

Protagonist In Imaro And The Fifth Season

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Introduction

Charles R. Saunders's *Imaro* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* place powerful Black protagonists within societies that fear, exclude, or attempt to control them. Imaro is an outcast among the Ilyassai warrior-herdsmen of the African-inspired continent Nyumbani. Essun, who is also revealed through the identities Damaya and Syenite, is an orogene in the geologically unstable Stillness, where people with her abilities are enslaved, trained, feared, and often killed (Saunders; Jemisin). The original essay recognizes parallels of discrimination, trauma, training, and resilience, but it contains plot errors, misspells "orogene," confuses the novels' quotations, and treats both characters as if their journeys were almost identical. A stronger comparison examines how each protagonist negotiates belonging, power, violence, identity, and community while also recognizing major differences in genre, gender, narrative structure, and political purpose.

Two Traditions of Speculative Fiction

Imaro belongs to heroic fantasy and sword-and-sorcery, but Saunders deliberately relocates the genre from its common pseudo-European settings to Nyumbani, a world inspired by African landscapes, cultures, myths, and histories. Imaro's physical power, wandering quest, supernatural enemies, and episodic adventures recall traditional heroic fantasy while challenging its racial conventions (Saunders; Hachette).

The Fifth Season is the first novel of Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy. It combines epic fantasy, science fiction, climate catastrophe, and social critique. The Stillness is repeatedly devastated by geological "Fifth Seasons." Orogenes can sense and manipulate thermal, kinetic, and seismic energy, but the empire controls them through the Fulcrum and its Guardians. Jemisin's narrative is structurally experimental: the apparently separate stories of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are revealed to describe one woman at different stages of life (Jemisin; Hachette Book Group).

Both novels revise speculative traditions, but they do so differently. Saunders creates an African-centered heroic world for a genre that often marginalized Black characters. Jemisin uses world-building and narrative form to expose how a civilization constructs oppression while depending on the people it dehumanizes.

Imaro as an Outcast

Imaro grows up among the Ilyassai but is never allowed to forget that he is different. His uncertain parentage and outsider status make him a target of contempt and bullying. He longs for recognition from the community, yet the community uses belonging as a weapon. His extraordinary strength and skill do not automatically earn acceptance; they can increase fear and rivalry (Saunders).

This experience shapes Imaro's emotional reserve. He learns to rely on his own body, judgment, and endurance because social protection is unreliable. His toughness is not simply a natural masculine trait. It develops through repeated humiliation and danger. Saunders therefore gives the heroic warrior a psychological wound: Imaro's search for identity is as important as his battles.

Essun, Damaya, and Syenite

Essun's identity is deliberately fragmented in the novel. Damaya is the child taken from her family after her orogeny is discovered. Syenite is the trained Fulcrum orogene assigned to missions and reproductive pairings. Essun is the adult woman living under concealment in Tirimo, where she has tried to build a family. The revelation that these are the same person transforms the reader's understanding of trauma and survival (Jemisin).

Each name represents an imposed or chosen adaptation. Damaya learns obedience under threat. Syenite develops ambition and anger within the Fulcrum's hierarchy. Essun attempts anonymity and domestic belonging. The fragmentation shows the cost of surviving a society that punishes one's nature. Unlike a conventional hero who discovers one authentic self, Essun has repeatedly constructed identities appropriate to dangerous environments.

Power as Gift and Stigma

Imaro's physical abilities make him a formidable warrior. His strength, speed, courage, and tactical intelligence support the heroic pattern of overcoming human and supernatural enemies. Yet power does not solve his need for belonging. It can separate him further from ordinary community life and make violence appear to be the only language others respect (Saunders).

Essun's orogeny is also both power and stigma. Orogenes can prevent or cause seismic destruction, making them essential to survival in the Stillness. The ruling order nevertheless calls them "roggas," denies their humanity, and controls trained orogenes through the Fulcrum. The society depends on their labor while representing them as monsters (Jemisin). This contradiction resembles exploitation and cultural oppression: the dominant system uses a group's capacity while justifying control through fear.

