

I CAN BUY MYSELF FLOWERS”: A Gender Performativity Analysis of Women's Empowerment in Miley Cyrus's Flowers

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Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of women's empowerment in Miley Cyrus's song "Flowers" (2023) and its contribution to the discourse of self-love and female independence from a feminist perspective. Employing an exploratory-interpretive qualitative research design, the study uses Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as the analytical framework. The primary data consist of the complete song lyrics, which were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014) and Creswell's (2014) qualitative analysis procedures. The findings reveal that women's empowerment is represented through repeated self-directed actions expressed in the phrase "I can," which emphasizes agency, emotional self-reliance, and personal autonomy. The lyrics further portray self-love through acts of self-care, self-acceptance, and forgiveness, while also representing female independence through the speaker's ability to define herself beyond romantic relationships. From Butler's perspective, these repeated actions function as performative acts through which the female persona continuously reconstructs her identity. Furthermore, the song contributes to contemporary discussions of self-love and women's empowerment by promoting emotional resilience and independence following a romantic breakup. The values represented in the song also support the broader objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) by encouraging women's autonomy, self-determination, and empowerment. This study contributes to feminist literary studies by demonstrating how popular song lyrics can function as cultural texts that foster gender awareness and empowerment in contemporary society.

Keywords: feminism, women's empowerment, song lyrics, self-love, gender performativity, popular music

INTRODUCTION

Literature plays a central role in human life as a mirror of society and a tool for shaping cultural values and self-understanding. Through literary works, individuals can explore complex human experiences, including emotions, social conflicts, and personal aspirations, thereby fostering empathy and collective awareness. Literature not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes societal norms and behaviors by challenging stereotypes and provoking critical thinking on contemporary issues such as injustice and identity. Literature serves as a therapeutic tool with curative properties for mental health and catalyzes social change by highlighting the perspectives of marginalized groups (Alfarhan, 2024). Similarly, (Haider, 2022) emphasizes that literature serves as the “mouthpiece of society,” playing a role in socialization and social reform, ranging from critiques of the educational system to the promotion of intercultural tolerance. In this context, literature helps individuals develop a broader perspective on life, enhance emotional intelligence, and build a more inclusive society. The development of literature in the digital age is increasingly demonstrating its flexibility, with popular forms such as music and song lyrics serving as modern

literary media easily accessible to younger generations. Contemporary songs often convey deeply personal narratives, much like poetry or short stories, reflecting the dynamics of everyday life and gender issues. (Mchussain, 2023) states that literary works, including popular narratives, shape human development through exposure to diverse perspectives, the honing of analytical skills, and the inspiration of personal resilience. This aligns with the view that contemporary literature contributes to the formation of social and emotional awareness in an increasingly digitally connected society. Thus a literary analysis of popular works is relevant for understanding how pop culture shapes the values of everyday life. One notable example of songwriting is “Flowers” by Miley Cyrus, released in January 2023 as part of the album *Endless Summer Vacation*. The song’s lyrics present a post-breakup narrative in which the female protagonist realizes her ability to love herself without depending on a partner. Cyrus uses the metaphors of flowers, writing a name in the sand, and dancing alone as symbols of autonomy and self-celebration, which intertextually respond to the lyrics of Bruno Mars’ song “When I Was Your Man.” As a literary work, this song functions as an empowering narrative that combines upbeat disco

elements with a profound message about emotional healing and independence.

A semiotic analysis of “Flowers” reveals the myths that underpin the themes of individualism and new femininity. The song depicts a woman who actively chooses to “buy her own flowers” and “hold her own hand,” emphasizing that happiness comes from within. A literary approach to the song’s lyrics demonstrates how pop music can serve as a vehicle for expressing women’s experiences in the post-toxic-relationship era, where Cyrus’s personal narrative becomes a universal representation of resilience.

The song “Flowers” offers significant benefits for listeners’ mental health and self-empowerment, particularly among women. This song encourages self-love, which can reduce emotional dependence on others, thereby boosting self-confidence and psychological well-being. Listeners often report feeling inspired to engage in independent activities such as dancing or self-care, which aligns with findings that exposure to empowering messages through music can strengthen resilience against relational setbacks.

