

Transcription

Exploring how we can master ourselves by looking at how experts say it is possible with your host Suswati Basu.

Intro music

Welcome to season 2 episode 61 of How To Be...with me Suswati as your timid presenter, guiding you through life's tricky topics and skills by reading through the best books out there.

Dangerous is one of those words, like power, that is largely defined by negative images and associations. And the terms dangerous, nasty and difficult have been attached to women as an insult for centuries. But behind these sexist labels lies a serious set of questions about the dynamics, conflicts, identities and power relations with which women live today.

And is being dangerous really a bad thing?

Here is People Manager of Wake Research, and podcast host of 126 Days: Stories on Life and Work Shannon Weatherly on being a dangerous woman.

SHANNON WEATHERLY: So what does being a dangerous, nasty or difficult woman mean to me, and how do I do this? I think being uh a Southern woman from the deep south of the United States, I question things. I speak up, I will stand up to power, I will speak truth to power. I will flat out say when I think something is wrong or unjust. And um a lot of times this isn't what is expected of Southern women, and it certainly causes men or other people in power to wonder what's going on. So um for me, it's standing up, stepping up and speaking up, and it's not hard for me to do.

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The first book is *Dangerous Women: Fifty reflections on women, power and identity*, edited by European Union legal scholar Jo Shaw, Ben Fletcher-Watson who manages the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, and Abrisham Ahmadzadeh is studying sexual agency of goddesses in antiquity at the University. Bidisha is one of the many wonderful contributors. She is a broadcaster, journalist, filmmaker and stills maker. Her latest publication is an essay called *the Future of Serious Art* as well as her film series called *Aurora*. As a journalist and broadcaster, Bidisha specialises in international human rights, social justice as well as arts and culture, and offers political analysis, arts critique and cultural diplomacy tying all of these interests together. She writes for the main UK broadsheet newspapers, currently as an art critic for the *Observer* and the *Guardian*, and presents and commentates for BBC TV and radio; ITN, CNN, Viacom CBS and Sky News. She spoke to me about the idea of dangerous women. Here is a snippet but find the full interview on www.howtobe247.com or on the YouTube channel.

BIDISHA: The project initially started off as a University based project with a lot of academics, but because I've written essays about this issue, I was approached to contribute uh to it because I wrote a few years ago a very personal essay called Emotional Violence and Social Power and it was about the way that abusive perpetrators often have a split between their public image and what they're like in terms of their interpersonal relationships. So you so often see rapists, murderers, family abusers who are actually pillars of society. So it's not just that they abuse and perpetrate against women and girls and often men and boys as well. It's that they're endorsed. They're cosigned by the rest of society. So they say, Well, I'm a businessman, I'm a human rights leader. I'm a prominent journalist, I'm a famous artist. I'm a good guy. It's like the stereotype of the nice guy that's actually an abusive boyfriend. It's very common stereotype. So the essay was about those things. It was about sociopathic narcissism. And of course, as we know, because we work in the field, all perpetrators are really the same. They follow exactly the same playbook, the same kind of abuser dynamics are the ones that they use. But they wouldn't have any power at all if they weren't supported by the whole of society, by the police, by juries, by even charity workers, by commentators holding the same beliefs in their heads around abuse, power, victim blaming, perpetrator, excuse all. That's why we're in the kind of societal mess that we're in and we've been in for thousands of years. It's because bringing a perpetrator to justice is very difficult if everyone on all sides of the line is brought up in a misogynistic, woman hating society and culture. What the MeToo movement is, it's not about trying to get abusive men in prison or in front of a jury trial. It's a testimonial movement. So all that the women, victims, survivors and witnesses have is our words. Me too is about saying, this is what happened to me, this is my truth, and um the truth is what you have when all other avenues have been completely exhausted. The truth is what you're left with when you tried to report your perpetrator to the police and it got nowhere. You tried to get justice and um you tried to get them into prison, you tried to get someone to believe you and they still didn't believe you and nobody helped you. So when I say a dangerous woman is truth incarnate, what I mean is that just the power of truth and testimony and speaking up for yourself without shame or guilt or horror or fear, that's powerful in itself. And it's um exactly what abusive perpetrators are afraid of. They are afraid of their victim or the witness of their abuses, just opening their mouths and saying the truth about themselves, saying the truth about the perpetrators. That's why you have men who are accused of any kind of abuse, misusing the legal system to try to threaten women with defamation suits and libel suits even though they're guilty. Defamation is only defamation. If you lie, it's only a crime. If you lie, it's not a crime if you told the truth about a perpetrator. But they will use anything in the world to stop people speaking out. So in that sense, the written word or the spoken word is incredibly powerful. In fact, the first thing that perpetrates to say, including schoolyard bullies or office bullies, is don't tell anyone. This is our little secret because they are so afraid of the truth getting out there. They're much more afraid of that than they are afraid of prison. Perpetrators aren't really afraid of prison. They're not really afraid of any of those things. They're afraid of the truth about themselves being known. We live in a misogynistic society. That's a woman hating society. But not just that. We live in a woman hating, perpetrator, excusing society. So it's a woman hating society that's also a man worshipping society. And in a system like that, you have endless ways of diverting people's attention away from the perpetrators, who are overwhelmingly men and boys. And their victims are everyone, including men and boys, and instead pointing the finger of blame at women. So whenever a man commits

