

Female Agency in Selected Song Lyrics of Raye ‘My 21st Century Blues’ Album: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Music, as a form of cultural production, reflects and responds to societal values, making song lyrics a meaningful site for analysing social issues such as gender and power. This study investigates the representation of female agency in selected lyrics from Raye’s “My 21st Century Blues” album, with the aim of identifying how agency is constructed through the dominant transitivity processes. Using Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and Abrams’ (1999) conceptualisation of female agency, this study analyses the clauses as the data of this study through Halliday’s transitivity system. The findings show that all types of processes were present in 310 clauses, with the material process as the most frequent (132 clauses or 42.58%), followed by relational and mental processes. Material processes frequently express self-direction, where the singer asserts autonomy through action, while relational and mental processes largely construct self-definition, revealing identity, reflection, and internal struggle. A discursive shift emerges from textual analysis, signalling how Raye positions herself within a particular discourse. These findings are further contextualised within the sociocultural practice of the music industry, where female artists often face marginalisation. Raye’s lyrics thus function as a powerful site for expressing female resistance, identity, and autonomy.

Keywords: *Critical discourse analysis; Female agency; Transitivity analysis; Raye; Song lyrics.*

1. Introduction

Music goes far beyond entertainment. It serves as both a product and a reflection of the cultural, social, and political realities in which it is created. It is a social phenomenon that is present everywhere, and, as the medium by which we shape our environment, it makes a great impact on society (Petrušić, 2021). Music presents as a social construction of social reality as outlined in song lyrics (Qonaatun, 2019). Song lyrics are more than just artistic expressions; they are powerful media through which artists convey messages, challenge norms, and reflect on personal and collective experiences.

Building on this understanding of music as a social phenomenon, song lyrics also become a valuable site for exploring how identities and power relations are constructed and contested. One such critical area of exploration is the representation of female agency. According to Abrams (1999), female agency captures how women define themselves and how they act, especially when oppressed or constrained. She argues that female agency should be understood as the ability



of women to define who they are and make choices, even when they are shaped or limited by social structures like patriarchy, sexism, or racism. Abrams further breaks agency into two parts: agency as self-definition and agency as self-direction. The former means how women come to understand themselves, while the latter focuses on how women pursue goals and take action, even in the face of barriers. This perspective on female agency is particularly relevant in analysing how contemporary female artists use music to narrate their struggles, assert their identities, and reclaim their power. One compelling example of this is *My 21st Century Blues*, the debut studio album by British singer-songwriter Raye. Female artists often assert their voices, challenge traditional gender roles, and articulate their autonomy and resistance within patriarchal structures. *My 21st Century Blues* is particularly significant as it marks Raye's transition from a label-controlled artist to an independent musician, offering a raw and unfiltered exploration of her struggles with addiction, sexual assault, and industry exploitation. Through her lyrics, Raye articulates a journey of resilience, positioning herself as an active agent in her narrative rather than a passive victim. From 15 tracks in the album, this study focuses on 5 selected songs. The songs are chosen based on their relevance to the theme of female agency.

Within this context, the examination of song lyrics offers valuable insights into the social dynamics and power structures that shape our world. This communicative power aligns well with Fairclough's three-dimensional framework in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of text, discourse practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2013b). Analysis of text involves linguistic analysis in terms of vocabulary, grammar, semantics, the sound system, and cohesion-organisation above the sentence level (Sheyholislami, 2001). Analysis at the word level helps to uncover how specific linguistic choices create meaning and reflect underlying ideologies in the text (Nadasdy & Elam, 2019). Discursive practice is concerned with the processes and practices that influence how texts are created and interpreted. Sociocultural practice emphasizes the connection between language, ideology, and dominance, focusing on the role of discourse in perpetuating or challenging social hierarchies (Van Dijk, 2008). In developing the analytical framework for his method, Fairclough benefited from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Fairclough, 2013a). SFL views language as a verbal social process, where language is treated as a social semiotic system that represent socio-cultural norms and values (Santosa, 2016). One of the key components of Halliday's SFL, particularly relevant to critical discourse analysis, is transitivity analysis. It examines how language represents processes, participants, and circumstances in a clause, offering insight into how experiences and actions are structured in discourse (Santosa, 2016). Transitivity reveals how participants are positioned in discourse, whether as actors, experiencers, or recipients, which is essential in analysing the extent to which women are represented as active agents. Process is realised by verbs, which are divided into six types: material (doing or happening), relational (being or having), mental (sensing or feeling), verbal (saying), behavioural (physiological or psychological), and existential (existing).

