

RBF and the Reluctance to Accept Women's Anger

by Erin Camia

The pop cultural phenomenon of “Resting Bitch Face” (RBF) is treated as fairly innocuous by many, but its implications suggest that standards for female beauty stretch to the impossibly high expectation that women only have certain emotions in public. An increasingly popular slang term, RBF, is more and more frequently attributed to people who have a lack of expression on their face or often have an annoyed or angry expression. Celebrities and normal people alike have been singled out for having RBF, but nearly all of those who are cited for this facial expression are women. This pattern suggests a general lack of acceptance and dissatisfaction within our culture at having to see women's anger, contempt, or even lack of emotion. Indeed, it seems we have an expectation, subconscious or not, that women should always present themselves publicly as happy and friendly. They must always be smiling. Like many other standards of beauty that women face, no matter their attempts to navigate them, they find themselves unable to escape criticism. Ultimately, the recent phenomenon of RBF illustrates that trying to live up to societal expectations for female emotion and appearance is a no-win situation for women.

Rise to Cultural Phenomenon

Although women's appearances have been dissected and degraded for countless years, the cultural importance of RBF has only developed in the past few. In 2013, the comedy group Broken People released a satirical video entitled “Bitchy Resting Face,” in which women explain how they suffer from this condition. This popular video may very well be traced to the origination of the term. As the video points out about the women who have (or who are suffering

from) “Bitchy Resting Face,” “they might not even be bitches at all. They might just have faces that, to you, look bitchy.” Interestingly, the video also describes a condition in men called “Resting Asshole Face.” However, the nearly nonexistent and unheard of use of the latter term suggests that it is only women who are forced to have a complicated relationship with their emotions. The video, although meant to be comedic, reveals a truth in how quickly women can be written off as “bitches” for having anything less than a friendly facial expression. While this video certainly did not originally spur the contempt for female displays of emotion, it did provide a phrase that enables people to quickly label a woman’s appearance based on emotion and facial expression.

Since 2013 and the popularity of the “Bitchy Resting Face” video, the term has gained traction both in the media, especially in reference to particular celebrities, and in casual conversation. Women often acknowledge their own RBF, choosing to either joke about it or, even worse, to apologize for it. It has become ingrained in our culture as just another way to categorize and qualify women. Research has even been done to find out why some people have RBF. In a 2015 study, Abbe Macbeth and Jason Rogers of Noldus Information Technology used technology that scans faces and identifies certain emotions in the facial features. They used faces of celebrities that are known for having RBF and found that their usual facial expressions tended to express contempt. However, these researchers and the software they have developed do not take into account the subjectivity of people. In other words, although their FaceReader software does sometimes find contempt in the faces of men, these men will be much less likely to be singled out in a negative way for having a stoic facial expression than are women seen as having the same RBF. In fact, Macbeth and Rogers seem not to be worried about the gender politics of RBF, arguing that “the root causes [of the stoic expression] may not even matter, as *that* face

continues to stare at us, haunt us, and make us second guess our every decision” (Macbeth and Rogers). This treatment of RBF as something women need to change about themselves for the benefit of others adds yet another insurmountable task to women’s plates.

A No-Win Situation

Whether they choose to embrace their RBF or fall in line with societal expectations, women will find they always come out worse for wear, pun intended. That is, as Naomi Wolf points out in *The Beauty Myth*, women face such decisions regarding professional versus provocative or, even, dowdy clothing on a daily basis. The same theory applies to RBF—if women choose not to mask their anger, annoyance, or indifference, or if they simply choose to “smile” in acquiescence, then their reputation may publically suffer. And, a lack of respect from peers and superiors can have serious ramifications that can hinder a woman’s success. In a study published in 2008, Victoria L. Brescoll and Eric Luis Uhlmann, researched the intersection of status, gender, and anger. They found that “professional women who expressed anger were consistently accorded lower status and lower wages, and were seen as less competent” (273). Simply expressing negative emotions can have a very harmful impact on a woman’s life. It can impact her career and other areas of her life in which she needs to have relationships with peers, superiors, and subordinates.