The two characters therefore reveal a common paradox. Exceptional ability can increase vulnerability when institutions decide that difference must be controlled. Neither protagonist needs to become weaker; the surrounding society must change its definition of who deserves personhood and trust.

Training and Institutional Control

Both protagonists undergo forms of training, but the meanings differ. Imaro's development as a warrior is connected to personal survival, cultural skill, and the heroic quest. Even when he is excluded, mastery gives him agency. His abilities become resources through which he moves beyond the group that rejected him (Saunders).

Damaya's training at the Fulcrum is explicitly disciplinary. Guardians teach orogenes to control their power, but training is backed by terror, including the threat of physical punishment and death. The institution converts a natural capacity into state-controlled labor. Advancement through rings gives the appearance of merit while leaving the underlying system of ownership intact (Jemisin).

Syenite's competence does not free her. The Fulcrum can assign her missions, partners, and reproductive duties. Jemisin thus questions the idea that success within an oppressive institution is equivalent to liberation. Imaro seeks mastery to become independent; Essun must eventually reject the institution that defines mastery on its own terms.

Trauma and Emotional Defense

Imaro's childhood exclusion contributes to pride, anger, guardedness, and a deep desire to know who he is. His emotional distance protects him from further rejection. The heroic genre often celebrates stoicism, but Saunders gives readers reasons to understand it as defense rather than absence of feeling (Saunders).

Essun's trauma is more cumulative and explicitly connected to family loss, coercive training, exploitation, and concealment. At the beginning of *The Fifth Season*, her husband has murdered their young son Uche after discovering his orogeny and has taken their daughter Nassun. Essun's pursuit is therefore driven by grief, maternal fear, rage, and the collapse of the life she tried to build (Jemisin).

Her anger can be destructive, but the novel refuses to separate it from the conditions that produced it. Trauma does not make every action morally correct. It makes judgment more complex by showing how survival strategies developed under oppression can harm both the self and others.

Belonging and the Search for Home

The publisher's description of *Imaro* emphasizes that he has struggled for acceptance and travels

across Nyumbani seeking identity and home (Hachette). His movement is both geographical and psychological. A home cannot be defined only as the tribe into which one is placed. It must include recognition and a meaningful relation to one's history.

Essun repeatedly attempts to create home under conditions that make permanence impossible. The Stillness is physically unstable, while anti-orogene violence makes social belonging conditional. Tirimo appears to provide ordinary family life until Uche's murder reveals how fragile concealment is. Later communities offer alternative possibilities, but they also face scarcity, fear, and internal conflict (Jemisin).

Both novels ask whether belonging must be granted by an existing community or can be created among people joined by experience and choice. Imaro's wandering opens the possibility of identity beyond Ilyassai rejection. Essun's journey suggests that survival may require building new forms of community rather than seeking acceptance from the system that caused the harm.

Gender and Heroism

Imaro is written within a masculine heroic tradition centered on bodily strength, combat, endurance, and independence. Saunders expands the tradition racially and culturally, yet the hero's identity remains strongly associated with warrior masculinity. The emotional cost of exclusion complicates this image, but physical power is central to how Imaro acts in the world (Saunders).

Essun challenges conventional heroic expectations in different ways. She is a middle-aged Black woman, a mother, a survivor, and an immensely powerful figure whose choices are not designed to make her consistently likable. Her maternal identity is not sentimental. Love, anger, protection, and fear exist together. The novel permits a woman to possess world-altering power and moral complexity without making her exceptionalism depend on youth, beauty, or gentleness (Jemisin).

Comparing the two protagonists therefore reveals an evolution in speculative heroism. Both reject white-centered fantasy conventions, while Jemisin also foregrounds gender, motherhood, institutional reproduction, and the fragmentation of self.

