

Sociological Criticism on Song Lyrics *This is Me* by Keala Seattle

Authors : Sakilla Kurnia^{1*}, Putu Lirishati Soethama², Ni Luh Ketut Mas Indrawati³, & Yana Qomariana⁴

Affiliations : ^{1, 2, 3, 4} Universitas Udayana

*Correspondence : sakillakurnia@gmail.com

Abstract : Social issues such as racism, gender inequality, and social class differences are commonly found in today's society. There are a bunch of literary works that carried a discussion of various social issues in various forms of literature. One of them is a movie entitled *The Greatest Showman* which showed the struggles of being different in the context of appearance and background. The data of this study was taken from one of the movie's original soundtracks, *This Is Me*, by Keala Seattle. This study was a descriptive qualitative study that analyzed the data through words and sentences. This study was aimed at (1) showing which lyrics of the song *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle represented the struggle of her people, (2) describing how society saw people who were born differently in the movie *The Greatest Showman* represented in the song lyrics *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle, and (3) describing how people who were born differently faced society in the movie *The Greatest Showman* represented in the song lyrics *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle. The results showed that the characters faced numerous social issues as individuals due to their appearance and identity. In the end, the character gained strength and finally was able to accept themselves.

Keywords : *sociological criticism, social issues, song lyrics*

License : This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY)

Copyrights : © 2023 by Authors

1. Introduction

Since the human relationship with one another has never been simple, there must be some social issues that occurred. It could be due to social class differences, gender inequality, environmental racism, occupational stress, etc. Literature has been used by many as a medium to address social issues. According to Nurgiyantoro (1998), fiction (which is also one of the literature) covers a broad spectrum of human and humanitarian issues as well as everyday issues. The author approaches these issues head-on and then reexpresses them through fictional works. People can share their thoughts and experience through literary works. The experience may be a real experience or an imaginary experience. Moody (1971) also stated that literature is a natural outcome of our underlying love for storytelling, aesthetically attractive word arrangements, and conveying unique aspects of the human experience. However, literary works that carry out social problems must have the same purpose: to educate and criticize society. It is because literary works primarily discuss numerous life values and how those values affect how people construct their characters (Kanzunuddin, 2012).

Literature is constantly created in a social setting and studied in sociology. Sociology derives from Latin and Greek, namely from *socius* and *logos*, where *socius* stands for fellow, society, or community, and *logos* for science. However, writers write for an audience, and that audience is society. They may support or critique the ideals of the society in which they live. In *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* by X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, a critic who adopts a sociological perspective analyses literature concerning the social, political, and cultural context in which it is produced or consumed. According to Lukach (in Khoirunnisa, 2021), social issues come to the surface because of an unharmonious relationship between one society and others. Social inequality, which frequently leads to social problems, is one example of how social critique in literature can take the shape of criticism of real-world social life.

Literary works can be presented in the form of a novel, poem, short story, or drama. As the music industry developed, songs also became the medium for musicians to express themselves; how they feel, think, and experience. *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle is one of the original soundtracks of a film titled *The Greatest Showman*. It was released on October 26, 2017. *The Greatest Showman* is an American musical drama film about P. T. Barnum and his struggles as a circus director. He starts with nothing but only an idea. Barnum recruited performers with various backgrounds for his circus. He collected some “freaks” who do not fit society’s standards. Barnum wants to show the world that those “freaks” are not mere humans; they can make money too. The performers’ uniqueness is that some come from different races; also, they have a dwarf, a full-tattooed man, a bearded lady, an albino, and many others. The main goal of this circus is for them (Barnum and the performers) to gain much respect, and they want other people to see and accept them as who they are.

Since *The Greatest Showman* is a musical drama, they convey the message and story primarily through songs. There is a total of 11 songs in this film. *This Is Me* is the song that was sung by Keala Seattle. Keala Seattle also played one of the roles in the film. She played the bearded lady named Lettie Lutz. *This Is Me* tells a lot about self-acceptance for those who are different. The time setting of this film is in the 19th century. Being different in the late 1800s could have been more complex. We can not even begin to understand how those who did not adhere to the day’s standards were handled if we think it is not easy to be a freethinker today.

Some previous related studies were reviewed as references to support this study. First is an article from a journal entitled *100 Years Sitti Nurbaya: A View on the Social Criticism in the Novel Sitti Nurbaya* written by Stark and Huszka (2022). The purpose of this study was to look at the critics of the society from Marah Rusli, the author of *Sitti Nurbaya*. The second is an article from a journal entitled *Social criticism in Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer* written by Abubakar et al. (2022). The focus of this study was to determine the social context in England at the time the work was published and to show how the author incorporated social critique into his writing. The last is another article from a journal entitled *The Analysis of Social Criticism in Millay's Poem Epitaph for the Race of Man* by Umboh et al. (2022). This study was purposed to explain the social criticism by Edna St. Vincent Millay through her poem *Epitaph for the Race of Man*.