Frowning or looking angry also seems to invite unwanted comments, adding yet another obstacle in a woman’s day-to-day life. This is most easily identified in media that critiques the appearances of female celebrities. Kristen Stewart, known for playing Bella Swan in the *Twilight* movie franchise, is one of the most popular punching bags for tabloids and celebrity gossip outlets that seem to thrive on pointing out cases of RBF. As a result, she is known less for her

work as an actor in an incredibly successful franchise and more for her facial expressions. Robert Pattinson, her costar in the *Twilight* movies, is also known for often donning a moody expression, but instead of being demonized for it, he has become a sex symbol.

It is not just tabloid news sources that feel they have the authority to comment on a woman's emotional appearance; it is currently best-known as a general cultural phenomenon. Casual observations about a woman's RBF are made by family members, acquaintances, and even strangers. One of the frequent types of catcalls I personally receive is a shout or seemingly helpful comment along the lines of, "Smile, beautiful!" This, unfortunately, is an all too common experience for many women, as evinced by a scene in the television series *Broad City*. Here though, the starring characters, played by Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, respond to a passing man's suggestion of, "You should smile!" with resistance. In response to this catcall, they push up the corners of their lips with their middle fingers. Jacobson and Glazer, who are also the creators and writers of the show, allow women to laugh about the discomfort of not only having men they do not know commenting on their appearance, but also the distress of not being able to show certain emotions without drawing unwanted attention. If women choose not to conform to the expectation that they need to present themselves as happy all the time, they often have to evade or suffer through a discussion on why they must smile more. Dealing with this, along with the lack of respect in professional relationships, means a woman can find herself facing various consequences for being seen with anything less than a smile on her face.

If, however, a woman chooses to attempt to always present herself with positive emotions, she will face different obstacles, but obstacles nonetheless. As I hinted at earlier, there is a correlation between displays of anger and being in dominant positions, either socially or professionally. As a result, the natural next step for many is to assume that if women should not

display their anger, then they should not be in positions of power. A study conducted by cognitive scientists Hess, Adams, and Kleck in 2005 found that “anger displays were chosen less frequently as appropriate for a low dominant woman than for a low dominant man” (528). Furthermore, they concluded that “men were rated as more dominant than were women even when they were described as equivalent in social dominance” (528). The perception of women by many people is that they are submissive and unable to play dominant roles in society. Emotion plays a significant role in keeping women from those dominant roles. For instance, if a woman is angry, she will seem unfit for a powerful position, even though anger would make a man seem more qualified. On the other hand, if she keeps her anger hidden, whether it is because she has been taught to do so or it is because she thinks her best bet is to play the system, she is characterized as less dominant. The woman who rarely shows her anger might not be written off as “bossy” or “bitchy” by those around her, but her chosen displays of emotions seem to confirm the assumption that her place is in a less dominant role.

A woman carefully schooling her facial features faces another challenge in the form of sheer exhaustion. In her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie Russell Hochschild explains how putting on an emotional façade is actually a form of labor:

This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.... This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality. (7)

Hochschild’s argument is mainly a critique of capitalism and the need for workers in service industries to be ever accommodating to customers, but women tend to do this type of labor much more frequently than men do. Furthermore, women are expected to hold these less dominant

positions, so the pressure to always smile is felt twice as much by women in low-ranking service positions.

This emotional labor is yet another form of work that women are expected to complete every day. A woman, assuming she has a job outside of the home, is expected to perform the labor she is actually paid for, the “Second Shift,” during which she completes housekeeping and parenting duties, the labor necessary to maintain her appearance, and, finally, the labor required to pretend she is feeling certain emotions and to mask others. The amount of effort and time women must put into each type of labor is excessive and exhausting. This works in favor of the patriarchal system that thrives on women being relegated to the inferior, submissive class of society. Wolf discusses this concept in *The Beauty Myth*. When discussing the impossibly high standards of beauty for working women, she argues that these women have “just enough energy, concentration, and time to do their work very well, but too little for the kind of social activism or freewheeling thought that would allow them to question and change the structure itself” (Wolf 53). Wolf was only talking about the exhaustion women feel after dealing with their jobs and beauty standards, but when emotional labor is added to the mix, it seems impossible for women to win. They will find themselves unable to overcome these complex relationships with emotion, either from simply being too tired to attempt to or from not being taken seriously when they do try.

