

Protagonist In Imaro And The Fifth Season

Posted on October 31, 2018

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Introduction

Charles R. Saunders's *Imaro* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* center powerful Black protagonists within societies that fear, exclude, discipline, or attempt to control them. Imaro grows up as an outcast among the Ilyassai warrior-herdsmen of Nyumbani and develops extraordinary physical ability while searching for identity and belonging. Essun, whose earlier identities are Damaya and Syenite, is an orogene in the geologically unstable Stillness, where people with her abilities are exploited by a civilization that depends on their power while treating them as dangerous and less than fully human. The protagonists therefore share experiences of exclusion, training, violence, and resilience, but their narratives are not interchangeable. Saunders works within African-centered heroic fantasy and sword-and-sorcery, whereas Jemisin combines epic fantasy, science fiction, climate catastrophe, motherhood, and experimental narration. Comparing Imaro and Essun is most productive when similarities in marginalization and power are balanced against differences in gender, institutional control, narrative form, community, and the ethical meaning of violence (Saunders; Jemisin).

Outsider Identity and the Search for Belonging

Imaro's early life is shaped by rejection. His uncertain parentage and outsider status make him a target of contempt within the Ilyassai community, so physical strength becomes both a survival resource and a barrier separating him from people whose recognition he desires. His wandering across Nyumbani is therefore not simply an adventure plot; it is a search for a place where identity does not depend on acceptance by those who first excluded him. Essun's struggle with belonging is more fragmented because she repeatedly constructs identities that can survive different forms of danger. Damaya is taken from her family after her orogeny is discovered, Syenite is trained and deployed by the Fulcrum, and Essun later attempts ordinary domestic life in Tirimo. The revelation that these identities belong to one woman shows how oppression can divide a life into adaptive selves. Both protagonists seek home, but Imaro moves outward from exclusion, while Essun repeatedly discovers that apparently secure communities can collapse when prejudice, catastrophe, or concealed identity becomes impossible to contain.

Power, Training, and Institutional Control

Power gives both protagonists unusual capacity but does not automatically produce freedom. Imaro's strength, speed, combat skill, and endurance allow him to survive enemies and establish independence, yet those same abilities intensify his separation from ordinary community life and can make violence seem like the most reliable language available to him. Essun's orogeny is even more explicitly political. Orogenes can sense and manipulate seismic and thermal forces, making them indispensable in a continent repeatedly threatened by catastrophic geological events. The dominant order nevertheless fears them, uses degrading language against them, and channels their abilities through the Fulcrum. Training appears meritocratic because skill can bring rings and status, but the institution retains control over assignments, mobility, reproduction, and punishment. Imaro's training tends to enlarge personal agency, while Essun's formal training exposes how expertise can be cultivated inside an oppressive system for the benefit of that system. The contrast shows that mastery is not inherently liberating; its meaning depends on who controls the conditions under which a person is trained and permitted to use power.

Trauma, Violence, and Moral Complexity

Trauma shapes both characters, but each text uses it differently. Imaro's childhood exclusion contributes to pride, guardedness, anger, and a strong desire to prove himself. His emotional reserve is therefore better understood as a survival strategy than as evidence that the heroic warrior lacks feeling. Violence remains central to his world because bodily combat, supernatural danger, and martial skill are basic features of the genre. Essun's trauma is cumulative and closely tied to institutional abuse, concealment, reproductive control, family loss, and social hatred. 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, turning Essun's journey into a response to grief, rage, fear, and maternal urgency. Jemisin does not present suffering as automatic moral innocence. Essun can make destructive choices, just as Imaro's strength can produce harsh responses. Their complexity matters because neither character is reduced to a passive victim; both retain agency, and the consequences of their decisions remain ethically significant.

Gender, Heroism, and the Revision of Fantasy Traditions

Saunders and Jemisin both challenge the racial conventions of speculative fiction by placing Black characters at the center of worlds that are not structured around white protagonists. *Imaro* reworks heroic fantasy through Nyumbani, an African-inspired setting whose cultures, landscapes, myths, and conflicts are not merely decorative backgrounds for outsiders. Imaro remains closely connected to a masculine warrior tradition in which physical competence, courage, endurance, and independence

define much of heroic action, although his need for belonging gives that model psychological depth. Essun revises heroic expectations differently. She is a middle-aged Black woman, a mother, a survivor, and an immensely powerful figure whose significance does not depend on youth, conventional beauty, or consistent likability. Her story also foregrounds reproductive control, motherhood, bodily autonomy, and the social management of feared difference. The comparison therefore reveals two distinct interventions in genre history: Saunders relocates the heroic center into an African-inspired world, while *Jemisin* combines racialized oppression with gender, family, climate, and institutional power to redefine who can carry an epic narrative.

World-Building, Narrative Form, and Community

The environments of the two novels shape their protagonists in fundamentally different ways. Nyumbani is an African-centered fantasy continent in which landscape, culture, myth, supernatural danger, and social organization structure Imaro's movement through the world. *The Stillness*, by contrast, is defined by recurring geological catastrophe, and its institutions have evolved around the expectation that civilization may periodically collapse. Stonelore, community organization, food storage, mobility, and the Fulcrum all reflect this environmental instability. The narrative structures also differ. *Imaro* follows a comparatively direct heroic development in which readers accompany the protagonist through conflict and discovery, while *The Fifth Season* uses multiple viewpoints and second-person narration to conceal and then reveal that Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are one person. This formal device makes the reader reconstruct a fractured identity shaped by trauma. Community likewise carries different meaning: Imaro seeks belonging beyond a rejecting origin, while Essun must ask whether new communities can be built outside institutions that survive by controlling people like her.

Conclusion

Imaro and Essun are compelling protagonists because their extraordinary power develops alongside experiences of rejection, training, trauma, and contested belonging. Imaro is an outcast warrior whose physical mastery helps him survive and seek identity beyond the Ilyassai community that denied him acceptance. Essun is an orogene whose identities as Damaya, Syenite, and Essun reveal the psychological and political cost of living under a civilization that depends on her abilities while fearing and controlling them. Their similarities illuminate how speculative fiction can explore discrimination and the social meaning of difference, but their differences are equally important. Imaro's story emerges from African-centered heroic fantasy, while Essun's narrative uses climate catastrophe, fragmented identity, motherhood, and institutional oppression to revise epic fantasy. Imaro's mastery tends toward independence; Essun's training exposes how mastery can become a form of state control. Together, the novels expand who can occupy the center of speculative storytelling while asking whether strength is enough when the deeper struggle concerns recognition, community, freedom, and responsibility.

Works Cited

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