a crime, the finger of blame points at the woman, because it's as if collectively, society cannot face the reality of how universal male violence against women and girls and men and boys really is. And so all of these side hustles spring up alongside that. And one of the side hustles of misogyny is coming up with endless words to insult women's. So bitch, dangerous, whore, cow, Nag, Hag, Babe, chick. I mean, they're all just words to demean women and dehumanize women. And it's all very obvious. You know, the fact that you can think of 100 million words to describe a woman who had more than two boyfriends, and you can't think for single words to describe a man who's had more than two girlfriends. Even calling a man like that a juggler or a fancy man, they're not really insulting, actually quite flattering terms, in fact. So dangerous women is just another way of insulting women. And for me, the simple thing about misogyny is how obvious it is. So we don't need to over analyze this. We don't need to say, oh, why is she dangerous? It's because if you tarnish a woman, calling someone a name is the first step towards dehumanization. It's the first in about 20 steps, and the last step is raping her and murdering her. The first step is calling her a name. So you don't call her by her own name. You call her by a generic hate word for women. But I also think there's some truth in it that perpetrators are genuinely afraid of women telling the truth about them. The world is genuinely, truly, for real afraid of people like you and me just opening our mouths and saying what we've seen and heard and witnessed, or what our friends have gone through or our mums or our sisters or anything like that. And so I like the idea of being a dangerous woman. Um I wish I were dangerous. Uh the rest of the world would better behave a bit better around me if I was genuinely dangerous. But feeling powerful and being powerful are two different things. So it might feel very empowering to be like, I'm a dangerous, powerful woman. But at the end of the day, if a guy wanted to perpetrate against me on the street, if he was bigger and stronger than me, no amount of my self defense classes would really help that there'd be nothing I could do. So ultimately, perpetrators need to take responsibility for their own behavior. But the Dangerous woman is like the mythical figure of what would happen if all of us just opened our mouths and spoke about what happened to us. And I do think there's genuinely power in that. I really do. That's why they tried to keep women apart. That's why there are so many jokes about groups of women being together and what are they going to say, yeah, we probably are going to talk about you. So don't perpetrate, and then we won't have anything to talk about.

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The Dangerous Women Project is an initiative of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, which is how the collection of essays came together. It was founded in 2016 by Dr Peta Freestone and Professor Joe Shaw, with Peta as editor.

The project asks what does it mean to be a dangerous woman? The idea that women are dangerous individually or collectively permeate many historical periods, cultures and areas of contemporary life. We may take lightly the label attached by mainstream media outlets to women such as Shami Chakrabarti, formally of Liberty, or Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon as being the most dangerous woman in the UK.

