

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Music goes far beyond entertainment. It has long been a part of human life, but in recent years, many artists have used their platform to comment on real-life issues. Music serves as both a product and a reflection of the cultural, social, and political realities in which it is created. It is significant to society because it resonates with people despite their race, gender, or class. It is a social phenomenon that is present everywhere, and, as the medium by which we shape our environment, it makes a great impact on society (Petrušić, 2021). Music has been a key medium for people to express not only their identity but also their concern regarding what is happening in society. It presents as a social construction of social reality as outlined in song lyrics (Qonaatun, 2019).

Song lyrics are not only artistic expressions but also discursive sites where gender, power, and identity are negotiated. Lyrics are words that make up a song, usually in the form of verses and choruses. Lyrics contribute significantly to the music itself, as they provide the listener an in-depth understanding of the message contained in the music. Qonaatun (2019) states that an ideal lyric should contain moral or idealistic messages and have the power of constructive social criticism. Song lyrics are more than just artistic expressions; they are powerful mediums through which artists convey messages, challenge norms, and reflect on personal and collective experiences. Song lyrics have the potential to not only resonate emotionally with listeners but also to provoke thought and inspire social change.

Within this context, the examination of song lyrics offers valuable insights into the social dynamics and power structures that shape our world. This communicative power aligns well with Fairclough's three-dimensional framework in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of text, discourse practice, and social practice. Fairclough's framework allows for a deep analysis of song lyrics by examining the words themselves, how these lyrics circulate within broader societal structures, reflecting and potentially reshaping power dynamics and social ideologies. The writer is interested in employing this method to analyse the dynamics in song lyrics. One key area where these dynamics are particularly significant is in discussions of agency.

Agency, especially in relation to gender, refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices despite societal constraints. For women, agency is an ability to define and enact their life choices in contexts where this ability previously was denied (Qutteina et al., 2019). This rejection has historically been constrained by societal norms, power structures, and gender expectations that limit how they express autonomy and assert control over their lives. Abrams (1999), in her essay titled "From Autonomy to Agency: Feminist Perspective on Self-Direction", argues that societal norms often act as limiting factors on female's agency, especially through gendered socialisation, institutional barriers, and pervasive cultural messages that may limit women's choices. Her argument is based on the liberal feminist view of autonomy, which emphasize independence from external influences and tends to overlook other dimensions of women's lives. Abrams' exploration of female agency reflects a woman's capacity for self-definition and self-direction within the boundaries of societal constraints.

Self-definition is a process by which women develop and assert a sense of self that is often in tension with external norms and expectations. This form of agency recognises and negotiates with the social influences around women. For example, the social norms around women's bodies and appearances may affect their self-perception, but self-definition allows women to reflect on them and either embrace, resist, or reinterpret them. By doing this, women can develop their own images (Abrams, 1999). Self-definition centres on "who" one is and how a person perceives her values, capabilities, and worth, often in relation to social expectations. Meanwhile, self-direction is the ability to set and pursue goals based on that self-definition. It focuses on "what" one does and how a woman acts on their sense of self and autonomy by making choices that align with personal goals, aspirations, and values, even within restrictive environments. This understanding of female agency is relevant in contemporary music, where artists often use their music to negotiate personal identity and social expectations that are imposed on them.

The music industry remains a male-dominated space where power, visibility, and influence are often unequally distributed. Historically, men are known to occupy senior positions in the industry. This resulted in a situation whereby such position of power is associated with men, so it is gendered as masculine and subsequently appears to be the 'natural' order of things (Wolfe, 2019). Even with the increasing involvement of women in the management and corporate sphere of popular music, Sheila Whitley in Wolfe (2019) argued that inequality in the industry still persists. Therefore, female artists seek to raise their voice within the gendered music industry by using their works. Through song lyrics, female artists challenge these norms and voice their agency in the current gendered

power dynamics. This can be seen in the songs from Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album.

Rachel Agatha Keen is a British-Ghanaian singer-songwriter that is based in the United Kingdom. Known professionally as Raye, she debuted in 2014 and has been on the journey for stardom ever since. Raye grew up in South London, she was brought up in a musical family. Both of her parents are musicians at church. Since she was a kid, she has been writing her own music. She also plays different instruments, such as the cello, flute, and piano, alongside honing her production skills. Musically, Raye resonates the most with the classic soul/jazz maestros of the 40s and 50s, like Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, etc. (The Vogue, 2023).

