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**Marginality and Disasters: Narrating the Debilitating Realities of Contemporary Life in**

**Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones***

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**Abstract**

*Every year hundreds of natural disasters occur all over the world which imperil the lives of millions of people. It has been found that the people belonging to marginalized groups are more vulnerable to the impact of the disaster. In the Gulf town of Mississippi, the Black population was more vulnerable to the destruction caused by the Hurricane Katrina. The delay in relief supply further aggravated the existing social inequalities. Moreover, it also exposed the already existing racial divide in the United States. Jesmyn Ward, American novelist and Professor, deploys the fictional medium to represent the days leading up to the storm and the devastation wrought about by it. Her work *Salvage the Bones* (2011) is inspired by her own experience of the hurricane and of being Black in the United States. She intends to expose the racial divide in contemporary American society while at the same time highlighting the role of neoliberalism in exacerbating the divide. She writes with the intention of giving voice to the voiceless and ensuring that the stories of those who faced one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States do not fade from public memory. The present paper attempts to examine the trauma of the marginalized population in the aftermath of a disaster and explores the connection between race and ramifications of disaster as represented by Ward in her work *Salvage the Bones*.*

**Keywords:** natural disaster, trauma, race, social inequality

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Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophic natural disaster that struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005. It made its initial landfall on 29 August 2005 and caused widespread destruction to the coastal areas especially regions of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The city of New Orleans was worst affected because of its location below the sea level. It caused widespread flooding, loss of lives and large scale damage to infrastructure. The hurricane displaced thousands of people, many of whom sought refuge in shelters or went to other cities and towns. The response to Katrina was characterized by lack of coordination and preparedness at various levels of the government, resulting in delays and inadequate relief efforts. The aftermath of Katrina sparked intense scrutiny and debate over emergency preparedness, disaster response and urban planning in the United States. It called for reform in disaster management policies, improvement in infrastructure and the need for better healthcare. The devastation brought by Katrina exposed the social inequality and racial divide in the US. The majority of the population affected belonged to low-income groups and the African-American community. This highlights the disproportionate impact of the disasters on the marginalized population. The delay in aid and the unequal distribution of relief further exacerbated the existing inequalities. Moreover, Katrina also initiated discussions on climate change and its potential to aggravate the severity and increase the frequency of weather related events. The destruction caused by Katrina was covered by the media. The media reportage comprised of the cities and its citizens experiencing apocalyptic conditions. The media reportage amplified the discourse that the George Bush administration was slow and ineffective in responding to the disaster. Additionally, the media reports also highlighted the role that race played in exacerbating the impact of the disaster. However, soon media outlets began spreading false and exaggerated accounts of gang violence, infant rapes, and survivors plundering for food. Many media accounts also blamed the victims for their suffering and portrayed the the survivors as fiscally irresponsible and uneducated. It is for these challenges posed by media coverage that writers and filmmakers felt the need to document victims' experiences. Ann Keeble notes that the Katrina texts focus on human stories of disaster and

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give voice to the voiceless. Author P. Smith says that she felt the need to write about the hurricane because most people affected by the Hurricane were poor and Black and this made the tragedy less significant. Jesmyn Ward states that she wrote about Katrina because she felt angry at everyone who blamed the survivors for staying back and for choosing to return to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm. These writers also felt that the by the time they started writing, Katrina was already fading from public memory. Thus, the writers wanted to ensure that victims were not forgotten. Additionally, the writings also critique the the political and social structures that exacerbate the impact of the disaster.