The issue this song brings is related a lot to the social context. Thus, the best theory to criticize this song is sociological criticism. Sociological criticism is an approach to literature used by critics interested in examining the social, political, and economic settings in which drama, poetry, and fiction are written and read. Literary works often include social critique as one of their traits (Soekanto, 2009). Sociological critics view literature as either a record of social conditions or as a product of those factors. Burke (1971) stated that sociological criticism is literary criticism that aims to comprehend (or place) literature in its broader social context. It codifies the literary techniques used to describe social constructions using a sociological methodology. This study aims to describe the critics of society in the song *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle.

2. Method

The data of this study was taken from song lyrics *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle, one of the original soundtracks of the film *The Greatest Showman*. This data was chosen because it represents the struggle of being marginalized in society, which becomes the concern of this study. The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach since the data is not numerical. A qualitative descriptive approach is the preferred design when a simple explanation of a phenomenon is required. In this paper, the data were collected through some steps. First, the researchers took the data from the music platform Spotify. Second, read the lyrics of the song *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle. Third, taking notes on which lines of the lyrics show the struggles of being marginalized.

The analysis was carried out in sentences and paragraphs. The theory of sociological criticism was applied to analyze the data. In analyzing the data, there were some steps carried out. First is showing which lyrics of the song *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle represented the struggle of the marginalized. Second, describing how society saw people who are born differently in the movie *The Greatest Showman* represented in the song lyrics *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle. Last, describing how people born differently faced society in the movie *The Greatest Showman* represented in the song lyrics *This Is Me* by Keala Seattle.

One of the theories of literary criticism, that is sociological approach to criticism, was used to be the guide to analyze the data. The main goal of the sociology of literature is to examine literary works in terms of the social standing of the author, the availability of markets, the requirements of the type of publication, and also the makeup of the readers (Muhadi, 2014). According to Alwaqaa (2020), the sociology of literature examines the connection between a literary work and the social environment in which it is generated since it is concerned with the

field of literary research. It also addresses the relationship between society and the author by looking at literary works from social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. The various genres of literature produced within a particular period clearly reflect the practices, traditions, values, and conventions of that society at that time. Thus, the relationship between literature and society and the literary form are the main topics of sociological criticism. Literature is constantly created in a social setting. However, writers write for an audience, and that audience is society. They may support or critique the ideals of the society in which they live.

3. Discussion

This Is Me by Keala Seattle talks a lot about how society sees people who were born differently. People who are labeled weird, be it appearance-wise or personality-wise, are often on the darker side than people who consider themselves normal. This song is one of the original soundtracks of a movie entitled *The Greatest Showman*. In the movie, this song served as the clarion call for P.T. Barnum's troupe of circus performers. *The Greatest Showman* took the time set in the 19th century, and being different from everyone else in the late 1800s was hard. Like what the singer of this song tried to say, she voiced out the struggle of being "freaks" that she and her friends deal with through *This Is Me*. This song started with:

I am not a stranger to the dark

Hide away, they say

'Cause we don't want your broken parts

Those lines show society's judgment of those who were not born the same as them. Society is brutal to accept that there are many people who have different features or come from various backgrounds. Instead of embracing diversity, they are being hostile to them. They told the "freaks" to hide, saying that they did not want to see what they called the *broken parts*, the parts they were not similar to see. Since society always asks them to hide, be away from their sight, and disappear, those people are getting used to being in the shadows, to being in the dark as if that is where they should be. This condition showed that the performers in P. T. Barnum were marginalized by society. According to Condé (2004), marginalized is the condition of individuals or groups who are relegated to a position of relative powerlessness and unimportance in society, sometimes by being compelled to live in remote, underdeveloped, politically irrelevant border regions or by being denied the right to meaningfully participate in politics, even in matters that affect their well-being. This phrase is occasionally used broadly to denote someone who has been made politically, socially, or economically irrelevant, marginalized, or weak in comparison to the rest of society. This definition fits what P. T. Barnum's performers experienced in their life.

