

The B Word

Shanelle Matthews, *SaidIt.org*

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- ¹ I hated my American Fiction class. The professor, who always came to class fifteen minutes late, was blatantly sexist. And he led me to rethink hate language – through his use of it.
- ² One day in class, he was talking about the movie *Dracula*, and he saw fit to describe Winona Ryder’s character as a “bitch,” not once, but again and again. The rest of the class laughed at this unusual outburst, but I found nothing funny about his use of this sexist word. I wondered: is this appropriate, and do I have to listen to it? It seemed I was the only one in the class who was offended by the slur.
- ³ It was then that I realized this very nasty word was becoming more and more acceptable in society as a synonym for “woman.” The fact that this 50-plus year old “professional” felt perfectly comfortable expressing his contempt for a woman by repeatedly using the word *bitch* in class, and the fact that most of the students seemed to find it funny, confirmed my belief that gender specific insults are a norm in contemporary society.
- ⁴ Obviously the word “bitch” is not only being used by young America, but by people of all types. It is being freely used in television programs, on the radio and in publications. Even though the Federal Communications Commission does have “decency” standards regulating what can be broadcast, ... derogatory language that targets women isn’t filtered out. The FCC has defined broadcast indecency as “language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities.” But apparently, the b word is not considered “offensive as measured by contemporary community standards.”
- ⁵ Ironically, the more commonly a derogatory word is used, the more invisible it becomes. But since it is a word loaded with negative meaning, it is worth investigating what it truly means, where it came from, and why people are so hung up on using it.
- ⁶ According to *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, the first definition of *bitch* is “the female of the dog or some other carnivorous mammals.” The second is “a malicious, spiteful or overbearing woman - sometimes used as a generalized term of abuse.” And the third is “something that is extremely difficult, objectionable, or unpleasant.”
- ⁷ Although these definitions seem familiar and unremarkable, one can find, with a little bit of analysis and breakdown, a much more menacing concept underneath. The basic idea is that if a woman is in any way disagreeable she is deemed a bitch. ...
- ⁸ For a long time now, the [music] industry has used sex to sell records, while promoting the use of this derogatory and offensive word. They have marketed women as “bitches” and “hoes” in order to ensure themselves money, power and respect. In this culture, objectification and misogyny is what sells.
- ⁹ Musician and producer O’Shea “Ice Cube” Jackson stated in the documentary *The N Word*, directed by Todd Williams, “If someone calls me a ‘nigga,’ I’m so used to the word that it won’t phase me. I won’t want to kill them or anything. But if somebody calls me a ‘bitch,’ then we have a serious problem.” For Ice Cube and many other men, being called a “bitch” puts into question the validity of their manhood. If indeed men rail against the word when it is directed toward them, what does it mean to these men when they direct it toward women?
- ¹⁰ We cannot overlook the women who call each other and themselves the b word. These women fall into two categories: those who accept the misogynistic definition of the word, and those who attempt to redefine it.
- ¹¹ *Bitch* magazine has taken up the challenge to redefine the meaning of the word as something powerful and strong. This is a complicated position because as often as women are eager to reclaim, embrace and redistribute a word that is so often used to insult them, this often backfires and reinforces the initial intention of the expression.

- ¹² Hip hop feminist Joan Morgan [writes], "There are inherent dangers in building an identity based on the prejudices of one's oppressor; eventually the line between myth and morality becomes dangerously irreversibly blurred."
- ¹³ On the one hand, the word *bitch*, like other derogatory words used in pop culture, can express camaraderie and affection amongst those who use it. However it's my belief that the meaning of the word can't be changed at its very root, and therefore, like other offensive phrases, should be eliminated.
- ¹⁴ Trying to use derogatory words in a positive way is risky because all too often playful slang turns into harmful jargon that sends a wounding message to the person on the receiving end.
- ¹⁵ So, what can be done to abolish this word and the offensive atmosphere it fosters? Women should start by evaluating the meaning of the b word and assessing their personal feelings about it. Let's think about how we feel when men or other women call us a "bitch" in an act of rage or anger. Men and women can make a sincere effort to become more socially conscious, more aware that these words are damaging. Using the word *bitch* has become a tradition. Instantaneous and cutting, we should remember that this tradition has a history of exclusion, which compromises the atmosphere of freedom we should be striving for.