

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN RUN THE WORLD (GIRLS) BY BEYONCÉ: A FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines women's empowerment and gender representation in Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)* through the perspective of feminist literary criticism proposed by Tyson (2015). The study aims to investigate how the song constructs and communicates women's empowerment through five dimensions: leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. This research employs a qualitative design using documentation and library research techniques. The primary data consist of the song lyrics of *Run the World (Girls)*, while secondary data are obtained from scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies related to feminism, gender representation, and popular music. The data were analyzed using the procedures proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The findings reveal that the song portrays women as capable leaders who possess authority and influence, confident individuals who challenge gender stereotypes, resilient figures who balance domestic and professional responsibilities, members of a supportive collective community, and economically independent actors who contribute to social and economic development. Through these representations, the song challenges patriarchal assumptions and promotes feminist values of agency, equality, and empowerment. The study concludes that *Run the World (Girls)* functions as a feminist cultural text that advocates women's empowerment and contributes to contemporary discussions on gender equality.

Keywords: women's empowerment, gender representation, feminist literary criticism, Beyoncé, *Run the World (Girls)*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important critical viewpoints for comprehending gender relations and social inequalities today is feminism. Feminism aims to oppose patriarchal systems that have historically disadvantaged women in the political, economic, cultural, and social domains. It is both a social movement and an intellectual paradigm. According to feminist scholars, gender inequality is a socially produced phenomena that is maintained by institutions, ideologies, and cultural representations rather than a natural state

(Gill, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018). As a result, feminist critique looks at how texts and cultural artifacts help to create, uphold, or oppose prevailing gender conceptions.

In contemporary society, feminist discussions have increasingly focused on issues of agency, leadership, economic participation, and women's representation in media. The growing visibility of women in popular culture has generated new debates regarding empowerment and gender equality. According to Banet-Weiser (2018), popular culture has become a significant site where feminist ideas are

circulated, negotiated, and contested. Similarly, Rottenberg (2018) argues that contemporary media representations often shape public understandings of women's roles, opportunities, and identities. Therefore, cultural products such as films, television programs, advertisements, and songs provide valuable materials for examining how feminist values are communicated to audiences.

Music is one of the most influential forms of popular culture because it reaches diverse audiences across national and cultural boundaries. Beyond entertainment, music functions as a medium through which social issues, political messages, and cultural identities are expressed and negotiated. Song lyrics, in particular, can be analyzed as literary texts because they contain themes, symbols, imagery, and ideological meanings comparable to those found in poetry and other literary works. As Leonard (2020) notes, popular music often reflects broader social discourses concerning gender, race, identity, and power. Consequently, song lyrics have become an important subject of literary and cultural studies.

Among contemporary musicians, Beyoncé has emerged as one of the most prominent figures associated with women's empowerment and feminist representation. Throughout her career, she has consistently incorporated themes of female strength, independence, leadership, and self-determination into her music. Her works have attracted scholarly attention because they frequently challenge traditional gender expectations while simultaneously promoting positive representations of women in public and private spheres. According to Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019), influential female artists play a significant role in disseminating feminist ideas through digital and popular media, making their works relevant objects of academic investigation.

One of Beyoncé's most influential songs is *Run the World (Girls)*, released in 2011 as part of her album *4*. The song

explicitly celebrates women's power and capability through lyrics that emphasize leadership, confidence, solidarity, and independence. Its recurring declaration that women run the world positions women as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of social authority. Through its empowering message, the song challenges conventional assumptions regarding gender roles and highlights women's contributions in various aspects of society.

The significance of *Run the World (Girls)* extends beyond its commercial success. The song has become a cultural symbol of female empowerment and has frequently been associated with discussions of feminism, gender equality, and women's leadership. Rens (2021) argues that musical texts promoting agency and self-determination can contribute to broader conversations about women's empowerment by presenting alternative representations of gender. Likewise, Sánchez-Olmos (2025) observes that contemporary popular music increasingly serves as a platform for feminist expression and activism. Through its lyrical content, *Run the World (Girls)* encourages audiences to recognize women's capabilities and challenges traditional narratives that position women as subordinate to men.

