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## **Intersectional Identity and Resilience in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones***

Author

Angelina Da Cruz Carvalho

Supervisor

Silvia Martínez Falquina

FACULTY OF ARTS

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## **Abstract**

In her works, Jesmyn Ward usually deals with her African American community so that her readers will be aware of their difficulties. This is seen in her novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which mainly focuses on the black women's difficulties with the example of a poor black teenage girl called Esch. This essay intends to demonstrate the importance of the concept "intersectional feminism," theorized by Crenshaw in 1989 and according to which in order to understand the situation of women of colour, it is essential to study all the elements of their identities together. To show this idea, this essay analyses elements of social and gender discrimination simultaneously, focusing on the character of Esch. Since she and her family are poor and black, they are excluded from the American dream and their behaviour is animalized in the struggle to survive Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, Esch lives in a patriarchal system where she has to adopt certain roles: she has to be a mother for her brothers, be responsible for the domestic chores and be a sexual object for men. To aggravate her situation, she has to cope with motherhood, since she is pregnant. However, in spite of all these difficulties, the ending offers some hope for the family. Esch decides to stay strong, thanks mainly to the inspiration of female figures, her brothers and a special friend. In this way, she is a great example of resilience, since she will be able to rebuild her own family.

## **Resumen**

En sus obras, Jesmyn Ward generalmente habla de su comunidad afroamericana para que los lectores se den cuenta de las dificultades de la misma. Esto se observa en su novela *Salvage the Bones* (2011), que se centra principalmente en las dificultades de las mujeres de raza negra con el ejemplo de una adolescente negra y pobre llamada Esch. Este ensayo tiene la intención de demostrar la importancia del concepto "feminismo interseccional," teorizado por Crenshaw en 1989, y según el cual para entender la situación de las mujeres de color es esencial estudiar todos los elementos que componen sus identidades en conjunto. Para demostrar esta idea, el ensayo analiza elementos de la discriminación social junto a la de género, con un enfoque en el personaje de Esch. Dado que ella y su familia son pobres y de raza negra, están excluidos del sueño americano y tienen que comportarse como animales para sobrevivir al huracán Katrina. Además, Esch vive en un sistema patriarcal donde tiene que adoptar ciertos papeles: tiene que ser una madre para sus hermanos, encargarse de las tareas domésticas y ser un objeto sexual para los hombres. Para empeorar su situación, tiene que lidiar con la maternidad, ya que está embarazada. Sin embargo, a pesar de todas estas dificultades, el final ofrece algo de esperanza para la familia. Esch decide mantenerse fuerte, principalmente gracias a la inspiración en las figuras femeninas, sus hermanos y un amigo especial. De esta forma, ella es un buen ejemplo de resiliencia, ya que será capaz de reconstruir su propia familia.

## **Contents**

Introduction: Jesmyn Ward and <i>Salvage the Bones</i> (2011).....	1
Chapter One: Social Critique.....	6
Chapter Two: Gender Critique.....	11
Chapter Three: Survival and Resilience.....	17
Conclusion.....	21
Works Cited.....	23

## **Introduction: Jesmyn Ward and *Salvage the Bones* (2011)**

Jesmyn Ward is an African-American novelist and a professor of creative writing at Tulane University (New Orleans, Louisiana). She was born in 1977 in DeLisle, a small town in Mississippi. As she has reported in an interview, she was bullied by her black classmates at the public school and by her white classmates at the private one she attended (Lavandera). This is an example of the complications associated to her identity. Ward earned both a B.A. in English in 1999 and a M.A. in Media Studies and Communication in 2000 at Stanford University. In the same year, just after having completed her Master's degree, Ward's brother was killed by an inebriated driver, and she decided to become a writer in his honour. In 2005, she received her MFA (Master of Fine Letters) from the University of Michigan, and just after that, she and her family were victims of Hurricane Katrina. Ward continued to work at the University of New Orleans, although she had to confront the struggle of the survivors during her commute (Cohen). This experience made her unable to write originally for three years, until she found a publisher for her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), a story of two high school graduates who struggle to find work (Cohen). This novel was an *Essence* Magazine Book Club selection and won a Black Caucus of the ALA Honor Award. Moreover, she received a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University and was also the John and Renée Grisham Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi. Her second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011), a story of a family during Hurricane Katrina, won the National Book Award in 2011 and an Alex Award in 2012. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (2013), which deals with the lives of her brother and four young black men who died in her town, was a finalist for the Indies Choice Book of the Year Award the National Book Critics' Circle Award. In 2017, she published *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,

