

**Make Them Know:
Esch's Feminist Journey in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones***

By Sam Miller

The feminist movement rose up out of a need for women to be treated equally to men. Despite popular belief, that need has not disappeared. Women won the right to vote in 1920, but the women's rights movement continued to fight for more equality. The right to work, the right to earn an equal wage for equal labor, and even the right to bodily autonomy were things that women had to fight for. In some parts of America, these ideas are still cut off from women due to the patriarchal beliefs that are ingrained in United States culture. The struggle for equality becomes even harder when aspects like race and class are added to the areas of marginalization that women must navigate in order to establish their identities. Taking that into consideration, it becomes necessary to look at Esch Batiste from Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* as not just a girl, but as a poor, black, pregnant girl. Esch must navigate all these obstacles in order to find herself. By deconstructing the ideas of mainstream feminism or "post-feminism", which excludes those women who fall into categories like "poor" and "black", it is possible to see Esch as a feminist character who creates an identity comprised of both masculine and feminine characteristics within her own situation.

Brief History of the Feminist Movement

The fight for equality began as early as the late 1800s, but women had to fight for decades to finally win the right to vote. The movement could not stop there though, because women were still viewed as inferior to men in many other ways in society. Women continued to fight throughout the twentieth century for more equality, not only in the economic and political world but in the domestic and social world as well. In order to achieve this total equality, it was

necessary to change all aspects of society that held women as inferior. This is known as “woman’s emancipation” (Hannam 6).

The movement was not without its own drawbacks. During the time when women were fighting for the right to vote, it was not for every woman’s right, but rather for every white woman’s right. The 19th Amendment “legally enfranchised all women, white and black,” according to the National Women’s History Museum, but States and individual citizens worked to block black women from the right to vote up until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (NWHM). This separation between different women within the movement is not new, it has been around since the very beginning of the women’s rights struggle. Julia Hannam states that “the movement has always encompassed a wide range of attitudes, concerns, and strategies” (3).

As the world changed, so did the things that feminists thought were important. It is because of this that the feminist movement is viewed in “waves” (first wave, second wave, and third wave or “post-feminism”) in which women were advocating for different rights and different ways of being. First wave feminism began to rise up during the time of The Enlightenment and the French Revolution and lasted until the latter half of the twentieth century. The focus was on the right for women to have a voice in politics as citizens, leading to the right to vote in 1920 (Hannam 19). Second wave feminism began in the 1950’s and began to lose momentum around the 1970s (Hannam 155). This wave strived to achieve the ideal of uniting all women underneath a common portrayal of womanhood. It called upon texts like Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in order to encapsulate the struggle of women not having their own identity apart from their comparison to men, as well as to the way in which women had been confined to the specific role of housewife because of their gender (Hannam 136-7). Second wave feminism strived for a united picture of women, one

under which all women could make their own choices and live their lives as they desired.

Unfortunately this proved to be difficult because women of different races, economic and social classes, and sexualities found it hard to relate to one another even when a common problem existed. Thus, when second wave feminism began to fade, post-feminism entered the picture.

Post-Feminism

The prefix post- implies that something has passed or refers to something that exists after something else. Postmodernism is the movement that came after modernism, and so if post-feminism follows that same rule it means that feminism is part of the past. Post-feminism cannot follow that rule, however, because feminism is still a key part of American culture. Instead it is a different way of looking at feminism, an “active rejection” of second-wave feminist ideals (Hannam 161). Post-feminism has come to mean that because of the rights that women have already won, it is no longer necessary for them to assert themselves as feminist in order to feel equal. According to Yvonne Tasker and Diana Negra, the editors of *Interrogating Post-Feminism*, even the term “feminism” has become something of a taboo. People would rather refer to it as “the F word” which “underscores the status of feminism as unspeakable within contemporary pop culture” (Negra & Tasker, 3). Instead of striving for the collective woman ideal that comes from second wave feminism, post-feminism emphasizes the idea that women have choices, specifically in regards to being consumers. June Hannam explains that women, particularly young women, were encouraged to make choices in regards to “clothes and beauty products, and to react against the stereotype of the serious feminist” because

Tasker and Negra go on to explain that these choices women have are still very central to one group of women. The ability to decide on things such as career opportunities and parenting, as well as sexual choices, are the focal points of post-feminism (Negra & Tasker 2). However,

these choices are not automatically available to every woman. The choice to go to work is often not a choice for women who live in a lower class. It is more often seen as “an economic necessity” (Negra & Tasker, 2). Post-feminism applauds white middle class women (the ones who can afford to make the choice of whether or not to join the work force) while ignoring lower class women as well as women of color (who do not have that luxury). Due to this exclusionary view that post-feminism represents, Esch’s kind of narrative is one of the many that gets left behind in feminist discourse and the discussion of whether or not gender equality really has been reached. Post-feminism awards the woman who believes there is no need for feminism, who rejected the idea that you had to forsake femininity and hate men in order to be feminist (Hannan 161).

