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**Empathy for the Earth: Ecological Empathy and Nonhuman Agency in
 N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy***

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Abstract

*This study examines N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, which includes *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017), with the aim of understanding the role of speculative fiction in promoting environmental empathy and encouraging ethical thinking on environmental issues. The specific objectives of this study are to examine the representation of climate change and environmental degradation in Jemisin's work, to examine the human-nature relationship and environmental empathy, and to examine Jemisin's contribution to climate fiction and environmental literary works. The main sources of data were obtained through a critical analysis of the texts in *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, which includes all three novels. In general, the analysis is based on the overall narrative content of the trilogy. In addition, the analysis is based on secondary sources in the field of ecocriticism, climate fiction, and environmental humanities. The analysis is based on an ecocritical and eco-feminist theory that emphasizes non-human agency, environmental justice, and anthropocentric thinking. The results show that the trilogy depicts the Earth as an agentic and morally relevant being, frames environmental degradation as part of a broader system of social oppression and emphasizes empathy as a key ethical concept for sustainable living. This research contributes to the field of climate fiction studies by revealing the potential of literature in promoting ecologies of awareness, engagement, and ethics, and shedding light on the role of narrative in the development of human understanding of social and environmental entanglements.*

Keywords: *Climate Fiction, Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Empathy, Human–Nature Interconnectedness, N. K. Jemisin*

Introduction

Environmental crises that plague the modern world, from climate change and ecological degradation to biodiversity depletion and environmental injustice, have become the focal points of intellectual and cultural discourse at the global level. Even though the scientifically and policy-oriented approaches to these crises are of crucial importance, they often seem not to address the emotional, ethical, and imaginative aspects that are necessary for the development of ecological responsibility in the long term (Latif et al., 2026). On the other hand, literature has been of crucial importance in the translation of abstract concerns about the environment into the lived experiences of individuals, not only by representing ecological realities but also by transforming the ways in which individuals relate to the nonhuman world, making it a crucial site of exploration of anthropocentric assumptions and the creation of alternative ecological futures that are built on coexistence, not domination.

Herein, cli-fi or climate fiction has emerged as a significant literary genre that seeks to explore the problem of environmental catastrophe through a fictional approach. While climate change is a scientific term that remains remote from human experience, climate fiction makes environmental catastrophes immediate and moral issues. One such work of climate fiction is the *Broken Earth Trilogy* written by N. K. Jemisin and consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017). Broken Earth Trilogy is one of the most prominent works of climate fiction because of its unique portrayal of environmental catastrophes and social inequalities. The novel takes place in the Stillness, an unstable geological environment, where apocalyptic disasters called Fifth Seasons bring about environmental catastrophes, which affect the lives of humans, thus highlighting the fragile nature of civilization. To begin with, Jemisin creates an unstable geological environment in the Stillness with the help of the following lines: "The Stillness is a land of unrelenting catastrophe" (*The Fifth Season*, 2015, p. 1).

Though there is growing awareness regarding the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, the predominant cultural discourses still promote the idea of nature as a passive object of exploitation by humans. Although science-based and policy-driven methods are essential, they lack emotional and ethical dimensions that may help foster environmental consciousness. Therefore, humans continue dominating nature and fail to live together with it. Climate fiction has become a popular research topic in literary studies, but despite the growing interest, the issue of empathy as an ecocritical concept is poorly researched (Rabi & Rabi, 2025). There have been many studies analyzing such issues as environmental degradation, social injustice, and trauma in the *Broken Earth Trilogy*; however, the role of constructing empathy towards nature in the narrative has not been analyzed so far. While Jemisin has depicted the Earth as an active and reactive entity, breaking away from anthropocentric discourses, the ecocritical implications of such a notion have not been sufficiently explored (Khan et al., 2026). This study aims to address this gap by examining the ways in which the *Broken Earth Trilogy* reimagines human responsibility towards nature in terms of ecological empathy.