Several previous studies have applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to explore gender ideologies and representations in song lyrics. Chin et al. (2019) employed Fairclough's CDA and Halliday's transitivity system to examine gendered power relations in 20 Billboard-charting songs from 2015. By using Haig's Participant Power Hierarchy, the study found that grammatical power was more often assigned to male characters, and the lyrics exhibited more sexist instances toward women than men. The ten themes used for analysis include portrayals of traditional gender roles, objectification, stereotyping, and violence. Females are more frequently objectified and stereotyped, while males are depicted as inferior or victims of violence in certain contexts. Ruanglertsilp (2022) applied Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework to Ariana Grande's *thank u, next* album, focusing on how linguistic features construct themes of female self-empowerment. All 12 songs from the album were analysed through CDA, categorizing lyrics into thematic groups and linguistic patterns. Through content and fine-grained linguistic analysis, four major themes emerged: independence, self-love, sexuality, and vulnerability, portraying empowerment as embracing one's complexity. El-Falaky (2015) used CDA to explore gender identity in Egyptian Mahraganat street songs, highlighting how women were portrayed as rebellious seductresses and men as moral gatekeepers. The study revealed how the genre reinforces patriarchal ideologies through linguistic representation. Lastly, Kayany & Riaz Dar (2019) combined CDA and Feminist CDA to analyse South Asian film songs from 1972 to 2015. Their findings revealed recurring themes of sexual objectification, male dominance, and suppressed female agency, reflecting deeply embedded patriarchal values in the region's popular music. While considerable attention has been given to themes of sexism and empowerment in music studies, less is known about how female artists linguistically construct and assert agency in their lyrical narratives. Therefore, this study examines how female agency is represented in song lyrics, employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover the linguistic strategies and ideological tensions embedded in the text. Based on this research gap, the study aims to uncover several objectives. First, to examine the dominant transitivity processes present in the lyrical texts to identify the specific linguistic patterns that contribute to the articulation of agency. Second, to analyse the representation of female agency as conceptualised by Abrams (1999).

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative method to explore how female agency is represented in selected song lyrics of Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album. Hancock et al. (2001) states that qualitative research is concerned with explaining social phenomena that will help us to understand the world we live in and why things are the way they are. It aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of a phenomenon by analysing textual data in its natural context. In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the analytical framework, specifically utilising Norman Fairclough's three-

dimensional framework. The analysis particularly focuses on the textual level, which examines the clauses to understand how female agency is represented in the lyrics. Thus, Halliday's transitivity analysis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) is employed to further analyse the clauses. The findings from textual analysis are further examined to discuss the next stage of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework, which includes discursive practice and sociocultural practice.

The source of data is the song lyrics of five selected songs from the "My 21st Century Blues" album by Raye (2023). The songs that are selected for this study are Oscar Winning Tears, Hard Out Here, Escapism, Ice Cream Man, and Buss It Down. The selected songs are chosen based on their relevance to the topic. Based on the lyrics, the clauses are highlighted as the data of the study. The data were collected by listening to the album and reading the song lyrics. Then, the clauses from the selected song lyrics were identified and categorised based on the process types, participants, and circumstances using Halliday's transitivity analysis. This step allowed for the identification of dominant linguistic patterns and their role in constructing agency. Following the transitivity analysis, the clauses were further examined through the lens of Abrams' (1999) conceptualisation of female agency, distinguishing between self-definition and self-direction. The findings were then contextualised within Fairclough's framework, considering how discursive choices reflect and challenge broader power structures in the music industry.

3. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents a result of the analysis process from the data. It consists of findings and discussion regarding the five selected song lyrics of Raye's My 21st Century Blues (2023) album. These are presented to answer the research problems. Thus, the objectives of the study can be realised. The analysis draws on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing specifically on the textual dimension through transitivity analysis.

1. Transitivity Analysis

The textual analysis reveals a total of 310 clauses across five songs that are selected from the album, which are "Oscar Winning Tears", "Hard Out Here", "Escapism", "Ice Cream Man", and "Buss It Down". The findings are presented below:

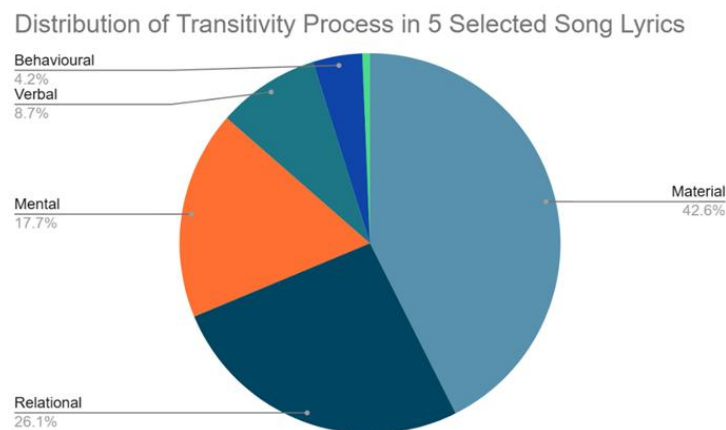


Figure 1. Distribution of Transitivity Processes in 5 Selected Song Lyrics

The most dominant process in five selected song lyrics of Raye's "My 21st Century Blues" album is the material process, with a total of 42.90% (133 clauses). It is followed by the relational process with 26.13%, occurring in 81 clauses. The next is the mental process with 17.74% (55 clauses). The fourth one is the verbal process with 8.71% (27 clauses). Then, the behavioural process with 4.19% (13 clauses). The last one is the existential process with a 0.65% occurrence (2 clauses). To further specify the data, the following chart presents the distribution of transitivity analysis in each song:

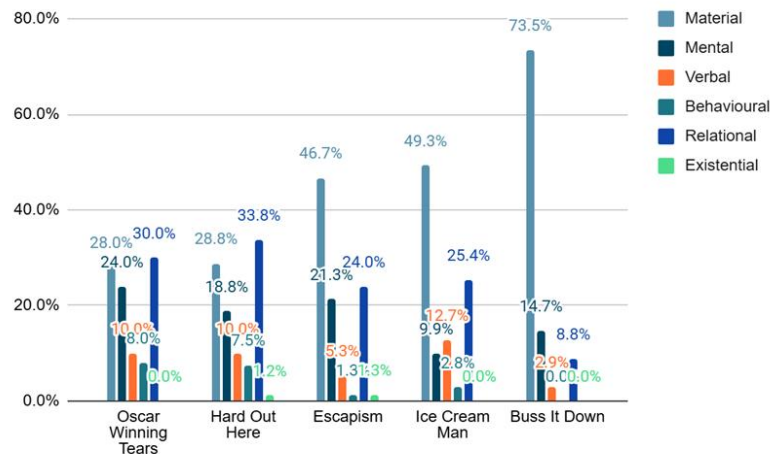


Figure 2. Distribution of Processes in Each Selected Song Lyrics

Based on the table above, the song “Oscar Winning Tears” is dominated by relational process with 30.0% (15 clauses), followed by material process at 28.0% (14 clauses), mental process at 24.0% (12 clauses), verbal process at 10.0% (5 clauses), behavioural process at 8.0% (4 clauses), and no existential process. “Hard Out Here” aligns with this result, as the dominant process is a relational process with 33.8% (27 clauses). It is also followed by material process with 28.8% (23 clauses), mental process with 18.8% (15 clauses), verbal process with 10.0% (8 clauses), behavioural process 7.5% (6 clauses), and existential process 1.2% (1 clause). Meanwhile, “Escapism” is dominated by material process with 46.7% (35 clauses). Then followed by relational process with 24.0% (18 clauses), mental process with 21.3% (16 clauses), verbal process with 5.3% (4 clauses), behavioural and existential process with each 1.3% (1 clause). For “Ice Cream Man”, the most frequent process is material process with 49.3% (35 clauses). Relational process is the second with 24.5% (18 clauses). The third is verbal process with 12.7% (9 clauses), followed by mental with 9.9% (7 clauses) and behavioural with 2.8% (2 clauses). There is no clause that represents an existential clause in the song. The last song is “Buss It Down”, which is dominated by material process with 73.5% (25 clauses). The second one is the mental process with 14.7% (5 clauses), followed by the relational process with 8.8% (3 clauses) and the verbal process with 2.9% (1 clause). Meanwhile, behavioural and existential processes are not present in the lyrics.

a. Material Process

As the most dominant process in the selected song lyrics (42.90%), the majority of the material processes were utilised to convey the speaker taking charge, showing control, and making decisions. For example, in Oscar Winning Tears, the clause “So I *will take* this front row seat” positions the singer as the actor (“I”) performing a deliberate action (“will take”) on the goal (“this front row seat”). The front-row seat metaphor situates Raye as an observer rather than a passive participant, signalling detachment from the “Oscar-winning” performance of the man. Similarly, the clause “After his Oscar winning performance, I *left* the room” signifies this detachment. The process *left* indicates an action, taken by Raye to distance herself emotionally and physically. The clause is from the final line of the song, which further emphasises the finality of her action to disengage from the relationship. In Hard Out Here, material processes like “I am *finna spray* now” and “Baby I *bounce back*” use action verbs to symbolise verbal retaliation and resilience, portraying recovery from systemic oppression. Imperative clauses directed at exploiters, such as “*get* your pink chubby hands *off* my face” and “*pay* me the whole bag”, reverse the power dynamic and frame the male CEO as the actor who must respond to her demands.

In some clauses, Raye uses material process to portray the power imbalance between her and the man, who refers to the CEO or her past partner. She positions herself as the goal of the process. The song Ice Cream Man narrates Raye’s experience with abuse. In the clauses “*tryna touch* me” and “*tryna fuck* me”, Raye recounts the experience through material processes to expose the coercive behaviour. She highlights her position as the passive recipient of unwanted acts by being the goal of the processes. The material process externalises the violation as deliberate physical actions, reinforcing the imbalance of power.

b. Relational Process

In the selected songs, Raye uses them to articulate clear evaluations of herself and others, to position people within the narrative, and to reframe the power dynamics of her experiences. The relational process in this song is mostly realised through “be” verbs like am, is, and was as a construction of identity. The use of relational process is particularly prevalent in Ice Cream Man, as Raye repeats the line “I’m a woman” and “I’m a very fucking brave strong woman”. Through these clauses, Raye declares her identity as a woman. The repetition and emphasis (very fucking brave strong woman) build a tone of resilience. Aside from personal definition, the clauses also function as a political one. These statements become a declaration of power in the world that tries to define women by their trauma. Raye also uses a relational process as a

narrative of transformation, from “I *was* a girl” to “Now, I *am* grown”. Raye uses the process *was* to reflect on her past. The attribute a girl indicates vulnerability, innocence, or naivety. The latter presents the process with the present tense *am* to assert the current identity. Raye is no longer passive. *Grown* indicates psychological evolution, someone who possesses awareness. By stating *I’m grown*, Raye reframes herself as someone who has survived.