*Salvage the Bones* (2011) is a work of fiction by Jesmyn Ward that examines the personal lives affected by Hurricane Katrina. The author had personally experienced the hurricane. She was at her home in her hometown DeLisle, Mississippi when the storm struck. She along with her family huddled in a car for survival as they were denied shelter by their white neighbours. She transforms this experience into both non-fictional and fictional narratives and represents what Hurricane Karina meant for their family and their community as a whole. *Salvage the Bones* revolves around the lives of the Batiste family and depicts their experience in the days leading up to the hurricane and during the hurricane. The account is narrated by a fifteen year old Esch Batiste who lives with her three brothers and an alcoholic father in the Pit which is the name given to their dilapidated lodging in Bois Savage, Mississippi (the fictional counterpart to DeLisle, Mississippi). She lost her mother when her youngest brother Junior was born and ever since has been the only female member of her family with no mother figure to look up to and her father often forgetting that she is a woman. Esch is an avid reader and often finds escape in mythological stories. She is has been involved sexually with her brother's friends since she was twelve years old. She says her sexual intimacy makes her feel in touch with her feminine qualities which she is not able to do otherwise as she is surrounded only by men and their masculine perspective. Her eldest brother Randall is a passionate basketball player and is aspiring for a basketball scholarship. Her brother Skeetah has a pitbull called China and he loves her dearly. She is not just a favourite pet but also has

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promise of prosperity associated with her litter of puppies whom Skeetah hopes to sell. Junior is the youngest of the siblings and spends his time burrowing in the earth beneath the house. Their father is clearly devastated by the loss of his wife and their impoverished state and in his inebriated state he transforms into a mean drunkard who doesn't like to be contradicted. The family is still coming to terms with the death of Esch's mother seven years ago.

The novel begins with the narrator recounting the birth of China's litter of puppies. As she witnesses, China deliver her puppies she is reminded of her own mother's labour during the birth of her younger brother Junior. Everyone especially Skeetah is excited as the puppies are born but when a stillborn puppy emerges, a sense of loss and pain permeates the joyous occasion. The struggle that the pitbul undergoes during the process of birth, and the fact that it reminds of Mama giving birth to Junior and losing her life in the process establishes some of the primary concerns of the novel such as motherhood, violence and loss. Also, Esch remembers that her father had reminded them that morning to help him prepare for the hurricane. It tells us that a hurricane is a part of life for people living on the Mississippi coast and how the families here are at the mercy of nature which makes its way into their lives unannounced and unwelcome. Amidst the birth of China's puppies and daddy's preoccupation with preparing for the hurricane, Esch learns about her own pregnancy which makes her feel sick and frightened. The lives of Esch, her Mama, China and other family members suggest the instinct for survival and the challenges it entails. The challenges are not only personal and emotional but also what they face as a community. These are reflected in the concerns and actions of the characters. For instance Esch, her brothers and their father go the abandoned house of her grandparents and salvage stuff from the place to put them to use in their own house. Also, Skeetah's devotion to China is coupled with his expectation of getting an income through the puppies. In fact, He kills one of the puppies to avoid the parvo germs from affecting the other puppies. After the puppy is killed and buried, he washes himself and burns his contaminated clothes. The need to kill the puppy is suggestive of the desperation to enable the other puppies to survive. And, the act of washing himself works on

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both a symbolic and practical level: he not only wishes to get rid of the contamination but also the guilt caused by the traumatic act of having killed a puppy. There are some other instances that highlight the extreme nature of poverty that the Batiste family lives in such as Skeetah stealing medicine to help his dogs survive and his inability to seek medical help to treat the injuries he sustained while doing so. For similar reasons Esch is not able to access resources to medically terminate her pregnancy in a safe manner.

The loss of the maternal figure is a personal trauma for the Batiste family. The mother kept the family together and nurtured them has led them to look for comfort in other areas. Ward demonstrates through her narrator Esch's statements that their mother's presence was a source of balance and peace in their lives. Esch shares a memory of her mother from a day that they spent on the beach and her mother catches a baby shark:

“She walked it tired, her arms big and round, strong under the woman fat. She coaxed it to death. And when it gave up, she hauled it in and let out a laugh that swooped up into the sky with the pelicans and flew away, wind-ready and wide as their wings. She cooked it in butter that night, soaked it in butter milk to take the wild out of it. When we ate it, it was tender, sea salty, and had no bones.” (64-65)

The memory demonstrates the warmth and harmony that characterized their lives before her death. All of her recollections about her mother be it taking biscuits from the oven or shopping for the kids from the market suggest that hers was a cohesive presence that kept them together and happy. In her absence, the family is starved for love, care and nourishment. When the mother was alive, they had fresh chicken, fish, eggs and vegetables. After her death, they depend on processed foods. Esch reflects that when they were younger, their mother would wake them up for school by gently touching them first and when they moved a little she would softly tell them to wake up. She says that after her death their father would knock at their door and shout at them to wake them up. She recollects the relationship that her parents shared:

