

## **SPECULATIVE REALISM AND DEREALIZATION IN VONNEGUT'S SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AND JEMISIN'S THE FIFTH SEASON**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the psychological phenomenon of derealization and how this is manifested in Speculative Realism in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) and in N.K. Jemisin's The Fifth Season (2015). The article uses Quentin Meillassoux's Speculative Realism as a framework to examine the concept of alternative realities as it is presented in these novels, and uses close reading as a method to explore how derealization is used to depict alternative realities. The study focuses on the effects of the derealization process on the experience of the protagonists in the event of trauma and on the destabilization of the ontological realities by Speculative Realism. The protagonists' worlds in both texts are indeterminate, and there are existential and ontological questions at stake. The novels focus on ontological instability, trauma, and subjectivity and the breakdown of linear temporality. They express the impact of outside crises on perception and the destabilization of reality through speculative frameworks. This study argues that the derealization in both novels is a reflection of Meillassoux's principle of possibilities outstripping human relationships. It contributes to the conversation at the intersection of philosophy, psychology and speculative fiction by exploring the impact ontological instability has on the human experience. Last, it makes derealization a literary tool, offering means for future literary investigators to investigate the psychological impact of derealization in speculative fiction and to create fractured realities outside of the literary paradigm.*

### **Keywords**

Derealization, Trauma, Speculative Realism, time, Alternate realities, linear temporality

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Background of Study**

Speculative realism is a profound philosophical movement that arose in the early 21st century. It challenges the anthropocentric thinking that has predominated in Western thinking since Kant. The idea that reality can only be experienced through the experience of the human subject is known as post-Kantian philosophy or correlationism and is espoused by Quentin Meillassoux. They said that reality exists outside and beyond the power of man's thinking. Amongst these pioneers he found Meillassoux who, in his work *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2006), developed the notion of absolute contingency. The attitude that there is no need and everything can be done differently. He claims: "The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being" (Meillassoux 2006, p. 60). So, even the rules of physics are by chance. In the same period, theory of derealization developed. Derealization is feeling detached from surrounding objects, making the world around you feel like a dream. In literature it is used to represent trauma or the traditional systems' failure. Titled *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *The Fifth Season* (2015) respectively, works such as Vonnegut's and Jemisin's redefine reality through war, trauma, or ecological disaster. Speculative realism and derealization are a strange combination that can be used to consider the relationship between narratives and ontological questions. The present study suggests that

derealization is not only a metaphor of alienation but it is also a redefinition of the nature of reality as is offered by the concept of derealization framework of Meillassoux.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a postmodern masterpiece that combines science fiction and historical fiction. It brings together reality, memory and time with World War II veteran Billy Pilgrim, who encounters the Tralfamadorians who see everything happening at the same time. This is a framework that challenges notions of time and causation. In his attempt to flee a stable reality, Vonnegut conveys trauma and ontological alienation through his metafictional devices and intrusive narration, which erode singular truths and challenge deterministic history. Jemisin's debut novel in the Broken Earth trilogy, *The Fifth Season*, is set in a world on the brink of collapse due to environmental degradation, systemic oppression, and survival. It is also a world under seismic activity or "Seasons", a chaos, which bears a resemblance to derealization. The changing point of view and the second-person narration create disorientation, indicating disintegration of time and space. Jemisin's agency emphasizes the agency of the Earth as an actor, a rejection of anthropocentrism, and paints a picture of reality as an unpredictable entity that is both human and environmental. These novels form a basis for analysis in the field of derealization and speculative realism. It is a study that connects philosophy and literature, demonstrating how *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season* throw into doubt the nature of reality and the nature of humanity, the essence of life.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

This research seeks to fill gaps in the scholarly literature and research in relation to the derealization and Speculative Realism in literature. Both of the selected novels feature themes of 'ontological instability' and 'disrupted realities'. Yet, as yet there has been little research into how the derealisation that the characters in the novels selected undergo can be better understood through the lens of speculative realism, as proposed by Quentin Meillassoux. This research aims to bridge this gap by using this philosophy to understand how subjectivity of protagonists of the novels selected in this study regarding time and reality affects their experiences.

### **1.3 Research questions**

1. How does derealization affect the protagonists' perception of reality and time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season*?
2. How does Speculative Realism challenge conventional notions of reality in the selected novels?
3. How do derealization and Speculative Realism interact to create alternative ontologies in the narratives of selected novels?