Violence and Moral Ambiguity

Violence is central to both narratives because the worlds surrounding the protagonists are violent. Imaro faces enemies through physical confrontation, and heroic combat often confirms his courage. His violence can be defensive, retaliatory, or connected to the genre's celebration of martial ability (Saunders).

In *The Fifth Season*, violence is less easily separated into heroic and villainous categories. Orogenic power can save communities or kill many people. Guardians enforce order through intimate brutality.

The empire's stability is built on violence that has become routine and respectable. Essun's destructive acts force readers to ask whether survival within a violent system can remain innocent (Jemisin).

Neither novel suggests that victimhood produces moral perfection. Imaro and Essun are compelling because suffering does not remove their agency. They make choices, sometimes harsh ones, and must live with consequences. Their power prevents the reader from reducing them to helpless symbols.

Nature, Stone, and World-Building

The original essay treats "stonelore" as if it operated similarly in both books. Stonelore is specific to Jemisin's *Stillness*: practical rules preserved for surviving catastrophic Seasons. It represents accumulated knowledge, but also ideological authority. Some rules are useful, while others support a rigid social order (Jemisin).

Nyumbani has its own relationships among landscape, culture, myth, and supernatural force, but it should not be collapsed into the Stillness. Saunders draws on African-inspired environments and traditions to create an alternative center for heroic fantasy (Saunders). Jemisin builds a continent whose geological instability shapes politics, architecture, migration, food storage, and social hierarchy. In both novels, environment is not background decoration. It influences the institutions and identities that produce the protagonist's struggle.

Narrative Voice and the Reader's Experience

Imaro presents its protagonist through a more traditional heroic narrative, allowing readers to follow his growth, confrontations, and search across an episodic adventure. The narrative builds identification through action and the repeated demonstration of character (Saunders).

The Fifth Season uses multiple viewpoints, including second-person narration, to create distance and intimacy. The reader initially experiences Damaya, Syenite, and Essun as separate figures. Their eventual unity reveals how trauma can divide memory and identity. The form makes the reader participate in reconstructing the protagonist (Jemisin).

This difference affects the meaning of heroism. Imaro's identity expands through his journey. Essun's identity must first be reassembled. The comparison is therefore not only between characters but between narrative methods of representing survival.

Race, Representation, and Genre History

Saunders's importance extends beyond one protagonist. *Imaro* helped establish African-centered heroic fantasy and demonstrated that the genre did not require medieval European settings or white heroes. Nyumbani is imagined as a complex world rather than an exotic backdrop for outsiders (Saunders; Hachette).

Jemisin similarly centers Black characters while confronting systems of racialization. Orogenes are a fictional group, but their treatment evokes histories of slavery, segregation, reproductive control, scientific exploitation, and dehumanizing language. The analogy is not exact, nor should fictional oppression replace specific histories. Its power lies in making structural mechanisms visible within a new world (Jemisin).

Both authors expand who can occupy the center of epic and heroic narrative. Their protagonists are not supporting figures in someone else's adventure. The worlds are interpreted through their struggles and capacities.

Conclusion

Imaro and Essun are powerful Black protagonists shaped by exclusion, training, trauma, and the search for belonging. Imaro is an outcast warrior whose strength allows him to survive and seek identity beyond the Ilyassai community that rejects him. Essun is an orogene whose identities as Damaya, Syenite, and Essun reveal the psychological cost of living under a civilization that exploits and fears her power (Saunders; Jemisin).

Their similarities should not erase their differences. Imaro develops within African-centered heroic fantasy, while Essun's story uses fragmented narration, climate catastrophe, motherhood, and institutional oppression to revise epic fantasy. Imaro's mastery supports independence; Essun's training exposes how mastery can be used as control. Together, the novels demonstrate that speculative fiction can challenge inherited genre conventions while asking enduring questions about who is recognized as human, who is allowed to belong, and what powerful people owe to communities that have harmed them.

Works Cited

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