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“Mama laid his outfit in clean layers for him on the chair sitting in the corner of their room every night, and Daddy would come up behind her when she was bending over the chair, put his arms around her waist, whisper in her neck.” (46)

Ward explicitly states that an important aspect of their lives was being perpetually prepared for disaster. Mary Ruth Morotte writes that disaster is a way of life for the Baptistes. They were always preoccupied with responding to it, grappling with it and emerging out of it. The narrator Esch remarks “Daddy’s crazy... obsessed with hurricanes... spent the entire summer pointing out the safest places in the house to crouch.” making Junior practice the drills he learned in school: “kneel, fold over your thigh, tuck your head between your knees, cover your neck with your bony fingers to protect the soft throat underneath.” (34) Daddy’s preoccupation with the hurricane is what introduces the element of vulnerability in the lives of the Batiste family and others living on the Mississippi coast. And, Esch recounting her mother’s death brings in the element of death in the novel. The mother’s death during labour while giving birth to Junior and her decision to opt for home births every time is a way in which she feels they can avoid medical bills. The birth of Esch and her siblings at home without any medical aid and the condition of their dwelling suggests their poor financial condition. Mary Ruth Marotte observes that if we take away the Ramen and other canned goods that they consume as a part of their unbalanced diet, these characters could very easily be living within the nineteenth century slave economy.

This delineates the vulnerability of the African-American family in the twenty-first century. Scholars have opined that little has changed for the poor sections of the African-American community living in the United States especially the Southern States. Ward, being a Black Southern Writer, explores the ramifications of poverty and racism in the American South. In her fictional work *Salvage the Bones* she reflects upon how poverty and race are intertwined and together increase the vulnerability to natural disasters. After establishing the impoverished state of her characters, Ward demonstrates that the impending Hurricane

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Katrina is just another in the line of many disasters for the African-American families living on the coast.

After situating her characters in the above mentioned personal context and social milieu, Ward highlights the significance of the impending hurricane in the lives of the characters. She shows Daddy to be endlessly preparing for the storm. He wants to fortify the house against the storm. In the course of the storm preparation, he even loses three of his fingers during storm preparation. Daddy, already incapacitated by his alcoholism, is further debilitated by this accident. This obstructs his preparation for the storm. The children now take over the storm preparations. Esch and Randall try to gather the food in the house for the difficult days ahead. Randal also insists that Skeetah gives up on his preoccupation with China and assist with preparation for the hurricane. They even try to salvage the stuff that remains after their wealthier neighbours have evacuated. Esch notices that even the birds and animals are making a flight away from the woods to escape the upcoming storm. The hurricane which is a regular feature of life on the Mississippi coast and was constantly on their father's mind has become a more real and tangible threat since it got a name. After few days, it was upgraded to the level of Category Five Hurricane. And, the family camps in the living room of their dilapidated house. Skeetah despite the opposition from the rest of the family takes Chima and her puppies in and tells Esch that everything needs a chance to survive. The next morning the speed and intensity of the wind increases and tree falls on their house leaving a hole in their ceiling. Eventually, water begins to enter the house through the floorboards and the vehicles including daddy's truck is floating in the water. As the water level rises, the Batiste family goes upwards towards the attic to escape the surge. When they realize that they can't survive the storm by staying within the house, they decide to step outdoors. Skeetah leads the escape and also ensures that Esch manages to escape safely as he is aware that she is harbouring a new life within her. The need to protect Esch and her baby is more important to Skeetah than keeping her pregnancy a secret. As they are navigating their escape, China's puppies are carried away by the storm and she moves away from the family