The Angry Woman

Although women are trapped in a no-win situation, those with RBF and those who do not cover their feelings of anger face a more severe and more direct backlash than others. Anger in women and girls is defined as taboo. Yet, for men, anger is associated with dominance and

competence. Angry people are unhappy about the situations they are in and wish to effect change. In a society built upon labels and hierarchies, it is extremely dangerous to have an inferior class able and willing to express their anger and utilize it. It is for this reason that angry women are demonized in our culture.

From a young age, particularly middle-to-upper class girls are taught that their anger is inappropriate. Young girls often display anger, but are quickly told by elders that they must keep their anger in check. In her book *Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger*, Lyn Mikel Brown argues:

What was once a sign of girls' strength and resiliency – their capacity to feel their anger, to know its source, and to respond directly – becomes a liability, at least in those places where white middle-class values and conventions of femininity prevail... [Girls learn] good girls are calm and quiet, they speak softly, they do not complain or demand to be heard, they do not shout, they do not directly express anger. (12)

Obviously, it is not the case that women are simply not born with the propensity to feel anger. Instead, girls are conditioned to hide their anger and understand it as inappropriate behavior. They then become women who have practiced suppressing their anger for so long that it becomes second nature. Through this process women learn to reject their anger and never discover its usefulness as a tool for progress.

Further, the disapproval of female anger is constantly reinforced by depictions of angry women in the media. Sometimes the angry women are action heroes or otherwise tough characters, which seems like it would lend a hand to feminist representations of women in television and movies. However, these heroines do not become beloved characters because viewers recognize their anger and respect them for it. In the book *Action Chicks: New Images of*

Tough Women in Popular Culture, a question is posed: “When women are being portrayed as tough...are they being allowed access to a position of empowerment, or are they merely being further fetishized as dangerous sex objects?” (ed. Inness 47) In order to get away with being angry and willing to act on their anger, these characters have to be sexy as well. Just like nearly all other aspects of media, they exist mainly for the benefit of male viewers who are able to focus on the attractiveness of these characters and largely ignore that their heroic actions may be spurred on by anger and the drive to correct injustice. Additionally, as one might note, there is a distinct lack of merchandise with female action heroes, while every male hero has their face emblazoned on any and all types of products. For example, Marvel’s Black Widow, played by Scarlett Johansson, is the only female member of *The Avengers* film and has appeared in five Marvel movies to date. Her anger is easily identifiable and it is nearly a job requirement to have RBF, as she is an undercover agent; she must remain stoic. Yet, while her male teammates, who include Captain America and Iron Man, have incredible amounts of related merchandise for sale, Black Widow’s fans struggle to find any products that include her. In addition, while most of her male colleagues have the privilege of entire films dedicated to their backstories, she is relegated to being the supporting character time and again. In this context we can clearly see that Black Widow, along with her anger, which is a negative characteristic but linked to her “badass” persona, have been relegated to mere decorations for men to enjoy.

The issue of women’s anger, however, is not entirely black and white. It is important to note that race and class often come into play, making it so women of different backgrounds have different relationships with their anger. While white women of the middle and upper classes are assumed to not ever be angry, or at least expected to pretend that they aren’t, black women are perceived to have anger as an ingrained character trait. The “Angry Black Woman” stereotype

reduces black women to aggressive, illogical people with a continuous stream of anger that can escalate to violence at the drop of a hat. In the article “Renisha McBride and Evolution of Black-Female Stereotype,” Noliwe M. Rooks argues that this has been shaped by the centuries-old perception that black women are “more threatening, more masculine, and less in need of help” (Rooks). Black women are expected to be angry because they are not seen completely as women, but as objects, even sexualized beasts (Bordo). Their assumed and exoticized bestial threat goes hand in hand with their assumed anger, though unlike in white men, these traits—even if they are not actually present—lose them the respect of the people they interact with. This issue deserves its own paper, particularly due to the concurrent oversexualization of black women, but it would be remiss of me not to note the challenges that minority women face in the cultural interpretation of anger.