which won a National Book Award. All these accolades show Jesmyn Ward's relevance and popularity, which is connected to the way her literature deals with real people in real situations, focusing on her own African American community.

Part of the relevance of *Salvage the Bones* (2011) is due to the way it deals with one of the most destructive hurricanes in the history of United States, Hurricane Katrina, as well as to the set of characters that the novel focuses on. Hurricane Katrina was formed on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2005 over the Bahamas as a category 1, but it grew rapidly to category 5, devastating places from Florida to Texas. It mainly affected the poorest states of the nation, that is, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, causing many deaths and homeless: "An estimated 1,833 people died in the hurricane and the flooding that followed in late August 2005, and millions of others were left homeless along the Gulf Coast and in New Orleans" (Zimmermann). Although the country tried to solve the different problems with a diversity of policies, the states continued to show the consequences of the catastrophe: "Ten years later, the region was still recovering from Katrina" (Zimmermann). Hurricane Katrina made a great impact on the country, and this explains its relevance in literature. There are works dealing with the disaster itself, as in *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2006) by Douglas Brinkley or *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (2006) by Jed Horne. Other works pay much attention to the kind of people it affected, as in *City of Refuge: A Novel* (2008) by Tom Piazza, *The Women of Katrina: How Gender, Race, and Class Matter in an American Disaster* (2012) by Emmanuel David and Elaine Enarson, or *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans* (2009) by Dan Baum. Moreover, this kind of literature can focus on the struggle of the people, as in *Zeitoun* (2009) by Dave Eggers.

Ward's novel is also relevant because it deals with the kind of people the hurricane affected the most, and that is why Ward decided to write about it. She wanted to put the readers in this kind of community, the one she comes from (Ifill). So, she writes about it by concentrating on the cruel reality of her own community, since for her, their stories have a universal relevance. Her brother died in 2000, four young black men from her community also died during the following year, and she and her family lived through Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Thus, she realized that she had to show this reality as she had experienced it. That is why Ward explains in the epilogue to her novel: "I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us" (*Salvage* 266). Moreover, she was inspired by the black characters of Faulkner, who according to her were a "failure" because of "the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion, how they fail to live fully on the page" (264).

*Salvage the Bones* (2011) is the story of the difficulties of a poor black American family in a fictional black Mississippi town, Bois Sauvage, during 10 days before Hurricane Katrina, the day of the storm, and the day afterwards. The story is narrated by Esch, a teenage girl who is 15 years old and lives with her father and her brothers: Randall (17 years old), Skeetah (16 years old), and Junior (7 years old). Since the death of their mother, which marked the beginning of their father's alcoholism, they have to face life on their own. Although Hurricane Katrina is approaching, their father is the only one obsessed with it, since the siblings have other personal preoccupations. Esch is in love with Manny, a friend of her brother Randall, who takes advantage of her and gets her pregnant. Since she is the only woman at home, she tries to find answers in

Greek mythology, in her memories of her mother and in China, Skeetah's dog. Randall is a basketball player who desires to achieve a scholarship in order to be able to play in college. Skeetah's main concern is his pitbull China, who gives birth to puppies; and Junior is the youngest, who is associated with their mother's death, since she died when he was born.