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

This research is important because it challenges the intersections between derealization and Speculative Realism in literature. The focus of the study is the psychological phenomenon of derealization, whereby one feels separated from one's surroundings during traumatic situations, and how this phenomenon is expressed in speculative fiction. The research brings Speculative Realism into the realm of literary criticism, adding the aspect of novel as a philosophical thought experiment to the theory. The study discusses how derealization influenced the characters of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season* in their view of time and reality, through the application of his philosophy. Overall, it is an addition to the conversation of literary theory and speculative fiction, and a connection between philosophy and psychology; it can inspire further investigations of non-human agents and fractured realities outside of the scope of traditional thinking

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter explores the connection between derealization and speculative realism. Discusses trauma, memory, the structure of narratives and object-oriented ontologies in speculative fiction. The realities of perception and non-human agency have been explored in previous scholarship on Vonnegut and Jemisin and their related systems. Speculative realism and derealization do not have their own exploration. Previous research has looked at trauma, memory and narrative form in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season*, but not particularly in relation to speculative realism. This chapter presents a survey of discussions about speculative fiction, trauma theory and object-oriented ontologies. It depicts the process of fragmentation, withdrawal of objects from reality and cognitive estrangement and how they create a derealization point of view in literature.

### **2.1. Speculative Realism and Literary Reimagining**

In the past few years, Speculative Realism has been employed to rethink literary traditions. Between 1890 and 1920, Bartholomew studied how Speculative Realism is better expressed in Gothic literature than in realism. His work proposes four conceptual tools, such as weird hauntology, gloomy ecology, necro-empathy and bilateral identity, to draw attention to the speculative aspects. Such frameworks redefine the Gothic as an approach to contest the anthropocentric assumptions and linear time. The Gothic, Bartholomew notes, can interact with the "weird," creating a world that is "strange and estranged, strange and ontologically grounded" (p. 12), one akin to derealization. The emphasis on the dead or undead through the process of necro-empathy, discussed above, is similar to the subject-object lines breaking down in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, especially Billy Pilgrim's passive relationship with death. Bartholomew also challenges "the naïve faith in mimesis" of realism as a means of achieving ambiguity, instability, and unknowability. (Bartholomew 2020)

Ercolino rethought realism (*The Antinomies of Realism*) and studied the realist narratives in 19th-century Europe through the prism of the speculative turn. He adds a third dimension to Jameson's paradigm: the "speculative impulse. The Russian 1860s and the French 1880s saw the emergence of realists who emphasized ontological issues and temporal ambiguity through their use of this speculative impulse in the broader context of the speculative period. This speculative layer of narrative or scenic, time neutral, philosophical confusion and metaphysical doubt. By showing how speculative fiction is an evolutionary force within realism, rather than antithetical to realism, Ercolino suggests that it can engage life, perception, and reality in ways that are appealing to speculative realism. (Ercolino 2020)

Meillassoux's speculative materialism was used by Brayard to explore how recent French film works in a post-cinematic mode in relation to correlation. He raised an objection to the notion that all things should be seen through the lens of human consciousness. Based on concepts such as facticity, Hyperchaos, and ancestrality, he offers an approach that calls into question the logic of correlation and imagines a world where cognition is not placed at its heart. Some movies adhere to the correlationist conception; others render the human completely displaceable. The study also reveals the characteristics of digital aesthetics, non-linear structures, unstable spatiotemporal flows and fragmented narratives, which represent contingency and Hyperchaos. There was a derealisation in the digital film that Brayard was talking about, the distortion of time, a distortion of causality, a distortion of perception. He brought film theory and continental philosophy together, moving Speculative Realism into the realm of visual culture, and providing a way to apply it to literature. (Brayard 2019)

## **2.2. Trauma and Narrative Disruptions in Slaughterhouse-Five**

In addition, Wicks explored *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the context of trauma theory and science fiction studies and demonstrated that Vonnegut's story is more effective at portraying psychological traumas than realism. He examined the issue of how trauma distorts linear memory and language, and how it makes it difficult to retell the Dresden bombing. Wicks stated that science fiction captures the disruptions of time and disconnection of trauma using Freud, Cathy Caruth, and E. Ann Kaplan. Time travel and alien abduction and the Tralfamadorian worldview are traumatic experiences of a "time stuck in time" that are experienced by Billy Pilgrim in his "unstuck in time" state. The novel is a science-fiction trauma story, in which estrangement serves as a mode of communicating the incomprehensibility and inexplicability of trauma. (Wicks 2014)