That Time of the Month

There are various reactions men commonly have to female anger, but none suggest an understanding of it. Male reactions to women’s anger can leave the latter feeling frustrated, annoyed, embarrassed, and even angrier, encouraging men to continue making disparaging comments. As long as men continue to be ignorant of women’s anger and refuse to accept it as a natural emotion, women will continue to be hindered by their inability to express a full range of emotions without reproach. Although they are not the only ones who do it, men contribute to societal expectations for female emotion. They must work to accept anger instead of writing it off if women are to free themselves of this issue.

One of the significant ways that men write off a woman’s anger is by linking it to a fictive biological process. In other words, many attribute women’s anger to pre-menstrual

syndrome (PMS) or “that time of the month.” First, this implies that a woman cannot be justifiably angry about something. Often in this situation, the target of a woman’s anger is a man, and he is able to avoid blame by claiming a woman must be in her menstrual cycle to be angry. Second, it perpetuates the stereotype that women are lunatics and she-devils while on their periods. This is one of the only times women are expected to display anger, but it stems from a lack of understanding of menstruation and incredibly outdated ideas about women and their mental states. This type of comment makes it difficult for women to be taken seriously and have their voices heard. It can have very real consequences for women, as evidenced by political reporters with millions of viewers stating on air that they believe a woman cannot be President because of her illogical behavior during her menstrual cycle. Not many people seem to care that women have periods without male coworkers ever knowing, or even that many female candidates for President would not even menstruate anymore. Ignorant arguments aside, it cannot be said that this type of write-off is a harmless joke.

Another way that men write off women’s anger is to call it “cute.” Just like the previous type of comment, this severely hinders a woman’s ability to be taken seriously. It is interesting to note that men do not actually find anger attractive in women. A 2015 study conducted by Jose Antonio Munoz-Reyes determined what type of facial features men find attractive in women. Munoz-Reyes found that men preferred average, youthful faces with friendly expressions (13). This implies that men do not find female anger attractive, but instead are amused by it. It seems to have become a trend to tell a woman that she is cute when she is angry. By telling a woman this, it undermines whatever argument she is making and lets her know that her voice is not being heard. The man is suggesting that anger is not for her, but it is adorable to see her try to step into a role she was not meant to play.

These comments are simple and may seem completely innocuous, but their underlying meaning is malicious, whether men know it or not. They suggest to women, as well as anybody else who may hear them, that the anger of women is not something to be taken seriously. It makes light of issues that women have a justifiable reason to be angry about. Allowing these comments to masquerade as a joke encourages more people to say them and believe them. As a result, men must recognize the harm their words and actions do, and make a conscientious effort to take the anger of women around them seriously. Only then will women be able to face their personal challenges with emotion and work to gain the freedom of expressing a full range of emotions.

Women's struggles with the appearance of emotion is a tough issue to tackle because it is neither clearly defined nor visible. Some of the only clear attacks on women expressing negative emotions are references to RBF or a joke made by an adolescent boy who clearly had a distinct lack of comprehensive sex education in school. However, it is important that we use these as a vehicle to discuss why our culture views female anger as taboo and what needs to be done to reverse that way of thinking. It starts with women identifying and embracing their anger. Righteous anger is a tool of revolution, indeed. Women can accomplish so much if they collectively identify sources of injustice and wield those emotions that people pretend they do not have. While it is true that this problem is multifaceted and deeply ingrained into the workings of our society, it can start to be dismantled when women refuse to conform to the roles that have evolved to maintain their passivity.

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