It is possible to connect this novel, especially the character of Esch, with feminist interests, for it shows a fight for equal rights between men and women, an idea that was achieved by women in the 1990s (Prasetio 1). According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, feminism did not take into account the idea of different identities in this fight (1242-1243), something indispensable in the case of women of colour. To solve this problem, Crenshaw coined the term "intersectional feminism" in 1989 to argue the need for the kind of feminism that analyses gender in connection with other identities (Vidal). To show these ideas, she divided her work on intersectionality into three parts: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. In the first case, Crenshaw refers to the difference in the experience of domestic violence and rape between black and white women. In the section about political intersectionality, she explains the way the politics dealing with feminism and antiracism increased the invisibility of the violence of black women. In the last part, she shows how these kinds of women are represented in society. As can be seen, black women are marginalized in different ways. Thus, when analysing the exclusion of black women, it is essential to bear all their identities in mind, that is, to consider their gender together with other elements conforming their identities, most notably race and class. As Crenshaw clearly puts it, "the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (1242).

This essay intends to show that Esch is doubly excluded as a black person and as a woman, and it is my contention that we need to attend to the two elements of her identity simultaneously. To analyse this I will show how Ward denounces the social exclusion of her characters, representative of the Black Americans living in poverty in the coast of Mississippi, by providing a realistic description of their conditions in relation to the concept of the American dream. Furthermore, I will focus on the character of Esch to show her situation in a patriarchal system, with a particular attention to the concept of motherhood. In this way, the readers' expectations of both concepts, the American dream and motherhood, are interestingly challenged. Through that challenge, Ward accounts for the resilience of her characters offering hope in spite of overwhelming difficulties for them too.



## Chapter One: Social Critique

I will start the analysis by paying attention to the social critique, which is based on race, class, and region, in connection to the concept of the American dream, which does not include poor African Americans, or other ethnic groups, for that matter. The American dream has been defined by Adams in relation to America as “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (XVI). This shows that it is based on the Protestant work ethic (PWE), which refers to the idea of achieving success through hard work, so, this dream can ideally be achieved by anyone (Levy et al. 76). In spite of this ideal, in *Salvage the Bones*, this concept has been rewritten in such a way that it proves that poor African Americans are excluded from this dream. This shows that there is a “gap between the American dream and the American reality” (Hartnell 209), as can be seen in the social conditions of the characters, the way these lead to their animalization, and the subsequent impact of Katrina on them.

The main characters’ social conditions are represented through realistic descriptions, most relevantly, of the houses the characters inhabit. Esch and her family are part of a poor black community in the coast of Mississippi and they know how difficult this kind of life can be. Interestingly, though, Esch presents their poverty as an assumed part of her life, “of her reality” (Williams et al.). She and her family live in the South of Mississippi, a very poor area, as the descriptions of the houses reflect. As a sample, Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph’s house, that is, Esch’s grandparents’ house, and its surroundings are described as having “fleas” and “scummy puddles” (Ward, *Salvage* 58). These and the following descriptions of the house do not present a positive image of the environment: “The screen door has long disappeared, and the front door

hangs by one hinge. I have to push the wood, which flakes away to dust in my hands, and squeeze sideways through cobwebs tangled with leaves to get into the house. The house is a drying animal skeleton” (58). This metaphor comparing the house with a “drying animal skeleton” transmits an image of something dead, that is, a negative image of their conditions. Another example of this idea is the Pit, their own house, which was built on the same area, and therefore, they suffer from the same deteriorating conditions: “A magnolia on the trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit, where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling” (94). The narrator describes the Pit with negative adjectives and with a synecdoche (“everything else”) to refer to themselves, since they are the ones who have to fight and survive in these conditions.

