms of control.

It is clear, then, that naming and role identities influence the attitudes and behaviours of a population by clarifying expectations around the levels of power and respect a titleholder should possess. Put simply, language has the power to shape public thought and opinion. As Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry (2000) explain in their article *Social Contextual Influences on Attitude-Behavior Correspondence, Attitude Change, and Persuasion*, thoughts and opinions, in turn, form attitudes—attitudes that are then expressed as overt behaviours, as "people's attitudes are developed and expressed as behaviors in a context that is social" (p. 2).

This concept applies not only to the naming, perceptions of, and treatment of the orogenes in *The Fifth Season*, but also to the potential impact the novel may have on its readers. By presenting issues such as racism, sexism, and the maintenance of power structures through labels within the context of a fictional story, Jemisin subtly encourages readers to draw their own conclusions, rather than confronting them with overtly political or didactic messaging.

As readers identify with—or empathize with—one or more of the characters and experience oppression through their perspectives, the possibility for a shift in attitude emerges. This perspective, that of the novel's main characters, may be entirely unfamiliar to previously unaffected or misinformed segments of the reading population—individuals who may not have previously engaged with these issues in political or philosophical discourse. Because the novel is a work of fiction, selected by readers not necessarily seeking to challenge their worldviews, it creates space for an organic and, perhaps, unexpected emotional response. At the very least, it may foster an awareness of the effects of marginalization and oppression.

In conclusion, *The Fifth Season* serves as a powerful tool for exploring the capacity of naming and title ascription in the construction and maintenance of role identities within a population. The novel functions as a clear and effective metaphor for the ways these same naming practices contribute to

the marginalization of minority groups in North America, particularly on the basis of physical differences such as race and gender. Framed within a work of fiction, the novel invites—rather than imposes—critical reflection on the role of language and naming in everyday life, and their impact on marginalized communities emotionally, physically, and economically. Through its narrative, *The Fifth Season* offers readers an empathetic perspective that might otherwise be inaccessible. In doing so, it has the potential to shift attitudes and, ultimately, influence behaviours in a meaningful and lasting way.

References

Alderman, D. H. (1988). Place, naming and the interpretation of cultural landscapes. In P. H. B. Graham (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Burke, P. J. (2008). Identity, social status, and emotion. In J. Clay-Warner & D. T. Robinson (Eds.), *Social Structure and Emotion*. Oxford: Elsevier Inc.

Fredrickson, G. M. (2002). *Racism: A Short History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Novik, N. (2015, August 09). June's book club pick: '*The Fifth Season*,' by N.K. Jemisin *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/books/review/the-fifth-season-by-nk-jemisin.html

Seidman, S. (1994).*The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Terry, M. A. & Hogg, D. J. (2000). Social contextual influences on attitude-behavior correspondence, attitude change, and persuasion. *Attitudes, Behavior, and Social Context: The Role of Norms and Group Membership*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kelsey Mullen (Santiago) is a PSE professional with a background in communications, holding a Bachelor of Communications from Mount Royal University and the pursuit of a MA-IS with a focus on Writing & New Media from Athabasca University. With a strong passion for the written word, Kelsey has served as an editor for the Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (JIS) and has edited numerous published fiction works as a freelancer. Her experience spans both academic and creative writing, where she has honed her skills in developing, refining, and presenting ideas.

Kelsey is deeply committed to the power of language and storytelling, believing that writing can challenge perceptions, connect ideas, and spark meaningful conversations across diverse fields.