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**GENDER INEQUALITY REPRESENTATION AS SEEN
IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S SONG *THE MAN***

Undergraduate Thesis

**Submitted as a Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
to Obtain *Sarjana Sastra* Degree English
Literature Department**



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2024

ABSTRACT

The researcher focuses on how Taylor Swift's *The Man* represents gender inequality. The concept of gender inequality within liberal feminism addresses the unequal treatment and opportunities afforded to individuals based on their gender. It highlights the need for systemic change to create a more equitable society. This song is a primary example of inequality and how a public figure like Taylor Swift uses her platform to raise awareness.

The study used Taylor Swift's song *The Man* as the primary data source, complemented by her documentary, interviews, and articles. The study has two main objectives: firstly, to analyze how gender inequality is represented in *The Man*, and secondly, to explore how the song reflects Taylor Swift's personal experiences. Liberal feminism theory examines the first objective, and biographical theories are used for the second.

The results of this study indicate that in the song *The Man*, nearly every lyric addresses the gender inequality that many women continue to face, including equal liberty and rights in politics and economics. Swift illustrates how men and women are judged differently for the same behaviors and achievements. Additionally, the song emerged from her frustration with how the media constantly commented on her personal life, her problem with Scooter Braun and Kanye West, and her sexual assault. Her lyrics reflect her struggles and resonate with a broader audience of women who face similar challenges in various aspects of their lives. Throughout her musical career, Swift continues to use her platform to address critical social issues and inspire change.

Keywords: Feminism, The Man, Taylor Swift, Gender Inequality, Biographical Theory.

A. Introduction

Gender inequality has long been a focal point in the discourse of liberal feminism, a prominent branch of feminism theory that emphasizes the importance of individual rights and equal opportunities for women within society. Liberal feminism argues that women should have the same political and social freedom as men, aiming to challenge and dismantle the systematic barriers that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and oppression. This approach advocates for reforms within existing societal structures to achieve gender equality, focusing on women's access to education, equal liberty, and political representation.

The concept of gender inequality within liberal feminism addresses the unequal treatment and opportunities afforded to individuals based on their gender. It highlights the need for systemic change to create a more equitable society. According to Rosemarie Tong in her book *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (2009), gender inequality encompasses the systemic and pervasive disparities in power, opportunities, and treatment experienced by individuals based on their gender. Tong emphasizes that these disparities are deeply rooted in societal structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices that perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. From the liberal feminist perspective, she often explores how addressing gender inequality involves advocating for legal and political reforms that ensure equal rights and opportunities for women, promoting individual autonomy, and challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Tong also highlights the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that gender inequality intersects with other forms of oppression, such

as race, class, and sexuality, requiring a comprehensive approach to achieve genuine equality.

Taylor Swift's music reflects her experiences, offering listeners a deeply intimate look into her life through her lyrics. Employing a biographical theory to analyze her songwriting, one can see how her narrative shapes her artistic side. Swift's journey from a teenage country sensation to a global pop icon is intricately woven into her music, with each album serving as a chapter in her personal story. Her songs frequently address the joys and heartbreaks of relationships, the trials of fame, and her struggles with self-identity. By understanding the biographical context of her work, we gain insight into the motivations and emotions that drive her songwriting. From the heartbreak anthems inspired by her high-profile relationships to the empowerment ballads stemming from her public conflicts, such as the highly publicized feud with Kanye West, Swift's life experiences are the bedrock of her musical career.

Based on the song *The Man* by Taylor Swift, the researcher has an interest in conducting research and examining more deeply the message that describes gender inequality that is still rooted in our environment. Taylor Swift's life experience in the song inspires her to write the song and inspire other people to stand up against inequality. *The Man* song on *YouTube* has over 100 million views and more than 2 million likes. Her music video was nominated for Video of the Year, Video for Good, and Best Direction at the 2020 MTV Video Music Awards, winning the latter award and making her the first solo female artist in VMA history to win the category (MTV, 2020). This means that her view is essential for this topic of research. The

researcher used descriptive research with a qualitative method and American Studies as an interdisciplinary approach, including liberal feminism and biographical theory.

