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The women of N. K. Jemisin: Representations of women and gender roles in the science-fantasy *The Fifth Season*

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Abstract:
The following paper deals with representations of women and gender roles in science-fiction and fantasy. It briefly discusses the issue in these genres in general, but it is primarily concerned with one specific example, i.e. N. K. Jemisin's science-fantasy novel The Fifth Season. *The paper's main aim is to highlight the changing nature of representations of women in science fiction and fantasy and pay tribute to a literary work depicting women from a modern perspective. Thus, it presents the analysis of said novel from the perspective of feminist criticism and gender studies, focusing on how the novel explores through its main and side women characters, ideas of representation, biological sex versus "gendering", and related notions of femininity, gender roles and gender stereotypes and myths.*

"Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall; Death is the fifth, and master of all" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 149).

Introduction

Even though they are often mistaken for simple escapist fiction, science fiction and fantasy are ideal environments for inclusivity and diversity to flourish. These genres are overflowing with ideas about the future and past of the human race, fictional worlds and alternative realities, and magical creatures and incredible technological innovations. The only potential limit, it seems, is the author's mind.

Notice that we used the word mind instead of imagination, as it is from here that the author's preconceptions or misconceptions originate. Factors like gender, age, class, sexuality and ethnicity all influence the way a story is written and how it is read (Goodman, 1996, p. 10). For the majority of their existence, these genres have been dominated by the white male mind. It is especially true in the case of science fiction, for science was once seen as masculine. Therefore, women were excluded (and by extension from any related fiction). Even if female (or minority) characters were included, they were relegated to limited supporting roles, playing mothers and caretakers to the heroic and adventurous male characters, witches and enchantresses, or quite often dangerously erotic femmes fatales and goddesses worshipped for their beauty and sexuality (Reid, 2009). The relationship of these women to one another was also often marked by jealousy. In these roles, they were unable to make their voices sufficiently heard.

Literature is not just about activating the reader's imagination. It is also an essential tool of representation. Popular culture, where many science fiction and fantasy entries arguably belong, has always been of interest to feminist critics (Rooney, 2006). These genres have been reproducing and perpetuating the stereotypes and myths concerning women commonly found in popular culture that audiences (particularly in the past) must tacitly accept as common sense to participate in the experience (Moody, 2006, p. 175). This is only one reason why they should not be neglected, and perhaps we will find examples that have a healthy attitude towards female (or minority) representation.

Moreover, science fiction and fantasy not only allow for the representation of minority or oppressed groups in unique situations but also the tackling of modern-day issues with greater detachment and perspective (Anandrao, 2015, p. 2). Nonetheless, the influence of popular entries in these genres, written chiefly by white male authors, had a rather unfortunate consequence: the narrative patterns they established became popular and were endlessly imitated, thus cementing the role of male figures as heroes and female ones as supporting characters in limited roles. These women were most often depicted as submissive; they were over-sexualized, silenced or excluded.

Female authors shared a similar fate to that of female characters. Plenty of them wrote unique stories, often discussing gender roles and issues important to women. However, many voices were either suppressed by various social factors or overshadowed by their male peers (like those of Anne McCaffrey (1926–2011), Charlotte Perking Gilman (1860–1935), Lois McMaster Bujold (b. 1949), Octavia Butler (1947–2006), Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978), Tanith Lee

(1947–2015) or Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018), to pay tribute to a few of them). The situation of African-American women was even more exacerbated. Only recently have we started to revisit female authors from previous generations and pay more attention to the diverse voices who feature women as central characters and explore femininity, gender and gender roles amongst the contemporary ones.

One such voice belongs to N. K. Jemisin (b. 1972), the American science fiction and fantasy author, referred to by many as a pioneer of diversity in science fiction and fantasy (Fanning, 2019). Her novel, *The Fifth Season* (2015), the first part of The Broken Earth trilogy, exemplifies what makes an open-minded, modern science-fantasy story. Even though issues related to women and gender are not the novel's primary concern, as the main focus is on other forms of discrimination and forms of slavery, in the background of the novel's rather dystopic worldview, we can also spot the semblance of a feminist utopia. To explore this idea, we will look at the novel through the lens of gender studies and feminist criticism.

