

# Music as a medium of debunking stereotypes: the voices of Mercury, Gaga and Prince

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**Abstract-** Music is a universal language. Its presence is felt, or rather, heard, in every corners of the world, hence it has a way of creating an impact on its listeners. The select songs include: Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *I want to Break Free*; Lady Gaga's *Born This Way*; Prince's *Dirty Mind* and *Uptown*. Language is one of the most important factors that shapes up both racial and gendered notions. Although the origins of language cannot be traced back to a particular period in history, the gendered language, however, has always existed in almost every language of the world. In this regard, this research will be done from a cultural studies point of view, looking at how songs have been able to break socio-cultural barriers and have changed the perspectives of the general audience on gender and racial stereotypes. The songs will also be looked at through the semiotic study of their lyrical compositions. It is quite important to look at this study from a cultural spectacle because it will largely focus on how stereotypical notions have changed overtime, and music being ubiquitous, is a mode of expression that has a positive socio-cultural impact in terms of breaking gender and racial stereotypes, either through the lyrical compositions or the artist's style of delivering the songs.

**Keywords – Queen, Gaga, Prince, music, stereotypes**

## INTRODUCTION

“The work lives to the extent it has influence. Included within the influence of a work is that which is accomplished in the consumption of the work as well as in the work itself. That which happens with the work is an expression of what the work is.” Karl Kosik

The select songs that have been chosen for this study explore what Michel Foucault describes in his “repressive hypothesis”, wherein he brings forth ideas that include the repression of sexuality and sexual orientation from the 17th to the mid-20th century due to the rise of capitalism and the bourgeois society. The myth of repression also tells us that “...we are in a time of liberation from a long process of sexual repression.” (Carr, 3).

Gender and racial stereotypes have great consequences in every part of the society- be it in personal or professional spaces. Where most people generally have a hard time “fitting in” to the societal constructs, we see other significant minorities; that is the LGBTQ community and various racial groups struggling just to live a normal, peaceful everyday life. It is thus important to look at how things have changed in the past and how things can still change, in order to break away from the negative notions brought by “conventional” society.

Now, moving to the idea of how songs debunk gender stereotypes, we shall first look at how Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* hints at Freddie Mercury coming out as a homosexual. In the opening lines of the song: “Mama, just killed a man/ Put a gun against his head/ Pulled my trigger now he's dead...” we may interpret the meaning to be a simple murder confession, taking its denotative meaning. However, here, Mercury is only trying to say that he had killed the man that he was expected to be, that is, a straight man. The image of him putting the gun against the said man's head implies that he wishes to do away with the whole idea of him posing as the straight person he never really was. The lines “Mama, life had just begun” also indicates a new journey, where he tries to live his life embracing the fact that he is gay. Mercury's biographer Lesley Ann Jones in her book *Freddie Mercury: The Definitive Biography* explains how the true meaning of the famous *Bohemian Rhapsody* lies within the metaphors in the song. Although Mercury himself does not explicitly explain the lyrics himself, he says he wishes for his fans to interpret the meaning of the song on their own, in any way they wish to. He also says in an interview that the song is only “about relationships”. His band-mates too did not have much to say regarding this because they wanted to protect Mercury's personal life. Mercury throughout his life has been seen as a flamboyant person way before he was aware of his same-sex orientations. The internalized notion of homophobia that reflects the society's belief that gay relationships were not acceptable and that same sex love was not something that is “morally correct”

perhaps was the main reason why Mercury, for the most part of his life was quite confused about his own sexuality, and also probably why he never really came out as being gay in his lifetime. However, it was only until the eve of *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, where Lesley Ann Jones has revealed that the song was actually a hidden confession of Freddie Mercury that he was gay. In her interview with one of the renowned lyricist in the UK, Sir Tim Rice, she discussed the song and actually found out that he was one to know mercury quite well, having worked with him on songs for the 'Barcelona' album. "It's fairly obvious to me that this was Freddie's coming out song" Tim Rice told Lesley Ann Jones in the interview. "I've spoken to Roger Taylor about it. There is a very clear message contained in it. This is Freddie admitting he is gay."

In the same song: "I see a little silhouetto of a man" indicates that Freddie Mercury himself seemed to still feel haunted by what he had done, and in a way it reflects a sense of guilt and shame in his being the way he was. This shows the struggle that he had to live with, and what the psychoanalytical study of Sigmund Freud would call as being a clash between his id and his superego. Mercury was born as Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar to Parsi parents from India. After growing up in Zanzibar and India, his family moved to Middlesex, England, while Mercury was in his late teens. Being from an orthodox Parsi family and living in the age where being gay would jeopardize his reputation and even his entire career, Mercury chose to keep his true self within a closed circle, which is also why perhaps he feels guilt. There is however, still an ongoing debate about whether Freddie Mercury kept his sexuality hidden or whether he was "openly gay" Homosexual acts between adult males over the age of 21 had been decriminalized in the United Kingdom in 1967, only seven years before the song was released. Mercury could not have openly made a statement that he was in fact gay, at least not at that age and time.