In addition, this song contributes to the cultural discourse on women’s independence, helping to reduce the stigma surrounding singlehood and promote emotional well-being. Its benefits extend to the social level, where songs like this can

serve as a tool for informal education on the importance of self-care amid the pressures of a patriarchal society. Related studies indicate that music with themes of self-empowerment is positively correlated with increased emotional intelligence and reduced stress.

This study employs Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity as the main theoretical framework to analyze Miley Cyrus’s song “Flowers.” Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a fixed or natural identity but is continuously constructed through repeated acts, behaviors, and performances. Rather than being something individuals inherently possess, gender is produced through actions that are repeatedly performed and socially recognized. Through this perspective, identity is understood as dynamic and continuously shaped by everyday practices. This theory is suitable for analyzing “Flowers” because the song represents women’s empowerment through a series of repeated actions performed by the female speaker. Expressions such as “I can buy myself flowers,” “I can take myself dancing,” and “I can hold my own hand” demonstrate acts of self-reliance and emotional autonomy. These actions challenge conventional assumptions that women require romantic validation from men in order to feel complete or fulfilled. Instead, the lyrics portray a woman who

actively constructs her identity through self-love, independence, and personal agency.

Through Butler's framework, this study examines how the female persona in "Flowers" performs an autonomous feminine identity through repeated self-directed actions. The song positions the woman not as a passive victim of a failed relationship but as an active subject who is capable of defining her own happiness, rebuilding her sense of self, and creating meaning beyond romantic dependence. Therefore, Butler's concept of gender performativity provides an appropriate framework for understanding how women's empowerment is represented in the lyrics of "Flowers."

Although several previous studies have examined feminist representations in popular song lyrics, significant gaps remain. Damayanti, Soethama, and Udayana (2023) and Caroline et al. (2023) analyzed Taylor Swift's "The Man" using feminist stylistics, focusing on the critique of external gender double standards through sarcastic and derogatory diction. Rangkuti and Hafifah (2022) examined feminist stylistic features in Lady Gaga's lyrics, while Sari (2025) discussed postfeminism in "Flowers" but limited the analysis to thematic identification of individualism without engaging deeply with integrating Butler's performativity.

Three gaps emerge from this body of literature. First, most existing studies treat feminist representation in pop songs as a critique directed outward at patriarchal structures, whereas "Flowers" articulates an inward-facing empowerment grounded in self-love—an angle that remains underexplored. Second, prior analyses of "Flowers" tend to rely on a single theoretical lens (semiotics or postfeminism alone), without integrating performativity into a coherent analytical framework.

Third, there is a lack of studies that link the literary analysis of "Flowers" to broader cultural and developmental discourses such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality). This study addresses these gaps by offering a feminist literary analysis through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

The research questions in this study are: (1) How do the lyrics represent women's empowerment? (2) What is the contribution of this song to the discourse on self-love and gender independence? The objective of this research is to analyze the song using feminist theory to identify representations of women's autonomy and to evaluate its significance as a work of contemporary literature. The contribution of this research lies in enriching the study of popular literature in Indonesia, providing an interdisciplinary analysis of music, literature, and gender studies, and adding a

local perspective to the global phenomenon of Miley Cyrus. This analysis is also expected to provide practical contributions to literary education and gender awareness among students and the general public.

The lyrics of Miley Cyrus's song "Flowers" can be linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. This song promotes self-sufficiency and rejects emotional dependence, which often reinforces gender inequality, thereby supporting SDG 5's goal of creating a society where women have full autonomy over their lives. Art and music serve as a bridge for transformation toward achieving the SDGs by highlighting issues of equality and giving voice to women's experiences.

Furthermore, the message of self-love in this song aligns with global efforts to address gender-based violence and promote women's mental health, which are integral parts of the 2030 SDGs agenda. Thus, "Flowers" is not merely entertainment but also a tool for raising social awareness that supports sustainable development through pop culture.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an exploratory, interpretive qualitative research design to uncover the deeper meanings of song lyrics

as a form of emotional expression. According to Creswell, "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process involves emerging questions and procedures; data typically collected in the participant's setting; data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes; and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data." This design is emergent, in which research questions and procedures develop inductively throughout the process, focusing on the subjective perspectives of the songwriters and their social contexts, thereby enabling a holistic understanding of the theme of self-empowerment.