However, to further the contrast of this family with the promises of the American dream, they lack supplies for their survival, since they have a lack of wood and food, and misuse their only source of escape, cars. They start filling the holes, but they do not have enough wood, and so, the light of the sun goes through: “Randall is trying to fill the holes in the wood, but he can’t. There isn’t enough wood. Light cuts through the house, slinky and thin as electricity lines from the chinks of exposed glass” (Ward, *Salvage* 188). This description can be related to another passage in the book, when Esch compares their own house with a white family’s, in such a way that this comparison emphasizes their own poverty: “The boards of the [white family’s] house are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids” (208). In addition, their refrigerator does not have enough food for four people and it is totally unprepared to sustain them through Katrina, as Esch’s description shows: “There are six eggs in the refrigerator. A few cups of cold rice.

Three pieces of bologna. An empty cardboard box from the gas station that holds chicken bones sucked dry. A half gallon of milk. Ketchup and mayonnaise” (189). Cars are also used to denounce these characters’ conditions. Cars have been traditionally understood, according to Hartnell (205), as symbols of escape and freedom, and this critic explains that having a car is a requisite for “daily survival” (205). Therefore, since many black people did not have access to them, cars have exerted negative effects on them: “disproportionate numbers of African Americans were left stranded in New Orleans in the late summer of 2005, because they did not own or have access to a car” (205). Although in the case of *Salvage the Bones*, people do have cars, they are not used for their intended purpose, but rather they “are often parked, or going nowhere in particular” (206). In other words, their social conditions, that is, their poor houses and lack of supplies, show that they are not the part of the American dream they are supposed to symbolize.

Regarding the descriptions of the characters, they are represented through animalization, as it is shown in their behaviour and the way they speak. In this way, there are “parallels between humans and creaturely characters” (Crownshaw 226), mainly in connection to fights. The chapter called “The Seventh Day: Game Dogs and Game Men” is the best example of this similarity between humans (“men”) and animals (“dogs”). By using the same adjective, “game,” for both dogs and boys, both groups are paralleled in the idea that they are wild. In the case of the boys fight, this idea can be seen during Randall’s game, when all boys start behaving like animals hitting one another:

Big Henry reaches out to grab Skeetah, but then Manny has pushed his cousin back into Skeetah, volleyed him like a ball, and Manny is punching Skeetah, and Marquise is on Manny, and Big Henry slides his body in between them as a

barrier, to stop it all, but then Rico punches him, and they are brawling, falling down the stairs, ripping the crowd like fabric. (Ward, *Salvage* 150)

In the case of the dog fights, the fights are even more cruel, since the descriptions of the barbaric events are “full of animal and human bodies bitten, bloodied, and broken” (Travis 221). Esch uses strong verbs, as in “He bites” (Ward, *Salvage* 173), “the brown-and-white still sinks his teeth” (164), and similes, such as “sinks his teeth into her leg like a stapler” (164), which show the cruelty of the dogs. An idea that is complementary to their fighting is the kind of language they use, which is full of swear words: “Fuck you!,” or “You a dirty motherfucker!” (150). This contributes to their representation as animals, and the characters themselves are aware of this, as Skeetah shows when he says “We savages up here on the Pit” (95). Moreover, the ellipsis of “are” (we are savages) shows that these characters come from a low class, since they use non-standard English. All these descriptions of their behaviour and language show the parallelism between dogs and boys in terms of their wildness. The characters have to behave like animals because they have to fight against their conditions in order to survive, and the only way to do this is through violence.

These characters are presented as animals mainly because they have to face their social conditions and this explains why the consequences of Katrina were so horrible for them. Jesmyn Ward is able to write about Hurricane Katrina in such a realistic way because she lived through it. She comes from a working-class family and lived in this kind of community, so, she explains why it was so difficult to escape from these situations: “I live in this really small community in Southern Mississippi where you don’t evacuate, and you have never evacuated because there are too many people in your family to evacuate” (Ifill). She also explains that the aftermath was hard for her

