

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

**"POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DISCOURSE IN SELECTED WORKS OF
KENDRICK LAMAR"**

Sneha Thomas Varghese

Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts, Ajeenkya DY Patil University.

E-mail: sneha.varghese@adypu.edu.in

**Sneha Thomas Varghese, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DISCOURSE IN
SELECTED WORKS OF KENDRICK LAMAR, -- Palarch's Journal Of
Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(10), 2428-2434. ISSN 1567-214x**

**Keywords: Political discourse, Element, Humble, Double Consciousness,
hegemonic discourse, rap, hip- hop**

Abstract

The genre of rap gained significant attention with regards to its close affinity with political and social themes. The impetus of hip- hop culture embeds a long lineage of political commentary and subversion that reflects the veins of oppressive dichotomy and the reassertion of power. The narrative of academic elitism that earlier debated the literary merit of analyzing hip- hop culture is gradually being replaced by the wave of new discursive and scholastic interventions within the genre of rap. The course of recent developments in the domain displays the revolutionary zeal of many artists who seeks to address pervasive issues that plague the contemporary socio-political scene. The present study aims to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the social and political elements of discourse in the works of Kendrick Lamar namely, *Element and Humble*. The research focuses on integrating Michel Foucault's model of hegemonic discourse of power and knowledge, as well as the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness.

Introduction

Kendrick Lamar proved to be one of the greatest pioneers to chart the course of rap with compelling social and political chronicles of recent times. His oeuvre is yoked together with paradoxical complexities endured by African Americans and it treads the thin line of exposing the hypocritical nuances within the community and painting a scathing portrayal of institutionalized racism prevalent in the American society and its psychological repercussions on an African American Individual.

The study intends to demonstrate how strategic functions of political discourse are implicitly enumerated in the selected works of the artist through the application of Foucault's view of power as being an entity of diffusion and discursiveness rather than coercion and combat of exclusive minority battling for power. Moreover, the

research emphasizes on how the concept of double consciousness relegates its position in the works of Kendrick Lamar and the redefinition of the notion in the postmodern world of hyper realism.

Initially, a brief overview of the theoretic outline concerning political discourse and its relevance in the genre of hip-hop would be elaborated, followed by an exploration of how rap as a genre is wielded as a tool to dismantle the hierarchical chaos rooted in arbitrary nexus of power and superiority. Lastly, the research provides a concise examination of various literary illustrations and the influence of the political narratives in the said works.

Theoretical Framework

The research is situated in the realm of political discourse and its conjectural structure borders on the psychological and cultural evolution of African American identity. The notion of critical-political discourse analysis fixates on the propagation of political authority, misuse of power, or subjugation through political dialogue, as well as varied predisposing factors or counter-power to such forms of rhetorical supremacy. Such an analysis, in particular, describes the discursive conditions and consequences of sociopolitical inequality that lead from such supremacy (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1993b).

Foucault's discourse reinvented the correlation between power and knowledge. To challenge power, one must not seek some 'absolute truth' (as it refers to the truth produced by the society), but rather 'disentangle the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time' (Foucault, in Rainbow 1991: 75). Discourse transmits and produces power; it serves to reinforce it, but it also undermines and exposes it, making it vulnerable and allowing it to be thwarted (Foucault 1998: 100-1).

Double consciousness is a term propounded by W E B Du Bois in order to allude to the psycho social bifurcations entrenched in the American society and he describes the inner crisis imbued with the creation of the fragmented personalities. Du Bois exemplifies the emotional turmoil of the contending archetypes in an African American body as a site of resistance and conflict.

Social Rap/ Political Rap

Political rap is gaining momentum in terms of creation and mainstream acceptance in the present scenario due to the upheavals of police brutality that rocked the entire nation leading to the emergence of Black lives matter's movement and other forms of resistance against systemic racism and undercurrents of invisible societal segregation.

The genre comes under the expansive umbrella of conscious hip-hop that challenges the hegemonic discourse of economic, social and political aspects. The corpus that comes under this field sends out strong political and social messages and is objectively directed towards the sentiments of the marginalized masses in the society. It witnessed a sudden resurgence aligning with the current turbulent political climate due to the invasive oppressive practices that affects the well-being of a particular race.

For instance, we have the likes of J Cole, Kendrick, Beyoncé and Childish Gambino restructuring the way in which we perceive rap through their intellectual

assessment and commentary upon the atrocities meted out against African Americans and their potent lyrics combined with arresting visuals displays the biting portrayal of the plight of African American duality as they traverse through the space of confrontation and internal clash with two warring ideals of being an American and African American.

Political and Social Discourse Analysis

Humble

Humble is a social commentary on politics and most importantly black identity in twenty first century. Lamar uses this track to satirize various African American ideologies while criticizing the continued marginalization of the blacks by the government via the American socioeconomic system.