In her interview with W Magazine, she explained how she dreamed of becoming a musician and signed her first four-record deal at 17 with Polydor (George, 2023). But this took a turn as she was quickly 'pigeonholed' as an EDM vocalist. In her own words, Raye stated that "when you have a dream, you often can't see how ugly and unsimple things are behind closed doors," because it is all about making big hits and fast cheques with no consideration for her artistry. After years of frustration, Raye revealed her feelings about not being able to put out an album since 2014 to X (formerly known as Twitter) in 2021. Shortly after she parted with Polydor, she began to rewrite her stories. In 2022, she released her single with 070 Shake, "Escapism". The single gained success with millions of uses on TikTok and almost 900 million streams on Spotify. "Escapism" reached its pinnacle with being the number 1 song on the UK Official Singles Charts in 2023. This marks

Raye's path to success, as she released her first studio album in 2023, titled "My 21st Century Blues."

The album is Raye's exploration of her personal journey; she offers 15 tracks, each containing her past story. From discussing her experience as a young female artist bound to a contract held by a domineering record label to sharing personal testimonies of her struggles with addiction, intrusive thoughts, sexual assault, and systemic misogyny. "My 21st Century Blues" becomes a mosaic of Raye's resilience (Lytras, 2023). This album stands as a declaration of all she had endured as an artist and as a woman. Raye's transition from a label-controlled artist to an independent singer-songwriter is not only a personal act of liberation but also a symbolic moment of reclaiming power, identity, and creative freedom, which is highlighted in the album. Her public statements and the narratives within her lyrics reflect a deliberate resistance to industry-imposed silencing, objectification, and emotional suppression. These experiences commonly faced by women in the entertainment world. With "My 21st Century Blues," Raye herself won in six out of seven categories she was nominated for in the Brit Awards 2024, namely Songwriter of the Year, Song of the Year, Best R&B Act, Best New Artist, Artist of the Year, and Album of the Year. This makes her the first artist with the most wins at a single ceremony, beating Blur, Adele, and Harry Styles' record for four wins (Bushby, 2024). She was also the first woman to win Songwriter of the Year. This context positions her album as a compelling site for analysis, as expressions of voice, pain, resistance, and self-empowerment are woven into the fabric of her songs.

The album itself also receives a high rating from critics and journalists. Cat Woods (2023), through The Telegraph, rates it as a 5-star album. It showcases her powerful vocal versatility and genre-blending style, fusing dance, R&B, soul, and electronic beats. The album, a bold response to former label restrictions, celebrates her independence with tracks like "Hard Out Here," critiquing privilege and showcasing her empowered, sultry style. Alexis Petridis (2023), The Guardian's head rock and pop critic, is satisfied by the album. He considers the album as a defiant, genre-blending debut that blends dance, R&B, funk, and pop with incisive lyrics on personal struggles and industry battles. The album opens with Raye's bold British voice asserting independence against the backdrop of nightclub beats, with tracks like "Escapism" and "Hard Out Here" taking on past experiences with vulnerability and grit. Petridis points out that despite some weaker moments in the second half, her self-produced work proves she is a potent force in British pop, with a promising future ahead. Lastly, Helen Brown (2023), as The Independent's chief albums critic, rates it 5 stars. The album is a fierce and cathartic release that tackles industry frustrations and personal traumas with raw honesty. Brown writes, songs like "Hard Out Here" and "Ice Cream Man" confront sexism and assault, blending genres from jazz to R&B with emotional depth. Raye's powerful lyrics, impressive vocal range, and unfiltered storytelling showcase her journey from major label restrictions to artistic freedom, creating an album that's equal parts vulnerable and empowering. From these reviews, the album showcases the story of personal struggle in the music industry and how Raye asserts her independence in the male-dominated industry. This aligns with the concept of female agency, where women make their own choice despite the restriction posed by the society. Due to these

reasons, the writer chose “My 21st Century Blues” by Raye as the corpus of the study.