Both areas of literary criticism (i. e. gender studies and feminist literary theory) overlap in their interest in distinguishing between biological sex and gender, which we can trace back to Simone de Beauvoir's influential work, *The Second Sex* (1953; originally published in French in 1949). In it, she defined the idea of gender and femininity as social constructs – she famously stated that one becomes a woman rather than being born as one (Fallaize, 2007, pp. 85-86; Postal, 2009, pp. 57-58). The notions presented in her book are still relevant to feminist critics today, and we will also rely on them in some capacity here. To clarify what she meant (and what aspects are relevant to us), she stated that notions of gender and femininity are artificial. Unlike biological determinists who believe that such concepts are based on biological differences and thus cannot be changed or challenged, she and many other feminist critics support the idea that "men and women *learn* to think of themselves as gendered beings" (Lieske, 2009, p. 252; our emphasis). Throughout history, these constructs act as tools that help men keep women in an oppressed position, passive and unable to enact change to better their situation in life (Fallaize, 2007, pp. 87-89).

As we have already stated, the novel explores these ideas implicitly, which we intend to demonstrate in the following sections. Firstly, we will focus on the ratio of active male to active female characters to see how the novel deals with the idea of representation and decide whether it is different (and how) from previous entries to these genres. Next, we will analyse essential women main and side characters to see how the author tackles notions of femininity, gender and gender

roles and the complex representation of women in science fiction and fantasy. Furthermore, we intend to focus on the language the author employs to describe them and the presence or absence of gender stereotypes and myths, and we will also look at some techniques the author uses to push readers to question their preconceptions and misconceptions concerning gender roles and the main protagonist.

The characters

In terms of the novel's inventory of characters, our research shows that out of the 50 characters named, 27 are identified as male and 23 as female. It is already strikingly different from many mainstream science-fantasies. Although our focus is on the women of the novel, the overall diversity of the character base, in terms of age, race, class and sexual orientation, is also worth noting. For this paper, the ratio of active female to active male characters is more interesting. To clarify, following Herman and Vervaeck (2005, p. 52), by active and passive we refer to the role characters play at the level of the story, where active characters steer and direct events and passive characters merely "undergo" events. According to this position, women triumph in the novel. Out of the handful of characters that could be labelled as active, women form the majority. These characters will be examined in the following sections.

Damaya, Syenite and Essun

The novel consists of three narratives seen through three focalizing characters: Damaya, Syenite and Essun. We must establish one crucial fact about them, i.e. they are orogenic. In the novel, orogenes have the power to sense the earth's movements and intensify (e.g. cause earthquakes) or quell them. The novel's society has been conditioned to believe that orogenes cannot control this power independently. Therefore, they either become the property of the Fulcrum (seen as a school for orogenes), overseen by the Guardian caste (i.e. they become slaves; the Guardians are stand-ins for slave overseers), or the people kill them. To understand the novel's complexity and the complexity of its representations of women, it is necessary to look at all three characters in more detail and spoil one of the reveals, namely that they are all one woman (the Damaya and Syenite narratives are flashbacks to Essun's past). We are going to return to this fact after a short description of all three focalizing characters.

Damaya, the youngest of them, is described as a witty, intelligent and curious little girl. When her parents learn she is orogenic, they lock her up in a barn before giving her away to the Guardians. To make matters worse, they think she will be killed, yet they still proceed with this plan. She is not only abused by them but later on by her assigned Guardian (whose purpose is to instil fear in her) and for a short period by her peers at the Fulcrum. The kind of slavery depicted in the novel is wrapped in niceties and decorum, as is evident from the word Guardian to describe the oppressors or the fact that when Damaya's Guardian breaks her hand, he still insists that he loves her (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 99). All orogenes, regardless of gender, are abused physically, sexually, but more often mentally (the warped sense of love is just one example) until they learn to believe they are not even human. It has to be mentioned here that equal treatment of men and women (meaning both negative and positive treatment, and regardless of position) is typical in Jemisin's storyworld (demonstrating her view on equality between genders and her view on gender roles). It is another way this novel is different from other science fiction or fantasy stories and our real world.

After passing her first exam, Damaya takes up the name Syenite. The name's meaning perfectly captures what is happening with Damaya: syenite is a rock that becomes stronger under heat and pressure (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 331). As a young adult, she is the second most potent orogene in the world. Syenite is still somewhat naïve as she believes that she will be allowed some semblance of privacy and control over her life once she reaches higher mastery of her powers. At the Fulcrum, she is taught to "always [be] polite and professional…[to] project confidence and expertise…[and to] never show anger" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 63). In essence, she is taught to suppress rather than control her feelings. She and her mentor (the most powerful orogene, who is gay) are forced to have intercourse and produce a child for the Fulcrum. Ultimately, these injustices and knowing her child will be taken away once born lead her and her mentor to flee their oppressors. Syenite's narrative ends with her killing her son so that the Guardians cannot get him.

