

SUMMARY

BAD FEMINIST

ROXANE GAY



Summary of “Bad Feminist” by Roxane Gay

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Discover Why Being a Bad Feminist is Better Than
Not Being a Feminist At All.

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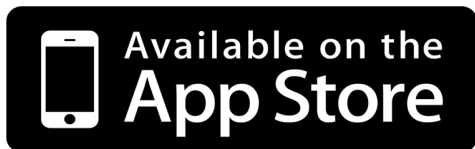


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Introduction

Today's society is riddled with music, television, and movies that damage the representations of women. We have singers like Robin Thicke who know "we want it," and rappers like Jay-Z who use the word "bitch" like it's punctuation. In movies, we often follow the stories of men. When women are involved, they are typically sidekicks or romantic interests. Rarely are women the center of attention. So what do we do? How do we bring attention to these issues? Many people might think the answer is feminism. But to Roxane Gay, feminism is largely flawed. This is because feminism is a "movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed."

Another problem is that feminists are too often associated with popular figures and people with the biggest platform and loudest voice. As a result, we forget the difference between feminism and Professional Feminists. For these reasons, Gay embraces the label of *bad feminist*. Gay recognizes that she is both flawed and human. She is not trying to be perfect, she may even have certain interests and opinions that go against mainstream feminism. She recognizes she does not have all the answers, but at the end of the day, she is still a feminist. When Gay was younger, being a feminist meant being an "angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person," and this caricature has been warped by those who fear feminism most. Gay herself feared it. It wasn't until she realized that feminism was about advocating for gender equality in all areas of life that she began to embrace it. Feminism has given her peace and has guided her writings, readings, and the way she lives.

Through her collection of essays, Gay aims to lead the movement of being a bad feminist. She examines race in contemporary films as well as the limits of "diversity." Like feminism, her ideas may be flawed but they are genuine. As Gay states, "I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in. I'm raising my voice to show all the ways we have room to want more, to do better."

The Harm in Reality Television

When you think about reality television, you might believe that you are getting a genuine, inside look at the lives of celebrities or average people across America. However, reality TV is simply a performance! Like many people, Gay loves watching that performance, it's one in which people reveal just how far they are willing to go and how much they are willing to compromise for something as fleeting as fame. Take a look at Bravo, VH1, and MTV programs like *Bad Girls Club* and *Sister Wives* in which women are often presented as caricatures and are reduced to awkward stereotypes.

As a whole, women are often the trophies of reality television as they compete in modeling competitions, *compete* for love, or take part in weight-loss challenges. They are often portrayed as having low self-esteem and longing for marriage. Furthermore, they are seen as unable to develop meaningful relationships with other women and are obsessed with a near-pornographic standard of beauty. Through reality television, women work hard to perform the roles expected of them, oftentimes playing shamefully warped ones. In *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* by Jennifer Pozner, Gay was forced to take a hard look at herself and why she enjoyed what she once thought of as "harmless entertainment programming." In reality, these programs are not harmless at all.

Throughout her book, Pozner reveals how women are exploited and largely conveyed as "catty, bitchy, manipulative, and not to be trusted." Even worse, the characters on reality television are just that...characters. These women are manipulated into becoming the worst versions of themselves and they lack the self-awareness needed to present their genuine selves. As a result, these characters are presented to the public as "real," reinforcing the idea that women must fit into one of the basic stereotypes. For instance, take a look at the "Celebrealty" shows like *Rock of Love* and *Flavor of Love*. In *Rock of Love*, women vied for the attention of rock star Bret

Michaels, while in *Flavor of Love*, women competed for the love of Flavor Flav of Public Enemy.

In each show, the women play the part of the bad girl, good girl, or good girl gone bad. Each one pretending that Bret Michaels or Flavor Flav is the center of their romantic lives, which is fueled by flowing alcohol, forced interactions, vicious conflict, stripper poles, and many more ridiculous scenes. Even worse, in *Flavor of Love*, women can't even keep their real names, forcing them to step into the constructed identities presented before them. Throughout the multiple seasons, women play the role of looking for love while the leading man artificially seduces the women while making it clear for the cameras that they aren't nearly as interested.

