

An Analysis of Taylor Swift's Song Lyric *The Man* using Feminist Literary Criticism Theory

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Abstract : Feminism was developed to defend women's rights and roles in society. It is a result of the evolution of culture and social structure, which increasingly differentiate the roles of women and men. The differences between women and men give rise to discrimination, leading to harassment. It is because gender equality still becomes an important problem in the modern era. Related to this, a song is an effective medium for conveying a message. It is because the message will be communicated through the song's story. Many celebrities raise the issue of feminism in their work, one of which is the famous singer Taylor Swift. This study aims to learn about the role of women and social meaning in Taylor Swift's song lyric *The Man*. For instance, the perception of women in society, their position among men, and the daily discrimination they confront. The data in this study was derived from the lyrics of Taylor Swift's song *The Man*. The qualitative research method was used to analyze the data in this study. The lyrics of *The Man's* songs are analyzed utilizing feminist literary criticism theory as the guidelines. The findings show that this song contains many elements of feminism. It is because Taylor Swift, throughout this song, wants to express her concerns about discrimination and gender equality.

Keywords : *feminism, gender discrimination, woman's role, song lyrics*

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1. Introduction

A song is an effective medium for conveying a message. The song is a form of expression for something previously seen, heard, or experienced. Songwriters frequently play with words and language to create the appeal and uniqueness of a song's lyrics when conveying their experiences. Songs can capture and elicit a variety of emotional states, including hope, desire, happiness, and even madness. The song's lyrics convey the meaning of the message. The message will be communicated through the story of this song. Consequently, many individuals use songs to express their emotions to others. This study aims to learn about the role of women and social meaning in Taylor Swift's song lyric entitled *The Man*. For instance, the perception of women in society, their position among men, and the daily discrimination they confront. It relates to one of the theories of literary criticism, feminist criticism theory.

Feminist literary criticism refers to analyzing literary works from a feminist point of view. Feminist literary criticism examines the social relationships and functions of men and women. It is a form of literary criticism that refers to feminist theory when critiquing literature, considering how literature depicts and is influenced by patriarchal narratives. Feminism was developed to defend women's rights and roles in society. It is a result of the evolution of culture and social structure, which increasingly differentiate the roles of women and men. The differences between women and men give rise to discrimination, leading to harassment. It is because gender equality still becomes an important problem in the modern era. Gender inequality can be classified into several types based on the economic framework of a society, the social system that exists in that society, the culture, and the way of life that has become hereditary habits in that society. However, despite all that, gender discrimination is often suffered by women compared to men in the same situation.

According to Bhasin and Khan (1995, p. 5), feminism is the awareness that women are oppressed in various ways by men and plans of action to combat these oppressions. Meanwhile, according to Linda Gordan (2002, p. 6), feminism is also a study of the subordination of women to find ways to change them. She stated that feminism includes increasing the influence of women in the home, community, and society. On another occasion, she defined feminism as a critique of male superiority, suggesting a shift in the framework. The pros and cons of this feminist theory are widely debated. Many people mistakenly believe that feminist theory focuses primarily on women and seeks to promote the superiority of women over men. In reality, feminist theory aims to combat gender inequality and injustice by eliminating the forces perpetuating inequality, oppression, and injustice.

Many celebrities raise the issue of feminism in their work, one of which is the famous singer, Taylor Swift. Since she became a renowned singer and songwriter, she often brings up the theme of feminism in her songs. Not only has her view of feminism changed throughout her career, but the way women are represented in her songs has also changed. On August 23, 2019, Taylor Swift released her seventh album, *Lover*. The fourth single from this album is *The Man*, which she wrote based on her personal experience. Taylor Swift's song entitled *The Man* is interesting to analyze because Taylor Swift's song *The Man* assumes the perspective of a man that addresses her concerns about gender discrimination.