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to rescue them. Amidst the disaster that has engulfed the entire town, there is a personal loss that each of the characters have to navigate through: China loses her puppies, Skeetah loses China as she is borne away into the waters, Esch's pregnancy is revealed and the Batiste house is destroyed. As they survive the deluge and seek shelter at Big Henry's house, they realize that survival comes at a cost and they have more problems to grapple with. Esch has to deal with her family's knowledge of her pregnancy and her immediate future, Skeetah has to deal with the loss of China and her puppies with whom he not only shared a deep emotional bond but who were also a promise of a better future, Daddy has to deal with his ailing hand and the family has to rebuild their ravaged home. Esch comes to realize that though Hurricane Katrina has ravaged her town, destroyed her home and led to various personal losses, yet it has kept the will to survive alive and it will teach them to rebuild.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Jesmyn Ward grapples with the themes of pain and loss like her foremothers before her. African-American woman writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have created narratives such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982) respectively which revolve around the bleak lives of young African-American girls who are violated by people around them. They explore how pregnancy is a dark and scary experience for these women who lack personal, social and even medical support to help them sail through this period. Ward carries forward the subject of a young black woman who is exploited and left to deal with her desire and pain without any support from the gentleman in question. Ward's narrative presents how pregnancy and childbirth can become a beacon of hope amidst despair; the despair being caused by social circumstances of the protagonist and compounded by her family and community's vulnerability to natural disasters. Thus, anticipation, preparation and endurance of natural disaster becomes important to the subject matter of Ward's novel as she describes how the lives of her characters is shaped by Hurricane Katrina. The Hurricane Katrina is just another disaster for the family. The family has gone through various disasters including Hurricane Elaine seven years ago. During Elaine, they survived and derived emotional strength from their mother. Disasters such as



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Katrina and Elaine are defining incidents in the lives of her characters and shape their cultural identity and collective memory. As the storm approaches, Esch's maternal body comes into contact with the hurricane and enables her to recognize her internal strength. She overcomes the shame and societal labels and embraces the survival instinct. Also, as they encounter the storm together, they come together as a unit determined to protect each other. Skeetah in his determination to protect his sister has to relinquish his grip on China. After the storm subsides and they survive, Daddy, Skeetah, and Big Henry give her the assurance of protection and though she is still far from giving birth, she gives birth to a new version of herself. The hurricane then becomes a force that teaches her not only to survive but to embrace motherhood. Also, it gives them an opportunity to reclaim their bond with each other and come together as a family as they were when Mama was alive. Thus, Mary Ruth Marotte writes that Ward's characters do not simply survive but move on in a seamless manner to shift into their new roles, the roles which they could not conceive of before the storm. Ward, thus, presents the storm as an opportunity for the characters to come into their own. For instance Esch Baptiste, the protagonist, is a young Black woman plagued by poverty, neglect, sense of loss and lack of female companionship. Her predicament deprives her of a voice and she becomes someone who is passively drifting in a world dominated by boys and men. It is when she survives the Hurricane that she discovers her agency, embraces her pregnancy and understands her role as a mother in the community that is marginalized in more ways than one. Black motherhood is usually characterized by a sense of helplessness and grief and lack of agency. Ward, however, gives Esch the agency to understand her situation, discover her strengths and take charge of her life. She tries to replicate how their mother took care of them, derives strength from her reading and draws inspiration from the pitbul China. And, she finally comes into her own after she survives the Hurricane. As she represents the predicament of Esch, Ward focuses on the multiple burdens of an African-American woman arising because of being situated in patriarchal, racial and class-based context. As the author highlights the various restrictions on women's bodies, choices and

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sexuality that engender traumas of sexual violation and poverty, she also gives her female protagonist her once suppressed voice.

It is pertinent to note that mother figures are significant to African American writing and Ward carries forward the tradition but dismantles the existing narrative around them.

It is after experiencing the storm that Esch learns some valuable lessons, the most important being the realization that in the absence of the mother, all they have is each other. She understands that though a mother is important yet family and the community can also play an important role in caring and nurturing. Skeetah loses China to protect his sister during the storm, Big Henry takes in the Batiste family when they are seeking shelter and also offers assurance to protect Esch's child. This highlights the significance of community solidarity during a disaster.

