

—I have had a lifetime of suffering. From what I know, you have not: *Animal* by Lisa Taddeo

Female depravity is a representation that is rarely depicted in modern novels. However, Lisa Taddeo includes several portrayals of female depravity in her novel *Animal*, which is about a woman, Joan, who has experienced a lifetime of suffering. Throughout the course of Joan's life, she rarely felt joy, and her decisions in life were ultimately premeditated due to the need for survival. Female depravity comes from the fear of failing as a woman by illegitimate notions of the gender's social construct. When pain is silenced, women are called angry. If they do not fit a specific stereotype of women, they are silenced even further. This pain is masked by rage, which happened to Joan within the novel. Taddeo's description of this silence that turns to rage in women, as depraved individuals, is important within the novel to serve the representation of women who encounter several adversities. In addition to Taddeo's novel, Roxane Gay's essays in "Bad Feminist" explain the impressions of feminist culture in relation to the hypocrisy of those ideas. When Joan was discussing a deeper experience with her depravity, she wrote a letter that said "I have had a lifetime of suffering. From what I know, you have not" (77). She is speaking to a woman named Alice who Joan believes took her family away. Though feminism would tell Joan to not demean another woman's suffrage, Joan chooses to say this anyway in an attempt to dispel her own. She is showing the truth of female depravity in its fullest capacity. Taddeo and Gay's texts offer a space for Joan's experiences to be understood further, as her life was never set up for morality; rather, it was set up for the journey of depravity from the beginning.

In the beginning of the novel, Joan describes her relationship with a man named Vic. Vic is an older, married man, which Joan makes very evident to the readers. As a depraved woman,

Joan understands that her decisions are not always made with the intent of others. However, she grew up without her family due to an “accident” that is grazed over in the first part of the novel. As a woman with scarce stability on a familial, emotional and physical level, she looked for validation in men who could provide her with that structure that she’d always lacked. In “Bad Feminist” by Roxane Gay, the author described a theory from Sheryl Sandberg that said, “*If you want to succeed, be an asshole*” (Gay, 311). Due to Joan’s consistent lack of lively organization, she set herself up to take risks, have confidence and gain from any situation that was presented to her. Nevertheless, Vic was emotionally abusive, as he would make her feel as though she was imprisoned in his life. Joan began to realize that her relationship with Vic was impractical, so she started to see somebody else. She was at a restaurant with the new man, Big Sky, and Vic appeared. Vic pulled out a gun and shot himself at the sight of Joan with another man. After Vic died, Joan blamed herself because she’d ruined his family and her own consciousness. After Vic’s family found out about Joan, Vic’s ex-wife and daughter made threats about killing Joan. While explaining the lives of Vic’s family whom she ruined, Joan said, “I severed her life with a snip-snip of my inconsiderate fingers...Little girls don’t kill people...But almost no one understands a little girl. We begin hard as marbles” (Taddeo, 102). Joan saw herself in Vic’s daughter, Eleanor. She had experienced a very similar situation, and she had, too, felt the female rage that stemmed from silenced pain throughout the entirety of her life; therefore, she was never angry at Eleanor for feeling the widespread emotions that she did. Being a bad feminist is, often, misunderstood. Depraved women do not search to be bad feminists; rather, their inability to be seen or heard leads them to decisions that they, also, think will be silenced.

Similarly to Joan’s relationship with Vic, Joan had experienced a lifetime of sexual assault and rape from a very young age. Most of the time, there are two ways that a depraved