The track depicts the cognitive dissonance affecting the artist while he tries to come in terms with his immense mainstream success and his African American identity. The duality calls in for a reevaluation of his previous self from Compton. The chaotic tonality and overlapping of the lyrics ("hol' up hol' up", 'sit down, bitch!') Is the manifestation of Du Boisian's notion of twoness in which the artist is burdened with and such feelings of humiliation, according to Du Bois, can stimulate the tactic of "race suicide"—"the trying to evade from ourselves," as he describes inclusion. This attempt entail and is also premised on—"the drawing of class lines within the Negro race" and "the emergence of a certain social aristocracy" defined by "looks" presumably complexion as well as education, wealth, cultivation, and idealism.

The connotative variation of the word, humble, is investigated from various angles. It comments on an African American man's place and power as he navigates social relationships, as well as the redefinition of his influence and place in society, which is directed through observation and intense scrutiny infiltrated in media texts, transforming the perception of African American males as predatory and menacing threats. Foucault mentions that power is an embodied phenomenon, and pervades into everyday chronicle in which the space an African American man occupies suddenly is associated with glorification of violence and abject poverty.

Furthermore, Kendrick reminds them of the significance of humility in social interactions and dismantles patriarchal notions associated with African American men by exhorting them to treat their female partners with respect and appreciation. He delivers a powerful message towards the women to take pride in their natural physique and asks the African American women to be confident in their melanin skin and how they do not have to subscribe to the conventional ideas of the beauty. The state of consciousness experienced by African American individuals as member of the oppressed group inhibits their celebration of self and Kendrick Lamar defers from the narrative to embolden the natural beauty of African American women and motivates them not to assimilate to fit into the euro centric perception of beauty. African American bodies are scrutinized and forced to morph and play into the conventional norms, as elite minority dictates control of the wider population. Foucault refers to this as the bio power.

The musical video of the track contains elements that restructure the discernment of what is branded as classic. The integration and re-enactment of classical paintings like the last supper by Leonardo Da Vinci and the scene featuring

Kendrick wearing a priestly cassock invokes the moral imperatives of his art and also attests the supremacy in artistic competence as he tries to veer a path of empowerment of his community in Compton.

Concomitantly, the artist resorts to exposing the vices in the industry and how fame can be detrimental to achieving the virtuosity which in turn produces mediocre art with no substance and he calls out the extravagant and mediocre productions of artists and he tries to create preserve the exclusivity of genre of rap. Through this process, he tries to change to narrative of power as a form of 'metapower' which seeks to drive the subjective notions of truth towards the common mass. Here the signification of power based on Foucault's understanding is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge and the accepted narrative of collective suffering.

Element

The track, Element, is a soulful amalgamation of dissent, art and politics performed to highlight the complexities piercing the multivalent struggles of African American individuals. It begins with an allusion to his alter ego, Kung Fu Kenny, cementing his stature, as one of the greatest rappers of the millennium but as the lyrics progress, the layers of concealed crisis with the internal self emerge to question the validity and durability of the artist's success.

The positioning of the archetype of Kung Fu Kenny appropriates the stereotypical notion of mastery over the craft, yet the artist fears his downfall by the same violent factors that are entrenched within his culture. He exposes the hypocritical stance by depicting black on black violence and how the culture of violence jeopardized the generational progress of African Americans.

During the course of the track, he realizes he is equally culpable because he endorses the violence but still wants to redeem himself from the corrupt paths of being damned but finds it to be a herculean task to disassociate himself from the violent past as he mentions he do not want to experience the abject poverty nor the brutality ridden accounts of killings, stabbings and drug peddling as a child. In fact, he metaphorically marks a triumph as he redeemed himself from the damnation of being subjected to the violence that pervades in his culture due to the subjugation validated by the dominant discourse of conventional positioning of an African American male as a predator when he mentions that no one can take him out of his element.

Kendrick embodies different personas, like Kung Fu Kenny and K. Dot to ascertain his contradictions as a mortal but acknowledges the fact he directs his fame as to tool of empowerment for his community and celebrates beauty within the chaos in African American Culture as he tries to display the camaraderie among the black community braving the odds to realize the American dream and their attempt to recapture their identities and their power. The racist political interventions weaponized the prison system to destroy black communities which leads to high degree of incarceration and this vice gives birth families devoid of stability and it also steals the conducive environment for a child's holistic development.

The video accompanying the track is equally pivotal as Kendrick drew inspiration from the renowned photo journalist, Gordon Parks known for his insanely graphic images of African Americans in the 1980s. Each frame captures the essence of his pictures but is reinvented and metamorphosed to correspond to the flaming concerns encountered by the contemporary African American generation. The

image depicts the chilling reality that African Americans has to go through and it corresponds to the answers enumerated by Du Bois in this essay, “The Study of the Negro Problems”, he defines the social problem is due to the failure to recognize the collective group ideals and the helplessness in generating any action to against these social evils as a result they are not able to envision a stable home and they cannot garner economic or social prosperity due to the rampant crime and lawlessness in the hood.