I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars

Run away, they say

No one'll love you as you are

They are also taught that their broken parts, their scars, are shameful, which causes them to lose their self-confidence. The society also told them to run away, there is no use for them to be there. There is no place for them in this *normal* society. No one will accept them as they are. No one will love them as they are. Society often projected its hatred toward people who do not fit its standards. In this case, Keala Seattle who played Lettie Lutz did not fit the standard of most women. She was born with a beard that usually appeared on men and humiliated for her strange appearance. This condition is referred to as hypertrichosis disorder in the medical

community. In addition to hair distribution, hypertrichosis disorders can be identified by their potential prenatal abnormalities, temporal growth patterns, and inheritance patterns (Elston, 2018). The same condition has also happened to her fellow performer, Fedor Jeftichew, who was also known as Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy. Although it was never their fault to be born that way, they still have to deal with the scorn towards them. This applied to the other performers as well. There is nothing they can do to change their appearance, but society does not want to bother thinking about being in their shoes.

The next verse is about how those society's perspectives did not affect them at all. They slowly rose against all the bad words thrown out.

*But I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious*

This verse shows that the singer is certain that they are not what people say about them. They will not let those negative words break them down to nothing. They believe that there must be a place for them to express themselves without the fear of being reviled. That is because they acknowledge their greatness; *for we are glorious*. They are different, and that makes them special. They truly stood out without even attempting it; their distinctiveness has brought attention to them. Society often does not provide opportunities to marginalized people, whether it is politically, economically, or socially. The circus group of P. T. Barnum also departed from the absence of opportunities for them to get decent jobs because of the uniqueness that existed for them. How they could make uniqueness in themselves as their source of money was a paradox that changed their lives.

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me*

They fought back against the insult that tried to hurt them. They did not allow those cuss words to have a big impact on them. Society's standards did not scare them anymore. Instead, they learned to ignore it. Although they were bruised because the insults undeniably hurt them, they decided not to sink into despair for so long. They could be whatever they want to become with their current condition, which did not lower their qualities as human beings.

*Look out 'cause here I come
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me*

Starting from this verse, they wanted people to see that they can do something. They were able to take the advantage of their special features and background. Though they had accepted themselves, they still wanted to prove to society that they are capable. They wanted what people call equality in getting a job and as an individual. They wanted a place in society, and people stopped underestimating them. They were also no longer embarrassed to be seen in public. They were no longer impacted by the insults directed at them. They did not feel bad about being different. There is no more problem if people do not like them; they will not make

apologies for it. Being guilty of being born differently is of little use; their existence was not intended to please others. They once again proudly said that *this is me*.

Another round bullet hits my skin

Well, fire away 'cause today, I won't let the shame sink in

We are bursting through the barricades

And reaching for the sun

(We are warriors!)

Yeah, that's what we've become

In this verse, they showed that if other insults are thrown towards them, this time they will get rid of them. To secure a better life and future, they construct stronger defenses. They can currently only rely on one another because society is not on their side. At first, they initially made friends with the shadows at the behest of those who wanted them to move aside and hide in the dark. Now, they will reach for the sun and have better lives. They are warriors of themselves. They have fought various insults and one-sided eyes from people. Society made them to be who they are now after the amount of hatred they got for no reason; braver and stronger.

and I know that I deserve your love

there's nothing I'm not worthy of

In the first verse, the last line said that no one would love people like them as who they are. In these lines, they perceive that they are worthy of all the good things in the world. They ultimately accept who they are, which is the song's fundamental premise. They are in the same position and have the same opportunities as everyone else in society, but with some unique features which never reduce their quality of themselves. They also deserve to be loved. They deserve love from anyone, regardless of how they look and where they come from.

The criticism of society in this song is represented. Not only *The Greatest Showman* came from a true story, but the social conditions that occur in the film are also still much related to what is happening in the present even though P.T. Barnum's circus was in the 19th century and we are in the 21st century. This song tells the listener how the society in the film *The Greatest Showman* becomes so evil to the people who do not even leave any harm to them. They tend to hate something they are not similar to instead of figuring it out and trying to be more considerate to the people who need it. After years of being the one who is underestimated and marginalized, those people finally got a chance through P.T. Barnum's circus as performers. The purpose of the circus is to make society accept and not turn a blind eye to what happened to them. They got stronger and braver, knowing that they were not alone. Even if society did not side with them, at least they have each other to rely on. They are more than ready to fight those who are against them. Starting from how devastated they were about their condition so that they were told that no one would love them and that they did not deserve love, the song ends with how much they have truly accepted themselves and all the flaws they have. Also, they finally realize that they also deserve to be loved and receive a lot of love.

People who feel superior always feel that they should seize the confidence of those who are different and have shortcomings. Through *This Is Me*, Keala Seatttle and the songwriters want to let those who like to berate what is different from them become aware that they will not be able to do that forever. That is because this song also tells us that it is okay to be different.

