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# Violated Voices: Millennial Messages of Sexual Violence in the Music of Contemporary Female Artists

Ally Zlatar

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*This paper examines the ways in which contemporary female musicians use their art to explore the impact of sexual violence. Through the utilisation of qualitative research and thematic analysis, the study analyses the lyrics of songs written by seven artists: Lady Gaga, Natalie Grant, Tori Amos, Ashe, Rapsody, Jolin Tsai and Ana Tijoux. The analysis focuses on examining several key themes such as the use of metaphor, the psychological experiences of survivors, and the representation of marginalised voices in the lyrics. The findings of the study highlight the powerful role that music can play in giving voice to the experiences of survivors and challenging cultural narratives that contribute to rape culture.*

*Key words: sexual violence, music, contemporary artists, female musicians, marginalised voices.*

*Content sensitivity warning: themes of sexual assault, violence and trauma.*

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Sexual violence and the trauma arising from it are significant issues that affect individuals and communities around the world. In recent years, numerous contemporary female musicians have used their art to explore the theme of sexual violence and to give voice to the experiences of marginalised communities. This essay examines two key questions of how these artists use their music to address the impact of sexual violence,

differences in cultural experiences of it, for which I will use the term 'rape culture', and to explore the ways in which their art contributes to social change. The research questions guiding this study are: What themes and patterns emerge from the analysis of the lyrics of these songs? How do these artists use metaphor and other literary devices to convey the experiences of survivors and challenge cultural narratives related to rape culture?

This paper used lyric and thematic analysis to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of songwriters and marginalised communities (Fonseca 16). Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, such as the use of metaphor and psychological experiences of survivors (Braun & Clarke 77; Yusuf & Amelia 38; Yamawaki 406). The representation of marginalised voices was also analysed, examining themes such as resilience and social change (Mendes et al. 12). The methodology provided an in-depth exploration of the themes and messages in the songs, aiding in the understanding of how artists used their art to challenge cultural narratives related to rape culture.

Rape culture refers to what the United Nations defines as 'the social environment that allows sexual violence to be normalized and justified, fuelled by the persistent gender inequalities and attitudes about gender and sexuality' (UN Women, 2019). An important feature of rape culture is the notion that sexual violence is driven by sex, rather than the progressive reconceptualisation that it is driven by rage and power (Brownmiller, 1976, 6). The consequences of this notion still being present include victim-blaming—rape is driven by sex, hence it is the survivors' fault for being sexual beings or dressing in an 'immodest' way—, and the tie between purity culture (abstinence until marriage) and rape culture (Klement, Sagarin, Skowronski 2070). Klement et al. provide correlational evidence that people who are survivors of sexual

violence are often viewed societally in rape culture as no longer 'sexually pure', which harms survivors, often leading them to feel damaged, unworthy and unwanted (Klement et al. 2080). Lyrical analysis will show how these phenomena and their impacts are present in the music of contemporary female artists.

### **Trauma and Its Remains**

Few can grasp the difficulty of living with the trauma from sexual violence for survivors (Najdowski 460). Trauma, a response to distressing experiences, can cause physical and emotional effects, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). Sexual violence can lead to a range of emotional, physical, and psychological responses, including fear, shame, and self-blame, and difficulties with trust, intimacy, and self-worth (American Psychological Association 2021). The following section will examine the ways in which Lady Gaga and Natalie Grant use metaphor and symbol to express the pain and violation of sexual violence and the ways in which their music reflects the experiences of survivors (Barker 128).

Lady Gaga's song 'Til It Happens to You' addresses the prevalence of campus sexual assault and the impact it has on survivors (Barker 123). Gaga sings about the fear, shame, and isolation that often follow sexual violence in her lyrics: "You tell me it gets better, it gets better in time / You say I'll pull myself together, pull it

together, you'll be fine / Tell me how the hell would you know? / 'Til it happens to you, you don't know how it feels" (Gaga 2016). These lyrics look at the individual difficulties that come from the experience. Not only is it isolated, but the recovery journey is highly individualised because of the effects of the traumatic event. She further expands upon how very few people truly understand the effects of sexual assault until they experience it themselves.

As Gaga stated in an interview where she recounts her experience of a producer trying to illicit sexual behaviours: "I understand this #MeToo movement, I understand that some people feel really comfortable with this, and I do not," she continued. "I do not ever want to face that person again" (Gaga in BBC News). 'Till It Happens to You' conveys these difficult emotions and experiences and serves as a reminder of the importance of the immense pain and difficulty one can endure alongside the need to voice these harsh realities. Gaga effectively captures the sense of betrayal and disillusionment that many survivors experience (Barker 128), and the idea that society often fails to understand the full extent of the trauma caused by sexual assault– that it is often up to the survivor to 'pull themselves together' and carry on with their lives.