The study in this research is shaped by the following set of interrelated objectives that form the framework for the analysis of N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*. Primarily, the objectives of the study are to examine the representation of climate change and environmental degradation, including the ways in which environmental crises affect human societies and the natural world in the narrative. Secondly, the study also aims to examine the construction of ecological empathy, including the ways in which the interrelatedness of humans and the nonhuman world are represented in the narrative, including the ethical and affective dimensions of these relationships (Rabi et al., 2026). Thirdly, the objectives of the study also include the examination of the representation of nonhuman agency, including the ways in which the *The Broken Earth Trilogy* challenges anthropocentric assumptions and the ways in which the Earth as an entity comes to be represented as having agency in the narrative. Finally, the objectives of the study also include the evaluation of the contribution of Jemisin to climate fiction and environmental literary discourse, including the ways in which the *The Broken Earth Trilogy* represents the importance of environmental awareness, ethics, and imagination.

In line with these goals, the study aims to answer four significant research questions. First, the study examines the ways in which the trilogy portrays the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on human societies and the natural world (Hussain, Rabi, & Aziz, 2026). Second, the study examines the narrative techniques by which the reader is encouraged to develop empathy towards the natural world. Third, the study examines the ways in which the Earth as a whole is depicted as having agency and acting on the world of the story. Finally, the

study examines the ways in which the speculative fiction of Jemisin promotes the ideals of environmental ethics and sustainability (Hussain, Danish, Rabi, & Rabi, 2025).

The study is underpinned by an ecocritical theoretical framework that is informed by some of the most significant ecocritical concepts, such as anthropocentrism, nonhuman agency, ecological interconnectedness, and environmental justice (Abdulwahab et al., 2026). Ecocritical theory seeks to subvert anthropocentric views by highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and promoting ethical relationships with nonhuman entities. For example, ecocritical theorists such as Timothy Morton focus on the interconnectedness and entanglement of nature by advocating for a shift away from anthropocentric views toward a more holistic ecological worldview (Ahmad, Rabi, Sardar, Khan, & Begum, 2025). Additionally, Lawrence Buell emphasizes the importance of environmental texts in promoting ethical relationships with nature by highlighting nonhuman agency and presence. In addition, this research draws upon ecofeminism, which aims to draw connections between humans' relationship with nature and their relationship with oppressed groups through caring, relations, and ethics (Swati et al., 2026; Ijaz & Rabi, 2022). It is within this context that this study tries to make sense of *The Broken Earth Trilogy* as a book that challenges anthropocentrism through its portrayal of nature as an intelligent entity. The study rests on the notion of ecological empathy as an ethical response that seeks to bridge the gap between the human and non-human realms through sustainable relationships with nature.

The current study contributes significantly to literary criticism, environmental humanities, and climate fiction in that it stresses the significance of empathy as an important ecological and ethical principle. Furthermore, the study is significant for existing literature on *The Broken Earth Trilogy* since it focuses on an ecocritical approach. It should be noted that previous literature on Jemisin's works has focused mostly on such topics as environmental destruction, social justice, and trauma. This study is significant for the following reasons. First, it challenges anthropocentric views by showing that the Earth becomes an actor in Jemisin's story that becomes part of human history, thus changing human-nature relations through reciprocity and responsibility. Second, it shows the significance of literature as a way to raise people's environmental awareness through promoting ethical thinking that promotes more sustainable and equal relations with nature. Finally, this study is relevant for today's globalized world since it shows the significance of speculative fiction in that it not only depicts environmental degradation but also creates alternative futures built on empathy and ecological harmony.

Literature Review

Nevertheless, recent scholarly research has recognized the *Broken Earth Trilogy* by N. K. Jemisin as an important part of contemporary climate fiction literature, specifically because of its unique approach to issues of environmental crises, social inequality, and speculative fiction. For instance, Brian Attebery has stated that the *Broken Earth Trilogy* by N. K. Jemisin is important because it represents a new definition of speculative fiction by linking environmental crises with colonial and social histories (Attebery, 2017). In addition, Gerry Canavan has noted that the *Broken Earth Trilogy* by N. K. Jemisin is important because it examines the issues of agency and possibility in the context of environmental crises, thus providing a new definition of climate fiction as a genre that explores ethical imagination (Canavan, 2018; Rabi, Ahmad, Hussain, & Ullah, 2025).

