
**RECONSTRUCTION OF STRONG WOMEN IN RACHEL PLATTEN'S
SONG 'GIRLS': A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS****Fatimah Al Azizah¹, Griselda Gian Heris Herdina², Irma Khoirot Daulay³**¹Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Wasil

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how the representation of strong women in popular culture is reconstructed in Rachel Platten's song Girls (2023). Prior research on women's representation in pop music has mostly concentrated on linguistic characteristics, moral principles, or themes of general empowerment. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) has been used to examine how feminist ideology and female agency are discursively constructed in song lyrics. In order to close this gap, this study intends to investigate how language and discourse in Girls represent female strength, agency, and solidarity. The study uses a descriptive qualitative design to analyze the song lyrics using Michelle Lazar's (2014) FCDA framework, with de Beauvoir's (2011) existentialist feminist theory and Hook's (1984, 1994, 2000) feminist theories. The analysis using Fairclough's (1989) three-level analysis includes textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The results show that affective discourse that emphasizes self-worth, vulnerability, and emotional resilience, solidarity-based narratives that frame relationships as sources of empowerment, and agency-oriented verbs and metaphors that position women as active subjects are all used to construct female strength. By showing a shift in empowerment songs from individualistic ideas of strength toward relational and existential forms of empowerment, this study adds to feminist discourse studies and provides cultural and pedagogical insights into gender representation in popular music.

Keyword: *Discourse analysis, feminist, girl, popular culture*

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of women's representation has changed significantly over the last two decades, specifically in popular culture (Inness, 2018; Milestone & Meyer, 2020; Storey, 2021). Music is one part of popular culture that is often used to send messages about women (Bridge, 2020; Milestone & Meyer, 2020; Whiteley, 2024). In many songs, women are no longer described as weak or passive. Instead, music now highlights women's strength, bravery, and independence, which gives a new and fresher meaning to how women are seen in

society (Dunbar, 2020; Olusola, 2023). Some musicians, such as Rachel Platten, Little Mix, Beyoncé, and Alessia Cara, have consistently used their music to send this kind of message (Al-Manaseer & Noori, 2023; Asroriyah et al., 2023; Kurniawati & Nuswantoro, 2021; Luthfiansyah & Fidinillah, 2023). Platten dissects the role and woman's ability in her songs entitled "Fight Song," which became a well-known anthem about personal strength, she continued to write songs like "Broken Glass," "Stand By You," and "Girls" that speak more directly about women's courage, solidarity, and freedom.

Among these songs, "Girls" (2023) is particularly interesting to study. This song is different from Platten's earlier work like "Fight Song" (2015) and also different from Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)" (2011). Before 2020, most empowerment songs focused on individual strength — one woman standing on her own (Luthfiansyah & Fidinillah, 2023; Neisya et al., 2023; Ruanglertsilp, 2022). Songs like "Girls" now talk about women supporting each other, facing difficulties together, and finding strength in relationships rather than alone. This change makes the song worth examining more closely, not just for its motivational message but also for the deeper ideas it carries about what it means to be a strong woman today (Rich, 2021).

Several studies have looked at Rachel Platten's songs before, but most of them focused on things like vocabulary, pronunciation, and figurative language (Permana & Winarta, 2019; Rahman et al., 2024). Others explored the moral values in her songs, such as honesty, courage, self-confidence, and loyalty, with self-confidence being the most common theme found (Asroriyah et al., 2023). While many studies have also examined how women are represented in pop music more broadly (Al-Manaseer & Noori, 2023; Whiteley, 2024), none of them used Feminist Discourse Analysis to look at Platten's work specifically.

This is where the gap lies. First, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) is still rarely used to study English pop songs. Second, studies on Platten's songs have focused more on language and moral content rather than on how ideas about women and power are built through the language of the song. Third, songs that talk about emotional strength and women supporting each other have not been studied much, even though they carry new and relevant messages about gender in today's world. This study therefore looks not only at what the song says about women, but also at how the language of the song constructs those ideas.

