



POPULAR CULTURE: EXPLORING ALTERITY IN TERMS OF FEMINISM AND POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM IN SIA KATE FURLER'S "BIG GIRLS CRY" AND "NEVER GIVE UP"

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Abstract

"Big Girls Cry" is a song that is emphatic of how social gaze pushes efforts to be "tough", they are not veritably acknowledged by the society. "Never Give Up" is a song that can be considered denotative of the women struggle in the post-colonial feminist paradigm. This paper carries out an exegesis of Gaytri Spivak's concept of 'Alterity' as reflected in terms of Feminism and Post-Colonial Feminism in the music videos based on Sia Kate Furler's songs, "Big Girls Cry" and "Never Give Up", respectively. The music videos of the two songs share certain abstractions, binaries and motives that identify the need to transcend beyond concrete realities, parochial boundaries and restrictive barriers that fetter an individual's imagination as well as his existence. The study chooses to analyze the visuals in tandem with lyrics in these videos because of the distinctive affinity that they share with the contemporary feminist and post-colonial feminist issues of otherness that the world currently confronts.

Keywords

Alterity, Post-Colonial Feminism, Female Consciousness, Social Gaze, Disidentification

1. Introduction to Songs Writers:

The song "Never Give Up" was a joint-production of Sia and Greg Kurstin while the song "Big Girls Don't Cry" was a joint-production of Sia and Christopher Braide.

1.1 Christopher "Chris" Braide is a British songwriter, record producer and singer based in Malibu, Los Angeles. Braide is known for being a pianist. First signed as a solo artist by Dave Stewart in the UK and Craig Kallman at Atlantic Records in the US, Braide relocated to Los Angeles to produce and write for artists including Sia, Lana Del Rey, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Selena Gomez, David Guetta, Marc Almond, Beth Ditto, Yuna and Beyoncé. Braide is a frequent collaborator of

Sia; together they have written for her own projects, movie soundtracks and for several other artists. Braide has won an Ivor Novello award and been nominated for a Grammy. He is published by BMG Music Publishing worldwide and Magical Thinking BMI.

1.2 Sia Kate Isobelle Furler known as Sia, is an Australian singer, songwriter, record producer and music video director. She started her career as a singer in the acid jazz band Crisp in the mid-1990s in Adelaide. In 1997, when Crisp disbanded, she released her debut studio album titled *OnlySee* in Australia, but it did not sell well. In 2014, Sia broke through as a solo recording artist when her sixth studio album, *1000 Forms of Fear*, debuted at No.1 in the U.S. Billboard 200 and generated the top-

ten single “Chandelier” and a trilogy of music videos starring child dancer Maddie Ziegler. In 2016, she released her seventh studio album *This Is Acting*, which spawned her first Hot 100 number one single, “Cheap Thrills”. The same year, Sia gave her Nostalgic performance for the Present Tour, which incorporated performance art elements. Sia has received accolades, including ARIA Awards and an MTV Video Music Award. 1.3 Gregory Allen Kurstin is an American record producer, musician and songwriter. Kurstin has been associated with releases which have cumulatively sold more than 60 million albums worldwide. He has won five Grammy Awards, including Producer of the Year (Non-Classical) in 2017 and 2018. Kurstin co-wrote, produced and played most of the instruments on the record-breaking 2015 Adele single, “Hello”. Among others, he has worked with Sia, Beck, Kelly Clarkson, Ellie Goulding, Pink, the Shins, Tegan and Sara, Lily Allen, and the Foo Fighters. He often plays guitar, bass, keyboards and drums, and engineers and programs the records he produces.