But behind this label lies a serious set of questions about the dynamics, complex, identities and power relations with which women live today. The dangerous woman project created more than 365 responses to those questions from all over the world between international women's day 2016 and international women's day 2017, gathered together on the website at dangerouswomanproject.org, many of these essays have been updated since first publish on the dangerous woman project website.

Each dangerous woman project essay explores and examines or critiques the dangerous woman by inviting reflections from women of diverse backgrounds and identities, including poets, playwright and other creative writers, academics, journalists, commentators, artists, performers, and opinion formers and indeed anyone of any gender with an angle on the theme.

For example, in April 2015, the Daily Mail ran several headlines characterising Sturgeon as 'the most dangerous woman in Britain'. Sturgeon said: "Terms like 'dangerous' belittle the positions of women in power by implying that we should be feared, not trusted or not skilled enough to do the job. I want to challenge the status quo and set an ambitious agenda to make Scotland a fairer and more prosperous nation."

Bidisha said she embraced the concept of being dangerous: "A dangerous woman is a woman who is in touch with her rage, her pain and her sorrow at the world we live in. A dangerous woman has decided that speaking the truth about what she's experienced and witnessed is more important than the diplomatic silence which lets oppressors and abusers get away with it. That's why I, and all women who speak out, are dangerous – and it feels great."

Irenosen Okojie, a Nigerian British writer, who wrote the novel *Butterfly Fish* talked about mental health. She said: "I wrote my novel *Butterfly Fish*, which centres on a woman struggling to maintain her grip on reality following a traumatic loss mostly because we don't talk about mental health issues in communities of colour. It is a silent, tangled thing amongst us. In Britain, African and Caribbean people are far more likely to be diagnosed with mental health problems than their white counterparts. They also face high levels of discrimination in the quality of treatment and care they receive, forced to deal with prejudice on two levels. It can be difficult getting someone struggling to cope to seek professional help. We need to have spaces where we can talk about these issues in supportive environment. We have to remove the stigma from mental health and consider alternative therapies to help people on their way to recovery."

Jasmine Tonie, who is a BBC Radio 4 extra regular contributor said she is dangerous because she prefers to be childless. She said: "I am a dangerous woman because I do not want a family; in fact I couldn't think of anything worse. I lack the broody, motherly, maternal sensibility which inevitably leads to vulnerability, and I possess all the discipline, drive and dedication to continually work out my career as a script writer without ever having to think of anyone or anything else. I have a life and it's up to me how I want to live it and what I want to do with it. I'm a firm believer in anyone doing what's right for them. I work hard for my money and I want to spend it on me."

Yewande Omotoso's debut novel *Born Boy* was shortlisted for the Sunday Times fiction prize. Loving herself is something she considered dangerous. She says: "When I think of danger I think of a serious kind of love for oneself, one skin, and what life is meant for. I consider my mother to be one of these women. She voyaged from Barbados to Edinburgh University in the 1960s."

Lebanese Australian author Nada Awar Jarrar says she struggled long and hard both with her conscience as well as with her family to find convincing reasons to move the veil, the decision to do so was indeed important, but it did not change her fundamental ways. She also developed an eating disorder that she attributed to anxiety over wearing the veil. There was an increasing number of veiled women in her old Beirut neighbourhood following the Civil War. But the choice to wear a hijab is a personal decision to her and an informed one not just a desire to conform.

And there are many more voices who reflect on the longstanding idea that women, individually or collectively, constitute a threat.

Who better than Nakia, played by Lupita Nyong'o, in *Black Panther* to showcase a badass woman. She is part of the War Dogs, the central intelligence unit of the fictional country of Wakanda. She is intelligent, and independent as seen in this clip.

BLACK PANTHER:

Come home.

I'm right here. I came to support you and to honor your father, but I can't stay. It's just about my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing.

What would you have?

The followers who have asked us share what we have.

We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it. We could do it better.

Well, not like these other countries, Nakia, if the world found out what we truly are, what we possess, we could lose our way of life.

Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time.

If you are not so stubborn, you would make a great Queen.

I would make a great Queen because I am so stubborn, if that's what I wanted.

