

# Seeking femininity in others



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In order to affirm one's personal identity in the context of social structure, we often seek affirmation through relationships with other people. While these identities are constructed by our society, they play an influential role in the development of each of our identities. One example of these socially constructed identities is the affirmation of feminine beauty and the emphasis of its importance as part of women's identity in the United States. Women in western culture are encouraged to affirm their femininity through their relationship to other people, men in particular. Two literary examples of a woman's struggle with femininity in their personal identity are Esch, of Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Bride, of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. The ways that the protagonists in each of the books experience and affirm personal femininity are both universal to many women in the United States, yet also specific to their race, upbringing and age during the events of the novels. Through these differences the reader can better understand his or her own relationship to femininity in the context of the 21st century. Both Esch and Bride are women who seek themselves and their own feminine identity in others, as they have been taught to, by their parents and family, their sexual relationships with men, and their relationship to their own fertility.

It is widely believed in both cultural and scientific fields that the largest influence on a person's relationship to themselves is their relationship to their parents or guardians. They are the first people a child interacts with, and these relationship build a foundation for how that child might see her role in the world, for better or for worse. Both Esch and Bride have one thing in common: an absent parent. Esch's mother, having died in childbirth to her

younger brother, Junior, when Esch was just a young girl. With no female influence on her, Esch's self image in the book reflects her search for the femininity that was never taught to her before her mother died.

Demonstrating her lack of a personal female nurturer, Esch contemplates what to do when she discovers that she is pregnant. She considers going to a clinic, but is at a loss for who she could talk to. "Who would bring me?" Esch thinks, "Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets that I am a girl?" (STB 102). In this short line it is understood that Esch cannot turn to anyone in her life, for to announce her pregnancy would reveal her womanishness, something she struggles with seeing within herself, and that her father has never been able to understand. Bride, on the other hand, who has a torrid relationship with her mother and an absent father growing up, only ever wanted validation. When she confronts her lover, Booker, after having been apart for months, he demands to understand why she lied to a prosecutor in childhood to falsely accuse a teacher of child-molestation. She replies to him, "'So my mother would hold my hand! ... And look at me with proud eyes, for once'" (GHC 153).

Another way we see our characters' feminine affirmation is through sexuality and sexual relationships with men. The act of sex is such an instinctual phenomenon in human biology that it is no wonder that both Esch and Bride seek to understand their own beauty and femininity through sex. For Esch, sex gives her the power of the goddesses that she reads about in her mythology book. When she is with Manny, the boy who has impregnated her, Esch gives herself over to him both physically and emotionally. "He was peeling away my clothes like orange rind," narrates Esch. "He wanted the

other me. The pulpy ripe heart. The sticky heart the boys saw through my boyish frame, my dark skin, my plain face. The girly heart that, before Manny, I'd let boys have because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it. I'd let boys have it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved" (STB 16). When Esch has sex, it affirms that she is desirable, wanted, by men because she gives these boys what they so desire, and they are grateful to her for this. Similarly, Bride sees through the motives of the men she has been with in the past. " Men leaped and I let myself be caught," says Bride:

For a while, anyway, my sex life became sort of like Diet Coke - deceptively sweet minus nutrition. More like a PlayStation game imitating the safe glee of virtual violence and just as brief. All my boyfriends were typecast: would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes, players waiting for my crotch or my paycheck like an allowance; others, already having made it, treating me like a medal, a shiny quiet testimony to their prowess. Not one of them giving, helpful - none interested in what I thought, just what I looked like. Joking or baby-talking me through what I believed was serious conversation before they found more ego props elsewhere (GHC 36-37).

Whereas Esch believes that she is in total power over the boys she is with, Bride, an older and more mature character, understands that she allowed the boys she was with to take advantage of her beauty and her money. Esch doesn't realize or feel that she is being taken advantage of, quite the opposite. Although both characters see power and affirmation in their sexuality, they also struggle with how to use that power, to what extent, and

at what point the power they retain becomes the power they give over to these men.

Femininity is something that is also inherently a part of childbearing and motherhood. While contemporary society has begun to accept different lifestyles of women that do not necessarily include having children, it is still widely expected of women to grow a family in the traditional sense. There are archetypal beliefs about women who have children, and what motherhood means. For Esch, she worries that having a child will mean weakness. When Manny says to her brother, Skeetah, ““ But you know China ain’t as boss as she used to be ... any dog give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don’t think it. Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female.” Although Skeetah shoots back at Manny with a counterargument that “ to give life is to know what’s worth fighting for. And what’s love,” Esch has taken this comment by the father of her unborn child as a slight. She thinks to herself, “ Does Manny think that of me, that I am weak? That there is a price to this body that swallows him, that pulls at him until he has nothing left? Is Manny glad because he will never have to pay it?” (STB 96). Because Esch is only a teenager, she is afraid of what will become of her and her child. She knows that this was a mistake, and is ashamed for her foolishness in her unplanned pregnancy, because she knows that raising a child at her age will be difficult. By contrast, Bride’s pregnancy, which is revealed at the end of the novel and underscores the love between Bride and her lover, is viewed as a gift to them both, in a glorifying tone: “ A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment.

Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe" (175). With this, the novel closes Bride's narrative. Every new parent believes they will be able to protect their child from the cruelties of the world. Whereas Esch fears she will be weakened by this pregnancy, Bride believes that the power from becoming a mother will make her power indestructible. Both of these come from inherently incorrect views of what it is or could mean to be a mother, which are perpetuated by society and those around the two characters.

Esch and Bride are two characters who beautifully exemplify the female experience. Although the two characters are different in age, socio-economic background, and geographical location, they are alike in so many ways. When Bride looks back on her youth, it is almost as if she is looking at a version of Esch. There is so much to learn from these characters' views of their own femininity, and therefore how our society views femininity and expects of femininity. It is through other people that traditionally we define femininity. By the end of both novels, however, we see that both characters have, to an extent, internalized the societal value placed on their own femininity. However, we also see that both bride and Esch have decided to shape the construct of femininity for themselves, in their own unique and personal way. Through this, the reader can understand his or her own relationship to femininity.