Several previous studies have applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to explore gender ideologies and representations in song lyrics. Chin et al. (2019) employed Fairclough’s CDA and Halliday’s transitivity system to examine gendered power relations in 20 Billboard-charting songs from 2015. By using Haig’s Participant Power Hierarchy, the study found that grammatical power was more often assigned to male characters, and the lyrics exhibited more sexist instances toward women than men. Ruanglertsilp (2022) applied Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework to Ariana Grande’s *thank u, next* album, focusing on how linguistic features construct themes of female self-empowerment. Through content and fine-grained linguistic analysis, four major themes emerged: independence, self-love, sexuality, and vulnerability, portraying empowerment as embracing one’s complexity. Harbi et al. (2019) analysed songs by The Beatles using Halliday’s transitivity system, identifying material, mental, and relational processes as dominant. Their analysis connected linguistic choices to the meanings encoded in popular music narratives. Yeh and Hung (2022) conducted a corpus-based discourse analysis of One Direction’s lyrics, using Fairclough’s CDA and Levinger’s model of romantic relationships. Their findings revealed how the themes of love and emotional shifts evolved over the band’s discography, illustrating how language constructs emotional narratives over time. El-Falaky (2015) used CDA to explore gender identity in Egyptian Mahraganat street songs, highlighting how women were portrayed as rebellious seductresses and men as moral gatekeepers. The study revealed how the genre

reinforces patriarchal ideologies through linguistic representation. Lastly, Kayany and Dar (2019) combined CDA and Feminist CDA to analyze South Asian film songs from 1972–2015. Their findings revealed recurring themes of sexual objectification, male dominance, and suppressed female agency, reflecting deeply embedded patriarchal values in the region's popular music.

While considerable attention has been given to themes of sexism and empowerment in music studies, less is known about how female artists linguistically construct and assert agency in their lyrical narratives. Therefore, this study examines how female agency is represented in song lyrics, employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover the linguistic strategies and ideological tensions embedded in the text. There are many songs that raise a theme about female agency, several songs from Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album are selected as the data of this study because there are no studies as mentioned which used Raye's album as the corpus of the study. Employing Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to analyse female agency involves dissecting the linguistic features of the lyrics. This analysis will investigate how Raye's lyrics represent women's voices, assert agency, and challenge conventional portrayals of female identity in popular music. Focusing on the linguistic features in the lyrics, this study aims to reveal how Raye constructs a narrative of female agency. By analysing these elements, the research intends to analyse the representation of female agency in song lyrics from Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, this study also analyses the hidden meaning behind the lyrics.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What is the dominant type of process in the selected song lyrics of Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album?
2. How is female agency represented in the song lyrics of Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album?

1.3 Objective of the Study

According to the research questions above, this study aims to:

1. To identify the dominant types of process in the song lyrics.
2. To analyse the representation of female agency in song lyrics through the use of linguistic strategies.

1.4 Significance of the Study

a. For Students

This study provides students, especially those within the fields of English literature, an insight on how female agency is portrayed in contemporary song lyrics. By examining Raye's lyrics, students can gain a better understanding of how linguistic choices and narrative structures can shape the representation of female agency and empowerment. This analysis promotes critical thinking skills and encourages students to explore complex social issues.

b. For Study Programme

For the study programme, this research enriches the curriculum by bridging the gap between theoretical concepts, such as Fairclough's three-

dimensional framework, and practical applications in popular media analysis. By focusing on a contemporary music album that addresses issues of female agency, the study programme can attract and engage students interested in modern interpretations of agency.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study focuses on analysing selected songs from Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album to explore how female agency is represented through language. The analysis is grounded in Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, with particular emphasis on the text analysis dimension. The songs selected for this study are chosen based on their relevance to the theme of female agency, specifically those addressing issues such as autonomy, resilience, and personal struggles.

While Fairclough's framework involves three dimensions (text analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice), this study focuses on the text analysis dimension. The production, distribution, and broader socio-cultural implications of the songs are interpreted based on the textual analysis but not the primary focus of analysis. The study is also limited to a selected number of songs from the album. The findings may not comprehensively represent the entire album or Raye's overall body of work.