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The next book is co-edited by Samhita Mukhopadhyay, who is a writer, editor and speaker. She is the former senior editorial director of Culture and Identities at Mic and the former executive editor of Feministing.com. Co-editor Kate Harding is also the author of Asking For It. *Nasty Women: Feminism, Resistance, and Revolution in Trump's America* showcases 23 leading feminist writers on protest and solidarity. They speak to Politics and Prose.

SAMHITA MUKHOPADHYAY: I think we both simultaneously had the idea on Facebook, and Kate and I have known each other for a long time, at least from the internet. And Kate has also was the co editor for *The Book of Jezebel*. And I was like, we need to do this now, and we need to do it like tomorrow. And I think uh for me and I know for many people, the night of the election, I was working in a newsroom, and so we had prepared for a kind of Hillary win. And then I was going to, like, go out and party. So I was like, at the Jabit Center, and I was ready to go out and party. And then all of a sudden, it became like the feminist zombie apocalypse there when we realized what was going to happen. I can joke about it now. It's after months of therapy, after I realized that I had to go back to the office, we had to rewrite everything, and that's pretty much every newsroom in America. Nobody knew that was coming. And I think our first phone call, we were like, it was both like, we should do this. And we were so angry. We were just yelling and realized that one of the things that we didn't want to get lost in the conversation that was happening was the role that kind of identity and identity politics in general played in this election. And um that there was like, and the train is never late for even Progressives to be like, shit, we shouldn't have done that. Like, we shouldn't have banked on a woman. We shouldn't have banked on the Black vote. I was like, we're going to need to counter this narrative immediately and for our own mental health, we're going to need to work on something that doesn't make us go crazy. And so that's really, I think, where the spirit of it came from of, like, showcasing a really diverse set of voices. And as you go through the book, they contradict each other. The left is fragmented right now and that we all have a lot of different perspectives on what groups should be prioritized and what does it look like to truly prioritize identity politics and the question of gender in kind of how we build power politically?

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"Such a nasty woman," said Donald Trump during an October 2016 debate with Hillary Clinton. That comment reverberated throughout the world.

So much so, actress Ashley Judd recited a poem during the Women's March in Washington written by Nina Donovan from Tennessee who was 19 at the time. The contents of the writing included references to Trump's election, mass incarceration, LGBT rights, the wage gap, and more relevant issues. Here is part of the poem.

NASTY WOMEN:

I'm not as nasty as racism, or fraud, or homophobia, sexual assault, transphobia, white supremacy, white privilege, ignorance, or misogyny

Not as nasty as trading girls like pokemon before their bodies have even evolved.

Not as nasty as your own daughter being your favorite sex symbol

Like wet dreams infused with your own genes.

But yeah!

I'm a nasty woman.

A phunky

Crusty

Bitchy

Loud

Nasty woman.

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After the debate, Caroline Light, a gender studies professor at Harvard, said the practice of calling women “nasty” dates to colonial times, “A ‘nasty’ woman is one who refuses to remain in her proper place, as defined by men. One who challenges male authority.” Trump’s comment reflected his anger that Hillary Clinton had the temerity to challenge him.

In the book, self-proclaimed nasty women weigh in on a plethora of topics ranging from identity politics to the war on the working class and pussy politics. The wide-ranging views are not a monolithic response to Trump’s insult. Through their essays, these women own their status as nasty women.

Nasty Women is a significant protest by self-avowed feminists against those who would challenge their inherent right to have an opinion and promote it publicly. Every woman who has ever been told to “shut up” will appreciate the effort.

Rebecca Solnit, in her essay, *A Nation Groomed and Battered*, writes, “Hillary Clinton was all that stood between us and a reckless, unstable, ignorant, inane, infinitely vulgar, climate-change-denying white nationalist misogynist with authoritarian ambitions and kleptocratic plans.” The first eight months of Trump’s administration had proved that description spot on accurate.

Kera Bolonik, in her essay, "Is There Ever a Right Time to Talk to Your Children About Fascism?," writes, "That protest is powerful, that resistance is powerful, that when people join together to fight for justice, it is not only effective but can restore hope for the future and faith in humanity."