woman chooses to deal with their depravity—devalue themselves and succumb to others' wants to get ahead, or they will resist temptation and live their life alone. Neither of the choices are seen as correct to the eyes of the social construct, which Gay explains. From another idea of Sandberg's, Gay says, "Perhaps we can consider *Lean In* for what it is—just one more reminder that the rules are always different for girls, no matter who they are and no matter what they do" (Gay, 313). By this, Gay proves that regardless of how Joan reacted to the pain that she'd experienced, her decisions would never be validated; therefore, she submitted herself to male desire in hopes to fill a lack that had been silenced. Joan's course of existence led to premeditated situations from the beginning; she was taken advantage of by almost every man she'd ever been with, as sensuality was Joan's only confirmation. After a conversation with a woman named Alice, Joan said, "She taught me that men will use you unless you use them first, that sometimes men must be punished because women are in important pain from the moment they are born until the moment they die" (Taddeo, 137). Bad feminists learn to take lessons out of the bad that they experience, as those bad experiences will never be understood by the social construct. Feminist culture is seen as the act of removing oneself from a male-dominated society; however, Joan's retaliation for her silenced circumstances is to corrupt those male-dominated societies by, also, interrupting their lives and gaining power back. Though, to some, this may seem problematic, Joan believes this is the only way to remind her Self of her ability to prosper.

The woman, Alice, that Joan familiarized herself with throughout the novel is a very important connection that Joan has to her past. Alice is Joan's half-sister, as her father had an affair with Alice's mother during Joan's childhood. Joan's mother—who was incredibly detached from Joan's life—found out about the affair, and she killed Joan's father by stabbing him. After murdering him, she went to the bathroom and committed suicide, to which Joan found her. Joan

had always been confused by this murder, as she did not see what her father had done wrong to her mother. Joan's grandmother—her father's mother—was raped by a man, and he went to take care of her. Joan's father was a light in Joan's life, so she did not understand what her mother's pain and rage was for. Joan said, "My father did not become the bad guy for me. Not yet. That day I hated my mother for killing my father...Because she wasn't strong enough. Or because she was too strong. Because she was so complex where my father wasn't. I hated my mother, in short, for being a woman" (Taddeo, 290). To be face-to-face with a woman that experienced a similar pain and rage before she did created a fire in her heart that she was unaware of at the time, but she hated that her mother had to yield her life to male dominance. She was never angry at her mother; she was pained by the result of the silencing by men. Joan's bad feminism was born alongside her.

This left Joan with no family besides her Aunt Gosia—who also died later in life after an accident. Alice was Joan's last attachment to the familial aspect of her life, and she felt that she needed to be close to her in order to heal the parts of her that were taken away. Joan said, "When I looked at Alice, I didn't want her. What I wanted was to eat her, swallow her, and become her. I wanted to reach down between my legs and feel her cunt there...I felt embarrassed, like she could see inside me—my roiling thoughts, my loneliness, my suffering, and most humiliatingly, my petty jealousy" (Taddeo, 87). In terms of bad feminism, women are supposed to support other women. However, this situation is different, and it is very dark because of the fact that Joan believed Alice was the reason her family was taken from her. This is very similar to Joan's situation with Eleanor and Vic; it was a reflection of pain into rage into acting on "bad feminism." When she met Alice, she explained all of the bad things she'd ever done to see if Alice experienced similar reactions to the situations between their families. Alice was unaware

that she and Joan were sisters, but Joan knew. She wanted to make sure that she wouldn't lose Alice, so she explained her depravity. Though they fell out several times within the novel, their relationship grew overtime when Joan became pregnant, gave birth to a daughter at the end of the novel and found out about their sisterhood. Gay describes the reasoning behind Joan's hesitation to meet Alice within "Bad Feminist." She said, "I'm not even sure what the sisterhood is, but the idea of a sisterhood menaces me, quietly, reminding me of how bad a feminist I am. Good feminists don't fear the sisterhood because they know they are comporting themselves in sisterhood-approved ways" (Gay, 316). Joan wanted validation; she did not want to fake this part of her life. Joan wanted to make sure that Alice knew everything about what it was like to be silenced as a way to teach, comfort and exploit herself. Gay also said, "Like most people, I'm full of contradictions, but I also don't want to be treated like shit for being a woman" (Gay, 318). Due to Joan's pain from grief and male ignorance, she became reliant on it. She had always been afraid of female relationships because of the fear of sisterhood—bad feminist, and Joan was a forced push in the correct direction to healing from the negative past she'd endured.