The first image of the hand emerging from the water represents the muffled voices of the African Americans trying to escape the dualities and the arbitrary hierarchical stratifications embedded within the American society. The frame in which a group of African American people gazing at the a building in scorching blaze represents they are being merely the spectators of violence as well as this is a reference to the emotional turmoil which they have to endure in their formative years which spirals into plethora of societal issues ranging from poverty, income and social inequality. It can observed that African American community is subjugated under what Foucault refers to as a disciplinary power, that is to wrest control through constant surveillance and monitoring of the community which in turn leads to persecution and subjugation of the race.

Another arresting visual, is a father forcefully persuading his son to embrace aggressive notions of masculinity and persuades him to hit him in an attempt to surmount the gang violence and other hardships associated with the life in a hood. Moreover, the recreation of the photo by Parks which depicts young black kids, holding a pistol directed towards a police vehicle emulating the violence that surrounds him and the wired fence stands as emblematic barrier which relegates the victimhood of African American race. Both of these images presents a raw portrayal of the factors that affects the cognitive and behavioral development of the children and attests to conflicting dualities they have to deal with and how it deliberately merges with their personal identity. The images also depict disciplinary power which is the kind of regulation we have over ourselves based on our comprehension of how to integrate in here with society. We restraint ourselves based on the messages we receive from society that is knowledge, rewards, and imageries concerning how we must live. Even in the absence of dangers of incarceration, we try to be normal by disciplining ourselves.

The thought provoking lyricism, coupled with arresting visuals, represents oppositions of the individual battle and strives to address the issue of internal conflict. It also discusses how the lives of young African American adults are influenced by hegemonic discourse and their coercive integration into the plot of violence, political and racial persecution.

Conclusion

The album *Damn* is an allegorical incarnation of the absurdity and despondency African Americans has to endure to rise against the tide of societal norms and internalized oppression designed to suppress their voice of reason.

The aforementioned tracks, in the album, *Damn* is an amalgamation of an introspective conflict between individualism and an existence with the institutionalized system riddled with poverty and violence. Moreover, the album incorporates an interesting technique of circular inspection. The organization of the

tracks in the album draws resemblance to allegorical characters in morality plays of renaissance which symbolized man's virtues and vices and his quest to find salvation as well as Blake's literary, *Songs of Experience and Innocence*. All the tracks are interlinked with polar opposite titles like pride and humble, love followed by lust.

The tracks, *Humble and Element* explore the dynamics of hegemonic deconstruction of power and defiance in the context of political turmoil against African American community in the era of Black Lives matters protests. Moreover, the main objective of the tracks is directed towards the satirical implications of the racial prejudice and bias. The metaphorical incorporation of Christian symbolism in the tracks drives the narrative of African American struggle and leads to the deconstruction of the institutionalized self to realize their true potential.

References

- Kitwana, Bakari. *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality Of Race in America*. New York: Civitas Books, 2005.
- Kajikawa, Loren. 2015. *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*. University of California Press.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 1996. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Simon & Schuster.
- Rashid, K. (2016). Start the Revolution: Hip-Hop Music and Social Justice Education. *Journal of Pan African Studies*(no. 4), 341.
- White, M. (2011). *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lamar, Kendrick. "ELEMENT." *Genius*. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamardna-lyrics>.
- Lamar, Kendrick. "HUMBLE" *Genius*. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://genius.com/Kendricklamar-fear-lyrics>.
- Lamar, Kendrick. Interview by Zane Lowe. "Kendrick Lamar: 'DAMN' Behind the Album [FULL INTERVIEW] | Beats 1 | Apple Music." *Beats 1*, April 27, 2017. Accessed March 6, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwNhoyDjAPg>.
- Faraji, S. (2016, April). Kendrick Lamar's Grammy Performance Points to a Simple Truth, #BlackLivesMatter When Africa Matters". *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 9(no. 2), 3-6.
- Jeffries, M. P. (2011). *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Behrens, Zach. "Before the 1950's the Whiteness of Compton was Defended Vehemently,"
- KCET, January 11, 2011, <https://www.kcet.org/socal-focus/before-the-1950s-the-whiteness-of-compton-was-defended-vehemently> (accessed March 29, 2021).
- Bradley, Adam., Andrew DuBois, Henry Louis Gates, Chuck D., and Common. *The Anthology of Rap*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. Boulder: Basic Books, 2009.
- Brown, David and Hopps, Gavin. *The Extravagance of Music*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

- Krims, A. (2000). *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarone, Elaine E. 1973. "Aspects of Intonation in Black English." *American Speech* 48 (1/2): 29–36
- Krims, Adam. 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge University Press.