B. Research Method

In this research, the researcher employed a descriptive qualitative method for analysis. This research also analyzes liberal feminism theory and biographical theory. The data sources are divided into two categories: primary data and secondary data. The primary data consists of the lyrics from Taylor Swift's song *The Man* (2019). The supplementary data includes references that support the primary data, such as the *Miss Americana* (2020) documentary, articles, interviews, speeches, books, journals, and theses relevant to this study.

C. Discussion

1. Gender inequality representation in Taylor Swift's song *The Man*

According to Rosemarie Tong in her book *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, there are two categories of liberal feminism: classical liberal feminism, including equal education, liberty, and equal rights, and welfare liberal feminism, including economic justice and government support. Tong's analysis highlights how liberal feminism aims to create a society where gender does not determine one's opportunities and rights, and individuals can pursue their goals freely and equally. Through these components, the research found that three parts from classical and welfare feminism are suitable for this discussion:

a. Equal Liberty

These components emphasize the freedom of individuals, including women, to make choices without interference from others and advocate removing social barriers that restrict women's decision-making power. Liberty is the condition of being free from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's lifestyle, behavior, or political beliefs within society (Oxford Dictionary, 2024). Before liberal feminism existed, women had limited rights that were not equal to the rights granted to men. Society often stereotypes women, confining them to restrictive roles. In *Feminist Thought* by Rosemarie Tong, she states that “Liberal feminists wish to free women from oppressive gender roles that those roles used as excuses or justifications for giving women a lesser place, or no place at all, in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace” (Tong, 2009). Consequently, liberal feminism demands liberty for women. The song critiques societal norms where men are given more advantages and roles, and women are expected to conform to traditional gender roles. In this song, few lyrics suggest equality of liberty.

I would be complex, I would be cool (Swift,2019)

These lyrics suggest that Swift is advocating for the freedom to make choices without interference from others. This aligns with Tong's concept of equal liberty, which emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and autonomy. These lyrics talk about how Taylor Swift, the writer and the singer of this song, wrote the song from the perspective of a man. She suggests that her personality and behavior would be treated differently if she were a man. Being *complex* and *extraordinary* implies that men are often seen as intriguing and admirable when they exhibit these qualities. In contrast, women might be judged negatively for the same traits, perhaps labeled difficult or aloof.

They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to, and that would be okay for me to do. (Swift,2019)

This song line implies that Swift seeks equal rights and opportunities in their relationship. This is based on the double standard and sexism in how society views men and women in dating history. If a man 'played the field' before settling down, they would be considered looking for the right person to commit to. However, women often face criticism or negative judgment for similar behavior, being labeled promiscuous or indecisive.

b. Equal Rights in Politics and Economy

Equal rights, aiming for a secure equal civil right where women have the same rights and opportunities as men. Liberal feminism advocates for equality for women. In *Feminist Thought*, it is stated, "If society is to achieve sexual equality or gender justice, then society must provide women with the same political rights and economic opportunities as well as the same education that men enjoy" (Tong, 2009). This issue concerns equal treatment for women in employment opportunities. Women often face discrimination and are underestimated by society, which perceives them as less capable and unsuitable for employment. Women should be afforded the same opportunities as men. Society must recognize women's abilities, as they possess diverse skills similar to men. Women can perform the same jobs as men. There should be no distinction between women and men in political and economic hierarchies, provided they can fulfill their roles. Society should not judge someone's capabilities based on their gender. It seeks to eliminate legal and social barriers that limit women's access to these rights.

I'd be a fearless leader (Swift,2019)

In the next verse, which discusses men's advantages in society, Swift imagines herself as a leader who is not afraid to take risks or make bold decisions. The term fearless leader means they make decisions based on their values, without self-doubt or succumbing to guilt or external pressure. They possess confidence, trust in themselves, and are willing to take risks and make mistakes. This trait is often celebrated in men but scrutinized or undervalued in women. Regardless of gender, men and women should be respected and trusted to be leaders in every work sector and society.

Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you (Swift, 2019)

In the verse, Swift pointed out that in the workplace, men who take on leadership roles, even if they reprimand, control, and command their subordinates, are often seen as exceptional and impressive. This praise stems from societal norms that equate strong leadership with traditionally masculine traits, reinforcing that men are naturally suited for leadership positions. Swift effectively illustrates this disparity in her music video for *The Man*. In the video, she portrays a male character who behaves in ways often praised when exhibited by men. This character is assertive, authoritative, and unapologetically ambitious, actions that garner admiration and respect from others. The visual representation underscores how society rewards men for behavior that aligns with conventional ideas of masculinity and leadership. However, if a woman were to act in the same manner, she would likely be labeled as temperamental and emotional. These labels stem from deep-rooted gender biases that expect women to be nurturing, accommodating, and less

confrontational. These lyrics advocate for equal treatment and opportunities in the workplace for better economic aspects in women's lives.

2. Taylor Swift's song *The Man* represents her life experience

The Man song is the fourth track of *Lover* album by American singer and songwriter Taylor Swift, released on 23 August 2019 by Republic Records. Through her sharp lyrics and cleverly crafted music video, Swift draws on her own experience over her life, criticizes her behavior and questions her life achievements to highlight the disparity in how men and women are perceived and treated.

In an interview, she revealed the existence of the song. Then, she introduces a track that explores the concept of perception. She has frequently pondered how her public image and reputation might differ if she were a man, leading her to write a song titled *The Man*, "this is a song I have wanted to write for a long time in my career, but I could never quite figure out how to articulate it. I have often wondered what people would have said about me if I had been a man instead of a woman and lived my life the same way. It is about perception, not what I would do if I were a man, but how I would be seen if I had done the same thing. This is when I finally figured out how to approach the song" (Spotify, 2019).

In this part of the discussion, the researcher will discuss it with biographical criticism by Wellek and Warren in their book *Theory of Literature*. Biographical criticism, as presented by René Wellek and Austin Warren, is a literary theory that highlights the significance of an author's life and personal experiences in the analysis of their work (Wellek & Warren, 1942). This approach centers on the

author's life, encompassing their experiences, upbringing, and historical context. It posits that understanding an author's biography can offer valuable insights into their creative process and the themes and motifs in their literary works. The researcher only used Taylor Swift's encounters, shown in interviews, documentaries, and articles.

a. Taylor Swift in the Media

As stated in the first part of the discussion, in the lyrics of *The Man*, women face various forms of inequality compared to men, one of which involves societal judgment on their romantic lives. Swift hints at this problem in *The Man's* lyrics *They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to, and that would be okay for me to do, and I'm so sick of them comin' at me again, 'Cause if I was a man, then I'd be the man I'd be the man, I'd be the man* (Swift,2019).

Taylor Swift uses her experience to show the inequality she faced during her career. Despite her professional achievements and talent, swift has often been criticized and judged for her personal life, particularly the number of her past relationships. Taylor Swift reflects on the hate comments she received in an interview “In the years before this, I was subjected to intense and relentless slut shaming. People mocked the number of boyfriends I had and trivialized my songwriting, portraying it as the obsessive behavior of a boy-crazy psychopath. The media reinforced this narrative. It became so painful that I had to find a way to make it stop (Rolling Stone, 2019).

This kind of criticism is not frequently directed at men, who are generally accepted or admired for having multiple exes before settling down. She also

addresses this problem in her interview, “I think that is a very sexist perspective. No one says that about Ed Sheeran or Bruno Mars. They write songs about their exes, their current girlfriends, and their love lives, and no one questioned it” (2DayFMSydney, 2015). On the contrary, she still gets harsh criticism and negative judgment regarding her relationship.

