

Diana Arriaga

### Breaking the Chains of Niceness

Although seemingly harmless, *nice* is a word that can be wielded as a lethal weapon. Its etymology surprises modern users, as it invokes now-contradictory connotations. This malleable word has been employed throughout centuries, as its definitions have undergone constant reinventions. With its current existence as a placeholder that insinuates not-so-nice feelings, its use endangers women's identities and positions of power, thus worsening the equality gap despite ongoing efforts.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, *nice* stems from classical Latin and refers to that which is ignorant (1). However, its current use denotes a pleasant event or action, a definition that differs widely from its original meaning (8). Another contradiction lies in an archaic entry that portrays *nice* as lascivious behavior, while a modern account refers to it as lovely (1, 13). However, this word was also used for coy behavior, directly juxtaposing its previous indication of wantonness (4). An additional definition relates it to the practice of being precise or particular, now translated as subtle (5). *Nice* also acquired a negative connotation when it became synonymous with cowardice, and it later became associated with effeminate qualities (4). Thus, society began to assign a gender to words, a threat to women and men alike. Because *nice* is rooted in ambiguity, it has undergone many changes but retained a negative characteristic. Although the two primary definitions that *nice* is associated with are positive, as they refer to pleasantries and accuracy, darker versions of the term exist, often used to subtly call someone dull or a pushover without the use of those exact words (6). *Nice*, though not translated across languages, has been translated across time, and it has evolved socially to remain in use. Upon

closer inspection, the distortion of each definition of *nice* reveals that women's identities and places in positions of power are jeopardized through the use of the word.

*Nice* has been shaped into a word that preserves social order since colonial times, when "men had more opportunities for public speech" and were only punished with a public apology if they misspoke (McDaniel 31). However, women who committed the same verbal mistake were severely "[physically] and [legally]" punished because their actions were contrary to what was socially acceptable (45). There was a widespread belief that *nice* women would not "[speak] in public" because of their "natural delicacy and timidity"; this idealization undermined women, as it prohibited them from acting freely and instead forced them to follow unwritten norms (38). Today, women who contradict the ideology of *nice* are also silenced, as "men [regard] women's speech as a threat to [their] power and authority" (37). Women in politics were particularly challenged, as it was argued their innate "modesty and bashfulness" made them incapable of "handling the demands of their jobs," an erroneous belief that continues today (37). *Nice* has become a synonym for "proper femininity" that seeks to maintain the "hierarchical social order... [dependent] upon women's submissiveness" (26, 27). It has also become a tool to "support hierarchies of gender, race," and power; as such, it is also used to explain "women's absence from positions of power" or attempts to remove them from these (21, 12). Those who threaten the social ladder are immediately antagonized, as "any deviation from prescribed gender [norms] calls an individual's [character] into question" in an attempt to ostracize them and minimize any damage caused (15). The word *nice* places a societal burden on women, forcing them to become "conversational cheerleaders" through the connotation the word carries; they must "[affirm], [enhance], and [celebrate] the well-being of others" before their own (11). As such, women should never "challenge ... men's authority over [them]" to avoid disrupting the "domestic and

political arenas" (27, 30). Women are allowed to be "assertive" when "defending [their] family or community" but never when they do so in self-defense; this reveals the fear that patriarchal society harbors toward "the disruptive power of women's speech," further demonstrated by the backlash women face when they challenge this through words or actions (27). Various females in current positions of power have persevered in the face of adversity by choosing their own path instead of following the one that *nice* has laid out for them, demonstrating women are not puppets to control through words.

Society has "traditionally regarded [niceness] as feminine," further associating it with "modesty and passivity"; this has created harmful stereotypes that bind women to a specific behavior (McDaniel 14). A famous nursery rhyme claims "girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice" ("What Are Little Boys Made of?" 8-9). Although it employs a playful tone, the use of *nice* dictates what is considered to be proper feminine behavior; they must strike a balance between being agreeable and interesting. The rhyme utilizes the sugar's sweetness and the spice's flavor to exemplify the friendly and kind deportment women should engage in. Such conduct is "a laudable sign of modesty and chastity" as it acts in accordance with the hierarchical order *nice* aims to maintain (McDaniel 7). *Nice* is never associated with boys, thus granting them the freedom to act as they desire under the pretense of masculinity. Society monitors women's behavior closely since a young age, but the same authority turns a blind eye to the actions of its male members. In behaving as the rhyme demands, women are deemed feeble for catering to society's expectations, but when they defy the established social guidelines, they are also castigated. Women are reminded of this disparity in Stevie Smith's poem, "Miss Snooks, Poetess." Through the use of *nice*, the poem acquires a critical tone that indirectly conveys disdain; the poems referenced are discredited because of the author's gender. It insinuates the