To fill these gaps, this study analyzes "Girls" using Michelle Lazar's Feminist Discourse Analysis combined with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist thinking and Bell Hooks' feminist theories. Lazar's framework helps to look at how language builds and

negotiates ideas about gender and power (Lazar, 2007). De Beauvoir's perspective adds another layer by helping us understand female strength not as something fixed, but as something that women continuously build through their choices and experiences (Beauvoir, 2011). Hooks's feminist theories help to strengthen the ideas of how feminism construct inside Platten's song (Hooks, 1984, 1994, 2000). Together, these two frameworks allow this study to go beyond simply describing what the song says, and instead explore the deeper meanings behind how female strength is constructed in the song's language and ideas.

Based on the identified gaps, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the textual, discursive practice, and social practice dimensions in Rachel Platten's song "Girls"?

RQ2: How is the representation of females constructed in Rachel Platten's song "Girls"?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design grounded in Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The design is selected to interpret meanings, ideologies, and gendered power relations embedded in song lyrics rather than to measure variables quantitatively. The analysis is guided by Michelle Lazar's (2014) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis framework, integrated with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory to conceptualise female strength as an ongoing process of becoming and Bell Hooks's feminism theories.

Data Source and Context

The primary data consists of the lyrics of the song *Girls* by Rachel Platten, released in 2023. The song was selected because it explicitly addresses themes of female empowerment, solidarity, emotional resilience, and relational strength. Popular music after 2020 increasingly reflects collective vulnerability, emotional recovery, and social interconnectedness. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly literature on feminist discourse, popular music, and women's representation.

Analytical Framework

This study applies Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (Fairclough, 1989), which operates at three interconnected levels:

1. Textual level, focusing on lexical choices, metaphors, repetition, and grammatical structures that construct female agency or passivity.
2. Discursive practice level, examining how linguistic features produce meanings related to empowerment, solidarity, and emotional resilience.
3. Social practice level, interpreting the identified discourses within the socio-cultural context.

These levels are analytically integrated with Bell Hooks' (2000), Michelle Lazar's (2007), and Simone de Beauvoir's (2018) existentialist feminist concepts, particularly agency, freedom, becoming, and transcendence.

Analytical Procedures

The data were analysed through a step-by-step coding process:

1. The lyrics were read repeatedly to gain familiarity and identify potential feminist meanings.
2. The text was segmented into meaningful units, including lines, phrases, and metaphoric expressions.
3. Preliminary codes were assigned to each segment based on recurring themes such as agency, vulnerability, self-worth, and solidarity.
4. The coded segments were analysed at the textual level to identify linguistic strategies constructing female strength.
5. These strategies were then interpreted at the level of discursive practice to reveal dominant feminist discourses.
6. Finally, the findings were situated within the social practice level to interpret their ideological significance in a context using Beauvoir's existentialist feminism.

Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The researcher acted as the primary instrument of analysis and interpretation. As a female researcher employing feminist theoretical perspectives, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling and peer checking were used to critically reflect on analytical decisions and minimise potential interpretive bias.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the following criteria:

1. Credibility was established through more than fifteen close readings of the lyrics and peer debriefing with two scholars familiar with feminist discourse studies.
2. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytical procedures.
3. Confirmability was achieved by grounding all interpretations in explicit textual evidence from the lyrics.
4. Transferability was supported through thick description of the data, analytical process, and socio-cultural context.
5. Coding reliability and triangulation were strengthened through iterative coding, peer discussion, and theoretical triangulation between Feminist Discourse Analysis and existentialist feminist theory, ensuring theoretical saturation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis examines how language works in a text, paying attention to word choice, grammatical structure, and how these choices shape meaning (Fairclough, 1989). Language is not a neutral system. Every word carries a perspective, and grammar decides who gets to act and who gets acted upon. (Fairclough, 1989) groups textual analysis into three areas: vocabulary, which covers what words are chosen and what they imply; grammar, which covers clause structure and who is positioned as the actor; and textual patterns such as repetition and parallelism. This study uses all three to examine how the lyrics of "Girls" construct women as aware, capable, and active subjects.