2. Discussion and Analysis

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theory of alterity was introduced in a 2014 seminar titled “Remaking History”, the purpose of which was to challenge the masculine conventions of history writing. According to Spivak, it is vital for one to unearth the antiquities and intrinsic historical conducts of individuals, in order to exercise a right to authentic experience, identity and reality. Within the concept of socially constructed backgrounds, one “must take into account the dangerous fragility and tenacity of these concept-metaphors” (269). Spivak recalls her personal history: “As a postcolonial, I am concerned with the appropriation of ‘alternative history’ or ‘histories’. I am not a historian by training. I cannot claim punitive expertise in reshaping history in the sense or redrafting it. But I can use an example of how historical narratives are substituted. The parents of my parents’ grandparents’ grandparents were made over, not always without their consent, by the political, fiscal and educational mediation of British imperialism, and now I am independent. Thus I am, in the severest sense, a postcolonial”. Alterity is an essential theme in post-colonial written discourse, referring to the concept of “otherizing”. The notion of otherizing can be defined as an ideology

espoused by one particular segment of the social calendar to press the other to the peripheries. It is the abstraction that highlights a substantive identity in opposition to which another identity is formed. These two identities then get referenced as the “self and the other”. This paper carries out an exegesis of alterity as reflected in terms of Feminism and Post-Colonial Feminism in the music videos based on Sia Kate Furler’s songs, “Big Girls Cry” and “Never Give Up”, respectively. The music videos of the two songs share certain abstractions, binaries and motives that identify the need to transcend beyond concrete realities, parochial boundaries and restrictive barriers that fetter an individual’s imagination as well as his existence. The study chooses to analyze the visuals in tandem with lyrics in these videos because of the distinctive affinity that they share with the contemporary feminist and post-colonial feminist issues of otherness that the world currently confronts. Jeffery Nealon, in *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*, debates that “ethics is constituted as an inexorable affirmative rejoinder to different identities, not through an inability to comprehend or totalize the other”. Therefore, it is essential to highlight how alterity operates through various theoretical levels in Feminist and Post-Colonial Feminist discourse.

2.1 Alterity and Feminism in “Big Girls Cry”: Treatment of Independent Women in Patriarchal Set ups

Feminist literary criticism offered a staunch rebuttal to popular male-chauvinistic standards upheld by key 18th century figures who reflected their male-oriented points of view, subjugating female voices in the society. Charles Maurice de Terryland, who was the French Ambassador to United Kingdom and also the Prince of Terryland, maintained, “Men are fated to live on the stage of the world... a public education suits them... the paternal home is better for the education of women... since they need to lead a calm and secluded life”, whereas the French Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was of the view that “little girls disliked learning to read and write because they were always ready to sew”. Women were always marginalized, their future could be defined precisely in the way that it has been described in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, “a dark corridor with a bolted door in the end”. In earlier times, it was considered

that their lives existed in overly-romanticized notions stretching barely any further from the chores at their parsonages to the church activities; they were expected to be radically proper in their mannerism and respectability, thriving hence merely on merry anticipations about a thrilling married life. Pitiably, the marital experience proved to be even more torturous than the pre-marital one for most, if not all. They longed for a spark in life, an anchor to hold on to. During the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, the economic necessity of having women as workers, caused them to work outside their homes. Women mostly found jobs in domestic service, textile factories, and piece workshops. Contributing as productive citizens, they sought for equal political rights as well, chiefly focusing on the right to vote. The idea led to the great Women Suffragette Movement of 1848, which successfully won them their constitutional right to vote, though on a limited scale. In the era following the world wars, women became more inclined towards coming out of their domestic paradigms and working to gain financial autonomy, now on a massive scale. With men engaged at the battlefields, practically the women at home had to win bread for livelihood, which resulted in women exploring new dimensions in their long journey leading to professionalism and career-orientedness in the twenty-first century. However, it is observed, contemporarily, that most women with a strong will to work are stereotyped with deprecating labels such as “she is too ambitious” and/or receive comments like “too ambitious to run a normal household”, whereas, if on the other hand men come across as ambitious, they are applauded as “remarkably focused” and “hardworking” individuals.

The music video of “Big Girls Cry”, represent what notions are espoused by the society towards “tough” women, and how they feel about it. The song represents the state of mind of the society against independent and strong-willed women on two levels: one, the idea of othering women because they have always been considered objects, bereft of the will to succeed in life; two, the idea of othering strong-willed and career-oriented women in the society. The song includes minimalist setting, in which there is a young girl with a black background behind her. Her countenance readily fluctuates between sad and jovial

expressions. She gesticulates with her hands, muzzles herself, and then moves her wrists in circular motions on either sides of her forehead, representing a certain state of the mind. She occasionally covers her mouth with her hands and the way she feigns her smile is reflective of her agonized inner self that she masks under the veneer of this smile. The social gaze pushes independent women to the peripheries, and despite their continual efforts to be “tough”, they are not veritably acknowledged by the society. This song stands for all women diligently working towards playing their individual role in the society—from contributing as productive citizens and career-oriented professionals to hardworking single mothers and abandoned daughters trying to make their mark and prove their mettle.