and her family, describing “their desperate search for shelter and subsequent dismissal by white neighbors, and their eventual struggle to come to terms with the devastation wrought by Katrina” (Marotte 207). These ideas reveal that her own life has been the inspiration for her writing. In the novel, the characters try to face the hurricane, but they fail. When the hurricane is getting closer, the characters try to protect themselves by covering the windows, but it is not useful: “The family covers the windows in order to minimize the damages, but that is all they are able to do, and still, they are limited” (Odgaard 11). They cannot escape from this situation because of the idea explained by the author and their social conditions, which prevents them from “muster[ing] the resources to escape destruction” (Clark 343). Therefore, the result is that the hurricane devastates many structures and this is presented in a lyrical way by using similes to show the devastation: “the elementary school is smashed flat as a pancake” (Ward, *Salvage* 249), “a trailer park looks like a stack of fallen dominoes” (250). Thus, the characters cannot aspire for the American dream because of their social situation. They live in penurious conditions determined by where they live, a poor area in the South of Mississippi; their houses’ conditions, their lack of supplies, and misuse of cars for survival. These conditions determine their behaviour and language and this explains their representation as animalized and outcasts. All these ideas determined the horrible impact of Hurricane Katrina on them.

## Chapter Two: Gender Critique

In this chapter I will show that although the social critique based on race and class demonstrates the exclusion of these characters, when talking about black women it is necessary to combine these ideas with gender. This is why I will connect the social critique with a gender approach, mainly focusing on the character of Esch, who has to face the problems derived from her being a woman, as well as an expecting mother. In addition, far from limiting the representation of motherhood to simple or romanticised images, Ward offers an ambivalent view on motherhood which contributes to the exploration of gender issues.

Regarding womanhood, nowadays it is often said that women do not have to face so many difficulties because of their gender: “Women have a chance to get [a] better life because they are not trapped on [sic] patriarchal system” (Prasetio 24).<sup>1</sup> However, in the case of poor black women there is a connection between womanhood and their social conditions, since the union of these ideas restrict their freedom. Therefore, it is clear that in these communities the patriarchal system is still functioning: “in the US, the patriarchy [...] [is] still working in black woman’s life” (2). This idea is clearly seen in the character of Esch. She lives in a patriarchal system and that is why she has to act as she is expected in this kind of system. She has to behave like a mother, since the siblings do not have one, by taking care of her brothers and doing the domestic chores. Moreover, she is also expected to be the sexual object of men.

Since the siblings have lost their mother in an early age of their lives, there is a rupture of the basic relationship between mother and siblings. It is possible to think that they still have the other leading figure, that is, their father. However, the death of their

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<sup>1</sup> However, this idea can be questioned, since nowadays some women still continue suffering from various levels of discrimination.

mother has also affected their father, who is described with the synecdoche of “cans and bottles,” which shows that he is an inebriated, and so, the figure of example, Daddy, is not a suitable example at all: “Cans and bottles, mostly beer, lay about him like smaller versions of himself wherever he was” (Ward, *Salvage* 133). Thus, if he cannot take care of himself, it would not be possible for him to take care of his children. In this way, it is Esch’s responsibility to take care of her own brothers: “Randall and Esch have served as Junior’s default parents, raising him from a baby when they themselves were only children” (Kellogg), and of the domestic chores: “After Mama died, Daddy moved the clothesline to a closet tree, but he didn’t tie it tight enough, so when Randall and I wash clothes and hang them out with wooden clothespins, the line sags, and our pants dangle in the dirt” (Ward, *Salvage* 108).

Furthermore, it is relevant to note how Esch is treated like a sexual object, since she lives in a patriarchal system and is under men’s domination. This idea is seen in the sexual life of Esch, who started to please men’s desires when she was 12 years old. Thus, Esch is considered to be a sexual object for men, and she mentions “the girly heart that, before Manny, I’d let boys have because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it” (Ward, *Salvage* 16). As Odgaard (5) states, Esch gives boys the right of treating her like an object by acting in a passive way, as her choice of the verb “let” reveals. That is mainly because she is aware of the kind of community she lives in, and thus, she is defenceless and feels that she has to please men, that she has no choice.