a. Empowered Women

The opening lines of the song address girls directly, urging them to hold on to their sense of self-worth:

"Hope you always know your worth. Though I know that life can hurt"

The verb "know" in this line is a cognitive mental process verb, not an affective one (Langacker, 1987). This distinction is important because it does not ask girls to feel worthy but rather asks them to know their worth, and knowing one's worth implies a conscious and deliberate act of self-knowledge. In addition, the word "always" works as a temporal modifier, pushing this expectation beyond a single

moment into an ongoing state of mind (Beaver & Clark, 2002). Girls are not just encouraged to recognize their value once, but also they are expected to hold on to that recognition continuously. Grammatically, the word "girls" occupies the subject position in the mental process clause (Langacker, 1987). They are the ones performing the act of knowing. The lyric constructs them as the knowers, not as people whose worth is decided by someone else. Therefore, the lyric positions girls as active agents of self-recognition, emphasizing that their worth is something they consciously understand and continuously affirm rather than something defined by external judgment.

b. Power as an Existential Process

In another section of the song, the lyrics frame girls as people who are naturally oriented toward movement and ambition:

"Girls, you were born to run To reach the stars and chase the sun"

The construction "born to run" works as a relational attributive process within Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, where the clause assigns an inherent quality to its subject (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Relational processes describe what something is rather than what it does (Sujatna, 2009). Saying girls were "born" with this quality treats mobility and ambition as characteristics they already possess, not as opportunities that society grants them under certain conditions.

The verbs that follow, run, reach, and chase, are material action processes that describe concrete engagement with the physical world (Langacker, 1987). These verbs carry a sense of forward direction and deliberate goal-seeking. Research on transitivity has shown that material process verbs tend to assign agency to whoever performs them (Ahearn, 2010). Throughout these lines, girls consistently occupy the Agent position. They are the ones moving, reaching, and pursuing, not the ones being moved or directed by others.

Discursive Practice Findings

Discursive practice in Fairclough's (1989) framework looks at how texts are connected to other texts and to broader social discourses. A song does not emerge from nowhere. It is shaped by existing ideas in society, and it also contributes to those ideas. This section examines how "Girls" draws from and reinforces circulating feminist discourses.

a. Solidarity and Emotional Relation

The following line constructs female strength as something that belongs to a network of women, not to individuals in isolation:

"Hope you know that you can turn to each other."

The phrase "turn to each other" draws from feminist discourses about sisterhood and collective support (Hooks, 1985). It connects to third- and fourth-wave feminist thinking that emphasizes shared healing and solidarity as responses to social pressure, body shaming, mental health struggles, and experiences of marginalization (Khan et al., 2023). The song participates in the broader chain of popular feminist discourse that has grown through social media culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007).

The line that follows extends this idea across generations:

"That you'll always have the love of your mother."

The narrator here takes on the position of a symbolic mother figure addressing younger women. This connects the song to feminist discourses that view the mother-daughter relationship as a channel through which gender awareness and self-confidence are passed on (Hooks, 1984). Maternal love in this line is not framed as moral instruction or domestic duty. It is presented as emotional infrastructure that supports women as they grow (Hooks, 1984). The word "always" carries the same function here as in the textual analysis: it signals continuity and reliability, reflecting discourses about emotional security in a world that feels unstable (Beaver & Clark, 2002).

b. Fragility and Resilience

The song also gives space to fear, grief, and the experience of feeling alone:

"Sometimes life can feel unfair

Broken hearts you can't repair

Sometimes you might be scared that no one gets you

It's not easy being brave when tears are falling down your face."

In these lines, they are presented instead as part of what it means to be brave. This aligns with cultural discourses that defined strength not as the absence of emotion but as the ability to keep going despite it (Faye & Hooper, 2018). The phrase "it's not

easy being brave when tears are falling down your face" frames courage as a process that coexists with pain rather than replacing it (Faye & Hooper, 2018).