Another important aspect of the song is its portrayal of economic independence and collective empowerment. The lyrics repeatedly emphasize women's productivity, financial capability, and social influence. Such representations are particularly relevant in contemporary discussions concerning women's participation in the workforce and leadership positions. According to Scharff (2016), representations of economically independent women have become central to modern feminist discourse because they challenge historical limitations imposed on women within patriarchal societies. Therefore, the song provides a rich text for examining how empowerment is articulated through language and representation.

Several scholars have previously examined *Run the World (Girls)* from different perspectives. Kurniawati (2021) analyzed the representation of women's power in the song and found that the lyrics portray women as strong, capable, and influential individuals. Similarly, Guo (2023) argues that the song promotes women's empowerment through depictions of authority, confidence, and social contribution. Other studies have explored the song through discourse analysis, semiotics, multimodal analysis, and figurative language approaches, highlighting its feminist messages and cultural significance. These studies demonstrate that *Run the World (Girls)* remains an important text for understanding contemporary representations of women.

Despite the growing body of research on the song, several limitations remain. Previous studies primarily focus on general notions of empowerment, visual representation, or linguistic features. Limited attention has been given to examining the song through the perspective of feminist literary criticism, particularly using Lois Tyson's framework. Furthermore, previous research tends to discuss empowerment as a broad concept rather than exploring specific dimensions such as leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. This gap indicates the need for a more focused literary analysis that investigates how these dimensions are constructed and communicated through the song's lyrics.

To address this gap, this study employs feminist literary criticism proposed by Tyson (2015). Feminist literary criticism examines how literary texts represent women, construct gender identities, and negotiate power relations within society. According to Tyson (2015), literary works often reflect dominant ideological assumptions regarding gender while simultaneously providing opportunities to challenge patriarchal

values. Feminist criticism seeks to reveal the ways texts position women in relation to authority, agency, identity, and social expectations.

Tyson's framework is particularly relevant because it focuses on issues closely related to this study, including women's empowerment, gender roles, social power, and resistance to patriarchal ideology. Through feminist literary criticism, literary texts can be analyzed not only as artistic products but also as cultural artifacts that reflect broader social structures and ideological struggles. By applying Tyson's perspective, this study seeks to uncover the feminist meanings embedded within the lyrics of *Run the World (Girls)* and to explain how the song constructs particular representations of women and gender.

Based on the background above, this study aims to answer the following research question: How are women's empowerment and gender representation represented in Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)* through the perspective of feminist literary criticism? Specifically, the study investigates how the lyrical content constructs and communicates ideals of leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze these dimensions of empowerment using Tyson's feminist literary criticism framework.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on feminism, literary criticism, and popular culture by providing a detailed analysis of women's empowerment in contemporary song lyrics. The findings are expected to enrich feminist literary studies, particularly those focusing on popular music as a literary text. In addition, the study broadens the application of Tyson's theory in literary research and offers insights into how popular music participates in shaping public perceptions of gender and women's social roles.

The themes presented in *Run the World (Girls)* are also closely connected to

the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The song's emphasis on leadership, independence, and equal participation reflects the core objectives of SDG 5, including the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of women's involvement in decision-making processes. By portraying women as capable leaders and influential social actors, the song supports global efforts to encourage gender-inclusive development.

Furthermore, the song relates to SDG 8, which promotes inclusive economic growth and productive employment. The representation of financially independent and economically active women aligns with international efforts to increase women's participation in economic activities and leadership positions. Therefore, *Run the World (Girls)* can be understood not only as a cultural product but also as a text that reflects values consistent with global development agendas concerning equality, empowerment, and social inclusion.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate women's empowerment and gender representation in Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)*. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meanings, experiences, values, and social phenomena represented in textual data. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research seeks to explore and understand how individuals or groups construct meanings regarding social and human problems. Since this study focuses on interpreting feminist meanings embedded in song lyrics, a qualitative approach provides the most suitable framework for analyzing textual representations and ideological messages. The study specifically utilized feminist literary criticism as the analytical perspective to examine how the lyrics

construct and communicate women's empowerment and gender representation.