Post-Feminism’s Role in *Salvage the Bones*

Ward wrote *Salvage the Bones* during the “post-feminism” era and therefore Esch Batiste is a product of that mindset. Her mother dies when she is eight years old and she has no female friends or siblings to look to for guidance when she begins hitting puberty. What this means is that Esch grows up without a way to see womanhood firsthand. Instead, she learns what it means to be a woman from her brothers and their friends and applies those ideas, male ideas, to herself. She sees that she is useful to the boys only so long as she is willing to have sex with them, even though there are instances where it is implied that she would rather not. She does not make any indication that she enjoys the act but rather seems to not care about what she is doing because that is also the way that the boys view it. To them it is just sex, so Esch views it as just sex. Her view about sex begins to change when she and Manny begin having a sexual relationship; in her mind, she loves Manny and she desperately wants him to love her back.

Growing up as a girl is hard enough, but growing up as a girl in the situation that Esch is in is significantly harder. Her class and race leave her without the resources she needs, and growing up without her mother leads to her trying to figure things out for herself. She begins having sex at the age of twelve, with boys not much older than herself, and her attitude towards it is one of indifference, at least until she begins having sex with Manny. She likens sex to learning how to swim, saying it was “the only thing that’s ever been easy for [her] to do, like swimming through water” (Ward 22). From Esch’s descriptions of her first time with Marquise, and the times that she has sex with Manny, it can be argued that Esch is not an active participant in these sexual encounters. Each action is done to her by the boy, and not the other way around. Marquise asks to touch her breasts and then see her genitals, and from there he begins having sex with her. Esch recalls that she let him have sex with her because “it was easier” (Ward 23). The role that Esch plays in these encounters is closer to that of a rag doll, as she does not ever recount being the one to initiate or to want sex. That begins to change with Manny.

Whereas before Esch’s attitude bordered on apathetic, with Manny she looks forward to seeing him, to being with him. She views their encounters as more meaningful than any of the others because even though he is so “beautiful” he continues coming to her for sex (Ward 16). She interprets this as genuine feeling and responds in kind by giving him not only her body (what she calls her “girl heart”) but her love (her other heart) as well (Ward 16). She also becomes more of an active participant with Manny, because she wants him to know that she loves him. It is not mentioned in the book whether or not she has ever said no to Manny or to anyone else before, so this is how Esch shows any sexual choice. By being with Manny as an active participant and by not sleeping with anyone else, Esch takes the beginning steps to

controlling her sexual identity. After she finds out she is pregnant, she continues to grow and take control over herself as well as how she perceives womanhood.

Esch's pregnancy comes at what most would think is an unfortunate time. With Hurricane Katrina on the way and their situation made very clear, Esch begins to think about the "options" she has in terms of how to deal with the child growing inside her. She thinks about what other girls have said at school, how "if you're pregnant and you take a month's worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on...if you drink bleach...if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach," then she might be able to get rid of the baby (Ward 102). Esch does not have access to birth control and never has; the other options pose too much risk to her physical health and so the solutions that she has presented the reader with "narrow to none" as she puts it (Ward 103). Esch cannot make the choice to abort her baby or keep it because the choice was never there for her in the first place. Her economic situation prevents her from getting access to birth control, much less to something like abortion, but post-feminism states that these choices are available to all women and therefore fighting for them is no longer relevant. Through this lens of post-feminism, one that excludes those who cannot make certain choices, Esch could easily be considered a victim of her unfortunate circumstances.