Although it is mentioned before that Freddie Mercury never openly talked about his sexuality in public, his flamboyance and his way of life has led as a great example for the general audience, that is his fans and followers to try to learn to live with and be happy with your true self, despite the challenges you face in this heteronormative society.

As a more contemporary example to what the thesis of this paper claims, we shall look at a female artist, Lady Gaga and her song *Born this Way*, which is considered to be a powerful self-assuring anthem for most fans, especially among the LGBTQ community, with the lyrics that are comparatively and quite deliberately direct. Gaga, also being an advocate of gay rights has been able to set the bar high in terms of creating an impact on her fans with her lyrical genius in the song.

Lyricaly, the themes in *Born This Way*'s varies from government corruption to gay marriage, etc. The lyrics in the song: "No matter gay straight or bi/ Lesbian, transgendered life/ I'm on the right track baby/I was born to survive", clearly stating that one should be proud and should feel comfortable with themselves, no matter one's sexuality. The song goes on to being so inspirational, especially amongst the younger generations where it is also seen that a fan in one of the YouTube comment states that the song has "saved" her after the multiple times she had attempted to end her own life as she was "bullied for being bi". At the time the song was released, it had not been a mainstream thing to promote LGBTQ rights, so perhaps this was one of the first songs to do so.

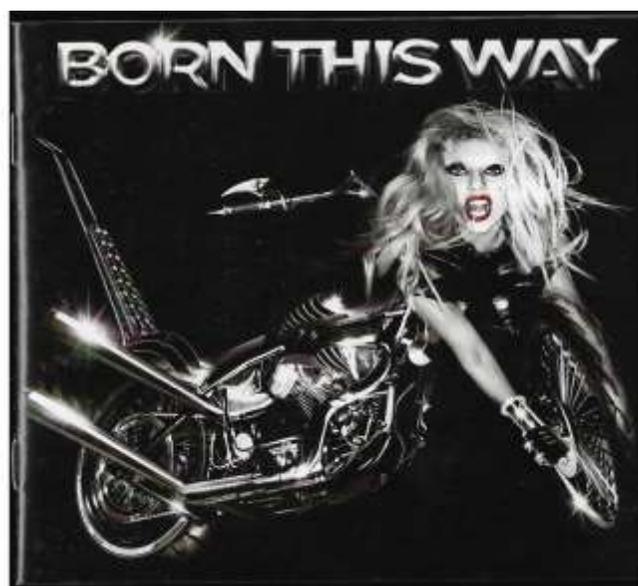


Fig.1: *Born This Way* album art: Lady Gaga depicted as half-female, half-motorcycle (2011)

The image above shows Lady Gaga, half human, half motorcycle. This album art can be interpreted as a symbol for change, where Gaga herself is shown to be transforming, perhaps again, as a way to send the message across that it is completely acceptable for one to take in the changes as they come, while at the same time, one must also be comfortable with however they and whoever they chose to be- to be true to oneself.

The link between music preference and personality is well-documented in the psychological literature (Brown, 2012), where songs have been found to play an important role in terms of making the audience aware and helping them be more open-minded about certain things.

In terms of performance and delivery, we may again look at Queen, with Freddie Mercury in the centre stage along with his band-mates, Brian May, John Deacon and Roger Taylor. In the course of his career, Mercury's flamboyant stage presence and his performances have led many journalists to talk about his sexuality. In one of Queen's music videos, "I want to Break Free" (1983), which is mainly performance based, the four members of the band lip-synch to the song in the music video, each of them dressed as women, as is seen in the image below:



Fig.2: Queen on the set of their music video "I want to Break Free" (1984)

The band appear in drag, where we see Mercury wearing a black leather skirt vacuuming the floor of a very typical English room, Brian May in curlers and a silk nightdress; John Deacon in a long furry overcoat and big earrings; and finally Roger Taylor dressed as a schoolgirl. In this case, the band uses the music to illustrate the themes of gender and sexuality in the music video. Drag queen performances have the dual role of challenging the heteronormative gender binaries, while at the same time portraying the current social image of a woman.