Those who do not fulfill society's standards do not have any responsibility to force themselves to be like one. This song gives strength to those people.

4. Conclusion

From the discussions above, it was proven that literature has the ability to convey a message from the author to the targeted audience. The issue this song brought is related a lot to the social context and tried to educate the social environment from the date this song is released and even until years later. *This Is Me*, which was included on the original soundtrack for the film *The Greatest Showman*, tells a lot about self-acceptance. *The Greatest Showman*, which took the setting of time in the 1800s, wanted the audience to know the struggle of being different at that time. We need to understand how those who did not adhere to the standards of the day were handled.

This song speaks volumes about the marginalization of people who are different in appearance and color. They are not given the same chances in society to earn money and find employment. These people frequently struggle to fit in with society and are ashamed of who they are. This song served as the clarion call for P.T. Barnum's band of circus artists in the film *The Greatest Showman*. Like the vocalist of this song attempted to convey, she talked out her struggle and the suffering of her friends as "freaks". This song starts with the negative words from society for the people who were born differently and how society tried to cast them out of their sight. The lyrics in the next verse until the song ended talk about how they rose from the scorn that was hurled at them. They perceive that they deserve love and they are worthy of all the good things in the world.

This song is not only to represent the struggle of the performers in P. T. Barnum's circus but also for those who need good words. This song can help people to accept the scars and the flaws on their bodies, to deal with the past decision they regret, and to understand that they have no obligation to do everything only to please people. This song has a purpose to reach those people.

References

- Abubakar, M., Muthi'ah, M., & Tsuraya, A. S. (2022). Social criticism in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. *Rainbow: Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Culture Studies*, 11(1), 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.15294/rainbow.v11i1.52804>
- Alwaqaa, M. A. (2020). Sociology and Literature: An Interdisciplinary Approach. *Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)*, 1(10), 34-38.
- Andriyani, F., Tahrun, T., & Mulyadi, M. (2021). Sociological Analysis of "Mirror Image" Novel by Sandra Novel. *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, 5(2), 5134-5140. <https://jptam.org/index.php/jptam/article/view/1774>
- Burke, K. (1971). *Literature as Equipment for Living*. The University of California Press.
- Cachero, P. (2019, October 23). *'The Greatest Showman': 8 of the Film's Stars and Their Real-Life Inspirations*. The Hollywood Reporter.



<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/true-story-greatest-showman-how-accurate-are-characters-1063088/>

- Condé, H. V. (2004) *A Handbook of International Human Rights Terminology* (2nd ed.). The University of Nebraska Press.
- Elston, D. M., MD. (n.d.). *Congenital Hypertrichosis Lanuginosa: Background, Pathophysiology, Etiology*. <https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1072987-overview?reg=1>
- Kanzunudin, M. (2012). *Peran Sastra dalam Pendidikan Karakter*. Retrieved at February 24, 2023 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321003820_Peran_Sastra_Dalam_Pendidikan_Karakter
- Kennedy, J., & Gioia, D. (2016). *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing* (13th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Khoirunisa, M. M. (2021). *Sociological Criticism of Taylor Swift's Champagne Problems*. Retrieved on December 16, 2022, from https://www.academia.edu/71602827/Sociological_Criticism_of_Taylor_Swift_s_Champagne_Problems
- Moody, H. L. B. (1971). *The teaching of literature in developing countries*. Longman.
- Muhadi, H. (2014). *Social Criticism of Bob Dylan's Song Lyrics: A Sociological Study of Literature* [Undergraduate thesis, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta].
- Nurgiyantoro, B. (1998). *Teori Pengkajian Fiksi*. Gajah Mada University Press.
- Seattle, K. (2017). *This Is Me*. <https://open.spotify.com/track/45aBsnKRWUzhwbcqOJLwfe>
- Soekanto, S. (2009). *Sosiologi Suatu Pengantar*. Rajawali Pers.
- Stark, A., & Huszka, B. (2022). 100 Years Sitti Nurbaya: A View on the Social Criticism in the Novel Sitti Nurbaya. *Asian Culture and History*, 14(1), 67-75. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v14n1p67>
- Umboh, F. S., Moge, T., & Rombejajung, P. (2022). The Analysis of Social Criticism in Millay's Poem Epitaph for the Race of Man. *KOMPETENSI : Jurnal Ilmiah Bahasa dan Seni*, 2(2), 1183-1195. <https://garuda.kemdikbud.go.id/documents/detail/2883664>