

I Am Woman, Hear Me Bark: An Analysis of Esch's Womanhood in *Salvage the Bones*

By Kyle Brown

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* is a tale that describes the world of 15 year-old Esch as the devastating Hurricane Katrina approaches from the Gulf of Mexico. This novel describes the various passions, desires, and needs of Esch and her family through the eyes of Esch. Throughout the story, we encounter dog fights, family struggle, teenage pregnancy, teenage love, family bonding, fighting for respect, as well as the feeling of family devotion and love. Ward's novel depicts the lives of this rural Mississippi family in a way that makes them seem human, the tragedies that the family goes through, may it be the family's loss of Mama or Skeetah's loss of China, creates outlets for the readers to plug into in order to sympathize or empathize with the characters that she has created. Ward has Hurricane Katrina there as a tool to create another sense of urgency and anticipation for what will bring the family together to survive something that will literally create a new world for them all.

Esch is a character that is very observant and has an interest in Greek mythology and their female characters. Esch is also a character that would be affected by the loss of Mama in the beginning of the novel and this is something that is a huge defining factor of her characterization. Esch is extremely invested in the idea of motherhood and mothers that she sees them everywhere and describes all of the different phenomena surrounded her in relation to that concept. Esch as a character does not know much about the people and things around her, as she is only a 15 year-old girl living in rural Mississippi, but her observations of her brothers are the things that stick with her and create lasting impressions on her personality and her character.

Esch is the only female within her family, excluding China who also counts as family according to Skeetah. Her family, mainly men older than her, include her father, her older brothers, Randall and Skeetah, and her younger brother Junior. Looking at all of these characters and how they all lie on a spectrum of the masculine-feminine scale can help us understand how Esch still finds “females” to help her develop as a woman even with the absence of her mother. Looking at how Esch uses the things that she absorbs and learns from her brothers can help us understand how she also falls on the masculinity/femininity spectrum. Doing this will help come to a conclusion on how Esch finds her own definition of womanhood and then lives by that.

Finding out where she falls on that spectrum will be one of the ways in which to find out how she finds her definition of womanhood and a means to ascertain where she falls on that spectrum will be determining if she is indeed a “woman-identified woman.” The “woman-identified woman” is a concept brought up by lesbian critical theorists and is described by Lois Tyson as a woman who “[directs] the bulk of [her] attention and emotional energy to other women and [has] other women as [her] primary source of emotional sustenance and psychological support” (Tyson 176). From this definition a “woman-identified woman” is one who has other women as her main emotional and psychological base as well as giving most of her energy to other women. This definition does not specify that the women have to be biologically women, so a man that expresses traditional feminine traits, or follows traditional roles attributed to women could qualify to fill out the needs to describe a person whose primary source of energy and primary taker of energy are biologically male as a woman-identified woman.

To find those people within the novel, queer theory will be applied to various male characters. Queer theory, as expressed by Tyson, is an argument that “human sexuality is a

dynamic, fluid force” (Tyson 178). This theory is heavily influenced by arguing that things are on a spectrum. This theory primarily speaks towards human sexuality on a spectrum, but it also makes heavy use of describing traditional gender roles and this is how it places people on the queer theory spectrum. Looking at traditional gender roles, which are used to describe tendencies between the sexes, will help to place people on the spectrum by showing them to be more traditionally “feminine” or traditionally “masculine.” Traditionally, men are described as more “strong, protective, decisive, etc.,” whereas women are described as more “irrational, weak, nurturing,” etc. (Tyson 142). This description of men and women not only helps to set up the queer theory spectrum, but it also aids in discerning where people fall on it.

Aiding in supporting the claims of the queer theory and the concept of traditional gender roles is the psychoanalytic theory and the basic concepts associated with it such as the role of the family in a person’s life psychological build up, repressions and the unconscious as a tool to cope with certain things that happen, and the defenses that come with those repressed emotions and feelings. The family usually has a large impact on the makeup of a person psychology by the time they reach adulthood and even effects them during their developmental years and the concept of family within the psychoanalytic theory describes how “it is in the family that our sense of self...is established” (Tyson 83). Additionally psychoanalytic theory describes how “we have all had some harmful emotional experiences growing up” (Tyson 83) and the way that we all react to them can be either traditionally “feminine” or “masculine” depending on the defense mechanisms learned and utilized which can add to the assessment of the queer theory spectrum.

When determining how the character Esch within Jesmyn Ward’s novel, *Salvage the Bones*, has defined her own definition of womanhood, it is important to line her up with the concept of the woman-identified woman. The notion that “woman-identification is essential to a

woman's development of personhood" (Tyson 177) is an important factor to take into account when assessing how Esch develops her sense of womanhood. The notion that a woman needs other women to know how to be a woman is important because that is essentially what the concept of the "woman-identified woman" is and lining Esch up with that concept will aid in showing how she comes to her definition of womanhood. The idea that both man and woman "require the supporting assistance of other people" for his or her actualization (Westerhorstmann 3). Thus, Esch needs the assistance and guidance of other people to find herself especially as she is in an age and stage of her life "characterized by dependence and neediness" (Westerhorstmann 4). There are three biological women that she gives some of her energy off to and still receives emotional sustenance from that may not be physically there but still adds to her emotional stability. Those three women include: her mother, China, and Medea.