Essun is a 42-year-old black woman, a wife and mother of two. Her narrative (the present-day) opens with the end of the world, both literally and metaphorically. There is a cataclysmic event on a literal level, slowly destroying the world, while on the metaphorical level, Essun's world ends with her son's death and her daughter's abduction. Her husband did this after learning of their orogenic powers – underlying the strong negative influence of social conditioning. As her eye colour suggests, which is "gray as slate and a little wistful", she is a complicated character with a

complicated past filled with many regrets (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 24). As the narration makes it clear, she is "well-educated" and "ordinary", capable of loving and mourning her child yet likewise capable of committing horrifying acts like destroying her hometown (along with some of its residents) (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 15).

The reveal that all three characters are one woman changes everything we know about her. It makes for a rather complicated protagonist, especially given that all three narratives and characters are complex in their own right. At the same time, the reveal also opens up questions about further issues.

Firstly, Essun is in sharp contrast with her past selves. She is quiet, broken and subdued. Not only because she lost her children (again) but because she had failed to attain freedom on multiple occasions, as is evident from her past. When she lost the battle with the Guardians as Syenite, she started a new life in hiding as Essun. However, this life is not what she wanted; it is a continuation of her oppression and self-oppression in the name of maintaining an unjust status quo. Her resignation is evident in the fact that she is only known as Jija's wife within her community. As the narrator remarks, "he's the foreground of the painting that is your life together. You're the background. You like it that way" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 16).

The beginning of Essun's narrative, to some degree, mirrors the stories of past female characters in literary works where they were defined by men, portrayed as passive and silenced. Although here we are dealing with the repercussions of a different form of oppression, and these different forms (i.e. slavery in this novel and sexism/misogyny in older works) cannot be equated, it is evident that all of them negatively affect people's minds. Like past female characters oppressed by men's dominance, Essun is subdued by the force of people's beliefs in the inferiority of orogenes and their cruelties committed due to holding such beliefs. As the narrative will later reveal, she is not comfortable being defined by others, i.e. being Jija's wife.

On the other hand, her past selves are portrayed as strong, brave, witty and resilient to the hardships they encounter, unwilling to subscribe to the status quo. Unlike Essun, her past selves are in control – even while being oppressed and in complicated situations. As an example, Syenite's first sexual encounter with Alabaster, her mentor, is described as follows: "but here and now, at least, she is the one with all the power. It makes this… well, not right. But better, somehow, that she's the one in control" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 70). The quote at once exemplifies the delicate way in which such matters as sexuality are discussed (women are not objectified or over-sexualized in the

novel) and Syenite's strength. However, Essun can never truly be herself. Since Essun is no longer as in control and uncompromising as her former selves, she is in constant conflict with herself. The narrator makes comments like "the self you've been lately doesn't make sense anymore…she's not useful, unobtrusive as she is, quiet as she is, ordinary as she is" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 42); or, towards the end of the novel, when she is beginning to open herself up again: "there it is again, that un-Essun-like sarcasm. Rust it, you're tired of reining it in" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 400). The expectations of the unjust society she inhabits slowly conditioned her to deny her true self.

Through Damaya and Syenite's narratives, we learn about the negative impact of various social constructs that lead to the genesis and metaphorical imprisonment of Essun. Interestingly, gender, femininity and gender roles are not amongst them though the novel still vindicates Beauvoir's and like-minded feminists' animosity towards them. We will explore this notion in a later section.

Once we learn that the three characters are one entity, we are more empathetic towards Essun because we understand that she has been fighting her entire life. In essence, her story chronicles the effects of discrimination and lifelong oppression and self-oppression. It is a theme that most readers can identify with, especially those belonging to our society's oppressed groups.

The unlikely hero trope

Essun's story has another interesting aspect. Without knowing her past, identifying with her might seem complicated. For instance, destroying her hometown makes Essun seem cruel, even heartless – and it seemingly proves the point the novel's society seems to believe is true: orogenes cannot control themselves. Until the reveal, she seems to be an unlikeable, angry "madwoman", a trope with even more significance given her racial background (i.e. on some level, the author seems to subvert the angry black woman stereotype). By combining all three narratives, no one would think Essun to be weak or mad. Although her actions are not always clearly justifiable, readers will understand them and her reasons better after putting together all the pieces (i.e. oppression/self-oppression eventually leads to an eruption of emotions).