Billy Pilgrim is not insane or a literary abstraction according to Veas-Gulani, he has PTSD instead. He applied trauma theory and Judith Herman's paradigm to illustrate how Billy's dissociation, time travelling and detachment is similar to the signs and symptoms of PTSD: mental numbing, flashbacks and avoidance. Billy's "unstuck in time" status is a representation of his inability to deal with Dresden, and the Tralfamadorian fatalism helps him not to suffer. The novel is a psychological case study and the literary form mirrors the psychiatric symptoms, reinforcing each other. (Veas-Gulani 2003)

Besides all of this, Mala, Abdulrahman and Tanritanır analyzed the violence of wars and its traumatic impact on *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s protagonists, Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim. Hallucination, detachment and fatalism are all symptoms of Billy's trauma. His fragmentation is exhibited in being "unstuck in time" and accepting death – it is a collapse from witnessing Dresden and wartime crimes. The authors emphasize the fact that war turns survivors into "mentally dead" individuals. Trauma's effects on identity, reality, and the body are a long-term experience, as Vonnegut's non-linear memories and numbness remind us. The novel states that violence disrupts ontological stability and changes their experience of time, memory and meaning. (Mala, Abdulrahman et al. 2022)

## **2.3 Ontological and Ecological Disruptions in The Fifth Season**

Through Posthumanism Walter critically analyzes Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* and Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*. He claimed these texts are not and cannot abandon humanist thought but that they envision alternative models of identity and power in their midst. In *The Fifth Season*, orogenes are hyperhuman beings who possess geologic abilities, who are oppressed by systemic oppression. They are dangerous and they are the saviors, they pose a dichotomy to anthropocentric and colonial views. The book brings to light violence in 'the human' and considers futures between humans, non-humans and Earth. Walter points out that *The Fifth Season* is important for discussing ecological, ontological and racial derealization (Walter 2019).

In addition, Lee investigated *The Fifth Season*'s geologic reflections of Slavery. He highlights the tripartite story and analogies to earthquakes and eruptions, and points out how Jemisin connects planetary upheaval to the influence of slavery. The notion of geological layering speaks to the history changing, and racial trauma becomes visible geographically. The novel's tectonics disassemble systemic violence and present world-building as a geopolitical metaphor tying racial history to environmental disaster. (Lee 2023) Similarly, in *The Fifth Season*, Warren explored how Essun is marginalized between the races, between the genders, and in American history. Both as an orogen and a woman, Essun is subjected to abuse – all of which are parodies of the exploitation of black women's bodies in monster theory, critical race theory,

and black feminist theory. The subject of Warren's work is the commodification of orogenic power as seen in the Fulcrum's portrayal of racial hierarchy. The multiplicities of names and roles that Essun displays are the ontologies of speculative realism. Warren emphasizes the theme of dehumanization and Jemisin's portrayal of resistance and survival. (Warren 2022) The literature reviewed as a whole, however, reveals scholarly work that has explored the connection between trauma, speculative realism, and ontological instability from a number of perspectives, particularly in the case of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*. These studies further strengthen the understanding of trauma in speculative texts but fail to link to speculation with the psychological phenomenon of derealisation. This is where this study aims to fill the gap with Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism.

### **3.Theoretical Framework**

The present work here is based on the speculative realism of Quentin Meillassoux, who is particularly critical of the correlation, and who focuses on the contingency of reality. As it were, Meillassoux destroys correlationism, the view that, in order to know anything, one must be a part of it: nothing, not even the natural laws, is needed. This instability is consistent with derealization, which occurs when people feel the world is not real or that it is broken up. The use of speculative realism in this study seeks to understand how narratives destabilise reality, allowing for the exposure of fragile boundaries between perception, existence and contingency. The derealization and ontological fiction approaches in this study illustrate his speculative realism with regard to the instability of reality as a subjective phenomenon, yet an ontological one. In speculative fiction, characters are drawn into worlds that are unstable and reveal this contingency.