It seems as if the only connection reality television has to reality is that women are often expected to perform their gender, whether it's through how they present themselves sexually, how they behave, or how they conform. So why do we watch these shows anyway? Many of us say we watch them to feel better about ourselves, to reassure ourselves that we are not as desperate as other people in the world. But maybe reality television is more real than we realize. Perhaps we watch the shows because we see, more than anything, the raw reflections of ourselves through the caricatures on screen. Unfortunately, these portrayals of women show us just how superficial we can be, while simultaneously ignoring the wisdom and depth that women have to offer.

Rape Culture Has Normalized Men's Aggression and Violence

Today, we hear about crimes every day. But occasionally, we hear what Gay considers *atrocities*. One such atrocity that Gay remembers is that of an eleven-year-old girl who was gang-raped by eighteen men in Cleveland, Texas. There were so many horrors about this story: the victim's age, the number of attackers, the public's response, even the video that was taken during the attack itself. The article, published in the *New York Times* by James Mckinley Jr., focused on how the men's lives would be changed forever, how the town was being ripped apart, about how those poor boys might never return to school. But what about the victim?

There was mention of how the eleven-year-old girl, the child, dressed like a twenty-year-old, implying that perhaps she was "asking for it" and that it somehow *made sense* that eighteen men would rape a child. There were questions about where the child's mother was; meanwhile, there was no question about the whereabouts of the child's father while the rape was taking place. Overall, the tone of the article focused on the many lives that were affected by such a terrible event. It failed to mention, however, how the girl's body, not the town, was ripped apart. How the victim's life was being ruined, not the lives of the men who raped her. How could an author lose sight of something so seemingly obvious? Well, we can thank "rape culture" for this obvious oversight.

The phrase "rape culture" signifies a culture in which we are inundated with the idea that male aggression and violence toward women is both acceptable and *inevitable*. So what has led to this natural representation and acceptance of men? One reason may be the language that we have adopted in modern culture. We jokingly say things like, "My boss totally just raped me over my request for a raise." Another reason may be how we are inundated with sexual and domestic violence in television and movies. I mean, can you even think of a popular dramatic television series in which rape wasn't incorporated in the storyline somehow? Probably not.

It's almost as if we've become numb to rape because of shows like *Law & Order: SVU* which portrays all types of sexual aggression against women, children, and even men on occasion. In fact, when the show first aired, Rosie O'Donnell openly objected to the need for such a show; however, people were quick to dismiss her objections and the show has gone on to experience wide success, airing over fifteen seasons with no signs of stopping soon. Gay watches *SVU* religiously and has seen every episode more than once, so what might this say about her? She's not quite sure.

However, it's not just movies and television in which rape is normalized and accepted. We see this in politics as well, and oftentimes, the politicians don't help the cause. For instance, Indiana Treasurer Richard Mourdock, running for the US Senate in 2012 said during a debate, "I struggled with it myself for a long time, and I realized that life is a gift from God, and I think even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that is something God intended to happen." Again, women are seen as the recipient of God's intentions are expected to bear the burden of them.

Furthermore, former Missouri representative Todd Akin coined the term "legitimate rape" in a discussion about women's rights to abortion. According to Akin, if a woman was a victim of "legitimate rape," then her body would reject a pregnancy. Of course, this is scientifically impossible. Instead, it's important to note that there is no such thing as illegitimate rape. While we're at it, there's also no such thing as "honest rape," "emergency rape," or even girls who "rape so easy," as said by many other politicians in the past. Luckily, none of these people are in positions of power anymore.

Hollywood's Obsession with the Magical Negro

If you live in modern society, you will likely know the story of *The Help*. The novel-turned-movie is aimed to be an inspirational, charming, and heartwarming story depicting life in a racially segregated town in Mississippi. Of course, it can be all of these things...if you enjoy the condescending and racist depictions of black people. As the movie enjoyed widespread success, the book topped the Amazon bestseller list; however, the story did nothing to help solve the problem of racial inequality.

Set in the 1960s, *The Help* showcases certain Hollywood stereotypes like the “magical negro.” The magical negro is the black character who helps the protagonist in some way, usually by imparting wisdom the protagonist needs to move forward. Matthew Hughey states, “The magical negro has become a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption of and salvation.”