Debra Patterson et al. examine why rape survivors often decide not to seek help from formal social systems (127). They interviewed 29 female rape survivors who did not seek any post-assault support and

found that several reasons occurred for their choice. The researchers found that survivors held the belief that the systems would not help, either because they were not 'worthy' or did not fit the 'normal rape conventions' that perpetuate notions of young, white, vulnerable females who come from middle class backgrounds being targeted by strangers (Patterson 136). In accordance, many felt that systems couldn't help or protect them from their assailants as either the events already occurred or that the assistance would intensify their painful feelings (Patterson 127). Therefore, survivors may choose the individual route of 'pulling

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*Gaga effectively captures the sense of betrayal and disillusionment that many survivors experience .*

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themselves together' as they may be attempting to protect themselves from perceived psychological harm or feel the systems are inadequately able to support them. This message is particularly poignant given the way that survivors are often blamed and stigmatised for their own victimisation (Barker 128).

Natalie Grant further reinforces these notions through her song 'Clean'. It is a powerful exploration of the importance of consent and healthy relationships and suggests that sexual violence is a societal

problem that requires collective action to address. Grant describes this song as being about a friend of hers. She stated: "I will never forget the moment I wrote the song 'Clean,'" the singer writes on her Facebook page... I began to weep. It was a holy moment. Truly an experience I'll never forget. Honestly, I feel like God wrote the lyrics and I just held the pen" (Grant in Ong).

Grant edified in an interview that she wanted to aid her friend and reaffirm to her that: "You are clean. We all are. That's the beauty of His grace and redemption." Part of the pain and trauma she describes is the feeling of being 'dirty' and with her Christian roots, focuses on faith to help preserve (Ong). often embeds the belief that people who are survivors of sexual assault are used, violated and no longer pure (Klement et al.). The lyrics of 'Clean' dealt with themes of empowerment, self-worth, and the need for respect and support. One of the key themes of the song is the importance of consent, with lines such as: "I don't want to be dirty, I don't want to be used / I don't want to be a victim, I don't want to be abused" (Grant) conveying the idea that individuals have the right to say no and to be treated with respect. The song also highlights the importance of healthy relationships: "I want to be clean, I want to be whole / I want to be loved, I want to be known" (Grant) conveying the idea that individuals deserve to be treated with care and consideration. Importantly, the song also suggests that the way we understand and support sexual violence

survivors is a societal problem that requires collective action to effectively address. Grant's lyrics reinforce this claim when she stated: "I don't want to be a statistic, I don't want to be a number / I don't want to be a part of your plan" (Grant). The lyrics suggest that sexual violence is often seen as an individual problem rather than a societal one, and that this needs to change.

Sociologists argue that sexual violence stems from social and cultural factors that contribute to a culture of violence and domination. In 'The Macho Paradox', Jackson Katz identifies gender roles, the objectification of women, and media normalisation of violence as contributors (17). He emphasises the importance of men taking an active role in promoting healthy relationships and gender equality, challenging cultural narratives, and speaking out against violence towards women (Katz 25). Men have a responsibility to challenge other men's violent behaviour, stand up for women's safety, and critically assess their own beliefs and behaviours to create a culture where violence against women is not tolerated (Katz 58).

Both Lady Gaga and Natalie Grant edify the complexity and depth in which women have been inflicted by the perils of sexual assault. What is important to remember is that these works could be argued to be proponents for understanding the immediate impacts and current culture surrounding sexual violence.

## Sexual Assault and Its Long-Term Effects

Contemporary female musicians have used their art to explore the ways in which sexual trauma is embedded in women's lives. Through their music, these artists give voice to the experiences of survivors and challenge cultural narratives that contribute to rape culture. One example of a female musician who addresses this issue in her music is Tori Amos, whose song 'Me and a Gun' explores the theme of sexual violence and is based on Amos' own experiences of being raped at knifepoint at twenty-one. She expresses the deep fear and torment she endured and the song evokes a powerful emotional exploration of the impact of trauma on her. She iterates the immense impact on her in an interview: "I really do feel as though I was psychologically mutilated that night and that now I'm trying to put the pieces back together again. Through love, not hatred. And through my music. My strength has been to open again, to life, and my victory is the fact that, despite it all, I kept alive my vulnerability" (Amos in Handal). The lyrics, which are spoken rather than sung, convey the sense of fear and powerlessness that can accompany sexual violence: "He left me with a gun / Pointed at my head" (Amos) conveying the sense of terror and vulnerability that she experienced. When analysing incidences of traumatic experiences many have described themselves as 'possessions' (Pietkiewicz et al. 373). Igor J. Pietkiewicz et al. (373) studied