To further analyze the behavior of depraved women, their struggles have always been suppressed because of the world of phallocentric economy. Joan's experiences are a depiction of what happens to women when they are consistently dehumanized by men; they become violent and aggressive. The gender binary describes women as frail, peaceful and quiet. Joan's false serenity became evident in the novel when she met a man in her neighborhood named Lenny. Lenny had Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, and he described his relationship with his late wife to Joan. Joan was displeased by Lenny's actions against his wife, and she became angry. Lenny would, often, think that Joan was his wife, Lenore, because of his Alzheimer's. Joan decided to use Lenny to fuel her rage that could not be ignored any longer, and she murdered him

for what he'd put Lenore through. She said, "Smiling, I closed my eyes and transferred the force of my whole body and history into my hands. Killing a man felt more glorious than I could have imagined" (Taddeo, 292). Due to the fact that Lenore was silenced for her entire life with Lenny, Joan used her ability to disrupt men's lives with her newfound rage. She also said, "I felt close to my mother then, to feel her rage in me" (Taddeo, 292). She had blamed her mother for her father's death throughout her life, as it was easier to blame her mother's disconnectedness for the demise of their family; however, she realized that her father—the man—had caused a generational curse of surrendering to male superiority. Joan was determined to break the spell.

Her bad feminism was sparked in the murder of Lenny because of the lack of femininity that she possessed in such a male-dominated act, and she could have potentially made the face of all women even worse, which is frowned about in feminist culture. Gay said, "All feminists are angry instead of, say, passionate" (Gay, 305). Gay's explanation of feminist behaviors is directly relatable to Joan's life because of the fact that passion cannot coexist with silence. Passion is fueled by the ability for others to truly hear the testimonies and advocate for change. Anger stems from the pain of being consistently ignored. Joan was ignored throughout the duration of her life, so she purposefully directed her pain toward an actor of emotionally abusing women. Joan would be the bad feminist to break another curse of generational mistreatment, which she could not do previously because her family was already dead, including Vic. This was her revenge as a bad feminist.

At the end of *Animal*, Joan gave birth to a daughter. Throughout the novel, she used the word "you" in minimal paragraphs to insinuate the testimony to another person. The reader does not find out the "you" until the last few pages of the novel; however, some people make the connection early on. Joan said, "I have shown you the wreckage of my relationships. I know you

won't make the same mistakes...And it was the first time I used a man for something I actually wanted and not for something I thought I needed" (Taddeo, 314). Almost immediately after, she said, "And I gasped because I saw that you were her. You were the girl in all of my dreams... You had been there since the beginning. And since the beginning someone had been trying to take you away" (Taddeo, 319). She was speaking to her future daughter within these paragraphs, and her daughter's birth was her final destination of peace; everything that she'd experienced was a lesson for her daughter's life. She wanted her daughter to learn about female depravity and revolt against the submission that men search for in women. Joan had overcome the nature of depravity that her life had provided her, and her bad feminism led to teaching her daughter the necessity of fighting for herself. Gay said, "I am not at all sure that feminism has ever suggested women can have it all" (Gay, 309). Joan was unsure of her ability to have it all, and she could not; however, the one thing she desperately wanted more than anything was the ability to break her own curse of female depravity. She was given the opportunity to bring a new woman into the world who could fulfill her mother's desire to be wanted, rather than needed.

Female depravity is masked by bad feminism each day. Women experience struggles, and the male society becomes determined to use their power to keep women permanently down. Through trials and tribulations, pain becomes anger, and that anger is manifested in bad feminism: the ability to do what needs to be done in order to survive as a woman, regardless of who it affects. Bad feminism is not the act of purposefully putting other women down; it is the act of purposefully changing the way women are perceived. Joan lived a life of bad feminism alongside her depravity, and it led her to ending the cycle of *needing* to be a bad feminist.

Works Cited

Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist*. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024.

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