Social Practice Findings

Social practice in Fairclough's (1989) framework examines how discourse is connected to ideology and to structures of power in society. Lazar (2007) develops this through Feminist Discourse Analysis by showing that representations of women in cultural texts are sites of struggle over meaning. Hooks (2000) adds that feminist change requires not only structural reform but also cultural transformation through solidarity, care, and community.

a. Redefining Strength

In the lyric "*Sometimes life can feel unfair*", this opening sentence reflects the social reality where women still often face inequality in various areas of life (Masood, 2023). In the social sphere, women are often expected to be perfect figures—professionally successful outside the home, but still retain full control over domestic affairs and childcare (Masood, 2023). This feeling of "life feels unfair" is also rooted in the gender gap, whether in the form of differences in work wages, limited safe spaces for women, to the stigma of society that judges women more than men for their life choices (Walby, 2003).

"Sometimes you might be scared that no one gets you"

This lyric is closely related to social pressures on women's mental health; patriarchal culture or social standards often create boxes of expectations (Gupta et al., 2023). When a woman feels tired, anxious, or does not want to conform to society's standards, for example, demands for marriage, physical appearance, or parenting. They tend to keep it to themselves for fear of being judged or labeled "weak" and "complaining too much" (Gupta et al., 2023). This fear arises because the social environment is often quicker to criticize a woman's choices than to try to understand the psychological burdens behind them.

"But that's how you'll find your strength."

These closing lines convey a powerful message of female empowerment and collective resilience. Rather than gaining strength from privilege, women throughout social history have often found strength precisely by overcoming hardships, discrimination, and pain (Gupta et al., 2023). These lyrics also reaffirm women's

agency over their own lives. Ultimately, a woman's greatest strength is not determined by external social validation, but rather by the internal process of how she rises from adversity (Gupta et al., 2023; Ruanglertsilp, 2022). Socially, these lyrics are a hymn to resilience for women. They honestly portray a social space for women that is not always welcoming, but conclude with an affirmation that vulnerability is not the end of everything, but rather a transitional process toward greater independence and emotional strength.

b. Women-Centered Relational Networks

"Hope you know that you can turn to each other

That you'll always have the love of your mother"

Patriarchal structures tend to organize authority vertically, placing power in masculine and institutional figures (Hooks, 1985). These lyrics construct a different kind of arrangement that is horizontal bonds between women of the same generation, and vertical bonds of care between mothers and daughters. At the social level, this reconfigures the sources of emotional and existential legitimacy, shifting it away from the patriarchal center and toward women's own networks (Hooks, 1985).

Discussion

Women as Rational and Continuous Subjects

The textual findings reveal a consistent pattern in how "Girls" constructs female subjectivity. Across the lyrics examined, women are positioned as people who think, reflect, and define themselves through conscious awareness rather than through emotional dependence on others. The choice of the cognitive verb "know" rather than "feel" in the opening lines is a good example of this. It frames self-worth as something women arrive at through deliberate recognition, not through feelings that may come and go (Langacker, 1987). Beauvoir (2011) argues that women become subjects through conscious acts of self-definition, and that becoming is a lifelong process rather than a fixed state. The temporal modifier "always" in the lyric reinforces this, turning self-recognition into an ongoing commitment rather than a single moment of realization (Beaver & Clark, 2002).

From Lazar's FCDA perspective, this song performs what Hooks (2000) describes as a rearticulation of femininity. The old construction of women as emotionally fragile and in need of external validation is replaced by a construction of women as self-aware, rational subjects. The narrator's tone is nurturing, expressed through the verb "hope", but the message is

directive: girls are responsible for knowing and maintaining their own sense of worth (Langacker, 1987). Hooks (2000) calls this feminized agency, a condition in which care operates as a form of empowerment rather than a form of submission. The grammatical structure of the clause reinforces this reading. Girls occupy the subject position and perform the mental process. They are the knowers, not the ones being defined by others.

Strength as Movement and Agency

The material process verbs identified in the textual analysis, run, reach, and chase, work together to build a picture of female subjectivity that is active, directed, and goal-oriented. This is not incidental. Fairclough (1989) has shown that process types in grammar can naturalize particular social roles, and the clustering of action verbs here consistently places girls in the position of agent. They act; they are not acted upon. This resists the historical pattern in which women were represented as static, domestic, or confined to the private sphere (Hooks, 2000; Walby, 2003).