Ward frames the narrative of the novel representing twelve days leading up to the storm. She depicts Katrina as an inevitable disaster the impact of which is compounded by the pre-existing socio-political predicament of Mississippi. Clyde Woods posits that through the circumstances surrounding the storm, the disturbing past of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi is reasserting itself. Critics such as Christopher Lloyd have suggested that as the flood waters of Katrina receded, the old racial demarcations of the city were exposed. In fact many are of the opinion that the poor of the South were abandoned long before the storm. Katrina did not create the inequalities of race, gender and class; it simply reinforced the idea that they were an important part of the American social and economic life. It is said that natural disasters do not discriminate but instead act as levelers. They don't single out victims based on gender, class or race but it must be remembered that these disasters do not occur in historical, social or economic vacuums. Also, the impact of these catastrophes exacerbate the already existing inequalities. Ward has portrayed this in a subtle manner through her narrative. In the novel, the narrator Esch's family home is located in a woodland clearing and the nearest white family in their neighbourhood is located on the top of the hills. The physical difference between the two locations makes a huge difference in the way they are affected by

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the hurricane. The African-American family is trapped in the lowlands and will succumb to the floods while the white family will survive as the water will take time to reach uphill. Moreover, the government response to the victims of the hurricane also reflected the racial divide. Also, the media representation of Katrina's aftermath reflected racial bias. This was also pointed out by the famous American artist Kanye West during his concert for the hurricane victims. He famously remarked:

"I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, 'They are looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.' And, you know, it has been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black.... George Bush does not care about black people." (West: 2005)

This statement by West set in motion the counter narrative to the initial narrative being propagated in the media. It also exposed the inaccuracy and exaggerated nature of the early media reports being circulated in the media. It also inspired artistic responses critiquing the response of George Bush and the government towards the people of New Orleans. American Songwriter Bruce Springsteen dedicated a song to George Bush referring to him as President Bystander and blaming his government's response for New Orleans' slow recovery post-Katrina. He wrote:

"me and my old school pals had some mighty high times 'round here/ And what happened to you poor black folks, well it just ain't fair / He took a look around, gave a little pep talk, said 'I'm with you' then he took a little walk."

Another popular artistic work called *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) highlights the institutional failures of the Government that aggravated the impact of the hurricane. The documentary also showed that the neighborhoods worst affected were those near the levees and all of them were African-American families. Thus, the element of race had a bearing on the the manner in which Hurricane Katrina impacted the people of New Orleans.

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Critics are of the opinion that the immediate artistic responses to Hurricane Katrina were more about the institutional failures of the federal government that exacerbated the impact of the the storm and the racial legacy of the American society that it exposed. It is for this reason that the experience of Katrina is perceived as cultural trauma. The theory of cultural trauma proposes that a traumatic event has the potential of disrupting the existing social order and collective beliefs and lead to a reevaluation of cultural narratives and social identities. Ward's narrative leads us into recognizing the profound impact of the storm on the collective consciousness, values and identity of the Black population inhabiting the Gulf Coast. Katrina not only caused physical destruction but also shattered the perceptions of security and trust in public institutions. Ward exposes the inequalities ingrained within the sociopolitical setup that made the poor and marginalized more vulnerable to the impact of the disaster. The Batiste family lives in poverty and lacks the resources to evacuate and adequately prepare for the impending hurricane. This exposes them to greater danger and leads to extreme hardship.

Jesmyn Ward also wrote an essay titled "We do not swim in our Cemeteries: a Legacy of Not Evacuating" which is a non-fictional account of Katrina inspired by her personal experience of the storm. She situates her family in a certain socio-economic context: poor, working class and vulnerable to natural disasters because of their location and poverty. She counters those who blamed the victims of the Hurricane for not heeding to the government warnings to evacuate. She asserts:

"My family prepared for Katrina like any other hurricane. We never evacuated so we didn't evacuate this time. For one thing, we couldn't afford to leave." (Ward:2015)

This immediately establishes the fact that they did not have the resources to evacuate and so they would not leave their homes. This highlights the significance of the idea that material resources are important if one has to shield themselves from the wrath of the disasters. And, because the poor are ill-equipped to handle disasters, they impact the marginal groups harder than they impact other social groups. In case of the author's family and community at large, the impact was worsened by the compounded effects of the intersection of race and class