It could also potentially reveal our bias towards certain types of characters (e.g. the older protagonists). We might want to ask ourselves which character we identify with the most and why, or whether Essun is truly more unlikeable. She is unquestionably an unusual protagonist (perhaps the term antihero suits her better, at least initially), especially given the genre(s) the author writes

in. But are Damaya or Syenite more likeable because they are young, brave and energetic, while Essun is 42 years old, unobtrusive, angry at the world and "too flabby and unfit" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 174)? In the author's admission, these are the kinds of questions we should be asking (Jemisin, 2015b). Answering them would require further exploration (thus, they will not be fully addressed here), but even starting to consider them is an excellent way to reevaluate the biases we hold towards older female characters or what the genre allows authors to achieve.

Forcing readers to identify with Essun

One unique way the author seems to push readers to question their biases is by employing second-person narration (marked by the prominent use of the pronoun you) in Essun's narrative (the other two are narrated in the third person), establishing a unique relationship between the reader and the protagonist. Right from the beginning, the narration puts readers into Essun's shoes. The first chapter opens with the lines: "You are she. She is you. You are Essun" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 15). There are a few other instances, such as the previous citation, where the pronoun *you* seems to be generalized, i.e. potentially pointing to the readers rather than merely pointing to Essun. To be precise, *The Fifth Season* seems to have a heterodiegetic narrator, meaning that the story is narrated by one of the characters (called Hoa) to another character, i.e. Essun, but this fact is only discovered towards the end of the novel. Regardless, readers might feel addressed at certain times.

Of course, other forms of narration can likewise help achieve identification with a character. However, Mildorf's research (2016, p. 154) suggests that "the *you* warrants the assumption of an internal perspective regardless of how much or how little specificity is added to the storyworld, while greater specificity in first-person narration in fact leads to more distancing." This finding means that perhaps second-person narration is more effective.

What is more, second-person narration works well with some of the novel's themes. For example, even though it is not difficult to identify with being discriminated against, the second-person narration intensifies the themes' power by equating Essun with the reader. Essun, as brave and as strong as she is, has been subdued by the society she is part of. The way the second-person narration seems to equate the reader with her makes us all the more sympathetic towards her struggle and could potentially be interpreted as a message to the reader: anyone, even the strongest and bravest of us, can be broken when pushed hard enough. In the novel, the metaphorical push originates from the social constructs and social conditioning at play.

Ykka and Tonkee

The women side characters are no less intriguing; two of them are especially noteworthy. When Essun meets Ykka for the first time, she is described as "quite possibly the most intimidating woman you've ever seen. It has nothing to do with her looks…it's the steadiness that you recognize, finally, from seeing it a few times before: confidence. That kind of utter, unflinching embrace of self is common in stills [i.e. non-orogenic people], but you weren't expecting to see it here" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 266-267; my insertion). The reason confidence is staggering in her case is because she is orogenic. Essun is used to seeing orogenes broken, but Ykka did not grow up oppressed by the Guardians or influenced by negative social constructs. She also has "deep brown skin and the expected size and visible strength of build" and is fond of make-up (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 267). The author here does two things. Firstly, she clarifies that looks do not matter much in her storyworld – it is other qualities that prevail and define her characters. Secondly, she subverts the common stereotype that physically strong women are not interested in beauty (or that beautiful women cannot be physically strong).

Ykka is further portrayed as a remarkably confident orogene and the headwoman of an underground community: "Ykka acts like being an orogene is just another talent, just another personal trait" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 272). In an example of linguistic reappropriation, she uses *rogga*, a derogatory term for orogenes, in her name (Ykka Rogga Castrima), signalling that she is not afraid. She utilizes the constructs that attempt to define her to (re)define herself, thus taking away the power those constructs would have over her. She is ready to fight for the rights she and others like her deserve. Therefore, for her, it is not a curse nor something that dehumanizes her. She symbolizes what Essun could have become had she accepted herself, but more importantly, had she not been broken by the system the Guardians (and her society) enforced on her.