The primary data of this study consisted of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences found in the lyrics of *Run the World (Girls)* performed by Beyoncé, released in 2011. The song lyrics were selected because they contain explicit representations of women's leadership, authority, confidence, solidarity, dual social roles, and economic independence. The lyrics served as the main source of textual evidence analyzed in this study. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, previous studies, and other academic publications related to feminism, feminist literary criticism, women's empowerment, gender representation, and popular music. These sources provided theoretical foundations and contextual support for the interpretation of the findings.

The data were collected through documentation and library research techniques. Documentation was employed to obtain and examine the official lyrics of *Run the World (Girls)* as the primary research material. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents in order to gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. In addition, library research was conducted by collecting relevant academic literature from books, journal articles, and previous studies related to feminism, gender representation, and feminist literary criticism. Snyder (2019) states that literature-based research enables researchers to establish theoretical foundations and identify gaps within existing scholarship. Through these techniques, the researcher systematically gathered, organized, and reviewed data relevant to the objectives of the study.

The data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis procedures proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Following Miles et al. (2014), the analysis

involved four stages: (1) data collection, (2) data condensation, (3) data display, and (4) conclusion drawing and verification. During the data collection stage, the researcher gathered the song lyrics and relevant scholarly references. In the data condensation stage, textual units related to women's empowerment and gender representation were selected and categorized. Subsequently, the data were organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified based on recurring patterns identified in the lyrics.

The study also adopted Creswell and Poth's (2018) qualitative analysis procedures, including managing and preparing the data, reading the entire data set, coding the data, generating themes and descriptions, presenting the findings, and interpreting the meanings of the data. The coding process focused on identifying textual evidence related to five analytical categories: leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. These categories were developed based on feminist concerns regarding women's agency and empowerment. The identified data were then interpreted using Tyson's (2015) feminist literary criticism framework, to reveal how the lyrics construct representations of women and challenge patriarchal assumptions. Through this process, the researcher examined the ideological meanings embedded within the song and their relevance to contemporary feminist discourse.

To ensure analytical rigor, the interpretation of the data was conducted systematically by comparing textual evidence with concepts derived from feminist literary criticism and previous scholarly studies. Tracy (2020) emphasizes that qualitative research should maintain credibility through careful interpretation, transparency of analytical procedures, and strong connections between data and theoretical perspectives. Therefore, the

findings were interpreted based on textual evidence and supported by relevant feminist scholarship to enhance the validity of the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal five major themes related to women's empowerment and gender representation in Run the World (Girls). These themes were identified through the analysis of the song lyrics using Tyson's (2015) feminist literary criticism framework. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 1.

No	Theme	Lyrics evidences	Feminist Representation
1	Leadership and Authority	"Who run the world? Girls!"	Women are represented as leaders and holders of authority.
2	Leadership and Authority	"My persuasion can build a nation."	Women possess the ability to influence and transform society.
3	Confidence and Superiority	"Some of them men think they freak this like we do, but no they don't."	Women are portrayed as confident and capable individuals.
4	Confidence and Superiority	"Boy, you know you love it."	Women demonstrate self-assurance and self-recognition.
5	Dual Roles of Women	"Strong enough to bear the children, then get back to business."	Women successfully perform domestic and professional roles.
6	Women's Solidarity	"Who are we? What we run? The world."	Collective female identity and empowerment.
7	Women's Solidarity	"My persuasion can build a nation."	Women's cooperation contributes to social change.
8	Economic Independence	"Make your checks."	Women are financially independent.
9	Economic Independence	"We're smart enough to make these millions."	Women are economically productive and successful.