Nevertheless, through the novel, Esch explains that she is in love with Manny and it can be interpreted that she thinks that this relationship will be different from the others, that is, that she will not be treated like an object by him: “Although Esch has been sexually active since the age of 12, Manny, a friend of her brother’s, is the first

man she's fallen for" (Kellogg). However, this relationship is based on sex and the condition of the patriarchal system is not challenged but reinforced. Manny just searches for Esch when he wants to have sex: "he has pushed me back into the stall, closed it behind us, grabbed my arms and turned us so that he is sitting on the toilet" (Ward, *Salvage* 145). When he discovers that she is pregnant, he despises her: "he is throwing me up and off of him" (146). This shows that Esch is just the object of his desires, that he is using her but does not care for her at all. Hence, the patriarchal system in which Esch lives makes her have certain obligations, such as her own brothers and the house, but she is also sexually objectified by men.

As aforementioned, this sexual relationship with Manny ends up with Esch pregnant. Thus, she not only has to face the problem of being a woman, but also the issue of motherhood, which Esch initially perceives as something negative, being so young. Being such a young mother in this poor community is something undesirable because there are no options, no choices. Esch is quite aware of this idea and that is why she describes her pregnancy in this way: "The terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach, eating all the fallen pine needles" (Ward, *Salvage* 36). She thinks about the different options, such as taking "a month's worth of pills" (102), or even risking her own life, by "drink[ing] bleach" (102), "hit[ting] yourself really hard in the stomach" (102) or "throw[ing] yourself on the metal edge of a car" (102). However, she concludes that she does not have options because she is a woman, but also because she is poor: "These are my options, and they narrow to none" (103). Therefore, as Odgaard explains, both her womanhood and her poverty affect her negative view of pregnancy (15).



Without an alternative, Esch has to accept her motherhood and searches for answers in the different role models presented through the novel, that is, her own mother, but also the dog China, Medea, whose myths she reads, and even Hurricane Katrina. Esch relates her own mother with a sense of loss and horror. Although the novel is located in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, her mother gives birth at home, which is due to their poverty (Marotte 210). This scene of her giving birth to Junior is perceived with horror by Esch, who remembers her mother “straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides” (Ward, *Salvage* 4). When Junior emerges, her mother loses strength and is taken to the hospital, but she will never return. The only positive images that Esch has when connecting her mother with motherhood are her recollections, which give her some comfort, since her mother used to take care of them very well: “When we were younger and Mama had to get us up in the morning for school, she would touch us on our backs first. And when she felt us twitch under her hands, felt us more toward morning, she would softly tell us to wake up, that it was time for school” (114-115).

However, since her mother is dead, Esch tries to find answers in other role models, but all of them are connected with violence. In the case of China, the novel starts with her image giving birth to puppies, but her attitude towards her puppies is described with cruelty, for she even eats one of them: “China snaps forward, closes her jaw around the puppy’s neck as she does when she carries him, but there is no gentleness in it” (Ward, *Salvage* 129). Her violence is also seen when she fights against another dog named Kilo, and Esch describes it with a metaphor that compares China’s teeth grabbing Kilo with a “mousetrap,” which usually kills mice: “Her jaw is a mousetrap snapped shut around the mouse of Kilo’s neck” (176).

Another motherhood model for Esch to reflect on is Medea, whom she learns about in the book she is reading about Greek mythology. The book refers to the myth of Medea and Jason. Medea, daughter of King Aetes of Colchis, fell in love with Jason, who came with the Argonauts to claim the Golden Fleece from the king. Due to her love for him, she helps him in his quest as long as he would take her with him. However, Jason betrays her by leaving her to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth, and finally Medea murdered their children in revenge (“Medea”). In this way, Esch is comparing herself with Medea, and Manny is compared to Jason throughout the novel. When Jason has what he wanted, he leaves Medea, just as when Manny has used Esch as a sexual object and realizes that Esch is pregnant, he leaves her. Thus, as Medea feels betrayed by Jason, Esch feels the same way about Manny: “he is Jason betraying Medea and asking for the hand of the daughter of the king of Corinth in marriage after Medea has killed her brother for him, betrayed her father” (Ward, *Salvage* 172).