The other side character called Tonkee is very similar in this respect. She likewise managed to escape one oppressive regime, i.e. the caste system. In the novel, people are sorted into castes, such as Strongbacks, Resistants, Innovators, Leadership or Guardians, based on certain predispositions. We first encounter Tonkee in Damaya's narrative, where she is called Binof. We do not learn much about her, only that she is a strange "Leader girl with her money and privileges and her fearlessness" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 308). In Essun's narrative, as an adult, Tonkee is depicted as an intelligent, though outcast, academic. She is prepared for every situation, and she noticeably does not care much about her appearance (once again highlighting its irrelevance in Jemisin's

storyworld). She is also a transgender character (although the word itself is never used, the narration makes it clear). Her treatment in the storyworld is very matter-of-fact, cleansed of the biases that exist in our world. Essun notices certain peculiarities about her; however, it is never commented on negatively, as is seen in the following example: “Tonkee is off somewhere, probably off shaving. She’s run out of something in the past few days, some biomest potion she keeps in her pack and tries not to let you see her drinking even though you don’t care, and she’s been sprouting beard stubble every few days because of the lack. It’s made her irritable" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 241-242).

Her curiosity, her stubbornness and the fact that she is transgender lead to her becoming an outcast for a time. Firstly, she was born to the Leadership caste, which meant she was predestined to be a politician or merchant – neither option was to her liking. Secondly, she was “born a boy and Tonkee’s girlness scuttled an arranged marriage or two” (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 265). It is explained that she was also very outspoken. To reiterate a previous point, it does not seem likely that the people of the storyworld care much about her being transgender. In her family’s case, it was her uselessness to them that mattered. All of this resulted in her disownment and expulsion from the Leadership caste. Nevertheless, it also allowed her to attend university to satisfy her curiosity. Thus, she escaped and achieved her dreams.

We circle back to the notion of biological sex versus “gendering”. From Tonkee’s example, it is clear where the author stands concerning this question. It is clear that she views gender and femininity as social constructs that could impact women negatively. Their irrelevance in the novel seems to free people (both men and women) from a burden and, consequently, allows them to be more active agents. Furthermore, all characters explored thus far highlight the complexity of the representations of women in the novel. The author treats each with realism, depth and respect. Each woman is on a par with (and some even surpass) their male peers. Some characters, like Essun, are momentarily weak and resigned, though it is always justified. The discrimination against orogenes and the insurmountable grief leave their mark on her for the rest of her life. The way the novel is written enables us to easily identify with her predicament and even substitute that manifestation of discrimination with other forms to realize they all cause similar harm. Since many of our negative constructs do not exist in the storyworld, sexism and misogyny are not something women in the novel have to endure, but it is not a massive leap of the imagination to think that they would have a similar effect on women’s minds. Let us now explore these ideas in more detail.

The status of women in the storyworld

Many of the prejudices present in the real world are not present in the storyworld. The biases that can be highlighted are only visible in the context of the real world. The most notable example is the case of the first emperor. The first time this emperor is mentioned is in Damaya's narrative in the form of a question during an oral examination: "What was the name of the first Old Sanze Emperor?" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 194). Many readers would assume the emperor to be male, either because male figures dominate our history (especially the higher positions) or because we assume a female leader of the same rank would get the designation empress. However, in the novel, the term is gender-neutral.

Interestingly, it seems to be an exception, as other positions use gender-specific variants for male and female characters, such as spokesman/spokeswoman or headman/headwoman. The only other gender-neutral term is warlord, which is used in the same way in the real world. Perhaps that is why this example is so intriguing.

Whether it is merely an aesthetic choice or not, it still manages to make readers question their biases. Later on, we get a more detailed description of the first emperor: "The Madness Season happened only a little while afterward, and Warlord Verishe – Emperor Verishe, the first Emperor – started Sanze then. She founded the Empire here, on land that everyone feared, and built a city around the thing they were all afraid of" (Jemisin, 2015a, pp. 317-318). Not only do we learn that the emperor is female and the founder of a mighty empire (another striking contrast to our history), but that she was a powerful and fearless leader. She is also an ideal role model.

The history and the legends of the storyworld are filled with similar examples. There are no stereotypical characterizations of women and gender roles here. The importance of these figures is perfectly encapsulated in Damaya's reaction while listening to a legend involving an emperor's bodyguard: "but when the Emperor arrived, he was not alone: with him was a single woman. His bodyguard, Shemshena. Damaya squirms a little, in excitement" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 90). Shemshena is further described as a renowned fighter. The narrator notes that "Damaya shivers in delight. She has not heard such a good story in a long time…while he told it, she imagined herself as Shemshena, bravely facing a terrible foe and defeating him with cleverness and skill" (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 92). Although the legend (at least the Guardians' version of it) is marred by having an orogene as its villain (and leads to Damaya's crushing realization that she cannot be Shemshena), Damaya's initial reaction to this strong female role model is intense and telling.