While the magical negro possesses a sense of *magic*, she always uses that magic to help the white protagonist. In *The Help*, the magical negro caricature is seen in the characters of Aibileen, Minny, and the rest of the black maids. They use their knowledge and strength to help educate the white characters, rather than themselves. Even worse, the movie also portrays the idea that the black maids need their white counterparts to save them. For example, Aibileen (a black maid) hangs a picture in her home of JFK. This was seen after John F. Kennedy attended the funeral of Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist. It's ironic, however, that Aibileen would choose to hang a picture of JFK alongside a photo of her deceased son and white Jesus rather than a picture of a black civil rights activist.

Another black maid, Constantine, is so devastated after being fired by the white family for whom she worked for over twenty-seven years, that she dies of a broken heart. “This gross implication is that her will to live came from wiping the asses and scrubbing the toilets of white folks. This white wish fulfillment makes the movie rather frustrating.” Furthermore, the movie depicts several black stereotypes. At one point, the black maid Minny is teaching Celia Foote how to make fried chicken and says, “Frying chicken tend to make me feel better about life.” Such a line shows how grossly stereotypical society still is today.

Lastly, men, both black and white, are largely absent from the movie. Apparently, white men are completely excused from taking any responsibility for race relations in 1960s Mississippi. In reality, white men were largely responsible for the sexual misconduct, assault, and harassment of black women. Additionally, the absence of black men plays into the stereotype that black men are absent in the lives of their wives and children. At the end of the day, *The Help*, among many films, shows the danger in writing across race. You see, the book and movie script were both written by a white man and women. In fact, some of the author’s depictions of race are downright insulting at times. For example, Aibileen once compares her skin color to that of a cockroach, better known as the most hated insect that you can think of.

Author Katherine Stockett doesn’t simply write about black women; instead, she caricatures black women, finding small bits of truth and genuine experience and “distorting them to repulsive effect.”

How Respectability Politics Won't End the Fight Against Racism

Today, there are many rules that black people must follow. You see, when a black person behaves in a way that doesn't fit the cultural ideal of how a black person should behave, then his or her authenticity of being black is immediately questioned. As Gay states, "We should be black but not too black, neither too ratchet or too bougie." In other words, there are unspoken rules of how a black person should think and behave, and these rules are ever-changing.

Of course, we do this for all people in society. Men shouldn't cry. Feminists don't shave their legs. Southerners are racist. However, black people are often held to a particularly unreasonable standard. Even prominent figures and celebrities are guilty of perpetuating stereotypes of how particular people should behave. For example, in an op-ed for the *New York Post*, Bill Cosby identifies apathy as one of the black community's biggest problems. He believes that if black people just care enough about themselves and their communities, then black people can reach a place where they will no longer suffer the effects of racism. More or less, he believes that if black people *act right*, then they will finally be good enough for white people to love them.

Another example is that of CNN anchor Don Lemon, who suggested five ways in which the black community can overcome racism. First, black people should stop using the N-word, black people should respect their communities by not littering, black people should stay in school, black people should have fewer children out of wedlock, and, young black men should pull their pants up. He even went so far as to provide evidence that white communities rarely have trash and litter on the ground and that sagging pants originated from male-on-male sex in prison. In other words, Lemon argued that the white, heterosexual man is the cultural ideal that black men should aspire to be like.

Unfortunately, this conversation about race in America has been ongoing. We constantly ask ourselves, “How do we prevent racial injustices from happening?” and “How do we overcome so many of the institutional barriers that only exacerbate racism and poverty?” According to Cosby and Lemon, black people can simply follow a prescribed set of rules that will end racism once and for all. This is called *respectability politics*, which suggests that there is a model (white) citizen that everyone should strive to be like. However, it’s dangerous to suggest that the targets of oppression are the ones responsible for ending it as well. That’s because people like Don Lemon have beaten the odds. For example, as a black man raised by a single mother, Lemon is now a successful news anchor for a major news network. As a result, he believes that if he can overcome and transcend the effects of racism, then everyone can.