#### **3.1.1 The Critique of Correlationism and the Problem of Ancestralism**

Meillassoux's critique of correlationism is a challenge to the notion that reality needs to be known via the human mind. The view of correlationism is that one can never see reality "in itself" but only as it shows itself to us, which is brought into question by the events that predate man. How, asks Meillassoux, is it that a being is manifested as anterior to the manifesting of being? (Meillassoux 2006, p. 26). Reality cannot be separated from thought, and if there is no thought, there is no world. If there is no thought, there is no world; if there is no world, there is no correlationism. The tension plays out in derealization with reality not necessarily being organized to be comprehensible: thus, speculative fiction presents fractured realities. Billy Pilgrim's time in the book *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not linear. In *The Fifth Season*, the unstable geological structures parallel Meillassoux's assertion that the world does not need consciousness and might not be governed by law.

#### **3.1.2 The Principle of Unreason and the Contingency of Reality**

Meillassoux believes that there's no necessity in the universe, only contingency. According to him, "The truth is that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise" (Meillassoux 2006 p.53). Unreason is the one principle that is applicable to everything, including time, physics and logic. Derealisation is an ontological experience of instability. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has Billy's time traveling that upends cause and effect. In *The Fifth Season*, it is revealed that the laws of nature are not absolute. This is a description of unstable worlds as found in the speculative fiction, where "Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws... not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything." (Meillassoux 2006, p. 53) The things that are uncertain in both novels translate into



an ontological fact, one that says nothing can be taken for granted as to the reality of what things are.

### **3.1.3 Speculative Realism and the Ontology of Derealization**

Meillassoux suggests that speculative realism is an alternative to correlationism. Conscious time is required to exist at a particular moment in the stream of time, and science does not require it, it is only possible at this determinate moment within it," he says, "science reveals that," (Meillassoux 2006, p. 22). This implies that the universe is independent of human knowledge. Billy's jumbled perception in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a sign of an intemporal universe. The Fifth Season is a world of contingency, in which natural and societal systems unravel at random. Ultimately, his philosophy will force us to ask ourselves what is reality and how do we get ahold of it? As he states in his work, "The arche-fossil impels us to follow the track of thought by asking for the 'hidden passage'... to behold the in-itself" (Meillassoux 2006, p. 27). Rejecting the correlationism, Meillassoux's principle of unreason and the reintroduction of the absolute can be applied to the understanding of derealization in literature. Speculative Fiction is a genre where we examine the fragility of reality because it is not necessarily organized in the way humans can think. In both novels derealization is not only a disorder but an experience of a reality that is not in line with human expectations. These texts are not only about psychological suffering, they are about the conditionality, fragility, and uncontrollability of the world. Meillassoux rejects correlationism and thus exposes a universe outside of the human mind that goes by the name of contingency. The implications are similar to derealization, whereby people feel reality is not real, broken or fragmented. Speculative fiction delves into this uncertainty, in which characters face the changing realities. In derealization, we see not only a psychological struggle, but an existential one, against a capricious, indifferent world, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season*.

### **3.2 Methodology**

The present study was of a qualitative nature and in this regard, the text analysis of the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut and the novel *The Fifth Season* (2015) by N.K. Jemisin was used. It investigated derealisation and ontological instability of the stories. The study in the context of Speculative Realism theory by Quentin Meillassoux applies the theory to discuss the challenges made by novels to human-centered realities and human perception in existential crises and planetary crises. Content analysis was used in the research and both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season* were examined. Themes, patterns and key concepts concerning ontological instability and the breakdown of reality were explored in a systematic way. The texts of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fifth Season* were used as primary data. Secondary sources were scholarly articles, critical essays and theoretical works on Speculative Realism, derealisation and existential philosophy, providing context and aiding in interpretation.

## **4 Discussion and Analysis**

### **4.1. Slaughterhouse-Five**

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, as a whole, is not a traditional realistic novel, but an intentionally disorienting work that plays with the mind and the heart, much like Billy Pilgrim's disintegration. Meanwhile, the story imparts a sense of derealization, making it difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy, as a way of symbolizing Billy's traumatic detachment from his experiences. This analysis will attempt to examine the narrative style of Vonnegut's work with regard to Speculative Realism and also discuss the psychological effects of derealization in the context of war, time, and identity.

