

Between Empowerment and Commodification: A Feminist Literary Criticism on *Girls* by Girls' Generation

Rayhan Tiensha¹, Fajria Noviana¹

¹Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275, Indonesia
fajria.noviana@live.undip.ac.id

Abstract. This study employs a feminist literary criticism approach to analyze the song lyrics of *Girls* by the K-pop girl group Girls' Generation, exploring how the poetic language and metaphors convey themes of women's empowerment, solidarity, and resilience. The analysis reveals that the lyrics portray women as active subjects in a shared struggle, determined to move forward and support one another in the face of challenges. The metaphors of a journey and blooming flowers symbolize women's collective experiences and their ability to create change and hope in a patriarchal world. The song encourages women to embrace their authentic selves, own their mistakes, and continue striving towards a brighter future. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, "Girls" can be interpreted as a work of popular literature that inserts a discourse of resistance against unequal social structures while elevating female identity and solidarity. The poetic language and affirming tone effectively convey an emancipatory message, making the song not only a cultural product but also a literary means of promoting gender awareness and equality. This study highlights the potential of popular music to serve as an alternative discourse, expanding spaces for women's expression and strengthening their collective voice in the pursuit of a more equitable society.

Keywords: Feminist Literary Criticism, Empowerment, K-pop Music Industry, Girls' Generation.

1 Introduction

Since the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2017, awareness of gender equality and gender-based violence issues has become increasingly widespread, not only in the legal and political spheres but also in popular culture. The #MeToo movement, which emerged globally in 2017, aims to address harassment and sexual violence, especially in the workplace. However, this movement's recent transformation is not limited to sexual harassment and assault, but has extended to discrimination or harassment based on gender, race, colour, religion, national origin, gender orientation, gender identity, age, or disability [1].

In the arts and culture sector, newly organised activist groups played a crucial role in promoting gender governance, leading to the mainstreaming of gender equality in the Artist's Status and Rights Guarantee Act in Korea [2]. Thus, the #MeToo movement in

South Korea had a significant impact on the arts, culture, and broader society. It inspired many women to share their experiences of sexual harassment publicly, and the movement's impact is evident in policy proposals and the revision of laws on sexual harassment and gender-based violence [3].

The K-pop music industry, which has long portrayed the ideal image of women as gentle, obedient, and aesthetically pleasing figures, is gradually opening up space for narratives of empowerment and resistance. While earlier songs often emphasised love themes and feminine aesthetics [4], newer content increasingly focuses on self-empowerment and diverse female imagery [4, 5]. Moreover, the incorporation of English in K-pop lyrics serves as a discourse of resistance, allowing South Korean youth to assert their identity, challenge authority, and reject conservatism [6]. This evolution reflects broader societal changes, with K-pop becoming a platform for challenging gender norms and promoting female empowerment [5, 7]. Female fans' participation in K-pop fosters radical empathy, contributing to industry sustainability and female empowerment [7]. However, K-pop's promotion of neoliberal feminism is said to reinforce patriarchal and traditional gender norms and also power structures while ostensibly empowering women [8, 9]. One of them is the message in girl group Aespa's song *Girls*, which portrays women as strong and independent subjects, while also commercially objectifying them [10].

Another girl group that has become one of the most successful in the K-pop music industry is Girls' Generation. Their songs and music videos often serve as the research corpus. Two of them are *Into the New World* and *All Night*, which are said to promote a resilience discourse alongside neoliberal positive psychology as a hegemonic ideal of female subjectivity [8]. The song *Into the New World* also metaphorically represents how this South Korean girl group rises globally and enters Japan, the UK, and the US markets [11]. One of their prominent works is the song *Girls*, a track from the 2015 album *Catch Me If You Can*, released in a mix of Japanese and English languages. This song presents affirmative and symbolic expressions that reflect the collective experiences of women as they face a world that is not always welcoming. Thus, this study aims to explore how the text of the song *Girls* articulates women's voices within the broader context of modern literature, with the primary focus being on how this song conveys ideas of encouragement, collective strength, and emotional resilience.

2 Methods

This qualitative study follows a feminist literary critique design. Feminist literary criticism reexamines literary works and frequently rediscovers works by female authors as a potential alternative voice [12]. In other words, feminist literary criticism refers to the critical analysis of literary works from a woman's perspective, whose aim is to examine socially constructed gender relations, specifically the relationship between women and men, and the situation in which women are in a state of male domination [13]. By employing a feminist literary critique design, this research not only focuses on

the aesthetic aspects of the lyrics but also examines how they represent women's experiences, serving as a medium of expression and resistance against patriarchal domination and the unequal social structures in contemporary women's lives. Moreover, feminist literary critics reconstruct and re-read these works with a focus on women, allowing for a broader interpretation. Therefore, as the object of this study is song lyrics entitled *Girls* from Girls' Generation, a girl group that narrates about women, the feminist literary critique design is highly relevant.

Data collected in the form of lines from song lyrics *Girls* [14], that relate to women's experience. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotics, signs are interpreted. Barthes' semiotics is considered suitable for this study because it not only provides an interpretation of a sign in language as conveyed in literary works [15] but also examines signs from the ideological perspective inherent in a culture [16]. Then, through a feminist literary critique, women's experiences and empowerment are revealed as an inseparable unity.