One of the main concerns that ecocritics explore in relation to this trilogy is the subversion of anthropocentric views and the redefinition of the human-nature relationship. In this context, according to Timothy Morton's ecocritical theory, human experiences within nature can be seen as "hyperobjects," that is, large-scale complex entities such as global warming that transcend human understanding and control (Morton, 2013; Rabi, Bibi, Mukhtiar, & Zahir, 2025). This is

particularly applicable to Jemisin's trilogy with regards to her presentation of *The Fifth Seasons* as uncontrollable environmental occurrences that interrupt human attempts at stability (Ullah, Rabi, Khan, & Ahmad, 2025). Additionally, another ecocritical theory that is applicable to this text is that, according to Lawrence Buell, one main characteristic of ecocriticism is that it is able to represent human experiences within nature that are able to highlight the agency of nature as opposed to human-centric views (Buell, 2005). Jemisin's presentation of nature as having agency, as seen through her personification of Earth as having reacted antagonistically to human existence, is applicable to this theory.

Further extending this discussion, Stacy Alaimo and Serenella Iovino, through the lens of material ecocriticism, also highlight the agency and liveliness of matter, suggesting that the non-human world also has its own forms of expression and meaning (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). This lens of analysis can also be seen as useful in understanding Jemisin's sentient Earth and the experiences of characters such as orogenes and stone eaters, whose identities transcend the boundaries between the human and the geological world. By highlighting the Earth as matter and as having expression and meaning, the trilogy also highlights the idea that the Earth is not passive but actively engaged in the creation of human histories and futures.

In addition to ecocritical analysis, feminist and ecofeminist approaches to *The Broken Earth Trilogy* have highlighted the relationship between environmental degradation, gender, and power. As Simon C. Estok argues, "the exploitation of nature is linked with the exploitation of marginalized peoples, particularly women, in patriarchal societies" (Estok, 2011). The character of Essun as a mother, survivor, and orogene is highlighted by Jemisin's work as having relationships with her vulnerability as a mother, her experiences as a survivor, and her power as an orogene. The control and institutionalization of orogeny through the Fulcrum can be seen as a metaphor for both the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of marginalized peoples, as highlighted by ecofeminist theory that power is expressed through the exploitation of both human and non-human bodies.

Additionally, studies have pointed to the role of affect and emotion in environmental discourses. According to Scott Slovic, literature has a significant role to play in promoting environmental awareness, as it appeals to the emotion and ethics of the readers rather than relying on scientific data (Slovic, 2010). In this context, it is obvious that empathy plays an important role in forming environmental awareness through literature. In this particular story, the emphasis on loss, trauma, and survival creates a sense of experience, thus prompting empathy towards suffering, be it human or nonhuman.

However, despite this developing body of literature, there remains a significant gap in terms of research on the theme of ecological empathy in *The Broken Earth Trilogy*. While much of the research to date has explored the themes of environmental degradation, social inequality, and trauma, fewer studies have specifically examined the construction of empathy with the Earth itself. This is especially relevant in recent environmental humanities discourse, as the importance of affective relationships with the Earth becomes increasingly apparent. In emphasizing the role of empathy as a narrative concern, Jemisin's work asks the reader to think critically about the constructed borders of self and Earth, of human and non-human (Rabi, Ullah, & Rabi, 2024).

Filling this research gap, the present study draws on the theories of ecocriticism, materialism, and ecofeminism to examine the construction of the Earth as a sentient, agential being worthy of ethical consideration in the *Broken Earth Trilogy*. The study undertakes textual analysis to examine the operation of empathy as an empowering ecological concept, reconfiguring the relationships between humans and nature, and promoting interrelated concepts of interconnection, obligation, and caring (Javed Ashiq, Usman, Rabi, & Uzma, 2024). By doing so,

the study makes an additional contribution to the discussion on climate fiction and environmental humanities, emphasizing the agency of literature in promoting not just the awareness but also the ethics and emotionality of the environmental crisis.

Methodology

The research design of this study is qualitative, interpretative, and is underpinned by the methodological framework of literary analysis, with the goal of exploring the themes of ecological empathy, environmental degradation, and the agency of the nonhuman in N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy*. Considering the importance of narrative structures, symbols, and thematic concerns in the texts, the use of qualitative research design is relevant when it comes to investigating the way literature shapes ecological issues with the aim of fostering ethical considerations.

Three novels chosen for analysis are *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017). They were chosen because of the theme of climate fiction and their discussion of environmental issues. *The Fifth Season*, orogeny, and the Personified Earth are some of the major narrative elements of the selected trilogy that will provide a rich soil for discussing degradation of the environment, relations between humans and nature, and agency of nonhuman entities.