In her Netflix documentary *Miss Americana*, Taylor Swift talked about the inequality female artists usually face. They must constantly reinvent themselves far more than male artists or become irrelevant. Women in the entertainment industry often face being discarded as they age, particularly after they turn 35. Everyone is a new toy for about two years. To maintain their careers, women must work harder to keep the audience entertained and strike a balance, being crazy enough to stay interesting without crossing the line and making people uncomfortable (*Miss Americana*, 2020 minutes 65:30-73:50). This has happened in the music industry and every work sector. Women must choose between advancing their careers and earning higher salaries or getting married and having children. Something like this should not happen anymore because of the equality and liberty we fight for.

b. Taylor Swift's Problem with Her Records Label

All of her success and achievements did not come easy. She had to experience conflict with his manager and record label in 2019, which resulted in her re-recording her first six studio albums. The conflict between Taylor Swift and Scooter Braun has become one of the most discussed disputes in the music industry. Taylor Swift has also hinted at this problem in *The Man's* lyrics and music video. For the music video *The Man*, Taylor Swift used prosthetics to transform herself into a male

character, Tyler Swift. In one scene, Tyler Swift is shown peeing on a subway wall graffitied with the titles of Taylor Swift's albums that Scooter Braun purchased. The wall also bears a missing poster with the caption 'If found, return to Taylor Swift' and a 'no scooters' sign. These references indicate Swift's ongoing feud with Braun over the rights to her musical catalog in the lyrics (Ahlarim, 2023). The train car ad Bo\$\$ Scotch may be a nod to Scott Borchetta, the former head of Big Machine Records, who was involved in Swift's disputes over her music catalog. The word greedy spray-painted next to the poster is interpreted by fans as a direct call-out to Borchetta's actions, critiquing the power dynamics and double standards in the music industry (Bruney, 2020). Swift also hints at the problem with Scooter Braun.

I'd be a fearless leader, I'd be an alpha type, and Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you (Swift, 2019).

Scooter Braun, who is more powerful than her, does everything he can to buy her album and how hopeless Taylor Swift feels because there is nothing she can do (Kelly, 2020). This also included equal rights in politics and economics, as stated above. Women should have equal opportunities in every social aspect.

In June 2019, Scooter Braun's company, Ithaca Holdings, acquired Big Machine Label Group, the record label that signed Taylor Swift when she was 15. Because of this acquisition, Ithaca Holdings obtained the master recording of Swift's first six albums. A few days later, Taylor Swift publicly shared a post on her Tumblr account about why she left Big Machine Records and how she learned about selling her master to Scooter Braun. "For years, I asked, pleaded for a chance to own my work.

Instead, I was allowed to sign back up to Big Machine Records and earn one album back at a time, one for every new one I turned in. I walked away because I knew that once I signed that contract, Scott Borchetta would sell the label, thereby selling me and my future. All I could receive was the insistent, manipulative bullying I have received at his hands for years” (Tumblr, 2019). Like the rest of the world, Swift discovered Braun acquired her master when it was announced to the public. She had long sought to buy her master herself and described the acquisition as her worst-case scenario.

On 14 November 2019, Taylor Swift posted on Tumblr, titling her message “Do not Know What Else To Do”. In her post, she talked about how Braun and Borchetta allegedly blocked her from performing her old song at the 2019 American Music Awards. She further revealed that her Netflix documentary *Miss Americana* (2020) had been denied permission by Braun and Borchetta to use her older music and performance stage. In response to losing control over her masters, Swift announced that she would be re-recording her first six albums to regain artistic and financial control over her music. She then said in an interview how she felt about this problem “He knew what he was doing. They both did. Controlling a woman who did not want to be associated with them. In perpetuity. That means forever” (Kelly, 2020). This problem is also one reason she wrote *The Man*, showing how it feels to have power in your workplace and do everything you want even though your policy can harm others.

c. Taylor Swift's Problem with Kanye West

In Taylor Swift's documentary *Miss Americana* (2020, minutes 16:50-18:44), she also talks about her tumultuous relationship with Kanye West, shedding light on how it has impacted her career and personal life. The conflict began at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards when Kanye West interrupted Swift's acceptance speech for Best Female Video, declaring that Beyoncé deserved the award instead. In a drunken state, West notoriously jumped on stage and declared, "I'mma let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time." The camera then showed Beyoncé silently exclaiming, "Oh, Kanye" The audience began booing West for his poor behavior, but Taylor mistakenly thought the boos were directed at her. Feeling confused and humiliated, she awkwardly walked off the stage (Emma, 2021). Swift also hints at this problem in the lyrics, referring to how she thought she did not deserve all of her accomplishments. This moment became a significant cultural flashpoint and began a long-standing public feud between Taylor Swift and Kanye West (Yahr, 2020).