Table 1. Women's Empowerment and Gender Representation in Run the World (Girls)

Theme 1. Leadership and Authority

One of the most prominent representations of women's empowerment in *Run the World (Girls)* is leadership and authority. The song consistently portrays women as influential individuals capable of directing social change and occupying positions of power.

(Data 1.1) "Who run the world? Girls!"

This lyric serves as the central statement of the song and directly positions women as leaders. The phrase "run the world" symbolizes authority, influence, and decision-making power. Rather than depicting women as passive participants in society, the lyric constructs them as active agents capable of shaping social, political, and economic realities.

From Tyson's (2015) feminist literary criticism perspective, patriarchal ideology traditionally associates leadership with masculinity while positioning women in subordinate roles. The lyric challenges this assumption by explicitly attributing power and authority to women. The repetition of the statement throughout the song strengthens its ideological function as a declaration of resistance against gender-based hierarchies.

(Data 1.2) "My persuasion can build a nation."

This lyric further reinforces the idea of leadership by emphasizing women's capacity to influence society. The phrase "build a nation" suggests that women possess not only personal power but also the ability to contribute to collective progress and social development.

According to Tyson (2015), feminist criticism seeks to uncover representations that challenge patriarchal limitations imposed on women. Through this lyric, women are represented as nation-builders

whose ideas, leadership, and contributions are essential for societal advancement. Leadership is therefore portrayed as an inherent capability rather than a male privilege.

The findings indicate that *Run the World (Girls)* constructs women as authoritative figures capable of exercising power and influencing society. This representation aligns with Kurniawati's (2021) argument that the song promotes female leadership and social agency while challenging traditional gender expectations.

Theme 2. Confidence and Superiority

Another significant theme identified in the lyrics is confidence and superiority. The song repeatedly presents women as individuals who recognize their abilities and reject perceptions of inferiority.

(Data 2.1) "Some of them men think they freak this like we do, but no they don't."

This lyric expresses strong confidence in women's capabilities. The comparison between women and men highlights women's belief in their unique strengths and competencies. The statement rejects the notion that women are less capable than men and instead suggests that women possess qualities that distinguish them from their male counterparts.

Tyson (2015) argues that patriarchal societies often construct women as inferior and dependent. Through this lyric, the song challenges such constructions by portraying women as confident subjects who acknowledge their own value. Confidence becomes a form of resistance against gender stereotypes that seek to diminish women's achievements.

(Data 2.2) "Boy, you know you love it."

This lyric demonstrates self-assurance and control. Rather than seeking validation,

women are represented as fully aware of their attractiveness, competence, and influence. The statement reflects a sense of empowerment rooted in self-recognition.

The representation of confidence throughout the song supports Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular feminism, which emphasizes self-belief and visibility as essential elements of women's empowerment. Therefore, confidence in the song functions not merely as a personality trait but as a feminist strategy for challenging patriarchal assumptions.

Theme 3. Dual Roles of Women

The theme of dual roles of women is explicitly represented through the song's acknowledgment of women's responsibilities in both domestic and public spheres.

(Data 3.1) "Strong enough to bear the children, then get back to business."

This lyric highlights women's ability to balance motherhood and professional responsibilities. The phrase "bear the children" represents women's reproductive role, while "get back to business" emphasizes participation in economic and professional activities.

From Tyson's perspective, patriarchal ideology frequently confines women to domestic roles and limits their participation in public life. However, this lyric challenges such limitations by presenting women as capable of succeeding in both domains simultaneously.

The use of the word "strong" is particularly significant because it frames women's multiple responsibilities as evidence of resilience rather than weakness. Motherhood is not portrayed as an obstacle to success but as one aspect of women's multifaceted identities.

The findings suggest that the song promotes a modern representation of women who actively contribute to both family and society. This perspective reflects contemporary feminist discussions regarding work-life balance, equal opportunities, and recognition of women's diverse roles.

