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Rap Poetry and Postmodernism

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Abstract

This article observes several most significant rap albums of this decade within postmodern literature. Today rap culture ceased to be a sort of “outsider” in academic opinion, because of its influences on the culture and art innovations. We study albums as literary objects according to literary aesthetic theories and principles, display the main postmodern features they have, and analyze the role of rap poetry within postmodernism in general. The results suggest that rap poetry is postmodern not only musically, but also lyrically, as an object of literature. The rap music embodies all the postmodern traits and synthesizes them within the syntheses of music and literature and high art and pop culture.

Keywords: Rap, Poetry, Postmodernism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many experts on rap consider Clive Campbell (known as DJ Kool Herc) the father of rap music. However, hip hop culture started developing directly in 1970, when the Harlem group of musicians and poets – The Last Poets – issued their first album “The Last Poets”. Rap music has dramatically changed since then and set an ultimate hegemony in pop culture as a whole. Today rap culture ceased to be a sort of “outsider” in academic opinion, because of its influences on the culture and art innovations. At the present time, nobody can ignore this fact: we listen to the rap music from many movies and videos, at the radio, in shopping centers – everywhere; hip hop culture became the most popular subculture of young generations, because it probably embodies an absolute freedom; even other musical genres, e.g. pop or rock music, feel the impact of rap (just listen to Arctic Monkeys or Taylor Swift – anyone).

It is extremely significant for hip-hop culture that in 2014, a course “Rap Linguistics” appeared at the University of Calgary in Calgary, Alberta. Darin Flynn, who is an associate professor of this course, says: “These songs crisscross sound, emotion, grammar and multiple metaphors in such a rich way”, “I think poetry is very much alive today, and it’s found in rap music, in the so-called gutter. Rap is the language of the gutter” (University of Calgary, 2016). Besides, in the same year, Professor Adam Diehl decided to study the Kendrick Lamar album “good kid, m.A.A.d city” at Georgia Regents University in Augusta, Georgia. He motivated that innovation by the following words: “I think Kendrick Lamar is the James Joyce of Hip Hop - i.e. in the complexity of his storytelling, in his knowledge of the canon, and in his continuing focus on the city of his upbringing - Compton” (Magazine of Hip-hop Music Criticism and News, 2016).

Despite hip-hop culture came from the “bottom of streets”, it is saturated with postmodernism. Generally speaking, rap was postmodern music from the very beginning, because approximately all rappers used samples from other songs, mixed genres within an album, tried to blur the distinction between pop culture and high art, and so on. Besides, rap started developing at the beginning of 1970-s, when postmodern philosophy became predominant world outlook (Weltanschauung).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is necessary to emphasize that our talk will not be about postmodern philosophy and its influences on hip hop culture. In addition, we even are not going to speak about rap music at all. Instead of that, we will be analyzing rap music as rap poetry - lyrics - from the position of the literary studies. Our aim is to list the main features of the literary postmodernism and

observe them within lyrics of some rappers and analyze how postmodernism (primarily, postmodern literature) and rap poetry interact each other.

The following books about postmodernism are methodological basis of our research: “General Introduction to Postmodernism” by Dino Felluga (2016), “Postmodernist Fiction” by Brian McHale (1987), and “Postmodern Literature and Race” by Len Patt and Sara Upstone (2015). According to all the literary postmodern aesthetic theories and principles which we have found in those works, the following traits should be listed: 1) intertextuality; 2) impersonation; 3) play and theatricality; 4) pastiche (blending of genres and styles); 5) complicated organization of texts; 6) a plenty of allusions; 7) fragmentation; 8) paranoia; 9) minimalism; 10) maximalism; 11) metafiction; 12) fabulation; 13) temporal distortion; 14) hyper-reality.

We offer to analyze and observe all these traits through the following relevant albums of this decade: “The Marshall Mathers LP 2” by Eminem, “Yeezus” by Kanye West, “Good kid, m.A.A.d city” by Kendrick Lamar. There are no any bonds and resemblances between them, but these albums, in our opinion, most embody the aforementioned literary postmodern features.

