

I'M A BAD BITCH!: GENDER POWER STRUGGLES IN HIP-HOP

By Bianca Gracie



The term “bad bitch” came about in the 1970s with Pam Grier’s blaxploitation films, and later adopted in the 1990s with female rappers like Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown and Trina and became even more prevalent in hip-hop in recent years. Instead of fighting against the word, women have now negotiated the social meaning of the discourse to make it work for them. The negotiation is seen through the addition of the word “bad” in front of “bitch,” which makes the term acceptable. “Bitch” is a degrading term; but put the word “bad” in front of it and the discourse becomes ironically encouraging.

Within the urban hip-hop culture, a recent phenomenon of “bad bitch” discourse has grown. In the past, some lyrics in rap music were seen as misogynistic. But in the current era of hip-hop, women have reversed this context into something more “positive.” There has been a transformative discourse among women being degraded by rappers, to women embracing being a “bad bitch.”

In “The History of Sexuality,” Michel Foucault explains that discourse is power that can limit or enable certain social frameworks, as with the stereotyping of black women through to rap music. But it also has the ability to reverse and change power.

The word “bitch” used to be seen as constraining when spoken by male rappers. But in the modern age, females calling themselves a “bad bitch” shows a reversal of power.

In order to understand the source of this discourse, the history of rap music needs to be discussed. Rappers began using misogynistic lyrics in the 1990s, when “gangsta rap” emerged. In an article co-authored by Terri Adams and Douglas Fuller, “The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music,” they define misogyny as “the hatred or disdain of women.” It is a social concept that “reduces women to objects for men’s ownership, use, or abuse.”

In these songs, women are objectified by males and are only regarded for sexual purposes. Because this derogatory discourse of women was so common, both the listeners and the rappers make justification that words like “bitch” or “ho” are okay while also reinforcing stereotypes of a weaker and disposable black woman.

Misogyny in rap was learned through the rappers’ social settings. Consistently neither gender has questioned the idea that women are subpar to men. Adams and Fuller state that these social beliefs



women, and the urban culture does not question it because they are subconsciously mimicking the ideologies they have learned from white society.

Because of the influence that rap music has, the ideologies the songs present become learning lessons for the people listening to it. The repetition of male dominance and female debasing in the lyrics creeps into the minds of the listeners and they utilize it in their own lives, continuing the cycle within the urban social structure. The more there is repetition of performance, the more individuals deem it as natural and “normal.”

The “bad bitches” referenced in these songs are not directly in possession of their gender; they are re-enacting what they have been taught in hip-hop over the decades. The music shapes gender relations—male listeners learn that they have control over everything (including women) and female listeners learn that the only value they possess is located between their hips. Thus, the power struggle is formed.

“Bitch” is now seen as a degrading term; but put the word “bad” in front of it and the discourse becomes ironically encouraging.

But in the modern age of hip-hop, the word “bitch” has become neutralized through the use of the term “bad bitch.” A word that was once seen as derogatory is now accepted as a title that should be admired. The women referenced in these songs are no longer exploited; they are now glorified.

In popular hip-hop crew Maybach Music Group’s song “Bag of Money” (released in 2012), they continue the use of misogynistic lyrics but soften the blow by the addition of “bad” to the word “bitch.” In the song, women are referenced as material goods, just like money—“My bitch bad, lookin’ like a bag of money / I go and get it and I let her count it for me / I fuck her good and she always ride it for me.

Instead of presenting woman as dispensable, they now have monetary value. Rappers are known to lust after wealth, so by comparing a female to money she too embodies a monetary worth.

In her book *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn Pough argues that Black women use hip-hop culture to find their voice. “By claiming the word “bitch” as their own, they have made the discourse work for their gain through the lyrical medium targeted at them,” said Pough. The reclaiming of the word “bitch” can have post-feminist undertones consisting of the idea that the feminist agenda has been met and the fight is over. This is most notable with female rapper Nicki Minaj’s song “Baddest Bitch.”

Released in 2009, Minaj uses the song “Baddest Bitch” to reinforce the “bitch” mentality through repetition of the lyrics. But, the main difference that makes the term post-feminist is that Minaj owns it, rather than having another man take control of it. She



within the urban, African-American culture grew from “capitalist, patriarchal system based on the principles of White Supremacy, elitism, racism, and sexism.”

With these lyrics, African-American men have now carved a space within the urban culture that strips them from their marginalization and they become dominant leaders—just like their White capitalist influencers. Demoralizing women in rap music then serves to boost the “tough” masculinity that rappers and their male listeners strive for.

These songs receive constant radio play and climb the music charts, all without question. The white culture does not question it because they are the ones who created the belittling image of



“*Been around the world,
I still can’t find another girl that can steal my shine /
I’ve had my highs, I’ve had my lows /
But you can’t tell me that I am not the baddest bitch*”

looks at being a “bad bitch” as a competition, and an individual accomplishment.

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It is important to note that recent rap songs call women “bad bitches” more than they do “bitches.” Within the hip-hop sphere, these two terms are drastically different. In her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Patricia Collins breaks down the two types of “bitches” within the urban hip-hop lyrical discourse. When the word is presented with a lower-cased “b,” it comes with the negative connotations of women as “aggressive, loud, rude, pushy,” said Collins. But, add a capital “B” and the meaning transforms.

A “Bad Bitch” is referenced as being tough, strong and admirable. Her power comes from her sexuality, which she uses as manipulation to gain what she desires: men and money. In order to be the “Baddest,” one must have complete control over her sexuality and know how to utilize it. So it can be argued that the “bitches” of the past have now become the “Bad Bitches” of today.

Ultimately, the word “bitch” is not just a word anymore. It has transformed itself as a part of urban social context through rap lyricism and gender performance—“It serves as an ideological support mechanism that legitimizes the mistreatment and degradation of women,” said Adam and Fuller. Throughout the years, the ambiguity of the “bad bitch” term has been continuous. Within different contexts, it can be interpreted as positive or negative. When the song ends, the listener has to determine which gender holds the power of the term—a power that will remain unsteady.



“*My bitch bad, lookin’ like a bag of money /
I go and get it and I let her count it for me /
I f*** her good and she always ride it for me*”