Relational identifying processes were also found when Raye identifies herself in *Oscar Winning Tears*. Raye uses relational identifying as an introductory line in the song (“Hello, it’s Raye here”). She opens the performance with introduction of herself, preparing the audience for a monologue of her experience. She uses a general referent *it* as a token to symbolise the narrator, and *is* Raye identifies who the figure is. Additionally, Raye defines her role with the identifying process in the clause “For the last time, I’m your audience”. She identifies herself as *your audience*, extending the theatrical metaphor central to the title of the song. With the circumstance *for the last time*, Raye expresses that she is no longer watching the performance passively and reclaims her position as narrator. Relational processes are not passive states of being, they are acts of identity construction. They allow Raye to re-author the narrative and define the terms of her existence.

c. Mental Process

Mental process appears most prominently in *Oscar Winning Tears*, *Hard Out Here*, and *Escapism*. The use of mental processes in *Oscar Winning Tears* is mostly to express Raye’s internal conflict and emotional reflection towards her past relationship and partner. She uses the verb “thought” in the clauses “(I) *thought* I was safe again” and “(I) *thought* he was innocent”, which is a part of cognitive sub-types, to reflect her state of mind at a specific moment. Raye describes it with the past form of the verb, this suggests not only past belief but also a recognition that her perception of the phenomenon (“I was safe again”, “he was innocent”) was wrong. It marks the beginning of realisation towards her experience with manipulation.

In *Hard Out Here*, mental processes articulate emotional resilience and the persistence of self-belief in the face of systemic oppression. Among the four sub-types of mental process, the perceptive and cognitive types are mostly used by Raye. The perceptive mental processes are expressed with the verb *see* to represent sensory awareness and show how she becomes conscious of manipulation and disrespect. The clause “(I) *can’t see* you” uses the negative form *can’t see* to signify the inability to see the person. Raye is blocking them out, visually and mentally, as a form of self-protection. She protects herself from the phenomenon *you*, which can refer to the people who disrespect her. In the context of the song, it shows her detachment from harm. Raye also employs the perceptive process *see* in the clause “now I *see* it so clear” as a moment of realisation. It signifies that Raye is no longer deceived. The phenomenon *it* refers to *all the lies*, and the intensifier *so clear* emphasises her awareness of the lies.

d. Other Processes

Although verbal (8.71%), behavioural (4.19%), and existential processes (0.65%) occur far less frequently than material, relational, or mental processes, the findings showed that they still play an important narrative and thematic role in the five analysed songs. Verbal processes often used by Raye assert her voice and expose power dynamics, particularly in the context of gender and industry exploitation. In *Hard Out Here*, the use of verbal process presented a shift from being the receiver of verbal acts (“He *said* I was done”, “(He) *said* I was out”) to using her voice to speak out against the injustice (“I *told* my lawyer to stand by (war)”). The behavioural process, which represents the outer manifestation of inner workings, helps to bridge her inner emotion and outward action. The clause “I *was looking* for a man who was on a same page” in *Escapism* expresses a physical manifestation of internal longing. It is more than a visual reception, and it indicates emotional experience enacted in the physical world. The behavior *I*, which refers to Raye, is actively seeking, making the process not fully material or mental. Lastly, existential process rarely occurs in the selected song lyrics, but it carries an existential truth. The process *is* introduces the existence of an emotional force (wrath) and qualifies it with the circumstance *like a woman scorned*. *No wrath like a woman scorned* implies that the most intense emotional backlash comes from a woman wronged.

2. Representation of Female Agency

Based on the transitivity analysis, the representation of female agency is analysed using Abrams’ concept of female agency (1999). The analysis categorises agency into two types according to Abrams (1999): Self-Definition (S-Def), referring to the speaker’s construction of identity and internal experience, and Self-Direction (S-Dir), referring to the speaker’s active assertion of autonomy and control. The writers specifically focus on clauses in which Raye is positioned as the main participant, either explicitly through the use of the first-person pronoun “I” or implicitly through actions and expressions attributed to her voice. The table below presents findings of the types of female agency across five selected song lyrics:

Table 1. Distribution of Female Agency Across 5 Selected Song Lyrics

Process Types	Oscar Winning Tears		Hard Out Here		Escapism		Ice Cream Man		Buss It Down	
	S-Def	S-Dir	S-Def	S-Dir	S-Def	S-Dir	S-Def	S-Dir	S-Def	S-Dir
Material	2	4	-	11	2	9	4	3	1	9
Mental	4	1	4	1	8	1	2	-	2	1
Verbal	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	1	-	-
Behavioural	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	1	-	-
Relational	4	-	10	2	3	1	13	-	3	-
Existential	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	10	6	14	17	14	13	19	5	6	10