To be honest, one may observe all these features within each aforementioned album, especially, within the second Kendrick Lamar album “Good kid, m.A.A.d city”, but to create an ultimate picture of our topic, it will be more appropriate to analyze postmodern traits within a several albums. We are going to overview the albums and single out the best realizations of the listed features.

3. RESULTS

Actually, “The Marshall Mathers LP 2” was released as a sequel of the outstanding Eminem album “The Marshall Mathers LP”. Eminem returned to his image of Slim Shady and to the themes which were predominant in his first “LP”. The first song “Bad Guy” is a sequel of one of his greatest hits – “Stan”. The plot of “Bad Guy” refers directly to “Stan” – Matthew Mitchell, who is Stan’s kid brother, wants to take revenge on Eminem, having kidnapped and closed him in the trunk of his car. Then he drives listening to “The Marshall Mathers LP”. In fact, it creates a “restoration” of the “Stan” events where the main character, Stan, was complaining about Eminem indifference to him and his brother, and as a result, he threw his pregnant wife in the trunk, and listening to the same album, drove over a bridge. In the second part of the song, we may observe the battle between Eminem and his alter-ego, Slim Shady. It is very significant to emphasize that despite this song did not become a famous musical

single, its lyrics are quite important for the whole album, because it opens all the main themes and ways of development of the album - *paranoiac navel-gazing* (inner monologs with his alter-egos: “I’m the nightmare you fell asleep and then woke up still in/I’m your karma closing in with each stroke of a pen” from “Bad Guy”), *hyper-reality* (the Eminem masks - Slim Shady, Eminem, Marshall Mathers), *a plenty of allusions, pans and irony* (“Cause all I wanted to do is be the Bruce Lee of loose leaf” from “The Monster”).

To prove our idea, just take a look, for example, at the “Rap God” introduction lyrics: “Look, I was gonna go easy on you not to hurt your feelings/But I’m only going to get this one chance/Something’s wrong, I can feel it/(For six minutes, Slim Shady, you’re on)/Just a feeling I’ve got/Like something’s about to happen, but I don’t know what/If that means what I think it means/We’re in trouble, big trouble/And if he is as bananas as you say, I’m not taking any chances/(You are just what the doc ordered). Eminem plays several roles within one album and probably seeks to find his own face (“Cause Marshall Mathers the rapper’s persona’s half a façade/And Matthew and Stan’s just symbolic” from “Bad Guy”) within another reality which has many ironic references to American pop culture and his own biography: “It’s not hip hop, it’s pop, cause I found a hell a way to fuse it/With rock, shock rap with Doc/Throw on Lose Yourself and make ‘em lose it.”

According to Tiny Mix Tapes, the sixth studio album by Kanye, “Yeezus”, is “a nebulous, dense, paranoid web of utterly unfiltered expression that’s utterly or negligibly fascinating depending on how much you care about Yeezy” (The Online Music and Film Magazine, 2016). “Yeezus” is an apotheosis of a favorite Kanye West tendency to use Biblical allusions within pop culture and routine reality. This album was practically issued as the Rap-Bible with his own “apostles”, “Yeezus”, “Mary” and some other characters. “Yeezus” mixes many musical genres on the brink of formalism and *maximalism*, at the same time, having quite *minimalistic* lyrics (“So here’s a few hatin’-ass niggas to fight you/and here’s a few snake-ass niggas to bite you”). This album shows a postmodern crisis, because it highlights the problems of faith, love, family, and mainly demonstrates an interaction between religion and media reality (“I am a god,/Even though I’m a man of God/My whole life in the hands of God,/ So y’all better quit playin’ with God”). Kanye West is not just an eccentric musician; his songs are saturated with *theatricality* and extraordinary play which one may find within any his song (e.g., “Bound 2”).