how women with a history of sexual abuse in churches had these trauma-related symptoms and feelings which led them to being discouraged to seeking social support because of their feelings of unworthiness (Pietkiewicz et al. 373). Another artist who addresses the issue of sexual trauma in her music is Ashe, whose song 'Moral of the Story' examines the theme of self-worth after trauma. The lyrics, which appear on her album 'Ashlyn', explore the idea that survivors of sexual violence often internalise feelings of shame and blame, with lines such as "I gave him what he wanted, he gave me a scar" (Ashe) conveying the sense of guilt and self-blame that many survivors experience. Ashe captures eloquently how survivors of toxic relationships feel not only inferiority but defenceless with her partner.

There is a growing body of research that supports the idea that contemporary female musicians are using their art to explore the issue of sexual trauma and its impact on women's lives, and to promote social change (Braun and Clarke 77). Scholars have examined the ways in which music can serve as a tool for giving voice to marginalised experiences and challenging dominant narratives (Beigi et al. 447). Beigi et al. argue that music can be a powerful means of communication and expression, particularly for marginalised groups who may not have access to other forms of power or influence (Ibid. 448). They further suggest that music can be a cultural anthology used to challenge dominant narratives

and promote social change, and that this is particularly true for movements that seek to challenge gender-based violence and oppression (Ibid. 449).

Similarly, researchers in the field of psychology have examined the ways in which music can be used to facilitate healing and empowerment for survivors of sexual violence. For example, Cindy Najdowski (2011, 463) argues that music can serve as a powerful means of expression and coping for survivors and can be used to facilitate healing and resilience. She suggests that music can be an important tool for survivors to make sense of their experiences and to find meaning in the aftermath of trauma (Ibid. 464). Schrader and Wendland reinforce this claim with their analysis of music therapy programming in Cambodia for survivors of child sexual exploitation and rape. They found that it not only helped them express and process their feelings but also be able to start to enjoy life beyond their trauma (390).

These studies provide evidence to support the idea that contemporary female musicians are using their art to explore the issue of sexual trauma and its impact on women's lives, and to promote social change. What is highly evident throughout this discourse is that music gives voice to the experiences of survivors and challenges the dominant discourse. Through these artists sharing stories of sexual violence, they are raising awareness about these important issues to society at large.

## **Societal change**

This section will focus on cultural issues that perpetuate the harmful impacts of sexual violence to survivors and society overall. The works of Rapsody, Jolin Tsai, and Ana Tijoux will be explored to examine their commentary on social issues and related back to sexual violence and rape culture. The lyrics present in these artists' works advocate for societal change and challenge dominant narratives in respect to the experiences of non-White and queer women and the particular struggles of these groups.

A contemporary female musician who is using her voice to share the experiences of marginalised communities is Rapsody. Marlanna Evans (known as Rapsody) is an American rapper and songwriter who has used her music to explore themes of race, gender, and social justice. In the song 'Power,' Rapsody addresses the issue of the suppression of black power in the United States, through lyrics such as "I know my blackness is powerful and they don't like that", promoting ideas of resilience and empowerment by giving voice to the experiences of women of colour. These struggles are often dismissed: she iterates that 'I want the power to be able rap bout, what I rap bout', which edifies the difficulty of her community to have voices heard but also freedom to express their experiences. This cultural phenomenon can be illustrated through the impact of sexual violence on black women and communities. Allegations of

sexual violence against black women are overlooked or silenced in mainstream discussions, and black women are underserved by the criminal justice system and other institutions (Campbell et al. 237). Furthermore, sexual violence disproportionately affects black women in the United States (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2021, 307). These resources are meant to provide support and protection, leading black survivors to feel unprotected and unheard (Ibid.). The work of minority artists discussing injustice and cultural phenomena that remove their power is critical (Fonesca 30).

By impressing the importance of black power, 'Power' challenges the narratives of rape culture that blame survivors rather than recognise the sociological forces working against marginalised groups. Listeners are encouraged to think about the ways in which these experiences can be understood and addressed, starting a conversation on injustice to these communities, which can include the lack of safety and institutional support for black survivors, and stigma of reaching out (Burton & Guidry, 370, 381).