agreeable quality of the "awfully nice [poems] fitted to a woman" the poetess wrote, but it does so in a derogatory manner (Smith 3-4). The control upon women's actions is masked as praise that applauds Smith for her unproblematic work while also belittling it by implying it is not real poetry because of this very same reason. Furthermore, the pleasant pieces that earned Miss Snooks "a lot of prizes" speak to the struggle of inequality women grapple with, as their work is often considered to be less than men's; women's achievements must be formally recognized to be valued appropriately, though they are continually attacked for receiving awards because of their gender, as the taunting tone of the poem indicates (Smith 8). Further proof of this gap is offered in The Wall Street Journal's article, "Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D." (Epstein). The opinion piece aims to discredit Dr. Jill Biden, as the sexist attack devalues her multiple credentials by referring to her as "kiddo" instead of addressing her by her professional title. The author tells Dr. Biden to forget the "small thrill of being [a] Dr." and urges her to refer to herself as "First Lady Jill Biden," who will experience a "larger thrill [by] living the next four years in the best public housing in the world" (Epstein). Epstein downplays the importance of her doctorate and identity as a woman by implying that her identity in relation to a man is superior; he also objectifies her by emphasizing her identity through her "marital title," which "eschews her personal identity" (Hesse). By arguing her degree was easy to obtain, he attempts to subjugate her, as she is in an extraordinary position of power. Dr. Biden steps outside of the parameters of the word *nice*, challenging its placating effect on women by publicly introducing herself through her professional title. She questions the hierarchy of gender in politics and academics, speaking as an accomplished woman to be heard. Although women's behavior and personality are tied to the word *nice*, women who break its hold on them pave the path to restructure the stifling social hierarchy.

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) suffered a blatant verbal attack by a fellow member of Congress after she dared to step outside the designated lines men have drawn for women through the word *nice*. The instigator of the attack, Republican Congressman Ted Yoho, called AOC "disgusting" after she asked for financial help for her district on the Congress floor; AOC, who calmly informed Yoho of his rude conduct, was met with misogynistic slander, which he later denied in an apology that was brutally insincere (Alaimo). His accomplice, who merely stood by as Yoho used derogatory and "abusive language" toward AOC, claimed he was distracted when the event occurred (Alaimo). Although Yoho denied referring to AOC as an expletive and apologized, he refused to acknowledge his attempt to silence a woman in a position of power through verbal intimidation, which recalls the ideas that men fear women's speech and that *nice* is used by men in political spheres to subjugate women so they do not "challenge their power" (McDaniel 37). Yoho's failed effort to belittle a woman through a sexist insult additionally demonstrates that acting in defiance to what the word *nice* prescribes threatens a woman's position in power. However, AOC distanced herself from the control of the word by speaking out against her assailant and also "[refusing] to let" Yoho have power over her, which she accomplished by reclaiming the obscenity he used toward her and drawing power from it. Her defense on behalf of "all women who seek power" directly refutes the control that men aim to have over women through the word *nice*, as AOC articulated she would not be intimidated (Alaimo). AOC's assertiveness was seen as a threat by Yoho, and it later encroached on his power as his colleague used the trait to defend herself. By not acting nicely, Ocasio-Cortez challenged the patriarchal order that seeks to subjugate women for improving their community and speaking their minds freely. Furthermore, AOC turned the tables of niceness on Yoho, as she denounced his behavior publicly. Although *nice* is associated with women because of the

constraints it places on them, Ocasio-Cortez drew attention to his conduct, which could hardly be described as pleasant, and trapped Yoho under the weight of *nice* he aimed to muffle her with. Another attack on women who went against niceness was committed by Donald Trump. In a racist tweet, he accosted four congress members known as 'The Squad,' to which AOC belongs. His xenophobic comment urged them to "go back to where [they] came from" (Cohen). These four women, who were simply doing their job, were also criticized for "daring to wield political power" (Alaimo). Once again, a man attempted to publicly shame women for their refusal to act nicely by expressing their opinions, but he provided insight into the power that women's speech holds, as he attempted to discredit them and their words. These women challenged the American hierarchies of power, gender, and race, as they are children of immigrants and minorities; by refusing to act submissively, they weakened the hold that *nice* attempts to keep on women, especially those of color in positions of power.

