



Research Article

Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Use in The Hip Hop Songs of August Alsina

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Abstract: Contemporary music genres are a rich source of information on issue that affect society. August Alsina is reported in www.thefamouspeople.com on January 10th 2018, as a famous recording artist from New Orleans born in 1992, signed to Def Jam Recordings. His songs are true reflection of the society in which he grew up and the challenges faced by youth in his neighborhood. Music is seen here as a tool of expression and education. The hip hop songs of August Alsina address themes that are relevant and of significant influence in the lives of Black America youths. Hip hop music generally appeals to the youth and it can be used as an educational channel as well as a means of raising self-conscience about contemporary issues in society. Music is relevant as a trend among the youths and they can easily relate with it. This study is a critical exploration of language use in five purposively selected songs that have common themes running across. Five songs were purposively selected from the website www.azlyrics.com (last accessed on 17th September 2019) and exposed to critical discourse analysis to identify the common themes that run through August Alsina's popular songs. Common themes include alcoholism and substance abuse, crime, materialism, prostitution, religion, and unemployment. These can be helpful in studying the issues in the society and through these we become more aware of our societies.

Keywords: hip hop, music, discourse, themes.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Discourse denotes written or spoken communication. In semantics, discourse is the conceptual generalization of conversation within each modality and context of communication. Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. The discourse for this study are the hip hop songs of August Alsina.

According to his biography published in the website www.thefamouspeople.com on January 10th 2018, August Anthony Alsina Jr. is an American recording artist from New Orleans born in 1992 on 3rd September signed to Def Jam Recordings. He is best known for his single "I love this shit" with Trinidad James. August Alsina mainly focuses on music that is known as hip hop. He attended middle school in New Orleans. His music career was inspired by Lauryn Hill in a musical comedy film *Sister Act 2*. He first uploaded videos to YouTube in 2007 at the age 14 starting with a cover of *Hypothetically* by Lyfe Jennings. He had a tragic childhood owing to drug addiction by his father and the death of his brother in crime. He relocated to Atlanta in 2011 and his music career started officially in 2012 when he released his first mix tape in April. His hit single "I love this shit" was released in January 2013 and the mix tape the *Product 2* followed in May 2013 (Stovall, 2006).

On December 11th 2015 Alsina released his second studio album, *This Thing Called Life*. It debuted at number 14 on the billboard 200, with the first week sales of 41000 copies. In

2014 he was nominated as the best new artist in the *BET Awards* and which he won. August Alsina's songs can be found in YouTube, which is an online platform that allows various artist works to be displayed to the rest of the world. Alsina's songs are true reflection of his society at which he grew up in and the challenges they face. In his songs he tries to address issues such as crime, unemployment and drugs.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Novels and traditional songs are the most commonly used materials in making references to the contemporary issues affecting our societies. Most people listen to music for its entertainment value. Rarely do we take time to think about the semantic content of the lyrics. Modern hip hop has greatly grown to be a very influential genre to the youth. The youth in the modern society identify themselves with the hip-hop music and thus it should be embraced and used as a communication channel on the issues affecting our society. The education system is largely designed for the youth, and it would be interesting to investigate that which appeals to them as the channel of communication in schools. From the music by August Alsina, we can identify various issues that arise and affect us and can be described as themes.

3.0 MAIN OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study is to identify the common themes in August Alsina songs and explain their relevance to society. This will be done through a critical analysis of

the discourses that form part of the hip hop songs by August Alsina.

The data that was subjected to critical discourse analysis was collected from the website www.azlyrics.com on 17th September 2019. The supporting data was collected from YouTube sites.

4.0 DISCUSSIONS

Five songs released by August Alsina formed our sample size. The number is appropriate to avoid bulkiness of information, which can be caused by repetition and that might make the study deviate from its purpose. The songs were picked according to the number of themes they contain. The song with the highest number of themes that are relevant to the topic got more privilege and likely to be chosen. The themes must be those that are relevant to the societal issues that are seen and known.

4.1 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Exploratory data analysis techniques was used to begin to understand the message contained in the data. The message from the songs can be derived from reading through the song and understanding what the direct meaning was. In some cases, the written or spoken words contain hidden meanings which can be understood through critical analysis of the text and related to the actual society.

Data interpretation was related to the information obtained from the suburban areas where the hip hop music developed. The themes indicated in his songs are then thereafter related to the society to prove they are actual things happening to the society. This will be supported with factual information of the incidences that happened in his society.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe data analysis as the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. A text analysis is the process of deriving high quality information from a given text. The researcher uses five songs from different albums by August Alsina. The songs to be analyzed are: *Benediction*, *Dreamer*, *Hip Hop*, *Make it Home* and *Get ya Money*. The data analysis is going to be guided by the research objective which is majorly to critically analyze the common themes in the artist's song.