The research data is sourced from the lyrics of the song "Flowers" by Miley Cyrus, released in 2023 as part of the album *Endless Summer Vacation*. These lyrics were selected as primary data because they tell an emotional narrative of self-recovery following a breakup and feature symbolic elements, such as "I can buy myself flowers," that reflect self-love and independence. Secondary data sources include literature on music lyric analysis in cultural and psychological studies, as well as the artist's biographical context, to enrich the interpretation. Data collection methods included documentary analysis

and library research. The documentary analysis focused on gathering complete song lyrics from official sources, including Miley Cyrus's official lyric video transcripts, to ensure the authenticity of the text. Meanwhile, library research was conducted through online library searches and reference books on qualitative content analysis in music, ensuring the completeness of the data without direct intervention in the subject matter.

The data analysis adopts the interactive approach proposed by (Miles et al., 2014) which consists of four main steps: (1) data collection, (2) data condensation, “Data condensation refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus”, (3) data display, “Generically, a display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that allows for drawing conclusions and taking action,” and (4) drawing conclusions/verification, “From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst interprets what things mean by noting patterns, explanations, causal flows, and propositions.” This approach is combined with (Creswell, 2014) six steps: (1) managing and preparing data, “Organizing the Data: Data management, the first loop in the spiral, begins the process,” (2) reading the entire dataset, (3) analyzing details through coding, (4)

generating descriptions and themes, (5) data presentation, and (6) data interpretation. This process is carried out iteratively to generate key themes such as resilience and self-empowerment from the song lyrics.

The interpretation of the lyrics was conducted through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The analysis focused on repeated actions, expressions of self-love, and forms of agency that construct the female persona's identity throughout the song.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research results based on a feminist analysis of the lyrics of the song “Flowers” (Miley Cyrus, 2023). The primary goal is to address two research questions: (1) How do the lyrics represent women's empowerment? (2) What contribution does this song make to the discourse on self-love and gender independence?

Flowers

Miley Cyrus

*We were good, we were gold
Kinda dream that can't be sold
We were right 'til we weren't
Built a home and watched it burn*

*Mm, I didn't wanna leave you
I didn't wanna lie
Started to cry, but then remembered I*

*I can buy myself flowers
Write my name in the sand
Talk to myself for hours
Say things you don't understand
I can take myself dancing*

*And I can hold my own hand
Yeah, I can love me better than you can
Can love me better*

*I can love me better, baby
Can love me better
I can love me better, baby*

*Paint my nails cherry red
Match the roses that you left
No remorse, no regret
I forgive every word you said*

Ooh, I didn't wanna leave you, baby

*I didn't wanna fight
Started to cry, but then remembered I*

*I can buy myself flowers
Write my name in the sand
Talk to myself for hours, yeah
Say things you don't understand
I can take myself dancing, yeah
I can hold my own hand
Yeah, I can love me better than you can*

*Can love me better
I can love me better, baby
Can love me better
I can love me better, baby
Can love me better
I can love me better, baby
Can love me better
Oh, I*

*I didn't wanna leave you
I didn't wanna fight
Started to cry, but then remembered I*

*I can buy myself flowers (oh)
Write my name in the sand (mm)
Talk to myself for hours (yeah)
Say things you don't understand (you never
will)
I can take myself dancing, yeah
I can hold my own hand
Yeah, I can love me better than
Yeah, I can love me better than you can*

*Can love me better
I can love me better, baby (oh)
Can love me better
I can love me better (than you can), baby
Can love me better
I can love me better, baby
Can love me better
I*

Representation of Self-Love in Flowers



One of the major findings in the lyrics of Flowers is the representation of self-love through repeated self-directed actions. The female persona shows her ability to satisfy her emotional needs by herself, without dependence on a romantic partner.