An obsolete definition of *nice* as synonymous with fragile has resurfaced because of the feminization of the word (Oxford English Dictionary 4). Through this interpretation, a *nice* woman was one that practiced being "delicate, sensitive, and sweet" (McDaniel 29). Women were encouraged to emulate this golden standard to control their troublesome speech. When "conventional gender distinctions ... [remain] intact even as women [compete] successfully in work, politics, and sports," men do not feel threatened because each gender contends in separate spheres and adheres to what is regarded as traditional gender roles (McDaniel 15). However, when cultural norms are challenged, men are quick to assert their power over women through the controlling aspect of *nice* because they fear the effects on the social ladder. One current example of this is Sarah Fuller's historic achievement of becoming "the first woman to score in the Power 5 college conference" (Romero). She is also "the first woman to play in a Power 5 football game"

and one of only three women who have played "in a Football Bowl Subdivision game." Despite these astounding accomplishments, the Vanderbilt senior has received backlash from online trolls. A viral tweet demonstrates the sexist, degrading, and misogynistic comments left on social media accounts that reported on Fuller's historic achievements; the tweet is meant to inform users of "what it is like to be a woman in sports." One comment degrades Fuller by asking for explicit photos, while others threaten her by speaking of the bodily harm she would suffer if she were tackled. Fuller directly opposes the meaning of *nice* as that which is tender or frail. She continues to challenge the social hierarchy that aims to deprive her of power by inspiring young girls to do "what [they] put [their] minds to" (Romero). Football is not a sport for the weak, and Fuller demonstrates that women are not delicate by choosing to defy the implied behavior that *nice* dictates. Her confidence on the football field translates to a defiance of the submissive culture that *nice* entails, and she symbolizes that women are not "too delicate to withstand the rough and tumble of public life," including contact sports ("What Are Little Boys Made Of?" 8, McDaniel 34).

*Nice* has also perpetuated the oppression of minorities, as "boldness and aggressiveness" are praised in white individuals but criminalized in the former (McDaniel 35). This is especially true for women of color, who are forced into silence through the social guidelines of niceness "as a means of establishing dependence and vulnerability" (McDaniel 34). White men in positions of power often "[attack] women with demeaning insults" to punish their assertive character (Summers). The 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States also instigated an attack against Kamala Harris, the first elected female Vice President, when he referred to her as a "monster that was onstage" during this year's Vice Presidential debate; Trump attempted to "dehumanize [and] diminish" Harris through the harmful stereotype that "black women [are] out of control,

hysterical, and rude." The assault on Harris called her "likeability into question," which directly relates to the definition of *nice* as that which is pleasant (Summers). Because of their "race and gender," female politicians must follow "[complex] ... rules that men ... don't have to think about" (Phillips). "This gender disparity" threatens women in positions of power by placing them in an unfair position where they are judged by their gender instead of their "qualifications or positions on issues," crucial factors when choosing elected representatives. Voters hold female politicians of color to an unfair standard, as they are "doubly saddled with a perception that they are angry or domineering in nature"; the burden of "likeability" is placed on women, making them subservient to others' perception (Phillips). This inequity, which forces women to work twice as hard for the opportunity to be on the same footing as their male counterparts, is sustained through the social hierarchies of gender and race that are upheld through *nice*. Women are also trapped under niceness, as they are pressured to avoid acting "too tough" to not "[jeopardize their] likability," which could cost them voters (Phillips). Politics is a male-dominated realm, and the women present in it are limited through the word *nice*, which is mistakenly considered to "offer important proof of femininity, a sign that they [respect] ... men's rightful position as head of" society (McDaniel 16). Men use the word *nice* to impose behaviors on women that allow them to retain their power. However, Harris broke free from the influence by holding Mike Pence to the standards she is measured against. As Pence repeatedly interrupted Harris, she calmly turned toward him and said, "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking" (Phillips). With this simple but striking phrase, Harris presented herself as a "clear and focused debater who effectively countered interruptions" (Summers). She skillfully deflected "sexist, racist, and misogynistic" critiques that stem from "long-dated tropes ... about black women ... unfairly denigrated as angry" (Summers). Harris is not the only powerful woman of color who has fallen



victim to racial bias, which illustrates the harmful and controlling aspects of the word *nice*. Serena Williams has also contradicted the social rules of niceness by "fighting crazily against the so-called wrongness of her body's positioning at the service line" (Rankine 29). She has been fined for this passionate defense of herself and the "struggles she represents for other women of color"; attempts to intimidate her have also been coupled with demeaning remarks, referring to her as "insane, crass, [and] crazy" (Tramel, Rankine 30). The criticism Williams has received throughout her career relates to the racial stereotypes that condemn self-assuredness in women of color because their speech conducts a threat to men's power. She is continually "penalized for being emotional," while male tennis players who have "profane outbursts" are applauded (Tramel). This illustrates the double standard that the word *nice* enables, allowing the racial and gender gaps to widen through the restraints that are placed on women. However, Williams, like Harris, transformed that which harms their identity as women into a liberating force. As women of color in positions of power, both have used their most valuable asset, their words, to battle the restrictions that *nice* places on them. They have shaped the word to define what they are not: complacent toward instances of abuse of power and blatant racism.