#### **4.1.1 The Unreliable Self and Fragmented Identity**

The first chapter of the novel is all about the main character's efforts to introduce himself as a soldier in WWII and his wish to write a book about the war. He talks to a filmmaker named Harrison Starr, who coldly points out that he should write an "anti-glacier book" instead; and he notes that writing anti-war literature is futile. When Billy's friend invites him to visit, Mary O'Hare is furious over Billy's project: "You were babies in the war, like upstairs! (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 10)"

This quotation is somewhat tongue in cheek. It is a reflection of the main concept of the book: the foolishness of war and the innocence lost. The soldiers are made vulnerable children, a challenge to anthropocentric stories of heroism, as presented by Speculative Realism. Throughout the book, Billy's derealisation is paralleled with this loss of innocence, which means that the war is a meaningless occurrence, that takes people away from humanity and reduces them to ordinary children forced into a chaotic world. This conflict between the apparent glitz of battle and the brutal reality adds to the speculative aspect of the book, in which the story defies conventional wisdom on combat and courage. The quotation, as seen in the context of Speculative Realism, suggests that individuals may not be aware of or understand the broader factors that are at play in their lives. The troops are referred to as "babies" because they are weak and frail in a cosmos that doesn't take them into account.

As the novel opens, early on, after the war, Billy is back in his regular life as an optometrist in Ilium, New York. After lunch, Billy went home for a nap, he was ordered to nap daily by his doctor and he hoped that would calm a complaint he had: Billy Pilgram would find himself crying, for no obvious reason, every so often. Nobody ever caught him crying. Only the doctor knew. It was an extremely quiet thing Billy did, and not very moist. (Kurt Vonnegut 1969)

The contradiction between interior rupture and exterior normality is expressed in these lines. Those tears of Billy's are dry, quiet, and private and there is a suffering here that is not easily diagnosed or understood. It is no longer a straightforward flashback to the military trauma, but what has emerged from it are ghostly, emotive fragments of it, in civilian life. The emotional break indicates that the trauma is not just an experience in his memory, but a part of him. The detachment of tone and body in this mark thus affects an unreachable inner pain, Billy's emotional self as much as his temporal one, whose erratic movements may be compared with his experience of the mark. This moment is linked to a sensation of derealization, the feeling that reality is removed, dreamlike or far away. It also fits with Meillassoux's notion of correlationism in Speculative Realism, which suggests that the human perspective can alter the perception of reality. Billy's emotional distance might be a clash between the internal and external worlds.

Billy Pilgrim's broken sense of self is often underlined by his psychological and physical distance from his surroundings. He has a skewed perspective of reality, and one that is emotionally removed. One of those disturbing moments: "Billy Pilgrim was on fire, having stood too close to the glowing stove." (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 47)

In this sentence, Billy's feeling of a lack of connection to his body is captured. Billy remains silent, he sees the experience but doesn't respond to it. He's "on fire" and yet, he's not reacting. This represents the sense of derealization as a trauma-prevention mechanism. In the speculative realist perspective, this is a point of concern because human experiences often break through from a more general and indifferent world. With this view, the individual is not an integrated, stable, coherent self, but a fragmented, dependent self in a chaotic world.