Jolin Tsai's song 'We're All Different, Yet the Same' promotes respect and equality for queer people, challenging cultural norms that dismiss, blame, or normalise sexual discrimination: 'Different, yet the same, suffering from all kinds of trouble /Different, yet the same, there's gathering and there's dispersing'. The song encourages reflection and collective action to promote fair and equitable societies that champion love and respect

to combat societal problems relating to sexual assault, queer love and trauma (Tsai; Braun & Clarke 79; Lonsway et al. 534; Gill & Harrison 529, 511). This notion is particularly important for Asian communities where queerness has been traditionally taboo due to cultural norms of shame (Gill & Harrison 529). Tsai's lyrics reinforce this notion as she stated that 'Who is better than another, and who is there to judge/ Need no forgiveness, leave down the love to touch the rest of the world'. In these communities, a lack of critical reflection and public support suppresses the voices of queer people

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*The work of minority artists discussing injustice and cultural phenomena that remove their power is critical*

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and inhibits their ability to share struggles and stories and access support. This is something crucial for queer individuals, as well as survivors of sexual violence. The lyrics of 'We're All Different, Yet the Same' have a parallel significance to dismantling the damaging narratives of rape culture.

Ana Tijoux is a Chilean rapper and singer who has used her music to explore themes of social justice and human rights. In the song 'Antipatriarca', which appears on her album 'Vengo', Tijoux addresses the issue of female liberation against the



forces of oppression and control. She sings: "You're not going to denigrate me, you're not going to force me/ You're not going to silence me, you're not going to shut me up" (English translation). In rape culture, women are socialised to feel powerless, to not occupy space or have true bodily autonomy; this is one of the root causes of violence against women (UN Women, 2019). Tijoux fights this: "I won't be the one who obeys because my body belongs to me/ I decide about my time, how I want and where I want to be" (English translation). 'Antipatriarca' has messages of female liberation, and the cultural issues Tijoux speaks out against in this respect also feature in rape culture and speak to survivors of sexual violence, who can feel they are powerless and no longer in control of their body, it belongs to their perpetrator(s) (National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2021, 310).

The musicians in this section all have non-White backgrounds, and often non-White artists differ in their approaches to writing about sexual violence in the specific cultural contexts and experiences that they draw upon. For example, Black female musicians may draw upon their experiences of racism and discrimination and may use their art to challenge dominant narratives that dismiss or blame Black survivors of sexual violence (Braun & Clarke 99). Asian female musicians, on the other hand, may draw upon their experiences of cultural expectations and traditions and may use their art to challenge dominant narratives that normalise or minimise

sexual violence within their communities (Najdowski 460). Comparatively white female musicians may also draw upon their own experiences and vocalise the pain and trauma more directly but tend to neglect cultural influences and focus on their individualised experiences through abstraction, symbolism, and direct one-on-one dialogue with audiences. To further explore this notion female musicians of different cultural backgrounds may differ in their approaches to writing about sexual violence in the specific messages and themes that they explore. For example, Caucasian female musicians may focus on issues of consent and healthy relationships, while others may explore the long-term impact of trauma and the importance of support for survivors (Kilpatrick et al.). Still others from marginalised communities are more focused on challenging dominant narratives that contribute to rape culture and promote messages of empowerment and social change (Najdowski 458). A commonality emerges in which all women are aspiring to challenge dominant narratives that dismiss or minimise the experiences of survivors through their different perspectives (Lonsway et al. 534).

## Conclusion

Throughout the discourse, this paper has examined the ways in which contemporary female musicians use their art to explore themes of sexual violence, trauma, and marginalised voices.

Using qualitative research and thematic analysis, the study analysed the lyrics of songs written by artists such as Lady Gaga and Natalie Grant. In accordance, the works of Tori Amos, Ashe, Rhapsody, Jolin Tsai and Ana Tijoux were investigated. The findings of the study highlight the powerful role that music can play in giving voice to the experiences of survivors and challenging cultural narratives that contribute to rape culture. The analysis identified several recurring themes, including the use of metaphor, the psychological experiences of survivors, and the need for representation of marginalised voices. These themes were explored in depth in order to understand

how the artists used their music to convey the experiences of survivors and promote social change. Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of authentic and diverse voices in cultural conversation about sexual violence and trauma. By using their art to give voice to the experiences both Caucasian and marginalised communities and to challenge cultural narratives related to post-sexual assault, rape culture, and the aftermath of trauma. These artists can raise awareness about these issues and contribute to social change. In this way, their music serves as an important tool for promoting respect, consent, and healthy relationships.

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