Victimhood is never something that Esch clings to, however, because she grows up in an environment that does not allow her to be a victim. Growing up around men automatically puts her in the nurturing motherly role, based on the traditional gender roles that society expects of people. It should be noted, however, that Esch is also strong and is more than able to keep up with her brothers. She does not completely embody the idea of the traditional woman, which Lois Tyson describes as "weak, naturally emotional...nurturing, and submissive" (142). Her brother Skeetah acknowledges this at multiple points, most notably when the group is hanging

out after bathing in the river. Skeetah says, “you see how boss China is. You think the other girl on the Pit going to be weak” and while it is a compliment, at least in their eyes, it also reminds readers that Esch does not have multiple role models to look to (Ward 96). She has China, a dog who constantly seems to be switching back and forth between vicious and gentle. Skeetah claims she is stronger after giving birth because China has “something to protect” and therefore “know[s] what’s worth fighting for. And what’s love” (Ward 96). Skeetah’s words have a large impact on how Esch begins to see herself because he presents the idea that women do not have to become weak and submissive when they are mothers; mothers can and are strong, perhaps even stronger because of that fact.

The question of China’s motherhood and whether or not it weakens her is brought up several times throughout the novel, and Esch watches this discussion play out until it comes to a head during the dog fight scene. Most everyone keeps telling Skeetah not to fight China because of her breasts, because of the puppies, but Skeetah refuses to listen to them. When Randall says “you fight her tomorrow in that dog fight and Kilo win, them puppies die” all Skeetah replies with is “Kilo ain’t going to win” (Ward 151). He is so sure of China’s strength and fierceness that he ignores all the dangers of allowing her to fight, and Esch absorbs that knowledge into her perception of her own self. The fact that China has been brought up to fight does have an impact on how she treats her puppies though. When one of them contracts Parvo, she refuses to feed it and Skeetah eventually kills it so that it does not infect the rest (Ward 40 & 52). China can tell the puppy is sick and therefore she rejects it, which seems brutal from a human perspective, but Esch still finds herself asking China, “Is this what motherhood is” (Ward 130).

All of these moments that Esch narrates are pieces that make up Esch’s identity. She is collecting parts of herself and becoming a woman, much in the way that second-wave feminism

wanted to develop a collective idea of the word “woman” and what it meant. What makes Esch’s journey different is that she is collecting pieces that the average woman does not collect. The average woman, the one depicted in post-feminism as white and middle class, does not have to look to a dog for guidance or think about ways to force herself to have a miscarriage, because she cannot afford an abortion or birth control to prevent the pregnancy in the first place. The average woman cannot exist because to think of an average woman as one certain kind of woman with a certain set of experiences is to “leave hidden other exclusions based on race, class and sexuality” (McLaughlin 113). Esch is not the average woman, she is a poor black pregnant woman and it is because Ward acknowledges these factors that make Esch different that allows Esch to be a feminist character. Rather than conform to the universality of second-wave feminism, she rejects it without also rejecting the idea that she should be treated with respect by the men around her.

Esch struggles to find that respect, and an answer to that question of motherhood, throughout the entire novel. She finally begins to find these things when the hurricane is almost there and she gets to confront Manny. He knows that she is pregnant, because he felt her stomach while they were having sex at the basketball game, but Esch does not get a chance to talk to him about it because he leaves immediately after finding out (Ward 146). From that point on he ignores her, much like he did previously until he wanted sex. By this point Esch has grown tired of the way Manny treats her because he does not truly “see her” as she wants him to. She makes him see her in the bathroom at the basketball game, and like China did at the dog fight, she makes him know. When she attacks Manny she says, “I am on him like China” and that is one of the turning points for Esch. She gives in to that anger and she makes herself visible to the boy

that did not want to see her for what she was, which was a human being and not just a warm body.

This is how Esch becomes a complex and well-developed character; she starts off not knowing much about what it means to be someone in her situation, and by the end of the novel, she does not know everything, but she knows a lot more than she did at the start. She knows now that she does not need Manny to love her, she does not need to submit to him in order for him to see her. To be a feminist character in this time is to find your identity within your experiences, rather than strive to be someone outside of them. Esch does not try to do things that someone in her situation is unable to do. Instead, she takes control of her life in the best way she can by deciding to keep her baby and embrace the role of motherhood as she understands it.

Motherhood in Esch's world is fierceness and nurturing, it is blood and it is warmth, and Esch chooses to embody that rather than reject it.

Characters like Esch exist because people like Esch exist. Ward wrote *Salvage the Bones* because she wanted to write about "people of the South" and more specifically, "the experiences of the poor and the black and the rural people of the South" (Brookes). Ward drew on her own experiences surviving through Hurricane Katrina and also living in poverty with her family to craft the details of Esch's family, and these details are what makes Esch an important character because she is real. Girls like Esch exist all over the country and even the world, but the majority of literature caters to the universal woman that second-wave feminism tried to instill in society. Ward challenges that, and by doing so turns Esch into a progressive female character who overcomes her challenges in her own way.

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