As references for this study, some relevant previous studies were reviewed. First is an article entitled *Representation of Existential Feminism in The Lyric of 'I Made You Look' Song by Meghan Trainor* written by Indah with her colleague in 2022. This research aims to find out

the meaning and to describe the existential feminism represented in the lyric of the 'I made you look' song. The method used in this research is descriptive with the approach of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) and the theory of existential feminism by Beauvoir (1949). The results obtained are from the five stanzas of the lyrics; the lyric of the song contains words, phrases, and clauses signifying confidence as a woman. In this song, there are phrases containing existential feminism, that is, being self-confident about femaleness, sexual roles, community, and body.

The second is an article entitled *The Representation of Feminism in “Tomboy” Song Lyrics by Destiny Rogers* written by Laely with her colleague in 2022. This study aims to find out the kinds of feminism and the portrayal of women in the song lyrics of “Tomboy” by Destiny Rogers. The data in this research were taken from the lyrics of “Tomboy” sung by Destiny Rogers. This study used a qualitative method to discover the result of this research. The result of this study indicated that the writer found 19 data in the lyrics that contain some words or phrases that contain feminism. In addition, this song portrays women as dominant, talented, productive, beautiful, tomboy and feminine, wealthy, charming, brave, hard worker, and independent human beings. Thus, the portrayal is in line with the title of the song “Tomboy”, which defines women as having a manner considered manly or boyish. Moreover, the song lyrics of “Tomboy” by Destiny Rogers indicate that they support feminism and represent women's freedom.

The last is an article entitled *An Analysis of Feminism in The Novel the Girl with The Louding Voice by Abi Dare* written by Gita with her colleague in 2023. This study aims to discover the types of feminism contained in the novel and the resistance shown in the novel. The method used is a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the data source taken from the story quoted in the novel *The Girl with the Louding Voice by Abi Dare*. This novel talks about the experience of a girl who is tough, strong, and brave. She experienced exploitation, oppression, and slavery in a patriarchal society and was able to resist them. This study uses a structuralism approach by Ferdinand de Saussure. The findings in this study are; first, the types of feminism in *The Girl with The Louding Voice* novel are liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, and existential feminism. Second, the resistance shown in *The Girl with The Louding Voice* novel has closed and open resistance.

2. Method

The data in this study was derived from the lyrics of Taylor Swift's song *The Man*. It is the fourth single from her seventh album, *Lover*, which was released on August 23, 2019. This song was chosen as the data source for this study because Taylor Swift explores the idea of being a man and how it will make her more "acceptable" in society. A qualitative research method was used to analyze the data in this study. The qualitative research method is a descriptive research method that emphasizes analysis. The data for this study was gathered in several steps, including listening to *The Man's* song on Spotify, carefully reading the lyrics of *The Man's* song to understand the content of the song, and using the note-taking technique to write down which song lyrics describe the gender inequality being attempted to express through the lyrics in this song. In this study, the analysis will be presented in the form of sentences and paragraphs.

The lyrics of *The Man's* songs are analyzed utilizing feminist literary criticism theory as the guidelines. This study will explore the meaning of *The Man's* song lyrics and how Taylor Swift's song *The Man* portrays the gender discrimination women face in society about their

position among men from a feminist point of view. Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism informed by feminist theory or, more broadly, by the politics of feminism. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to critique the language of literature. Feminism is a theory that explains woman's emancipation in areas such as politics, economics, and other social aspects where women are not allowed to participate. According to Moeliono (1993, p. 241), feminism is a women's movement that demands complete equality between men and women in all aspects of life, including the political, economic, social, and cultural fields. Feminism is an organized movement that advocates for women's rights and interests. If women are equal to men, they have the right to define themselves in terms of what has traditionally belonged to males, also known as women's autonomy. In other terms, feminism is a movement by women to achieve autonomy or self-determination.

Feminist theory emerged from the struggle for women's rights, beginning in the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Feminism has experienced two waves. The First Wave, also called liberal feminism, usually refers to the social movement in that women fought for their legal vote rights and fundamental civil rights in America and Britain from 1890 to 1920. In the First Wave, women had successfully strived for their civil rights and the opportunity of attending higher education and finding jobs in specific industry areas. The Second Wave, also known as the Women's Liberation Movement, focused on the differences between females and males and discussed the origin and operation of gender discrimination in ideology, culture, and society.