Another such performer that is generally considered to be an icon that believed in gender fluidity and has followed through what he believed was the power of androgyny was the famous artist Prince. Prince Rogers Nelson is considered to be an enigma. He comes across as being someone who is completely cloaked by a myth of his own making, he exists now as a revered "artist", and is also a great way to look back to old-school musicianship and showmanship. After thirty-six years of releasing music, it is almost easy to forget how strange and absolutely fresh Prince's music felt when he first appeared in the music scene. Paying close attention to his lyrical composition from the major albums recorded between 1980 and 1988, we will see the development of a in his views on sexuality, which is one of the most evident themes of much of his work. In the year 1980, he released his third album *Dirty Mind*. *Dirty Mind* presents a clear of the sexual freedom that Prince longs for. Various types of sex are described and celebrated throughout his albums. He talks about being the rejected lover in *When You Were Mine* where he seems to be so desperate to get back with his ex-lover, he also mentions that he has no problem sharing a bed with her new lover. The lines: "I didn't care. I never was the kind to make a fuss/When he was there/ Sleeping in

between the two of us.” indicates his openness towards sexual relationships and clearly shows how he has no problem with the whole idea of having of “partner(s)”. Various representatives of Prince would tell Perez Hilton, a famous American blogger, that the *New Yorker* misquoted him: “What His Purpleness actually did was gesture to the Bible and said he follows what it teaches, referring mainly to the parts about loving everyone and refraining from judgment,” Hilton wrote.

In 1980, Prince appears in the Album art cover of his *Dirty Mind*, where he is seen to be dressed simply in a studded coat, a pair of bikini briefs and a bandana around his neck. This was indeed a bold statement of liberating sexual and sensual identity, although he explores the whole idea of androgyny long before he was known to be Prince. This of course was edgy. Prince was an African-American musician exploring various genres, and mostly playing an addictive blend of rock and soul during an era when pop and rock radio were still separated. Furthermore, with his look and his style in this particular album art, he was not really going to get much of any kind of appreciation from the Black radio either. He was a true outsider, who was bold enough to openly write and perform music that, in a way, prompted listeners to break off all the shackles of any kind of pre-conceived social conventions and give in to their “dirty minds”, that is, sending a clear message to his followers to be fearful in who they chose to be- no matter what the society thinks and no matter the society looks upon them as being on the “wrong” side.



Fig.3: Image by Allen Beaulieu: *Dirty Mind*, album art: Prince in his studded coat and a pair of bikini briefs (1980)

*Uptown* is one of the songs in the album *Dirty Mind* that is considered to be its anthem, a manifesto that celebrates absolute liberation. “Prince equates sexual freedom and individual freedom– the freedom to be one’s own person, unbound from the rules dictated by society at large. Uptown is Prince’s Utopia” (Munoz).

In the following lines of the lyrics: “Where I come from/ We don’t let society/ Tell us how it’s supposed to be/ Everybody’s going uptown./It’s where I wanna be./Uptown, set your mind free.” Prince talks about a place similar to the Utopian idea, where there is no kind of judgments or discriminations, and he too, wishes to be there. The idea in general embodies a will and the wish for a liberal space, free of any kinds of prejudices and discriminations. This can again, be looked at from the Freudian’s perspective on the human mind, where we may take the idea of the *Uptown* as a manifestation of his id, which in most cases, he gives in to. It can also be concluded that Prince was one to not listen much to the superego, the superego perhaps being the face of the society in general. He feeds his id, and for most parts of his life, lives in indulgence of what pleases his mind and soul.

The lyrical elements of *Uptown* received a more thorough treatment in another of Prince’s song *Controversy* (1981). The title of the song imbibes Prince’s rebuttal to those who dare question his lifestyle. The lines:

“I can’t understand all the things people say./Am I black or white?/Am I straight or gay?”, Prince very directly tells the world not to judge or think about his gender identity, sexual ethics, or even his race. He also concludes with the lines: “People call me rude./ I wish we all were nude./ I wish there was no black or white./ I wish there were no rules.” Perhaps alluding to the time before the fall of mankind, that is, the story of Adam and Eve, where in the book of Genesis, it is mentioned that Adam and Eve were both originally naked, "but they were not ashamed." It was only after they ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Genesis 3:7. In the same way Prince calls for a society where there are no rules or restrictions that bind humans and segregate them in any way. This is also seen in John Lennon’s song, *Imagine* (1971) that calls for world peace where he talks about a place where there is no religion, possessions, etc. – perhaps this can be a place where people can live together in peace and harmony.

So far, this paper focuses on the positive impacts of songs and performances on the audience, however, we cannot ignore the fact that any one song or text can still be interpreted and received by the audience in a negative light or play a part in engraining negative notions on the like. Therefore, songs can have both a negative and positive impact on the society and on the audience. This is however subject to the context of the listener.

Apart from the aforementioned limitation, the texts: *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen, their music video of *I want Break Free*; Lady Gaga’s *Born This Way*; and Prince’s songs *Dirty Mind* and *Uptown* have been carefully chosen because they talk about very important and relevant social issues such as gender and racial discriminations, and sexuality. These texts act as mediators or an initiators of a new kind liberalization, wherein they are very likely received by the audience (especially belonging to the minority groups that have been mentioned before in this paper) in a positive sense in terms of giving the listeners a sense of belonging and also giving the recipients a nudge to leading a more liberating, happy life- quite similar to what the Existentialists believe in. In this way, the paper brings forth the whole idea of spreading positivity through songs: where language plays a massive role in shaping up gender and racial notions, music as an expressive form brings about positive impact on the audience through language itself.

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