They'd say I hustled put in the work. They would not shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve (Swift, 2019).

The documentary reveals the emotional effect of this incident on Swift, who was only 19 then. It highlights her struggle with self-worth and the pressure to be liked and accepted by the public (Yahr, 2020). Swift discusses how the incident influenced her need for approval and validation, which shaped much of her early career. Years later, in 2016, the feud reignited with the release of Kanye West's song *Famous*, in which he referred to Swift in a derogatory manner and claimed to have made her famous. This led to a public dispute over whether Swift had approved the lyrics, with conflicting accounts from both parties (Grady, 2019). Swift's portrayal

in the media during this period was often harsh, further exacerbating her feelings of vulnerability and isolation.

Shortly afterward, Taylor seemingly alluded to the controversy in a heartfelt and widely praised acceptance speech at the Grammys. She remarked, “As the first woman to win Album of the Year at the Grammys twice, I want to say to all the young women out there, there will be people along the way who will try to undercut your success or take credit for your accomplishments or fame. However, focusing on the work will show that you and the people who love you put you there” (Grammys, 2016). The documentary shows her growing disillusionment with the need to be perceived as perfect and her decision to take control of her career and public image. It emphasizes her evolution from a young artist seeking approval to a confident woman asserting her beliefs and values despite the challenges and criticism she has faced.

d. Taylor Swift’s Sexual Harassment

Taylor Swift also recounts in her documentary an incident that happened to her during a fan meeting in 2013. This case brought significant attention to issues of harassment and the treatment of survivors in the public and legal systems. She reported a radio former radio DJ, David Mueller, for alleging that Mueller reached under her skirt and grabbed her backside. She reported to her team and Mueller's boss, who was subsequently fired from his job. In 2015, Mueller filed a lawsuit against Taylor Swift, claiming that her allegation was false. He sued her for \$3 million, and Swift countersued him for assault and battery, asking for a symbolic \$1. The trial took place in court in Colorado in 2017. Throughout the proceeding,

Swift explains her testimony in detail and remains her composure. Swift expressed frustration with her treatment despite having seven witnesses and a photograph supporting her. She still faces skepticism and disbelief from the jury (Miss Americana, 2020 minutes 55:45-60:38).

When everyone believes ya, what's that like (Swift, 2019)

The lyrics above reference how people did not believe her. The lyrics delve into much more than just the privilege of being trusted. Swift hints at the trial and the common justifications women encounter when their accounts of sexual misconduct are dismissed (Midkiff, 2019). Swift's lawyer also emphasized that her claim was not about the money but seeking justice. Even though she won the trial, she revealed in her documentary that she did not feel relieved or happy because the process was dehumanizing (Miss Americana, 2020). Swift is widely praised for raising awareness about sexual assault and encouraging other survivors to speak up, and this song also be one of the ways she raises awareness.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

1. Conclusion

In conclusion, Taylor Swift used her platform and privileges to advocate for gender equality and social justice. Through her music and public statements, Swift's willingness to speak out about her experiences with sexism and inequality is a powerful example, inspiring others to do the same. Her song *The Man* is a clear call to action, urging women to stand up against inequality. Swift validates many women's experiences and fosters a sense of solidarity and

empowerment among her audience. Through her efforts, Swift continues to inspire a new generation of feminists to be vocal, resilient, and unafraid to demand equality and fairness.

2. Suggestion

While this research has limitations, it aims to shed light on aspects not fully explored in this research. Future studies can build on these findings, exploring gender inequality in the music industry through other media and considering diverse influences. By expanding the scope and incorporating varied perspectives, subsequent research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in the music industry and across different sectors. This continued exploration will enhance the depth and breadth of our knowledge, contributing significantly to the discourse on gender equality.

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