The lyrics reflect how women who come across as self-reliant are “otherized” by patriarchal societies. They are portrayed as ambitious, materialistic and self-centered women, because the patriarchal dynamics of the society favour demure, submissive and subservient women.

*Tough girl in the fast lane
No time for love, no time for hate
No drama, no time for games
Tough girl whose soul aches*

The visuals in the music video explaining benumbed and fragmented consciousness of the girl (Maddie Ziegler) expressing the psychological turmoil that independent women are indoctrinated with by the side of the society.

The horrifying stereotypical jargon associated with “tough” women rests upon statements like “men do not want wives who play football all the time, learn to make aloo gobi” (“Bend it Like Beckham”); Halley Bock, CEO of leadership and development training company Fierce, notes that the ruthless “ice queen” stereotype is rampant. Cultural depictions, like frigid magazine editor Miranda Priestly in “The Devil Wears Prada” (and her real-world counterpart Anna Wintour of Vogue) and backstabbing boss Patty Hewes on “Damages”, paint successful women as unsympathetic power-mongers. It is, of course, a Catch-22. “A woman who shows emotion in the workplace is often cast as too fragile or

unstable to lead,” Bock said. “A woman who shows no emotion and keeps it deliberately hyper-professional is icy and unfeminine. For many women, it can be a no-win situation” (Jenna Goudreau, “Ten Worst Stereotypes about Most Powerful Women”). Michael Kenny, in his *Politics of Identity: Liberal Political Theory and the Dilemmas of Difference* states, “The regulation of alterity becomes a defining attribute of self-hood, as my sense of who I am is crucially mediated by an understanding of that which I am not”. The lyrics of the song similarly define how working women who come across as “tough” and self-reliant are prejudiced against.

*I may cry ruinin' my makeup
Wash away all the things you've taken
And I don't care if I don't look pretty
Big girls cry when their hearts are breaking*

The girl in the video stands to articulate to the world that independent women should not be labelled as the “other”, because they might pull a very strong disposition throughout their day but they do need to be treated the way that independent, hardworking men are treated by the society, because at the end of the day they need to claim from within the mainstream a space of their own.

2.2 Alterity and Post-Colonial Feminism in “Never Give Up”: Otherization of Third World Women

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her article, *Under Western Eyes*, states:

Universal images of ‘the third-world woman’ (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ‘third-world difference’ to ‘sexual difference’, are predicated on (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives.

“Never Give Up” is an emotional and powerful song with an uplifting message. This section considers the two girls in the music video as the voices advocating the post-colonial feminist model; it explores the lyrics of the song in tandem with post-colonial feminism. In Audre Lorde's foundational essay, “The Master's Tools Will Never

Dismantle the Master's House”, Lorde uses the metaphor of “the master's tools” and “the master's house” to explain that western feminism is failing to make positive change for third world women by using the same tools used by the patriarchy to oppress women. The idea that the lyrics are predominantly punctuated with the phrase. “I'll find my way home, my way home...” is something that the post-colonial feminists also reiterate when they theorize the concept of how their geographical roots should not be a hindrance in their path to success—the idea that the western feminists conceptualize all Third World women in monolithic terms and blame their geographical anchorage for the limitations and the constraints they face.

Mohanty asserts in “Under Western Eyes” that Western feminists write about Third World women as a compound, singular structure that is capricious and limiting. She states that these women are represented in works as sufferers of masculine control and of traditional culture without including information about historical context and cultural differences within the Third World. This generates a dynamic where Western feminism functions as the norm against which the situation in the developing world is evaluated. Mohanty's primary initiative is to allow Third World women to have agency and voice within the feminist realm. The lyrics of this song are very assertive of this attitude, especially coupled with the idea that female voice in the song has been crafted with meticulous significance.