Esch's mother may not be physically there but Esch constantly refers to her mother throughout the novel and even mentions lessons, or ideals that she learned from watching how she interacted with other people. Esch's references to her mother are often in relation to something that her brothers are doing or something else in her environment and it often ends in her mentioning that that is how she thinks the roles of a man and a woman work. Such as when Esch is talking to Skeetah when he is removing the linoleum for the puppies and she thinks it is for China, primarily due to the fact that what Esch thinks "a man should do for a woman" is "build her something to live in" (Ward 60) due to stories she has heard about the way her father treated her mother. Esch learns some traditional gender roles and she even tries to put that into practice as she observes her brothers as explained in the previous example. Another example of how Esch's mother influences her still is within the passage when she is tending to Skeetah's wound and is reminiscing about going swimming with her family at the Bay of Angels and how

there is a juxtaposition between her tending to Skeetah's wound and her mother tending to her own wound on her own. The tenderness of Esch being put side by side with the tenderness of her mother as she described her hand on the back of her neck by saying "her hand was special" (Ward 86).

The constant reminders of her mother through the memories of Esch show that she still has some remembrance of her even though she is gone and the constant reminiscing on the times with her mother is how she is devoting some of her emotional energy towards her even though she is not physically around. This qualifies Mama as a person to aid in showing how Esch is a woman identified woman. Esch often mentions how after her mother died there was something missing where it be a shoulder to cry on or someone to hold on to, as Esch expresses while speaking about her mother and Mother Lizabeth's death. Esch reflecting on her mother is a way for her to cope with her being gone, even this long after the death.

Moving forward from the role of Esch's mother in her existence as a "woman-identified woman," it can be seen that a female character that is not exactly a woman, but is giving the presence of a human female character throughout the novel inherently effects Esch's character and is a force that not only teaches Esch lessons on how to act, but also is given a lot of Esch's attention as signified by the amount of times Esch compares things to her. This female presence is Skeetah's dog, China. China is there in Esch's view from the very start of the novel as Esch describes her birthing of her puppies. Even after that, though a lot of Esch's descriptions are references to China in some way. As in when she is fighting with Manny and is using the idea of China to push her forward to be fierce enough to take him on and hold her own. In an article about *Salvage the Bones* Elizabeth Hoover discusses how "Esch's female role models are Medea and China" (Hoover) and even goes on to mention how the idea of motherhood gets painted in a

strong light by Esch's brother Skeetah as he mentions that they're strongest then because "they got something to protect" (Ward 96). Esch being in earshot when hearing this conversation about the power of a mother is something that gets instilled in her and adds to the emotional and psychological support given to her from China in an indirect sort of way.

Moving on to how Esch learns and is supported by Medea, Hoover describes Esch's relationship to Medea eloquently in saying that "she is closer to Esch's world" (Hoover) when teaching her about love and motherhood. Medea teaches Esch both non-traditional gender roles in the fact that she fights against the male and is not submissive and also in the fact that she is depicted as a powerful force to be reckoned with. Medea contributes to Esch's psychological support in the sense that her story is one of the things that teaches Esch things about motherhood and the power that a mother can have. This idea of Esch being a "woman-identified woman" can be shown through her relationship with the aforementioned three women, but the question arises of "what about her brothers and father?" This is a relevant question as she must devote a lot of her attention and emotional energy towards them as she is with them every day of her life. This is where the queer theory comes into play.

Looking at Esch's brothers they are there for everything that she goes through, they are truly devoted to her and her well-being, this is ultimately seen when Skeetah chooses Esch over China. Esch's family is so tight-knit that they "brawl and sacrifice and steal for her and each other" (Seghal) as Parul Segal mentions in his review for The New York Times. Esch's family is so devoted to her and each other that they make up for the absence of Mama in Esch's life as most families do compensate when a piece of it is missing in most cases. They portray the missing aspects in different ways, but looking at the queer theory spectrum and traditional

gender roles, the traits that Mama would possibly fulfill can be seen in the other portions of Esch's family.

Looking at Skeetah, the brother that Esch spends the most time with and is seen to encounter the most you can see a lot of traits that would be seen from a mother in Esch's observations of how he treats China. Esch sees Skeetah nurturing China through her pregnancy and even after. Esch often notes the tenderness that Skeetah displays when handling China mentioning at one point that she wishes Manny would look at her the way Skeetah looks at China. Esch notices Skeetah's affection for China and even calls it a "devotion" at one point. The way that Skeetah is described to care for China is mentioned to have him "turned from lover to father" (Ward 98) at one point, but the tenderness and devotion that he displays for China is seen to be more traditionally mother-like when looking at traditional gender roles. Skeetah displays more emotions when regarding China, he is more nurturing and submissive to her needs as well, even going as far as getting things for her when he needed to get things for the family. All of these things place him on the spectrum of queer theory in a place where he can be seen as a "female" role model for Esch and add to her emotional understanding of womanhood as his motherly tendencies can rub off on her to display some of the characteristics of a mother.