While speaking about Kendrick Lamar’s “Good kid, m.A.A.d city”, we should point out that it has approximately all the specific postmodern features, but primarily this album is interesting for us because of its *intertextuality* and *fragmentation*. Time is represented here fragmentarily, like a diffuse puzzle – the original order of the songs does not coincide to the

order of the “album chapters” and development of the entire plot. The events are not fixed within a song - an event may be developing within two or three songs. There are many flashbacks (e.g., “Money Trees”), temporal leaps (e.g. from “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe” into “Backseat Freestyle”), and unconscious dialogs (like in the song “Swimming Pools”). All these traits help to create a more chaotic and bright image of Compton - and besides, actually Kendrick does it as though he creates his own reality of madness which no any inhabitant of Compton can avoid.

Kendrick creates an infinite scope for *intertextual* play. He uses some references to hip hop culture to make some lines more widely meaningful for his auditory, e.g.: “It got ugly, waving your hand out the window, *check yourself*, uh” (the reference to the Ice Cube song “Check Yo Self”). The most interesting examples of *intertextuality*, *metafiction* and *fabulation*, are the songs “Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe” and “Sing about Me/I’m Dying of Thirst”. In the first one, we may observe real Kendrick (not K. Dot), who analyzes the same problems through his mature eyes. It reminds a typical postmodern author appearance in his/her own work where they analyze their own creativity or just share opinions correlating to a given piece of art – as Kurt Vonnegut or Julio Cortázar and many other postmodern authors did. In the first part of “Sing About Me/I’m Dying of Thirst”, Kendrick creates three different characters, and the second one is the sister of a heroine of his first studio album “Section.80”: “You wrote a song about my sister on your tape/And called it “Section.80”, the message resembled “Brenda’s Got a Baby”/ What’s crazy was, I was hearin’ about it/But doubted your ignorance how could you ever just put her on blast and shit/Judging her past and shit, well it’s completely my future”. It is very interesting that she does not mention a song directly – Kendrick creates one more allusion through the Tupac song “Brenda’s Got a Baby” to “Keisha’s Song” from his first album “Section.80”. Such a play, together with a complicated organization of texts, helps Kendrick to interact with his audience better, because actually his messages require awareness of his whole creativity. This fact makes reading/listening to his album more playful.

Other quite important features of this album are mixing of different styles, parody, and synthesis of literary genres. For instance, the song “Poetic Justice” is written in the form of an epistolary style (“They say conversation rule a nation, I can tell/But I could never right my wrongs ‘less I write it down for real, P.S.”); in the song “The Art of Peer Pressure”, he uses colloquial style with slang words (“Speaking language only we know, you think is an accent/The windows roll down all I see is a hand pass it”); “Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter’s Daughter” has a prayer directly at the beginning of the song (“Lord God/I come to you a sinner/And I humbly repent for my sins”), and etc. In the song “Backseat Freestyle”, the main character, K. Dot, plays with the famous Martin Luther King speech “I Have a Dream”:

[Break]

Martin had a dream

Martin had a dream

Kendrick have a dream

[Hook]

All my life I want money and power

Respect my mind or die from lead shower

I pray my dick get big as the Eiffel Tower

So I can fuck the world for seventy-two hours

The “hook” reveals the corruption of a typical young Compton inhabitant. K. Dot speaks about Martin’s dream, but when he is talking about such a dream, mentioning Martin Luther, we realize that he just does not understand genuine values - such a passage creates an ironic effect to increase the perception of the whole message.

Finally, as we mentioned in the previous paragraph, one may observe here a synthesis of different literary genres. It is obvious that we deal with lyrics, because all the songs are written in a lyric form. However, the album also has the features of drama and prose, because some speeches of the characters are represented in the following way:

K’s Mom: See he high ass hell, and he ain’t even tripping off them damn dominoes anymore. Just bring the car back.

K’s Dad: Did somebody say dominoes?

All these attributes bring the albums together with postmodernism.

4. CONCLUSION

As a result, we may conclude that rap poetry is postmodern not only musically, but also lyrically, as an object of literature. It means that rap music is a product of postmodernism, and perhaps, one of the best products in general, because it embodies all the postmodern traits and synthesizes them within the syntheses of music and literature and high art and pop culture.

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