#### **4.1.2 Time, War, and Non-Linearity**

The second chapter of Vonnegut's book mentions in the text how "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 14). The first time Billy has experienced time travel was in World War II. Billy's inability to see time as a linear series of events, but rather as disjointed pieces of time that are not his, sets the novel's nonlinear framework in place, as well as its fatalistic tone. His "unstuckness" is real, and he is derealized and alienated from linear causality. The detachment from chronological time is related to the speculative realism's fascination to non-anthropocentric models of being, in which time does not have a linear trajectory but a manifold. Billy is also a destabilized subject, rather than the center of a narrative or metaphysical coherence, because of his "unstuck" state. Vonnegut used the non-linear idea of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which places the past, present and future in an unstable, simultaneous continuum. One such time this happens is when Billy watches a military movie instead of just a regular movie, late at night. Time itself twists, Billy's inner psychological fragmentation. The causality is questioned in this novel: "He came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. This is the ontological failure that Billy experiences as well as the criticism of temporal linearity offered by speculative realism. After *Finitude* is a book in which Quentin Meillassoux argues that contingency is the only certainty. Time itself may change for no reason. This illustrates in a graphical manner that the event could collapse, turn over or repeat without further information without taking the expected path. What's even more upsetting, is that watching the film on reverse, sets a wrecking ball in the place of restoration. Bullets ricocheting in planes, cities rising from the rubble, and death becoming non-death. This inverted logic produces an eerie metaphor, which is a yearning for a future in which crimes could be undone. But the turnaround is only temporary, and Billy, like the reader, will have to deal with the ineluctable tragedy of history. "That's just the way we made the moment." (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 75) This straightforward statement catches Billy's deterministic reasoning, controlling his perspective on time. It reflects the Tralfamadorian attitude of "all moments are present moments" and "all moments are immutable" and "all moments are in control. Viewed from this perspective, Billy has no agency in his life, and becomes a helpless spectator. His response to this fatalism of the cosmos is confined to his turn and is a reflection of speculative realism's rejection of anthropocentric meaning making. Billy takes this attitude from his family and alienates himself from the need to make human decisions, the Tralfamadorians experience the whole of time as a single unalterable mass. The sentence highlights the free will negating nature of the book and its reality as a pre-scripted series with no moral relevance. The characters lose their agency, and Vonnegut is using the same sort of language to reveal the inevitability of events in the story.

#### **4.1.3 Death and Detachment ("So it goes")**

In the novel, the phrase "So it goes" is repeated many times as it is used in reference to what happens after death, destruction, or catastrophe. In the context of Speculative Realism, the expression is indifferent; it can elicit derealization, as there is a universe without human perception, understanding, and control. Simple but linked to the broader themes of the novel – time, fate, human condition. In this quote, Vonnegut separates his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, from the emotional burden of what he sees during the events. The phrase "So it goes" as it is repeated by Vonnegut throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a cynical and unfeeling reminder of death's inevitability. It gives a tone of flatness, of the derealization of Billy Pilgrim, who goes through life with a detached inevitability, without emotional significance threatening to death. There aren't any real soldiers left, she said. "It was true. So, it goes." (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 77)



This crusty statement comes from a battle widow who writes down the ragtag survivors she comes across in the butcher as undeserving to be called "soldiers." Idealized notions of military honor are eliminated from the sentence, which thus conveys the absurdity and futility of war. It underscores the fact that broken and traumatic pieces have replaced the disciplined and valiant personalities of the chivalrous mythological heroes of patriotism. This sentence is the focus of the thematic exploration of a war as a terrible joke, where the only winners are those who are lucky. This quotation is a very good example of derealization, the feeling that reality itself feels empty and meaningless. One of the distinguishing features of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is its mechanical aspect of killing. "So, it goes" (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 99) Here is Billy Pilgrim's reading of a science fiction book inside the bigger story of the book *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which Jesus Christ is crucified by a time traveler. The blunt statement "The Son of God was as dead as a doornail" takes the spiritual and historical significance out of the event, and thus diminishes it to a mechanical observation. Conventional respect for Christ's death lies beneath the picture of him being as dead as a doornail, a simile that is just one of the many deaths recorded in the book. The quick "so it goes" response to the statement of the other fundamental event in Western religion, the death of Jesus, suggests the cold, disaffection attitude: death is less significant than any other death on the cosmic level. This scene does not make the metaphorical power of this scene sacred, it becomes material, thus the essence of derealisation. The expression "So it goes" distances one from viewing death as a moral or emotional event, and encourages them to view it instead as an ontological fact, one that one encounters in the cosmos given that it is without regard for us or for our pain or our meaning-making.

#### **4.2. The Fifth Season**

The focus of speculative realism and derealization, which were key issues in the study of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, remains central in the study of *The Fifth Season*. Vonnegut's fragmentation examined the trauma of war in a time-travel and metafictional fashion. The earthquake is used as a metaphor for structural violence, emotional breakdown, and epistemic uncertainty in Jemisin's world. The stillness and seasons of her post-apocalyptic world create a world, while also being emotional and story breaks that throw reader and characters off. Like the passive drifting of Billy Pilgrim's reality and memory throughout time, the protagonist of Jemisin's novel is a character who moves in two ways, mentally and physically, questioning identity, cause, and time. Speculative realism is brought to new vigors in Jemisin's human world. The earth is made a living, violent force, and instability of reality becomes a theme and an integral part of the story.