3. Discussion

Taylor Swift is among the musicians who compose feminist songs. Taylor Swift published her seventh album, *Lover*, on August 23, 2019. This album's fourth single, *The Man*, was inspired by her personal experiences. How people always deny her assertive actions due to her gender. The lyrics focus on sexism that is manifested in double standards. Taylor plays with the concept of being a man and how that would make her more "acceptable" in society in *The Man*'s lyrics. Taylor Swift describes in this song precisely what it is like to be a woman in general, not just in her position. Due to the influence of gender discrimination, women sometimes struggle to fight for their freedom in this situation. As we all know, men take on more responsibilities in many aspects of life. Taylor reveals how women strongly oppose this, believing that they will gain the same advantages as men if they transform into men. Taylor Swift uses this song to express her concerns about discrimination and gender equality; therefore, feminist theory is the appropriate theory for analyzing the lyrics of this song.

Data 1

*I would be complex, I would be cool
They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to
And that would be okay for me to do,
Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you*

Taylor begins the lyrics in this song by talking about dating life. In this case, Taylor mentioned that women and men have different standards of proper behavior. She also touched on a sexual double standard in this case, where men and women expect and respect different sexual behavior as well. Traditionally, men are considered more active and sexually dominant, whereas women are expected to be more passive and submissive to men. Men have more freedom in terms of sexual behavior than women. A man can freely date many women before deciding she is the only one. However, this does not apply to women because if a woman dates

many men, then the woman will be labeled with many inappropriate words. Therefore, slut shaming is more prominently aimed at women than men. According to *Wikipedia*, slut-shaming is the practice of criticizing people, particularly women, and girls, who are perceived to violate sexuality-related norms of behavior and appearance.

Data 2

*I'd be a fearless leader, I'd be an alpha type
When everyone believes ya, what's that like?*

In these lyrics, Taylor discusses the advantages possessed by men in society. They are seen and praised as "fearless leaders," and "alpha types," whereas women who traditionally exhibit "male characteristics" (assertiveness, strength, etc.) are considered bad or disliked. Taylor also discussed that society is often more inclined to trust men than women. She emphasized this in the lyrics, "When everyone believes ya, what's that like?" This lyric also refers to the Me-Too movement and society's general attitude toward survivors of sexual violence. According to *Wikipedia*, the Me-Too movement is a social movement against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture in which people speak out about their experiences with sexual abuse and harassment.

It is also related to Taylor's personal experience in 2013 when she became one of the victims of sexual harassment and won a lawsuit in 2017. However, some people trigger crude jokes and reject Taylor as part of the Me-Too movement. She said that in the future is a very difficult and painful thing to go through. It is because there is a fear of being blamed, embarrassed, doubted, and retaliated. Women are often untrustworthy and considered to exaggerate an incident when they become victims. Taylor, in this case, reflects on the fact that for women to be trusted, they need to present much evidence, whereas men can be trusted only because of their words.

Data 3

*I'm so sick of running as fast as I can,
Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man
And I'm so sick of them coming at me again,
Cause if I was a man, then I'd be the man
I'd be the man, I'd be the man*

Taylor, in this lyric, discusses the gender inequality women face in the world of career and work. In this case, if women want to achieve their goals or dreams, they have to do extra work compared to men. The fact that men have an advantage over women because of social norms is a common argument about gender inequality that occurs in society. Taylor Swift is one of the female singers who often gets criticized in the music industry. She said that because she is a woman, people often criticize and insult her. Therefore, with these lyrics, she voices that if she were a man, she would be "the man" and celebrate her accomplishments and attitude.

Data 4

*They'd say I hustled, put in the work
They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve
What I was wearing, if I was rude
Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves*

In this section, Taylor discusses a man's privileges in modern society. A man usually known for wins admitted he was "hustled" at work. Meanwhile, the achievements obtained by a woman will only be considered luck. A man is allowed to react, but when a woman tries to react to something, she will be seen as overreacting. When a man becomes a leader, he will be considered a wise leader; when a woman becomes a leader, she will be regarded as bossy and annoying. Society wants women to remain humble even though they are abused and cannot defend themselves.