Moreover, Katrina is represented as a mother, as Esch explains at the end, and she is directly connected with violence too. Katrina is the symbol of water, that is, it can represent life, but also death. Although Katrina devastated the communities, as it has been explained before, it does not kill Esch and her family, but has left them to survive on their own: “She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes” (Ward, *Salvage* 255). Hence, with all these role models connected with violence, Esch has to decide what kind of mother she will be. She does not only have to face their precarious social conditions, but also the fact of being a powerless woman in a patriarchal system. In this way, her main responsibilities are her brothers and their home; and to aggravate the situation, she is pregnant as a

consequence of her being a sexual object of men. Without a mother or a caring father, she searches for her own models in China, Medea and Katrina. Finally, she decides to stay strong, to make the best from the complicated situation, and tries to be the best possible mother. She will also count on the support of her brothers and a male friend for this, in such a way that she realizes she is not totally alone in her difficulty.

### **Chapter Three: Survival and Resilience**

Although Esch's family has to face many difficulties, she is the one who has to deal with more problems, since she not only has to confront adverse social conditions, but also gender issues which additionally complicate the situation. To face these problems, she decides to be strong and her resilience is more emphasized at the end of the novel, mainly thanks to the resistance and support of her brothers and their friend Big Henry. In this way, she and her family will be able to restore the family itself. A close analysis of the novel shows how Esch changes from having a passive role to an active one, by choosing to fight in order to be able to rebuild the family.

Esch is aware that she has a passive role in her community, but at the end she decides to transform herself into an active character by choosing to fight. As aforementioned, being a woman in this kind of community is not an easy task. Since Esch lives in a patriarchal system, her position is under men's and she accepts to adopt this passive role. She behaves like a mother, by taking care of her brothers and doing the domestic chores, and like a sexual object to Manny. Nevertheless, reaching the end of the novel, Esch changes to an active character. She tells Manny that he is the father of her baby, but he denies it. This negation makes Esch realize that her relationship with him simply reinforces her subordinated position to men, and that is why she decides to react with violence, just like her role models China and Medea, against Manny: "I am slapping him, over and over, my hand a flurry, a black blur. His face is hot and stinging as boiling water" (Ward, *Salvage* 204). She understands what she actually means to him, that is, merely a sexual object, as he suggests: "How you come to me saying something's mines when you fuck everybody who come to the Pit?" (204). In this way, Esch fights back, using violence to reaffirm herself and gaining empowerment so that

she will have hope in her own future: “*Tomorrow, I think, everything will be washed clean. What I carry in my stomach is relentless; like each unbearable day, it will dawn*” (205).

This need of fighting to have hope for a better future is reflected in the title of the novel. Ward explains in her epilogue that the word “bones” refers to what remains after disasters (*Salvage* 264), but that they should not surrender, but rather have hope to continue life. For continuing having hope they should be “savage,” a word that indicates agency, even if it may be agency outside the “civilized” norm. In a way, having described their life conditions in detail, Ward may be challenging the meaning of savage altogether, blaming the circumstances outside these characters’ control. Savage is also connected with the other word of the title, “salvage,” for, as Ward also explains in her epilogue, “the word *salvage* is phonetically close to *savage*” (264). In her community, this word is seen with prestige, since it is connected with “fighter,” someone who struggles against every difficulty to stay alive: “For us it means that you’re a fighter and that you’re a survivor. And that you’ll do what you need to do in order to survive” (Hartnell 212). Thus, in her epilogue Ward emphasizes the idea that they only need their “hands,” “feet,” and “head” (*Salvage* 264) when fighting, and no tools are needed. This explains the presentation of characters through animalization, since they need to be savage to survive: “Survival is never pretty; it is savage” (Travis 221). Thus, Esch’s behaviour towards Manny is justified. She acts like a savage using violence against him so that she will no longer be his sexual object. In other words, her behaviour is probably the only choice in her circumstances, and the blame is placed on the sexist behaviour of the man.