##### **4.2.1 Becoming Unreal: The Speculative Unmaking of Damaya**

In *The Fifth Season*, Damaya's psychological breakdown stems from her first experiences in a theoretical world that is both emotionally violent and geologically unstable. The setting of Jemisin's story places Damaya within a culture that sees institutional mistreatment, distortion of instincts, and family betrayal as normal; it sets the stage for the derealization to be a coping mechanism for her. Speculative realism's early experiences are a means of undermining Damaya's identity before it could be established. She now hears voices outside the straw heap -- voices of Mama and someone else who are getting closer.

Her mother's character is very cold and distant, revealing the community and family preparedness to sever ties with the "dangerous" child. This is Damaya's first real attempt at derealisation, the world she knows - one that is loved and protected by parents - is being cruelly and irrevocably taken from her. The Stillness is not only geologically unstable but also socially unstable, as Jemisin's hypothetical space makes the emotional trauma real: the identities of the

people living here are in constant flux. At this point of family betrayal, where the "other's" abandonment is tolerated as a norm in a society, the derealization of Damaya begins by reflecting real life dehumanization. A sensorial experience of the distance that exists between Damaya and what should be familiar, is highlighted by her hearing but not yet seeing. "You're firemountain-glass, Dama." (Jemisin, 2015, p. 28) Schaffa's analogy is amazingly apt: Damaya is useful and dangerous when sculpted and tamed. The beauty, the deadly, the fragile, the powerful elements of "Firemountain-glass" will shape Damaya's life at the Fulcrum. The early internalization of the objectification of the self severely disturbs Damaya's relationship with an unmediated self, plunging her into derealisation. This metaphor was a rethinking of human beings as unstable elements of nature that need to be controlled and was a speculative realism. To survive, it will require brutal slices of identity in *The Fifth Season*. Instead, Damaya is taught to be an ephemeral substance, not a human, and the emotional response to being not-in is becoming a part of her world. Her name is lost, and the transition from Damaya Strongback to simply "Fulcrum orogen" shows the hypothetical structure (or the box) in which actual psychological suffering takes place. "There is a way to life in the Fulcrum." (Jemisin, 2015, p. 164) Repeated in a mantra-like way, "Order" obscures the terrible reality of Fulcrum surveillance, control, and violence. "Order" starts to be a euphemism for systematic oppression. The words in this phrase are repeated throughout the text. It is used as a metaphor for psychological conditioning and internalized submission. The sense of self is externalized and the degree of compliance of a grit is a measure of success. In this case the speculative realist shows his/her card, showing how social institutions are themselves speculative devices.

#### **4.2.2 Ontological Crisis and the Speculative Self**

In Chapter 4 of *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin Through interactions that radically alter Syenite's perception of reality and power, Jemisin starts to undermine her ideological and epistemological underpinnings. In an environment that is outside their comprehension, Syen is pushed away from the rigid confines of the Fulcrum. The narrative of Syen's journey is seen through Jemisin's speculative gaze, as she struggles to feel a sense of belonging in a world that once felt certain of her. This chapter highlights a turning point where Syenite has to deal with the patronizing bureaucracy of the Fulcrum. In Syenite, Jemisin examines the ways in which institutional power affects orogenes' physical and mental makeup, training them to mask their rage with a civil demeanor and to exercise their ambition through compliance.

"We are the gods in chains and this is not Rusting." (Jemisin, 2015, p. 227) At this moment, in a flash of desperation and power, Syenite's mind melds with the alien frequency of the obelisk. It is an extreme identity statement, of course, not just for her, but for anyone who is an orogene who is chained and weaponized under a repressive government. Here the obelisk is a mirror, and it's also a catalyst for the ontological awareness. This is the sum of all that is speculative in Jemisin's metaphysics. The world Syenite inhabits is a world that is ontologically corrupt which was made when entities with capabilities greater than human knowledge were repressed. "You can't make anything better. The world is what it is. Unless you break it up and start over again, there's no changing it." (Jemisin, 2015, p. 326) In this comment, Alabaster shows us the deep-seated cynicism that he has interiorized from years of being handcuffed both mentally and literally within the Fulcrum. It's a dark allusion to the geologic metaphor in the text, change on this planet only occurs when seismic disturbance occurs. Thus, systems are logically independent of moral judgment in Alabaster's argument that removes the anthropocentric concept in progress. The starting over idea, in a nutshell, is that it is impossible to find any merit in the normal optimism in a skewed power system, so it shifts the moral axis from

redemption to ontological reset. In Jemisin's story, this is not only theoretical; it also points towards the ultimate literal disintegration and regeneration of the planet.