3 Result and Discussion

By applying Barthes' semiotics and a feminist literary criticism lens, three messages contained in the song lyrics *Girls* are identified, as discussed below.

3.1 Women as the Subjects of Struggle

Women are portrayed as active subjects in the shared struggle, not as passive objects waiting for change. They are determined to step forward and leave the past behind, as seen in the following lines.

顔上げてまっすぐに歩いて行くから

"Lift your head and walk straight."

Never gonna look back, girls

There is no struggle that is ever truly finished for women in a patriarchal world. Women must continue to fight and open themselves up to what the future may bring, just like the following line implies.

今はまだ 旅の途中未来へ story goes on

"I'm still on my journey to the future, story goes on."

Moreover, while encouraging women to be agents of change, daring to step forward and face the future with determination, the following lines illustrate how women support one another.

Stop もう迷わない泣いたってあきらめない

"Stop, don't hesitate anymore, even if you cry, don't give up."

追いかけて転んだら痛みも見せ合って
“If you fall while chasing, let’s show each other our pain.”
I will always be with you, whenever you call my name
いつだって 強がって頑張りすぎないで
“Always be strong, just don’t try too hard.”

In many studies, women supporting and empowering one another have demonstrated a significant impact across various domains, such as academia and entrepreneurship, that extends to the digital realm [17–19]. These studies highlight the positive outcomes of women supporting women, including increased empowerment, improved work-life balance, enhanced entrepreneurial success, and better management of health conditions. The research underscores the importance of fostering supportive networks among women across various life domains, which aligns with the song lyrics.

3.2 Women are Strong and Brave

The women’s strength and bravery are presented in metaphors, as seen in the following lines.

追いかけて転んだら痛みも見せ合って
If you fall while chasing, let’s show each other our pain

This line presents the metaphor of a journey as a shared struggle. The act of “chasing” symbolises the effort to achieve dreams or freedom, while “falling” represents the obstacles or failures that women frequently experience in a patriarchal society. However, instead of suggesting that we hide failures, this line invites us to share them or show each other. This invitation fosters a space of empathy and solidarity, where women support and empower one another in their shared struggles. From a literary criticism perspective, this metaphor affirms the importance of women’s collective experiences as a source of strength, not weakness.

Another metaphorical line that highlights women’s strength and bravery is as follows.

かすんだ世界に大きな華を咲かそう
In a hazy world, let’s bloom a big flower

This line describes women as flowers, not in the clichéd sense of being passive symbols of beauty, but as a force capable of growing, thriving, and spreading fragrance even in a world shrouded in the mist of uncertainty and injustice. The “big flower” here becomes a symbol of women’s transformation—not only enduring, but also creating change. From the perspective of feminist literary criticism, this metaphor rejects the portrayal of women as victims. Instead, it celebrates them as agents who create meaning and hope in the face of a bleak reality.

3.3 Women are Eager to Embrace Their Authentic Self and the Future

In life, failure is sometimes inevitable, and when it happens, it is okay to cry. Crying is not a sign of weakness; instead, it shows others that the person is embracing his/her authentic self by owning their mistake, as implicitly conveyed in the following line.

追いかけて転んだら痛みも見せ合って
If you fall while chasing, let's show each other our pain

Not only are women willing to be their authentic selves, but they are also eager to embrace the future. The word “shine” in the following lines is synonymous with “ray of light”. Light is traditionally linked with goodness, life, knowledge, truth, fame, and hope [20]. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is always hope and goodness in life if we continue to move forward.

輝きはここにある
The shine is here
輝きを 抱きしめて
Embrace the shine

4 Conclusion

As a literary work, the song *Girls* by Girls' Generation presents a poetic narrative rich in the meanings of struggle, solidarity, and the courage of women in facing challenging social realities. Through feminist literary criticism, this song elevates women's voices as active subjects who continue to move forward, support one another, and are unafraid to reveal their vulnerability as part of a collective strength. The metaphors construct a poetic image of a struggle that is not individualistic, but instead rooted in solidarity and empathy among women. The image of flowers blooming in a blurred world suggests that, despite uncertainty and injustice, women can still create beauty and effect change. Thus, it can be said that this song conveys a powerful message about perseverance, the courage to keep moving forward even when it becomes difficult, and the importance of never giving up, even in the face of failure.

As a work of popular literature, *Girls* presents an inspiring and empowering representation of women. Although it originates from the entertainment industry, the lyrics of this song hold the potential to serve as an alternative discourse that promotes gender awareness, expands spaces for women's expression, and strengthens solidarity among women. Thus, this song is not only a cultural product but also a literary means of expression that voices the values of equality and humanity.

Within the framework of literary criticism, this song can be read as a text that inserts a discourse of resistance against patriarchal social structures, while at the same time elevating female identity as the narrator of their own stories. By highlighting poetic

language rich in metaphor and with an affirming tone, this song effectively conveys a powerful emancipatory message in the form of popular literature.

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