These stories have two important implications for the women of the storyworld, i.e. highlighting the importance of diverse role models known for their skills and cleverness and the character-forming power of representation. On the one hand, the novel's women can become practically anything: from emperors and bodyguards to teachers and homemakers. There is even a female butcher who flirts with Essun at the beginning of the novel. No one questions their choices or ability to achieve their goals, and they are treated equally positively, and at times equally negatively, as their male peers. On the other hand, this means there are no traces of sexism and misogyny in the first novel. The absence of these particular negative phenomena frees the women of the storyworld from some of the burdens they have to deal with, and it allows them to succeed in new ways.

Stonelore, gender roles, stereotypes and misconceptions

So far, we have seen several examples of how the author subverts expectations about gender roles or debunks stereotypes. As a result, she magnifies their status as social constructs rather than things set in stone. In fact, this very idea is reinforced by one of the novel's prominent themes.

Common knowledge, and by a slight stretch of the imagination, our ideas about gender roles, stereotypes and related misconceptions, are represented here in the concept of the so-called *Stonelore*. Throughout the novel, it is suggested that old ideas and concepts such as those mentioned above are in flux. They can (and sometimes should) be contested and rethought to eliminate the discriminating elements that affect people negatively. On the surface, Stonelore in the novel is propagated as absolute wisdom carved into stone and therefore unchangeable, and which should be followed to the letter (including ideas about eliminating or controlling orogenes for society's betterment). Changing the lore is said to be impossible (much like biological determinists accept gender and gender roles as unchangeable), yet as is it highlighted on several occasions, secretly "stonelore changes all the time", primarily for political reasons, underlining its artificiality (Jemisin, 2015a, p. 124). Like stereotypes and misconceptions, Stonelore never presents a situation in its entirety; thus, it needs to be reevaluated periodically. The novel seems to implicitly suggest that we in the real world should do the same.

Conclusion

Like any literary genre, science-fiction and fantasy are potent tools in the right hands. The continuously rising number of acknowledged (past and present) female authors means that those narrative patterns set by past generations of writers are changing. Female characters are no longer predominantly passive, and the representation of women and minorities is improving.

One example of this trend is N. K. Jemisin's science-fantasy story, *The Fifth Season*. The novel embodies a world where women and men are treated as equals. The author seems to agree with the sentiment that biological sex and gendering are two different concepts (that one becomes a woman, so to say) and that femininity and gender roles are likewise fluid concepts. This is not disputed in the novel and seems to have a positive impact on the women characters. They are free of some of the obstacles like sexism and misogyny that women must face in the real world. As a result, the population of the storyworld has an array of strong female role models (from prominent historical figures to everyday heroes) they can admire. The contrast between the storyworld and the real one is striking.

There are 23 female characters in total, and more importantly, there are more active female characters than active male characters. There are no damsels in distress or evil witches here, just as there are no sexist male characters, only people trying their best to live and work together in a world that makes this equally challenging for everyone. The author shows how women can be portrayed realistically as complex characters with rich internal lives. It applies not only to her (perhaps unusual) main protagonist Essun but to her side characters, as seen in the case of Ykka, Tonkee or the female heroes of the storyworld's history and legends.

The second-person narration to relate Essun's story is another intriguing element of the novel. On the one hand, it helps readers to better identify with the author's unusual female protagonist and consider Essun's story and personality more thoughtfully and with greater empathy. Since Essun is older than most main characters in mainstream science-fiction or fantasy stories, this choice might potentially be even more significant. On the other hand, the second-person narration also emphasizes the novel's message concerning discrimination (i.e. suggesting anyone can be discriminated against – even the reader), as the pronoun *you* not only addresses Essun but the reader.

Furthermore, the fact that women thrive in the storyworld (they are treated as equals in every way and their abilities are never questioned) and the lack of stereotypical characterizations of women or gender roles might lead readers to reevaluate these concepts in the context of the real

world, where these concepts most often impede women's progress. Ultimately, the novel's themes also push readers to recognize them as social constructs that, like the Stonelore of the novel, can and should change over time, rather than be unchangeable dictums.

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