#### **4.2.3 From Domestic Disappearance to Ontological Derealization**

N.K. Jemisin was not a star with complete agency, but a lady who chose to operate around the edges of her world in *The Fifth Season*. Home and family security is a carefully crafted camouflage, and a construct driven by fear and necessity, and not by choice. It's a very derealizing retreat into home invisibility, as Jemisin reveals: not only is the self she has got hidden, but it's built around the idea of impossibility. One such story can be given as Essun's, representative of the philosophical and affective aspects of derealisation in a speculative context, and that destabilizes the self and world. "You're still figuring out who you are: You and Uche were dead together; The 'you' you were around lately doesn't match up (Jemisin 2015 p. 32)." The thematic structure of identity is set up in the first sentence of Chapter 3 and is highlighted by Essun's displacement of self. Here, the second person narrative thrusts the reader into an awkwardly intimate proximity with a character who is not attached to her being, thus making her disintegration literal. Today, Essun accepts that it can no longer be part of her lifestyle, and that of the peaceful, subservient wife and mother. Her son's death disrupts and destabilizes this identity, leading her into a liminal zone where identity is fluid and can shift. The story line is speculative, identifying the characters with the fracturedness of the world, and bypassing the identity of the self that, in its steady, continuous course, is always "somebody else." Essun is not a person, but a vessel made by the dynamic world. The theoretical framework adds her emotional disenfranchisement to a ontological instability.

"Didn't want to wait for death to come for you. Right. Stupid, stupid woman. Death was always here. Death is you." (Jemisin, 2015, p. 48) This is the high point of the chapter. After Essun's terrible damage was released upon Tirimo she was left to think. She's not been killed, rather she's made it her agency, as her comment's irony cuts sharp. The more often "stupid, stupid woman" is repeated, the more bitterness, guilt and shame will arise. Her relationship with death, "Death is you" is a testament to how trauma has reshaped her identity. She is no different than the teacher or the mother, Essun. The power and pain of the destroyer in this case is Essun. She thinks of herself as a force that is breaking the world, not the person who is a part of it. The idea of 'self' fuses with the division between inner anguish and external consequence. The book explores an interiorization of the world and self that is fundamental, a derealisation that occurs through trauma, concealment and systems of domination. In a world where time is cyclical and the Earth is a sentient being, the book puts into doubt linear and steady notions of truth and history. *The Fifth Season* is the end of closure and the beginning of disruption; meaning and power come from the radical act of unmaking the world that you created.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This thesis has explored how both *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* challenge given notions of reality, identity and temporality, in the context of speculative realism and derealisation. In the footsteps of Quentin Meillassoux, it has demonstrated the articulation of the instability of reality in speculative fiction, abandoning the notion of a reality that is structured for human understanding and accentuating contingency and ontological indifference. Billy Pilgrim's fragmented sense of time, the Tralfamadorian view, and the nature of the narration all represent a world in which meaning is situational, and causality is misperceived. So it goes transforms death into mechanical repetition, in response to correlationism and a world beyond the power of man, as Meillassoux criticized it. *The Fifth Season* expands on this perception to the planetary level. In Jemisin's world, the sustaining and

powerful bonds of identity and subjectivity are broken by trauma and systemic violence. The Earth itself becomes a living entity, active and not completely under human control, through characters such as Essun, Syenite and Damaya, which in turn reflect Meillassoux's belief that reality exists outside of human perception. Derealisation is described as ontological instability in both novels, not as one might simply think. Vonnegut example is a temporal fracture, Jemisin expands it to planetary upheaval. They illustrate the way in which crisis warps reality and the way in which speculative fiction conveys experiences of forces that threaten human experience. Ultimately, this thesis contends that derealisation is an ontological state an encounter with indifferent reality. Vonnegut and Jemisin illustrate the destabilization of self and world by means of speculative fiction, in which they challenge anthropocentric assumptions. Speculative realism, then, offers a means to address the contingency of reality within literature and places speculative fiction as an important literary genre for investigating issues of identity, knowledge and existence in times of uncertainty.

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