Theme 4. Women's Solidarity

Women's solidarity emerges as another important dimension of empowerment represented in the song. Rather than emphasizing individual achievement alone, the lyrics repeatedly promote collective strength and unity among women.

(Data 4.1) "Who are we? What we run? The world."

The use of collective pronouns such as "we" establishes a shared identity among women. Empowerment is presented as a collective experience achieved through cooperation and mutual support rather than individual competition.

Tyson (2015) notes that feminist movements often emphasize collective action as a means of challenging patriarchal structures. The lyric reflects this principle by portraying women as a united group capable of influencing society.

(Data 4.2) "My persuasion can build a nation."

Although expressed in the singular form, this lyric can also be interpreted as representing collective female influence. The ability to "build a nation" symbolizes the transformative potential of women working together toward common goals.

The repeated references to women as a unified group encourage solidarity and mutual empowerment. This finding is consistent with Rens (2021), who argues

that contemporary feminist music frequently creates communities of empowerment through shared representations of agency and resistance.

Overall, the song suggests that women's empowerment becomes more effective when women support and uplift one another.

Theme 5. Economic Independence

Economic independence is the final theme identified in the song and represents one of the most important dimensions of women's empowerment.

(Data 5.1) "Make your checks."

This lyric directly refers to women's ability to earn income and achieve financial autonomy. The phrase positions women as active participants in economic life rather than dependents who rely on others for financial support.

According to Tyson (2015), economic dependence has historically functioned as a mechanism that reinforces women's subordination. Therefore, financial independence becomes a crucial aspect of empowerment because it enables women to exercise greater control over their lives.

(Data 5.2) "We're smart enough to make these millions."

This lyric further emphasizes women's economic capability. The phrase associates women with intelligence, productivity, and financial success. Rather than portraying wealth as something obtained through external assistance, the lyric attributes economic achievement to women's competence and hard work.

Scharff (2016) argues that economic agency has become a central component of contemporary feminist discourse because it provides women with greater autonomy

and decision-making power. The lyric reflects this idea by presenting women as capable creators of wealth and contributors to economic development.

The findings demonstrate that *Run the World (Girls)* promotes a vision of women as financially independent individuals who possess the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in professional environments.

The analysis reveals that *Run the World (Girls)* represents women's empowerment through five interconnected dimensions: leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. Through Tyson's feminist literary criticism, the song can be understood as a cultural text that challenges patriarchal assumptions and reconstructs women as capable leaders, confident individuals, resilient multitaskers, supportive communities, and economically autonomous actors. These representations collectively reinforce the song's central message that women possess the power, agency, and capability to shape their own lives and contribute significantly to society.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Beyoncé's *Run the World (Girls)* represents women's empowerment and gender representation as forms of resistance against patriarchal ideology. Through Tyson's (2015) feminist literary criticism, the song portrays women as active and influential subjects who possess the capacity to lead, make decisions, contribute to society, and determine their own identities. Rather than reinforcing traditional gender roles, the lyrics construct women as capable individuals whose presence and contributions are essential in both private and public spheres.

The analysis reveals that women's empowerment in the song is manifested

through five interconnected dimensions: leadership and authority, confidence and superiority, dual roles of women, women's solidarity, and economic independence. These dimensions collectively demonstrate that empowerment is not limited to individual achievement but also involves collective strength, self-confidence, social participation, and financial autonomy. The song therefore promotes a positive representation of women as competent, resilient, and independent individuals who challenge gender stereotypes and unequal power relations.

The findings indicate that *Run the World (Girls)* functions as a feminist cultural text that advocates gender equality and encourages women's agency in contemporary society. By highlighting women's capabilities and achievements, the song contributes to broader discussions of women's empowerment and supports the values embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Future studies may examine other popular songs or compare representations of women across different musical genres to provide a broader understanding of feminist discourse in popular culture.

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