The power of protest and resistance to those who would destroy this fragile experiment of the American republic was evident in January 2017 when millions around the world stood up and said, "No." Whether it was a woman wearing a pink pussy hat, or a car bearing a bumper sticker, "Don't Blame Me, I Voted for Hillary," protest and resistance permeates what it means to be an American. The United States is known as a "melting pot" and that pot is being stirred by anger and fear and hope.

Sarah Michael Hollenbeck refers to this in her essay, "As Long As It's Healthy." She writes, "As an adult, I'm still occasionally told to shut my mouth, to get more sleep, to stop yawning, or to smile, because either Jesus loves me or "it doesn't cost a thing.'"

Post-election many criticized Clinton for promoting "identity politics." In *Nasty Women*, Rebecca Solnit addresses the issue, "Identity politics' is a disparaging term for talking about race, or gender or sexual orientation, which is very much the way we've talked about liberation over the last 160 years in the U.S."

And one must remember that it's only "identity politics" when discussion revolves around women or people of color, never when the conversation revolves around what white men want.

Writer Jessica Valenti is co-founder of the blog *Feministing*. She says now is the time for us to clearly define what feminism is about and reject the attempts by the right to co-opt the movement when it is at its strongest. Because we truly are at an incredible moment. She refers to the massive global protest that took place when Trump was inaugurated where some veteran feminists, and some who had never been to a protest in their life all took part. She said: "We have an opportunity, and an obligation, to ensure that the next wave of feminist activism is so clearly defined that it will be impossible for conservative women to claim it."

In her essay "All American," Nicole Chung, who is Korean-American by birth but who was adopted as a baby and raised by white parents, tries to reckon with how people she loves could have voted for Trump when they have an Asian daughter and autistic granddaughter. She writes: "I have no choice but to be a bridge between my white family and all the people like me who are terrified to be living and raising children in Trump's America." She does this by repeatedly e-mailing her parents and other relatives with information about Trump's policies and appointees and encouraging them to call their representatives, in the hopes that at least one issue may galvanize them. The day of the Women's March on Washington, she has a small success: her mother makes a phone call to her representative to ask him to support the education of special-needs children like Chung's daughter.

So to sum up:

In *Dangerous Women*, the book celebrates and gives agency to women who have been dismissed or trivialised for their power, talent and success – the women who have been condemned for challenging the status quo. They reclaim the right to be dangerous. This powerful anthology presents fifty answers to that question, reaching past media hyperbole to explore serious considerations about the conflicts and power dynamics with which women live today.

Mukhopadhyay says in *Nasty Women* that in the end, diversity is embedded in America's social fabric. Hillary Clinton might have lost the election by way of the electoral college, but she won the popular vote—so more people across the country supported her vision of America than Trump's. And Barack Obama, the first US black president, won twice. We may not see eye to eye on the political positions of these candidates or how the details of identity politics play out on the national stage, but coalitional politics—recognizing and fighting for the diverse needs of many—are the best shot at building a progressive future. It will be our ability to draw from, incorporate, and celebrate our differences that could make America truly great.

Being dangerous, difficult, or nasty is not an issue itself, it's the negativity associated with it. But as women, we can reclaim these terms and be as dangerous as we like in order to move the dial on equality forward. Please join in on the conversation by following @howtobe247 on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and subscribe on the podcast, which can be found via www.howtobe247.com.

Please do leave a review if you found this helpful! Thank you to Meera Sharma, the founder of The School of Sass and host of weekly motivational radio show, The Sass Life, for your lovely comments saying that it is a "Great podcast with interesting conversation!"

I'll leave you with parenting teenagers expert and psychologist Angela Karanja on her thoughts on being a dangerous woman.

See you in two week's time!

ANGELA KARANJA: I encourage women to be dangerous. Here is a quote by T. E. Lawrence: "Everyone dreams; but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds Awake to find that it was vanity; But the dreamers of day are dangerous men. That they may act their dreams with open eyes to make it possible." So yes be dangerous, be a daydreamer, act on those things, open your eyes and make them possible.