Common themes addressed in the songs include alcoholism and substance abuse, crime, materialism, prostitution, religion and unemployment, each of which are addressed below:

4.2 Alcoholism and Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is a patterned use of a drug in which the user consumes the substance in amounts or with methods which are harmful to themselves or others. Drug abuse is a big menace to the American society and generally the rest of the world (National Drug Intelligence Centre, 2006). August Alsina describes his life in his songs and how his father was a cocaine addict. The issue of drug abuse has been portrayed in his songs *Benediction* and *Hip hop*.

Alcoholism and substance abuse is a great challenge to the societies in most parts of the world. August Alsina has brought about the topic of drug abuse and alcoholism in most of his songs. He also explains the situation he faced with his step father who was a drug addict.

In *Benediction* stanza two, there is a line that states:

I pray that my step-pops stay off of that crack pipe

Crack is a slang word to mean cocaine. His father suffered from addiction and eventually died of drugs. This is evidence that his songs are a true representation of the society. In yet another song *Dreamer* he tells a story of a young boy at the age of thirteen who started taking drugs and selling them:

*He was only 13 just a lookout on the corner
First he started off small couple pills and marijuana*

*Now he's thinking he should go out on the block and see
if he can get shit poppin
'He was tired of going in for just a little bit of profit*

Logically, if the young boy was trying to sell more drugs, it means that the users were increasing with time. This draws our attention to the rate at which drugs are introduced to children at fairly tender ages. Newcomb and Bentler (1989) report that despite widespread concern regarding the effects of teenage drug use, there has been little effort to establish specifically what long-term consequences arise from such use and whether these adverse outcomes may be mitigated by a supportive social networks. Apparently in Alsina's society, there is growing market for drugs and youth are not about to stop drug pushing.

4.3 Crime

In ordinary language, a crime is an unlawful act punishable by a state or other authority. August Alsina talks about crime (in terms of robbery and murder) in his songs. In his songs, he describes murder events and deaths of people in the society in which he grew up. The artist highlights the activities that happen in the streets where he grew up. These are activities such as gangster life. Societies all around the world face almost similar challenges. Walker (2002) concludes that crime-control policies offered by both conservatives and liberals have failed to make a significant impact on serious crime. August Alsina has used his songs to make known some social issues that his community faced when he was growing up. Through the songs, people can look back and offer help to those in the affected area.

August Alsina addresses crime through his songs such as *Benediction*. In the first stanza he states:

*So I had to make a way for my home, you know
Now I'm in a place where I ain't gotta scheme no more
The good life, done with the hood life
I did what I could, didn't always do what I should*

In this he tries to explain that he is done with the hood life which is associated with scheming against other people to gain from them. Scheming is an adjective used to describe someone who is always doing sneaky things to make things happen. What can be understood from the song is that the sneaky things done had bad intents. The change in his location does not allow him to engage in crime any more.

The next stanza too addresses crime:

*Our father who art in heaven
I pray you free me from my demons and keep me level
I know you kept me out of prison where I was headin
When I heard somebody killed my brother,
One-eighty-seven*

In this stanza we see the evidence of crime when he says he was heading to prison due to the things he was doing. At the same time someone killed his brother. Murder according to the law is a crime. In this song we are able to get a picture of the society in which he grew up in. This society is similar to very many societies in the world where youth live in uncertainty and are largely exposed to criminal activities.

In yet another song *Make it Home* August Alsina describes his life in crime where he is being chased by the police trying to arrest him. In the first stanza he sings:

*See I done dodged a couple shots
Served a couple blocks
Hit a couple corners tryna shake a couple cops
I broke a couple rules*

In the first line, he dodged a couple of shots which is clearly the police shooting at him after he had robbed a few shops in his street. As a result the police are chasing and he is trying to

lose them. This type of lifestyle is what he depicts as a day-to-day normal life in his neighborhood.

4.4 Materialism

It is the tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). In this, people strive to acquire material wealth disregarding the morals taught by the society. August Alsina mentions materialism in his songs when he describes girls who engage in prostitution in order to get expensive bags and money. This is clearly portrayed in his songs *Dreamer* and *Get ya money*. In *Dreamer* he sings:

*She never knew that
She'd ever do that
Now she addicted to the money and the new bags
And now he wishes that
That he could get back
All the time he lost
Now he pays the cost.*

In the above stanza third line, he says about her addiction to money and new bags. Materialism is another factor that corrupts morals in the society. The children only look up to having a lot of wealth and nice things such as bags. Materialism is morally discouraged (Groundswell, 2019). Too much wealth is the abundance of valuable resources or valuable material possessions. Alsina portrays the American society as materialistic. Everyone is striving to acquire wealth and be able to buy nice things. This is as portrayed in *Hip hop* where everyone wants to be successful.