The relational clause "born to run" does something additional. By treating ambition and mobility as qualities girls are born with, the lyric refuses to frame female agency as something granted by circumstance or social permission. Beauvoir (2011) argues that women are ontologically free even when social conditions constrain that freedom. The lyric encodes this philosophically: movement is not a reward girls earn but a condition they already inhabit. Fairclough (1989) notes that grammatical choices can present socially constructed meanings as if they were natural facts. In this case, that naturalization works in a liberatory direction.

Solidarity as a Form of Power

The discursive practice findings show that the song participates in a broader cultural shift in how female empowerment is imagined. Power in this song is not generated by a single heroic figure but circulates through relationships between women. This is consistent with previous studies showing that women's solidarity and mutual support function as important sources of empowerment and collective resistance against patriarchal structures (Kusumaningtyas, 2025; Longman, 2018). Hooks (2000) makes a related argument when she writes that sisterhood becomes a political force when it is grounded in genuine solidarity rather than in competition shaped by patriarchal values.

The song frames both peer networks and intergenerational bonds as legitimate sources of emotional and social power. The mother figure in the lyrics is not a guardian of tradition or

a symbol of domestic confinement. She is a bearer of a love ethic, a form of care that challenges hierarchy and domination rather than reproducing it (Hooks, 2000). This reinterpretation of maternal love draws on feminist discourses about the mother-daughter relationship as a space for transmitting gender awareness, agency, and self-confidence across generations (O'Reilly, 1998).

Vulnerability as Part of Strength

The social practice findings point to what may be the most ideologically significant move in the song: the integration of vulnerability into the definition of strength. Hegemonic culture has historically treated emotional expression as incompatible with power, particularly for women (Porter & Samovar, 1996). By showing courage as something that happens alongside tears and fear rather than in their absence, the song destabilizes one of the more durable gender binaries: strong versus weak, rational versus emotional (Rachman, 1984).

This does not simply revalue emotion for its own sake. It does something more structural. It widens the definition of what strength can look like, making it accessible without requiring women to adopt a masculine model of stoic self-control (Hill & Blazejak, 2021). Hooks (2000) have written about the political dimensions of this move: when vulnerability is acknowledged collectively, it becomes a basis for solidarity rather than a source of shame. Butler (2004) extends this further, arguing that shared vulnerability is not a weakness to be overcome but a condition that makes genuine community possible (Chwang, 2014).

At the same time, it is worth noting that this song exists within a cultural context where emotional empowerment has also become a marketable product (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser describes it, packages feminist messages for mass consumption in ways that can sometimes smooth over the more difficult political dimensions of gender inequality. The song does not escape this tension entirely. Its message of collective solidarity coexists with the conditions of the popular music industry, which shapes how that message is produced and received. Recognizing this tension does not diminish the song's feminist content, but it does add a layer of complexity that a full reading of the social practice cannot ignore.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrates that Rachel Platten's "Girls" constructs female empowerment through a feminist discourse that redefines traditional notions of femininity, agency, and

strength. Drawing on Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings reveal that women are represented as rational and self-aware subjects who actively define their own worth, while agency is constructed through movement, ambition, and self-determination rather than dependence on others. The song further reframes empowerment as a collective process grounded in solidarity, sisterhood, and intergenerational support, positioning relationships among women as important sources of social and emotional power. Most significantly, it challenges patriarchal binaries that separate strength from vulnerability by presenting emotional openness as compatible with courage, resilience, and agency. The song also contributes to contemporary feminist discourses by promoting a more inclusive understanding of female empowerment based on self-awareness, collective support, and the acceptance of vulnerability as an integral part of strength. Future research could extend this analysis by examining how audiences interpret and negotiate these representations of empowerment, particularly in relation to the tensions between feminist advocacy and the commercialization of feminist messages in popular music.

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