Esch's eldest brother, Randall is primarily mentioned as a protective figure when Esch is encountering him or with him as events occur. Randall's entire existence within the novel is seen as a protective force for the family as he takes on both traditionally female roles such as feeding and caring for Junior while he is young and caring for Daddy while he is sick and traditionally masculine roles as he helps repair things, plays sports, and tries to break down things for the sake of the family. While reflecting on bottle-feeding Junior with Randall, Esch inadvertently refers to Randall as a mother figure as she wonders if Junior remembers "who bottle-fed him, who licked

his tears, who mothered him” (Ward 91). While reminiscing on the times where she and Randall took care of Junior she expresses the tenderness that Randall showed for Junior while taking care of him and through this, by also mentioning him as a “mother-figure” for Junior she aids in placing him on the spectrum as well and showing how he adds to her psychological understanding of what womanhood is.

Then comes the youngest of Esch’s brothers, Junior. Junior is seen as a dependent and a person that Esch, along with her brothers and father, need to protect and make sure that he is nurtured and innocent. This is seen in the various times that he needs to be protected, as in when he is being carried by Big Henry as they are all running from the dog or when Esch tries to cover his view of China giving birth. Junior, as a young person is there for Esch to display a traditional gender role, but also display some non-traditional gender roles. As Esch is the main person displayed taking care of Junior and mothering him, since the novel is in her point of view, this is displaying her as a mother-figure already, but when she is more dominant and stern with him, she is displaying a non-traditional gender role as women are not described to be submissive. This is adding to the way that Esch is determining a working definition of womanhood, Esch is beginning to learn how some things work well for being a woman, but they don’t work all of the time.

Esch’s father takes on both the roles of Mama and Daddy after Mama’s death, which is depicted in the description of how Daddy would bottle-feed Junior before Esch and Randall began to. Daddy was the one to teach Randall and Esch how to do it, displaying a role that, traditionally, mothers would teach their children. However, there is a scene just before that that describes Daddy teaching Esch how to start the truck. This creates an interesting juxtaposition displaying the dual roles that Daddy is now holding and shows how Daddy is instilling in Esch

that a mother can also have traditionally “masculine” traits, thus putting him on the queer theory spectrum as well. Another thing, that is not in the forefront of the novel because it is in Esch’s point of view, is that Daddy is constantly trying to protect the family and keep them safe, that he is trying to make sure that the kids are safe, something that is usually attributed to the mother of the family, thus displaying his motherly tendencies again, just not very advertently for Esch to notice.

Looking at what Esch learns from all of the messages from the various people being thrust at her in all directions, both intentionally and unintentionally, she appears to receive a message that paints a well-rounded portrait of what a woman is and she gains a personalized image of what womanhood means. Through her memories of Mama, the tales of Medea, and her life with China, she gains a hard-edged view of womanhood and motherhood. One that is “dangerous and bloody business” (Hoover). Esch learns that being a woman means standing her ground when she needs to as the words “make them know” go through her head as she is “on him like China” (Ward 203). She learns that a woman is beautiful in her truest form while watching her mother dance and she learns that a woman is powerful as she remembers her mother reeling in a shark, denying the men that were trying to take her fishing rod from her, and China tearing apart the male dog before her as she protected Skeetah, and the others, from Twist, nearly killing him in the process.

From her brothers and Daddy, Esch learns that a mother and a woman is nurturing from Randall and Skeetah. Randall displaying this as he takes care of Junior in place of Daddy and Skeetah displaying this as he mothers China and takes care of her every need. She learns that a woman and a mother is devoted from Daddy and Skeetah. Skeetah, in his undying devotion to both China and Esch herself. Daddy, in the respect of his devotion to the kids in which he is

constantly preparing the house for the oncoming storm to keep them all safe. Esch also learns that a mother and a woman is also knowledgeable and dominant from Daddy as he displays both the characteristics of Mama and Daddy in Mama's absence. Through all of this, it appears that Esch comes to the conclusion that womanhood, and to an extent motherhood, is not solely masculine or feminine, Esch realizes that there is a spectrum and she places herself on the more masculine side of things mentioning that China "will know...that [she has] fought" (Ward 258). Esch wants China to "bark and call [her] sister" (Ward 258).

The implications of Esch's decision on womanhood are displayed through Ward's various interviews. Ward wanted to give a voice to the unheard, to make it so the world could hear the stories of people who are unsung. Ward wanted to speak about "human beings trying to survive and make the best of what [they] have right here, right now" (Lavandera). Ward's display of Esch discovering her personal definition of womanhood within this tragic tale of Katrina grabs the reader and makes the characters more real and creates a way for people to empathize with her and her family. This teenage girl finding her womanhood adds to the humanization of the characters and the story itself, making it as universal as Ward mentions that the stories of the unheard are. Esch's coming of age barks loud and clear like the sound of China in the distance.

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