4.5 Prostitution

Prostitution is the business or practice of engaging in sexual activity in exchange for payment. Prostitution occurs in a variety of forms. Brothels are establishments specifically dedicated to prostitution. The act of prostitution is morally wrong according to the Christians (Encyclopedia, 2006). But factors such as poverty and peer pressure can greatly encourage it.

In his songs, August Alsina has addressed the issue of prostitution among college and university students. He explains why they do it. Some to raise tuition fee for schools and some due to peer pressure. Young students offer sex in exchange for money.

The song *Dreamer* aptly presents thus:

*On the couch of a one bedroom apartment
Roommate tryna get her to pop her pussy for dollar*

In this it is the peer pressure that forces the girl to sell her body for money. This is also depicted in the song *Get ya Money*:

*Single mother in college Working hard for them dollars
Girl we got something in common
Making money with ballers
See you pussy popping that only Keep it clapping that magic
Got them niggas tricking at follies
Come on making this happen
Girl I love seeing your back bend
They cashing out and you cash in
They going broke and you working
Back broke when you twerking
I know how hard this shit can be when income is
uncertain*

In this stanza, August Alsina presents the young mother in college as lacking money to raise her child and cannot find a decent job to support her. Thus she opts to engage in prostitution to get money. This is a form of exploitation as she goes home with money the rest go home without any cash. The society is not allowed to judge them for it cannot provide a better life for them.

4.6 Religion

According to Mandaville (2010), religion is a relatively-bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence, and in which communion with others and otherness is *lived* as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing. August Alsina has acknowledged the existence of supernatural being by praying to God and asking for forgiveness.

Religion is the belief that there is a greater power or a supernatural being. August Alsina brings about a sense of religion in his song *Benediction* in which he prays to a greater power to help them and protect them:

*I pray to God he forgave me
'Cause I made it, and it didn't kill me
So it made me stronger,
I pray to God that you feel me, that you feel me... Our father who
art in heaven I pray you free me from my demons
and keep me level I know you kept me out of prison Where I was
headin*

In the excerpts from the first two stanzas, we are able to relate his words with Christianity in which he prays to God. The beginning of the prayer in the second stanza is similar to the Lord's Prayer in the bible which is a Christian religious book. In the Bible, the Lord's Prayer is found in Mathew 6, 9-13 Cox and Ribert, 2017). This depicts belief in religion by the people of News Orleans where August Alsina grew up. The reference to God shows his faith in a supernatural being capable of changing their circumstances.

4.7 Unemployment

Unemployment is the situation of actively looking for employment but not being gainfully employed despite one possessing qualifications for a given job. It is the situation where people have no way of earning a living either formal or informal. The issue of unemployment has been addressed in the song *Make it Home* when he talks about how hard it is for the black people to get jobs in this quote "*Cause I know it's hard to find a job, So niggas kill and rob*". This justifies why blacks have to engage in crime as a way of earning their livelihood.

*But everyone ain't tryna see me make it
Or they only wanna see me win so they can take it'
Cause I know it's hard to find a job
So niggas kill and rob
There's a chance that I won't make it here tomorrow
Being honest*

The third line of the above stanza acknowledges that it is hard to find a job and the black young Americans only turn to crime. They rob and kill people to earn a living. This is an economic factor that he addresses. Social enablers such as education are available but people are not able to sustain themselves in schools. This shows the high rate of school drop outs at college levels due to various factors such as poor living standards back home.

In the song *Dreamer* he sings:

*She was only 17 when she left home heading off to
college
Just the clothes on her back 40 dollars in her pocket...
..Now you can find her on the main stage
Trickin' and twerking and working so hard for them
singles
20 for how she get naked
Money she see for the takin'
She gonna take it
Been dancing so long she don't know when she'll be
graduatinn'
Friends tryna tell her she trippin'*

This explains how college students are not able to sustain themselves in school and they end up engaging in activities that are not socially frowned upon. In this case the young girl turned to stripping in clubs to earn a living. Eventually she is not even sure if she is going to graduate.

In the song *Make it Home* the issue of education is mentioned when he says:

*I broke a couple rules
Ain't graduate from school
'Cause I was busy hustling,
man, I thought that shit was cool*

This is his testimony that he dropped out of college to start an independent life where he was supposed to fend for himself at a young age. When this happens the young people join street gangs to survive.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is clear that music plays an important role in informing society about various issues that affect our lives. The youth are especially prone to social ills that impact on their lives in their formative stages, and it is important to use hip hop music as a channel of communication since this genre has a great influence on them.

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