In addition, it is essential that the characters continue to fight so that they can rebuild their own family. Although many houses of the community have been devastated by the hurricane and China is lost, they have hope and are willing to fight against anything that can come. Thus, the novel ends with hope, offering an image of the siblings and their friend Big Henry waiting for China, lost during the hurricane, since they expect her return, they have hope. In this way, Esch is not alone, but with her surviving family and Big Henry. Although Katrina has destroyed much in the community and has caused the loss of China, the family still have the most necessary thing, that is, one another: “They cannot evacuate as their white neighbors do, but they have each other, and that becomes the key to their survival” (Williams et al.). Moreover, Esch counts on the help of Big Henry, who was always fond of her, so, when Esch tells him that her baby does not have a father, he responds that ““this baby got plenty daddies”” (Ward, *Salvage* 255), and that she has his help for whatever: ““Don’t forget you always got me”” (255), he says to her. This shows that Big Henry is the opposite of Manny, a different kind of man altogether, he will not treat Esch as a sexual object, but rather “will offer them comfort in the present and future” (Marotte 217).

This idea of rebuilding which we find at the end of the novel is connected with Ward’s own life and to her desire to write. Ward explains that after the hurricane, she was unable to write for three years because Katrina’s devastation strongly affected her: “All I saw was that this really traumatic thing had happened, and it made me realize that at any time a disaster can happen, and it can erase your home and your community” (Hartnell 216). Nevertheless, she realized that this kind of devastation can destroy but at the same time it is an opportunity to start again, a way of rebuilding: “You just have a new home, a new community” (216). As can be seen, Esch has to leave her passive role

for the purpose of fighting. For this, her strength will come from female figures she is inspired by, including the memory of her mother, and from her brothers and Big Henry's support, and with all this she will be able to rebuild her own family.

## **Conclusion**

In *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Ward transmits her experience through Hurricane Katrina, especially focusing on her own community, poor African American people, since they were the most affected by the disaster. Thus, the story is narrated from the point of view of Esch, who has to face her social conditions together with the problems of being a woman and a future mother.

This shows the importance of the intersectional approach first theorized by Crenshaw in 1989, according to which, in order to analyse the situation of black women, it is essential to consider the idea of a woman, that is, gender, together with class and race. This is the only way to avoid simplifications and generalizations that we would probably find if we attended to only one of those categories of analysis. The characterization of Esch is best approached in this way, from an intersectional perspective, since she is clearly excluded triply, because of her race, her class and her gender. Thus, we need to pay attention to all three categories in order to understand the conflicts she faces and how she responds to them. Esch is part of a black community, so, she is excluded from the American dream. She confronts their social conditions, living in a poor area, having to survive in a way that resembles animals and finding herself in a very vulnerable position in the face of the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, she has to confront the idea of being a woman in a patriarchal system, where she is under men's position, who expect certain things from her because of her gender. She has to be a mother for her brothers, do the housework and worst of all, be a sexual object of boys like Manny. To aggravate her situation, she gets pregnant and has to decide what kind of mother she wants to be.



Interestingly, Ward describes the situation in a way that makes readers question their expectations of two key concepts, the American dream and motherhood, challenging our assumptions about them, and in the end, the novel offers hope. Esch chooses resilience, that is, staying strong, and she even acts with necessary violence when she has to, fighting back. This resistance enables her to survive and to rebuild her own family, mainly with the inspiration of strong female figures and with the help of her brothers and friend Big Henry. Although this is not enough to fight against all the difficulties black women have to face, staying strong is the first step to make progress and this is why this novel provides a good example of resilience in spite of overwhelming difficulties.

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