The following lyrics illustrate this representation:

“I can buy myself flowers”

“Talk to myself for hours”

“I can take myself dancing”

“And I can hold my own hand”

These acts are about self-care, self-acknowledgment and emotional self-reliance. In romantic relationships, there are some activities like receiving flowers, dancing, holding hands. The female persona, however, does these things for herself, implying that emotional fulfillment can be attained independently.

As Butler (1990) argues, identity is not fixed by nature, but is continuously constructed through repeated performances. The repetition of “I can” highlights the speaker’s agency and reaffirms her ability to take charge of her own happiness. By repeating these actions, the lyrics present a picture of a woman who loves and cares for herself actively.

Moreover, the line “I can love me better than you can” strengthens the idea that self-love serves as an empowerment tool after the end of a relationship. The female persona becomes confident in her ability to provide emotional support and affection, instead of seeking validation from a former partner. Thus, the song represents self-love as an important part of women’s empowerment.

Representation of Independence and Female Agency

Another important finding is the depiction of women’s independence and agency. The lyrics depict a woman who is able to make decisions and manage her emotions after a breakup.

This representation can be observed in the following lyrics:

“No remorse, no regret”

“I forgive every word you said”

These lines imply that the female persona chooses to move on, rather than to dwell in emotional pain. To forgive is not to respond passively, but to choose actively. Rather than a victim of heartbreak, the speaker comes across as a person with emotional strength and resilience.

For Butler, these acts are performative acts by which the female persona rebuilds her identity. She releases regret and chooses

forgiveness, showing her capacity to define herself beyond the failed relationship.

The lyrics also represent independence through symbolic actions:

“Write my name in the sand”

The phrase “my name” calls attention to personal identity and self-awareness. The emphasis is on the woman’s own existence, not the romantic relationship. This means that the female persona is no longer defined by her partner but by her own decisions and actions. So the song defines independence as the physical freedom as well as the emotional independence. The female persona is capable of creating meaning and happiness without romantic validation.

These findings are consistent with past research on the representation of feminists in popular song lyrics. For example, Caroline et al. (2023) and Damayanti et al. (2023) show how Taylor Swift’s “The Man” represents women’s resistance to the gender double standards and patriarchal expectations. Similarly, Sari (2025) argues that Miley Cyrus’s “Flowers” represents postfeminist ideals, highlighting themes of individualism, choice, and women’s independence. But unlike those previous studies, this study focuses specifically on the construction of self-love and female independence as a performative act, through Butler’s theory of gender

performativity. Most of the previous research indicates the thematic content as feminist messages. The emphasis of this study is on the repeated actions in “Flowers,” such as buying flowers, dancing alone, forgiving the past, and affirming “I can” as performances for the reconstruction of the identity of the female persona. Thus, this study contributes to feminist literary analysis by showing that women’s empowerment in “Flowers” is not only depicted through the theme of independence but also built through repeated linguistic and symbolic performances.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the song “Flowers” by Miley Cyrus is a potent cultural text that expresses women’s empowerment using feminist literary analysis. The lyrics’ repetitive self-directed actions, especially “I can”, build representations of self-love and independence which, as per Butler’s theory of gender performativity, actively reconstruct the identity of the female persona beyond romantic dependence. The song’s symbolic elements flowers, sand, and cherry red nail polish are strategic re-appropriations of traditionally patriarchal symbols of romance, turned instead into markers of female autonomy and self-celebration.

The findings suggest that, beyond its

commercial function as pop entertainment, “Flowers” offers a psychologically healthier narrative of post-breakup healing through themes of self-acceptance, emotional autonomy, and the letting go of regret. This representation is consistent with Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine* in that it foregrounds the female subjectivity and subverts the dominant masculine narratives. The combination of the song’s upbeat musical elements and deep emotional healing makes it an accessible vehicle for gender literacy and women’s empowerment in contemporary society. In theory, the study contributes to the growing body of feminist literary criticism that claims women’s empowerment in popular music is not only thematic content but also an act produced through repeated linguistic and symbolic acts. From a practical perspective, the analysis supports the proposal to align popular culture with global development priorities, in particular SDG 5 on Gender Equality, by demonstrating how open forms of media such as pop music can foster emotional independence and diminish gendered vulnerabilities. Future research may also include cross-cultural comparisons and the reception of such empowering messages to different audiences.

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