Carrying out an exegesis into the music video based of the song, it can be observed that the music in the beginning of the song is very oriental (sitar strings) and the two girls are running to the beat of the drum. This drumbeat itself is oriental in nature and this idea coupled with the semiotic visuals in the video, can be considered denotative of the women struggle in the post-colonial feminist paradigm. It is this beat of the drum that engenders organic emotions pulsating in a rhythm within the psychological frameworks that operate on two levels—one, being self-reliant and determined to acquire freedom that transcends the confined spaces, and two, being imprisoned within the mental recesses.

The girls run in the opposite direction of the rail tracks—rebellious against predefined notions; the journey undertaken by the two girls poses them as being individuals

dispossessed of any conscious memory of the past, as the train most vividly does not belong to anyone. The messages/notes on the railway tracks are phrases like “abandoned” and “I’ve battled demons”, which are emphatic of the post-colonial feminist struggle.

*I won't let you get me down
I'll keep getting up when I hit the ground
I won't give up, won't give up, no, no
I'll find my way, find my way, home, home*

In the article "Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism", Ethel Crowley, sociology professor at Trinity College of Dublin, remarks how western feminism is quite deficient when practiced on non-western societies. She charges western feminists of theoretical reductionism when it comes to Third World women. Her major problem with western feminism is that it devotes too much time in ideological “nit-picking”, as a substitute to expressing strategies to restore the highlighted issues. The most noticeable opinion that Crowley in her article expedites on, is that ethnography can be essential to problem solving, and that freedom does not mean the same thing to all the women of the world. Being the other, makes the individual a non-individual, a non-agency and a disregarded, useless object, this is

Precisely what the Western feminists have done to the Eastern Third World women—indoctrinated the mind of the free world with their “disidentification”; this disidentification is in terms of responsivity and objectivity; the Western feminist critics feel that all Third World women have the same objectives and the same kind of responses towards various social ideologies. They present a nebulous justification for gender discordance in the Third World and consider that the female physicality is a stoppage, a limiting prison house in every social segment of the Third World countries. However, the lyrics of the song show how the girls are being pulled back but paralingually, they are rebelling against these pull-back currents.

The two girls in the video explore their inherent selves, and eventually attain freedom, by the unitedness in their disposition coupled with love for each other in a world where emotional-amnesia abounds. The hair of the two girls are bifurcated to represent one half as black, and the other as white, and this is

primarily what explains the idea of being snagged by social constructs, taboos, gaze and grappling with the idea of western impositions.

*Oh yeah, I'm haunted by the distant past
Called to the skies but she was overcast
But I won't never give up, no, never give up,
no, no*

The concept of alterity or the self and the other, has been tremendously embossed in post-colonial feminism. Simone de Beauvoir's essential stance, “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other”, gestures the significant prominence of the concept in feminism. In global perspective, all notions of the selfhood have been masculinized, and in the post-colonial world this notion has been used by the western feminists to collectively create a monolith of Third World women labelling them with their own definitions i.e. all Third World women are weak, demure and not capable of exercising their agency and/or fending for themselves. Another reason that is foundational to the idea of the song being validated from the post-colonial feminist perspective is that of the girls in the video having ragged clothes—something that the Western feminists deem the Eastern women as: lowbrow and monolithically subjugated. However, at the end of the video, the two seemingly downtrodden girls accomplish their goal and find their way home. The song with its theme of struggle, essentially induces the idea of unchaining fetters to question the marginalization that the Third World women are purposefully made to face by the Western thinking agencies, consequentially paving way for them to recognize their potential and prove their capabilities as veritable self-reliant individuals.

3. Concluding Remarks

The music videos of the two songs share certain constructs and aims that epitomize the need to surpass objective truths and insular, compartmentalized thoughts choking the mind's eye of the individual. The study has made a detailed analysis of how the visuals and lyrics in these videos have a distinctive affinity with the contemporary feminist and post-colonial feminist issues that the world is currently challenged with, and has displayed how art and literature can be collectively analyzed, examined and researched over, under a theoretical lens.

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