On the other hand, a man who is rude or defends himself will be respected like a hero. In the lyrics above, Taylor also discusses that women are often poorly criticized because of how they dress compared to men. They are often considered impolite and looked down upon. From these lyrics, Taylor believes that if she becomes a man, she will not be criticized for how she dresses and behaves. If she becomes a man, she will be free from all the bad opinions directed at her.

Data 5

*And they would toast to me, oh, let the players play
I'd be just like Leo in Saint-Tropez*

Taylor mentions in the lyrics above that if a man is a "player," he will become very popular among women. Women who date, on the other hand, will be shamed for their behavior. It is inversely proportional to males, as they will be perceived as cool due to the number of dates they go on. There is an expression that says, "boys will be men," which refers to forgiving a young boy's wrongdoing or inappropriate behavior.

The song's lyrics also refer to Leonardo DiCaprio and his annual gala held by his Foundation in Saint Tropez. Leonardo DiCaprio, at the age of forty-six, was known to have dated a much younger woman in her twenties. But unfortunately, society considers this a normal thing for a man to do. If it were a woman who did the same act by dating a man much younger than herself, society would scorn and curse it. There are significant differences between women and men in the case of dating partners who are much younger than them.

Data 6

*What's it like to brag about raking in dollars
And getting bitches and models?
And it's all good if you're bad
And it's okay if you're mad
If I was out flashing my dollars, I'd be a bitch, not a baller
They'd paint me out to be bad
So, it's okay that I'm mad*

Taylor says in the lyrics of this section that if a man with much money shows his money and throws it at women, he will be considered very cool and manly. When a man is angry, he is justified if he has a logical reason for his anger. It would, of course, be very different if done by women. When a woman has a lot of money and is successful, she is sometimes vilified by society as a bitch. A woman's personal life and dating life are frequently conflated with her professional success, which should have nothing to do with it. It is in contrast to men, where society often separates a man's personality from his achievements.

What society often differentiates between men and women is when a woman is angry. Women are often seen as overreacting or hysterical, so they are asked to control their emotions and eliminate negative feelings about something. In this case, Taylor was outraged by all the labels women get when they try to do the same thing a man does. According to her, being a woman is not easy because she is seen as the lower gender compared to men. Even though the world is becoming more modern, incidents like this continue to occur, and women continue to face harsh criticism from society. Many things can become material for criticism, such as the way women dress, the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they exercise, and the way they dress. It's as if whatever women do is wrong in society and should be criticized. This song is about raising awareness about gender inequality, stereotypes, and double standards, not hating men. It is because our voices must be heard and not silenced whenever we talk about women's issues.

4. Conclusion

From the discussion above, we could conclude that the pros and cons of this feminist theory are still widely debated nowadays. Many people mistakenly believe that feminist theory focuses primarily on women and seeks to promote the superiority of women over men. In reality, feminist theory aims to combat gender inequality and injustice by eliminating the forces perpetuating inequality, oppression, and injustice. Feminism was developed to defend women's rights and roles in society. It is a result of the evolution of culture and social structure, which increasingly differentiate the roles of women and men. The differences between women and men give rise to discrimination, leading to harassment. It is because gender equality is still an important problem in the modern era, and women often suffer gender discrimination compared to men in the same situation.

Many celebrities raise the issue of feminism in their work, one of which is the famous singer, Taylor Swift. In the lyrics of *The Man*, Taylor plays with the idea of being a man and how it will make her more "acceptable" in society. In this case, women sometimes struggle to fight for their freedom because of the influence of gender discrimination. As a result, feminist theory is an appropriate theory to use in analyzing the lyrics of this song because Taylor Swift attempts to express her concerns about gender discrimination and gender equality. In this case, Taylor was outraged by all the labels women get when they try to do the same thing a man does. According to her, being a woman is not easy because they are seen as the inferior gender compared to men. This song is not about hating men but raising awareness about gender inequality, stereotypes, and double standards. It is because our voices must be heard and not silenced whenever we talk about women's issues. Through this song, it is hoped that people will learn more about the gender inequality and gender discrimination that women continue to face even today. To raise public awareness about the importance of respecting and not discriminating against gender, both men and women.

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