The work draws on ecocriticism and ecofeminism theories, employing different aspects of theories to develop an analytical framework. Anthropocentrism, ecology of interconnection, and environmental ethics provide the basis for this study. The theory of ecological entanglement by Timothy Morton and the theory of environmental representation by Lawrence Buell guide the human-nature interactions in this study. Material ecocriticism, as seen from the theory of nonhuman agency by Serenella Iovino, provides insight into the representation of the Earth as a living and responsive entity, whereas ecofeminism, through the theories by Simon C. Estok, shows the intersection of environmental and social exploitation.

This research applies close reading and thematic analysis to investigate motifs, characters' relations, and symbolic representations in the text. The main source of data for this research is the excerpts from the text that result from rereading the trilogy, focusing on the scenes where the ecological crisis, orogene powers, and stone eater agency are depicted. The secondary sources of data for this research are the academic texts related to ecocriticism, climate fiction, and the environmental humanities that serve as the theoretical background to interpret the thematic patterns revealed in the text.

Since all the information used for this research was taken from literary books, it did not involve any human subjects. Thus, all ethical considerations have been met by giving appropriate references and properly presenting both primary and secondary sources. The limitation of this study is that it is based on the qualitative and interpretative analysis of one literary text, which may affect the generalization of the results. Moreover, interpretations are subjective in nature, and the selection of ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches may have limited other possible approaches, such as Marxist, postcolonial, and formal approaches. Moreover, there is no use of any empirical tools and survey results; only textual analysis is done.

Analysis and Discussion:

Depiction of Environmental Catastrophe

Jemisin foregrounds environmental instability as a perpetual and ethically charged reality. The trilogy's opening articulates how catastrophe is normalized within the world of the Stillness:

"When we say 'the world has ended,' it's usually a lie, because the planet is just fine... This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends." (*The Fifth Season*, p. 1)

This repetition is not just thematic but structural as well, suggesting that environmental decay has changed the temporality and experience of the narrative. Moreover, Jemisin's writing demonstrates the presence of disruptions and their impact on people's lives:

"Home is what you take with you, not what you leave behind." (*The Fifth Season*, p. 245)

In this quote, uttered by the protagonist amidst a scene of utter destruction, stability is defined not as something static, but as something relational. Here, we see just how much the ecological catastrophe in the trilogy is not an event, but a condition, a condition that defines humans in terms of their identity, their values, and their relationships.



The Earth as Sentient and Agentic

Key passages reflect the Earth as an active, responsive force rather than an inert setting. Jemisin frames Earth's agency through metaphor and narrative voice that challenges anthropocentrism: *"Father Earth thinks in ages, but he never, ever sleeps. Nor does he forget."* (*The Fifth Season*, p. 32)

In this instance, memory and will have been granted to Earth, implying the great lengths of time that Earth's processes run on, beyond human control. The significance of Earth's reaction is further emphasized in *The Obelisk Gate* through character reflection on survival and consequence:

"Being useful to others is not the same thing as being equal." (*The Obelisk Gate*, p. 142)

This distinction, however, highlights the moral complexity of the relationship between humans and Earth. By ascribing meaning and intention to the forces of nature and the environment, Jemisin appears to align with material ecocritical theories that focus on nonhuman agency.

Human–Nature Interconnectedness and Empathy

Ecological empathy is developed through character interactions that blur the boundary between the human and nonhuman. Hoa, a stone eater, articulates a non-dualistic understanding of existence:

"We are not separate from the earth. We are the earth." (*The Obelisk Gate*, p. 181)

This statement dissolves anthropocentric separation and underscores interconnectedness. Empathy also manifests in narratives of loss and relational continuity:

"After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you." (*The Fifth Season*, p. 313)

This insight foregrounds relational identity, suggesting that empathy extends beyond human communities to encompass our embeddedness within broader ecological systems.



Social and Environmental Justice

Jemisin juxtaposes ecological exploitation with social domination through the characterization of orogenes. The objectivization of orogenes is indicative of larger patterns of marginalization, even including the planet Earth:

"For all those that have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question." (The Fifth Season, p. 76)

This statement highlights the role played by institutional power in determining whose life and whose work is deemed important. In addition, social stratification founded on fear and control can be seen from the imagery of conquerors and the conquered:

"But there are none so frightened, or so strange in their fear, as conquerors..." (The Stone Sky, p. 417)

In this passage, we can see that the fear of losing something is what makes these damaging systems operate to ruin humanity as well as nature.