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inequalities. She mentions that they decided to flee their grandmother's house when it was flooded with water and could no longer offer refuge to her family. They have to eventually seek shelter on a hill where a white family resided but the family refuses them shelter. She remembers:

“The small hill we were on belonged to some white neighbours. The neighbours emerged from the house to check out their pick up trucks and cars... They eyed my pregnant sister, my grey-haired grandparents and, I thought our black skin.” (Ward: 2015)

In her essay, Ward explicitly introduces the element of race and presents Katrina in terms of the racial tensions it exposed. On the contrary, in her fictional work *Salvage the Bones* the idea of race is expressed but in an inconspicuous manner. Similarly, her essay also points out the lack of Government initiative in helping the African-American victims of the hurricane. She recollects that all along the Government agencies were guarding malls and shopping complexes but did not make an effort to provide aid and assistance to the Black community which was worst affected by the storm.

“But we still wondered where FEMA was... In Gulfport, they were guarding the outlet malls and malls and the strip malls. Meanwhile, all along the Coast, they were guarding the large chain stores. Meanwhile, all along the coast, we were starving in our homes.” (Ward: 2015)

This presents the government ineptitude and institutional racism that marked the American response towards the victims of Katrina. So, in her essay Ward is openly critical about the Government and its dealing with the marginalized victims of the storm. However, when she treats the same subject matter in a fictional manner, her perspective changes from retrospective analysis of the disaster and its aftermath by a well-informed victim of the hurricane to that of a young first person narrator who has limited perspective and experience with respect to the hurricane and American society. Esch is a teenager who in impoverished neighbourhood of the Gulf Coast. She is pregnant, has no access to anything beyond her immediate reality and her perspective reflects her ignorance of the broader political and socioeconomic aspects of her country. This perspective gives Ward the opportunity to focus

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on themes that are more universal: themes such as motherhood, violence and sense of loss. Ward's novel begins with an account of birthing as China, the pit bull gives birth to her puppies. It introduces the themes of motherhood and survival in the face of all odds. China giving birth reminds her of her own mother's labour during which she also lost her life. And, it is both China's survival instinct and her mother's memories that help Esch embrace her own pregnancy and survive the disaster. The representation of Katrina is such in Ward's fiction that it does not act as a force to reveal the social inequality but as a force to cleanse and purge the world of the Baptiste family and any other families living through similar circumstances.

Ward's narrative also brings to our attention the environmental aspect of the storm. The environment both produced and suffered from the damage caused by the storm. Rob Nixon says that nature is also a victim of the violence caused by natural disasters. He also asserts that the marginalized communities are more likely to be disproportionately affected by the cataclysmic events. Also, the land they occupy is more likely to be devastated and plundered causing extended traumatization of the residents. This leads to a different kind of displacement. Rob Nixon explains that this kind of displacement refers not to the movement of people from the place of their belonging but to the loss of land and resources beneath them which makes the communities stranded in an area that is stripped of the resource that made it inhabitable.

*Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward incorporates the elements of race that were vital to the understanding the fallout of Katrina but at the same time it is an attempt to break away from the political and socioeconomic aspect of the storm. This becomes possible because fictional representation allows for a multi-dimensional processing of the disaster. It permits a shift from reportage and allows artists to creatively imagine a disaster. Glenn Jellenik writes that creative imagining allows an artist to tap into the truths that truth can't tell us, thereby highlighting the importance of stories. Salman Rushdie has stated that stories could convey truths that truth itself could not tell. Thus, when Ward creatively processes the narrative of

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Hurricane Katrina, she avoids explicit dealing with the concept of race and socioeconomic implications of government inaction. This enables her to adopt a more universal perspective to the disaster. Her characters belong to the African-American families, live in the poor neighbourhood of Mississippi coast but they rise beyond these immediate contexts by their humanity and universal appeal. And, Katrina is no longer limited to a disaster that affected the American South but a universal agent which leads to transformation of characters. Additionally, Ward's depiction of a Mississippian family abandoned by the US government is an indictment of the neo-liberal government not only in the US but all over the world. Moreover, creative representations such as this forge serve to forge connections between effects of white supremacy in different parts of the world.

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