Respectability politics, however, isn’t the answer to racism. You see, racism doesn’t discriminate and can be prevalent no matter how respectable, wealthy, educated, or high-class you are. For example, Oprah Winfrey, the wealthiest black woman in the world still experiences racism in her daily life. In July 2013, Winfrey traveled to Zurich to attend Tina Turner’s wedding. While there, she was informed by a store clerk at the Trois Pommes boutique that the purse she was interested in buying was too expensive for her. This isn’t a story about feeling sorry for Oprah, but simply one that reminds us that “racism is so pervasive and pernicious that we will never be respectable enough to outrun racism, not here in the United States, not anywhere in the world.”

In July 2013, President Obama shared some insights about racism that shed some light on how we might truly be able to see change. He began by sharing his own experiences with racism, but more importantly, he offered suggestions about how we might improve race relations in the United States. We can begin by ending racial profiling and reexamining state and local laws that might contribute to tragedies like Trayvon Martin’s murder. Lastly, we can find more effective ways to support black boys. While these suggestions were vague and Obama failed to mention black girls, he placed the responsibility for change on everyone. “We are, after all, supposed to be

one nation indivisible. Only if we act as such, might we begin to truly effect change.”

Racial Profiling and the Tale of Two Profiles

Let's take a look at Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who in early 2013 was identified as one of the two young men suspected in the terrorist bombing near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. As a result of the bombing, three people were killed and nearly three hundred others were injured. On August 1, 2013, Tsarnaev was featured on the cover of an issue of *Rolling Stone*. After the feature, the magazine became accused of glorifying terrorism and exploiting tragedy. Perhaps this is because the author decided to portray Tsarnaev, a young white man, as the "boy next door."

The author, Janet Reitman, discussed Tsarnaev as a "normal American teenager" and interviewed those who were close to him, such as his friends, neighbors, and brothers, all of whom expressed their shock to find Tsarnaev could be responsible for such a crime. Over and over again, he was described as "normal" and as a "beautiful, tousle-haired boy with a gentle demeanor, and soulful brown eyes." Overall, Reitman aimed to elicit empathy for Tsarnaev and reveal how he could turn from the boy next door to terrorist. This portrayal is simply another example of white privilege.

You see, when Trayvon Martin was murdered, he was also a "normal American teenager," he wasn't a criminal or a terrorist. He was simply a victim. A victim killed by George Zimmerman (who was later acquitted of all charges) because Martin fit the cultural ideal of what danger looks like. Even as a victim, Martin has never been portrayed the same way as Tsarnaev. Instead, media outlets reported on his recent suspension from school because of drug residue found in his backpack. But Martin did nothing wrong. In fact, when he was murdered, he was only armed with an iced tea and a packet of skittles. Even worse, Fox News attempted to explain how Martin may have used those same items as murder weapons.

George Zimmerman engaged in racial profiling, a law enforcement practice that is known to implicitly connect race to criminality. It's because of racial profiling that George Zimmerman felt justified in following an unarmed

young black man who was simply walking home, even after police informed Zimmerman not to pursue Trayvon Martin. But Zimmerman saw a young black man and believed he was looking at a dangerous criminal, so he hunted that danger down. “Racial profiling is nothing more than a delusion born of our belief that we can profile danger. We want to believe we can predict who will do the next terrible thing. We want to believe we can keep ourselves safe. It’s good that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, tousled hair and all. We need a reminder that we must stop projecting our fears onto profiles built from stereotypes. We need a reminder that we will never truly know whom we need to fear.”

Final Summary

Like humans, feminism is flawed and imperfect. And like Gay, many people stereotype feminists and buy into the inaccurate myths, believing they are “militant, perfect in their politics and person, man-hating, and humorless.” Gay once bought into these myths as well, but she now realizes the importance of being a feminist, even if it’s a bad feminist. Bad feminism is the only way she believes she can embrace both herself as a feminist and herself. At the end of the day, Gay considers herself a feminist and cannot deny the importance of advocating for the issues that are important to the feminist movement: the fight against misogyny, institutional sexism, pay inequality, violence against women, and more. As Gay states, “Like most people, I’m full of contradictions, but I also don’t want to be treated like shit for being a woman. I am a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all.”



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