Idealizing niceness "in women as both natural and proper [effectively]" encourages women's silence; this "powerful ideological tool" allows for discrepancies in the hierarchies of gender and race to grow, as women are punished for not acting appropriately (McDaniel 45). *Nice* is a word that monitors women's speech, which men consider "a threat to [their] authority" (45). The word and its use "naturalize and conceal men's institutional power over women," "perpetuating a culture of violence against women" (McDaniel 13, Alaimo). However, women have defended themselves through niceness, redefining it to protect their identities and positions

of power. They challenge the hierarchies in place to rebuild them, advocating to further facilitate the goal of eradicating gender, racial, and social inequality.

## Bibliography

- Alaimo, Opinion by Kara. "AOC's Brilliant Defense of Women Who Seek Power." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 24 July 2020, [edition.cnn.com/2020/07/24/opinions/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ted-yoho-alaimo/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/24/opinions/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ted-yoho-alaimo/index.html).
- Cohen, David, and Bianca Quilatan. "Trump Tells Dem Congresswomen: Go Back Where You Came From." *POLITICO*, 14 July 2019, [www.politico.com/story/2019/07/14/trump-congress-go-back-where-they-came-from-1415692](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/14/trump-congress-go-back-where-they-came-from-1415692).
- Epstein, Joseph. "Opinion | Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not If You Need an M.D." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 11 Dec. 2020, [www.wsj.com/articles/is-there-a-doctor-in-the-white-house-not-if-you-need-an-m-d-11607727380](https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-there-a-doctor-in-the-white-house-not-if-you-need-an-m-d-11607727380).
- Hesse, Monica. "Perspective | The Wall Street Journal Column about Jill Biden Is Worse than You Thought." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 13 Dec. 2020, [www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/dr-jill-biden-wall-street-journal/2020/12/13/e43883a4-3d45-11eb-8db8-395dedaaa036\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/dr-jill-biden-wall-street-journal/2020/12/13/e43883a4-3d45-11eb-8db8-395dedaaa036_story.html).
- McDaniel, Patricia A. "Shrinking Violets and Caspar Milquetoasts." New York University Press, 2003.
- "Nice, Adj. and Adv." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020, [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/126732?rskey=62feRe&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid](https://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/126732?rskey=62feRe&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid).
- Phillips, Amber. "Analysis | Kamala Harris's Critics Fell into the 'Is She Likable?' Trap." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Oct. 2020, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/08/kamala-harriss-critics-fell-into-is-she-likable-trap/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/08/kamala-harriss-critics-fell-into-is-she-likable-trap/).
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: an American Lyric*. Penguin, 2015.
- Romero, Dennis. "Vanderbilt's Sarah Fuller Becomes First Woman to Score in Power 5 Football." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 12 Dec. 2020, [www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/vanderbilt-s-sarah-fuller-becomes-first-woman-score-power-5-n1251011](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/vanderbilt-s-sarah-fuller-becomes-first-woman-score-power-5-n1251011).

Smith, Stevie. "Miss Snooks, Poetess by Stevie Smith." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2020,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55633/miss-snooks-poetess-56d2376982235](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55633/miss-snooks-poetess-56d2376982235).

Summers, Juana. "Trump Calls Harris A 'Monster,' Reviving A Pattern Of Attacking Women Of Color." *NPR*, NPR, 9 Oct. 2020,  
[www.npr.org/2020/10/09/921884531/trump-calls-harris-a-monster-reviving-a-pattern-of-attacking-women-of-color](http://www.npr.org/2020/10/09/921884531/trump-calls-harris-a-monster-reviving-a-pattern-of-attacking-women-of-color).

Tramel Raggs, Cindy Boren. "Serena Williams Fined \$17,000 for U.S. Open Outburst; Billie Jean King Calls out 'Double Standard'." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 29 Apr. 2019,  
[www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/09/08/serena-williamss-game-penalty-at-u-s-open-final-sparks-torrent-of-reactions/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/09/08/serena-williamss-game-penalty-at-u-s-open-final-sparks-torrent-of-reactions/).

"What Are Little Boys Made Of?" *Nursery Rhymes*, 2018,  
[allnurseryrhymes.com/what-are-little-boys-made-of/](http://allnurseryrhymes.com/what-are-little-boys-made-of/).