Speculative Fiction and Ethical Imagination

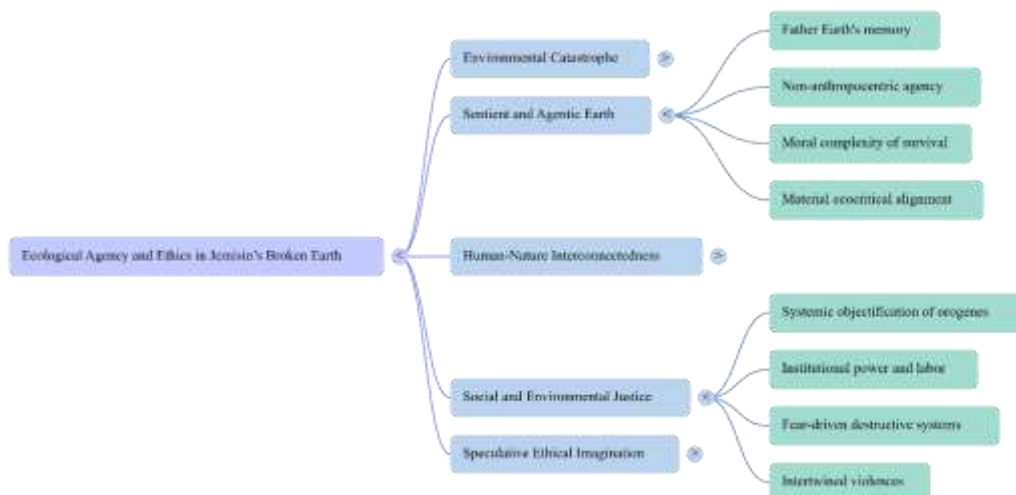
The trilogy utilizes speculative narrative in a manner that brings the ecological disasters within an emotional and ethical reach. The conflict between ruin and renewal is reflected through the narrative trajectory of the endings, as these emphasize transformation:

“The world is burning now, actually... This is the way a new world begins.” (paraphrased thematic conclusion from *The Stone Sky*, p. 450)

That is the heart of the apocalyptic restatement of apocalypse as loss, but also as an opportunity to restore balance through ethics, though the exact wording varies from edition to edition. In other places, the fragility of life is contrasted with endurance:

“It’s a gift if it makes us better. It’s a curse if we let it destroy us.” (*The Fifth Season*, p. 418)

This maxim articulates the ethical core of resilience—survival realized through learning and empathy rather than domination.



Conclusion

In *The Broken Earth Trilogy* written by N.K. Jemisin, there is a groundbreaking exploration of the ethical, social, and environmental obligations of mankind in the context of a climatic emergency. In the narrative of *The Stillness* and the recurring *The fifth Seasons*, there is a focus on environmental uncertainty as an ongoing, rather than a distant or hypothetical, ethical concern.

By portraying the Earth as a sentient and active entity, the author subverts anthropocentric thinking and encourages relational thinking, promoting readers to think in terms of interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman entities. The discussion proves that "ecological empathy" is a key ethical concept, which guides characters such as Essun and Hoa in their survival, relational, and environmental obligations. Additionally, the narrative portrays environmental degradation alongside social oppression, especially in the systemic marginalization of orogens, which illustrates the mutual reinforcement of human social hierarchies and environmental degradation. By promoting narrative closeness, speculativeness, and nonhuman perspectives, *The Broken Earth Trilogy* makes environmental degradation emotionally and ethically accessible, encouraging readers' affective engagement with the subject.

In conclusion, the study confirms that *The Broken Earth Trilogy* is an important contribution to the study of climate fiction, as it illustrates the importance of literature in raising environmental consciousness and promoting ethical responsibility. Through the concepts of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, *The Broken Earth Trilogy* highlights the necessity of empathy, humility, and relationship-based approach to achieving environmental sustainability and justice. The themes addressed in *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, including environmental agency, social inequality, and ethical survival, demonstrate the importance of literature in the promotion of environmental and social justice. In summary, the study confirms that *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, by Jemisin, is important not only in challenging the reader to consider the environmental and social systems of today's world but also in inspiring the reader to act ethically towards the environment and the people in it.



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