The results demonstrate that both types of female agency are distributed throughout the songs, although some songs show a clear dominance of one over the other. Overall, the writers found 114 instances of female agency across five song lyrics. Self-definition is the primary type of female agency, with 63 instances, while self-direction has 51 instances. The findings reveal that self-definition is most commonly expressed through relational processes (33 instances), in which the speaker assigns attributes or roles to herself. On the other hand, self-direction is primarily realised through material processes (36 instances), where the speaker is positioned as the actor. Additionally, mental processes (20 instances) contribute to self-definition by revealing the speaker's internal states, thoughts, and emotional reflections.

a. Female Agency Self-Definition through Relational Process

Self-definition is the most prominent dimension of female agency in the album, with 63 instances overall, and 33 of those are from relational processes. The relational process is dominant in this category to construct identity. Abrams (1999) describes self-definition as an act of constructing one's identity through personal reflection, values, and envisioned purpose. In this context, self-definition involves the speaker's ability to articulate who they are, what they have been through, and who they are becoming. Relational processes allow Raye, as the speaker, to assert and redefine who she is. For example, in the song "Oscar Winning Tears", Raye utilised a relational process to define her role in relation to others.

"For the last time, I'm your audience"

The song is presented as if it were a theatrical performance. The attribute "your audience" defines Raye as the carrier, someone who has been passive in the gaze of another. But the temporal modifier "for the last time" marks a final moment of recognising and rejecting that role. It signals a moment of re-evaluation of herself, reflecting her awareness and the end of passivity. Abrams highlights that self-definition begins with recognising how society has influenced one's identity, including the roles, labels, and values that are imposed by the society. The clause shows Raye asserting agency over how she is defined.

Raye also employs relational processes to attach and assert her identity. The example is from "Ice Cream Man", a song that recounts Raye's past experiences with abuse and trauma:

"I am a woman"

"I am a very fucking brave strong woman"

These are strong declarative clauses where the Carrier (I) is directly associated with an Attribute ("a woman", "very fucking brave strong woman"). Raye is explicitly identifying herself as a woman. Not only assert her gender, but also the identity, experience, and perspective that comes with it. The relational process allows her to assign identity and value to herself, which is crucial after a violation where identity and autonomy were stripped away. Through relational processes, Raye traces a journey of becoming, which aligns with agency as an ongoing process, not a fixed state. The consistent use of the first-person "I" as a carrier and empowering or reflective attributes/identifiers reveals that Raye is not only aware of who she is and what she has endured but also unafraid to state it, which aligns with the self-definition realm of female agency by Abrams.

b. Female Agency Self-Direction through Material Process

Material process plays a central role in representing self-direction, with 36 out of 51 instances of self-direction realised through material clauses. Self-direction focuses on what one does and how a woman acts on their sense of self and autonomy by making choices that align with personal goals, aspirations, and values, even within restrictive environments. This understanding is central to the way Raye expresses agency through material processes in her lyrics. Material processes allow Raye to show herself as an actor, someone who actively makes decisions and takes steps to cope, protect, or move forward, even when those actions are small or internal. Raye exemplified this in *Oscar Winning Tears*:

“After his Oscar-winning performance, I left the room and never saw him again”

This clause presents Raye as the actor, actively performing the process “left”. The material process of leaving signals intentional action. The choice of “left the room”, though, may seem simple, is significant for Raye. She asserts control in disengaging from the man’s performative and harmful behaviour.

In *Ice Cream Man*, material processes expressing self-direction are often tied to survival strategies. The material actions do not seek to change her external world but are instead focused on navigating it in a way that minimises harm.

“Cause I put on these faces, pretending that I’m fine”

Raye is the actor, and the material process “put on” represents an intentional act of masking pain. Putting on “faces” shows that she’s aware of how she is perceived and that controlling this perception is a way to maintain dignity, protect herself, or continue functioning in a harsh environment. Self-direction in this context is a survival-based strategy, an action to navigate a world where vulnerability might be unsafe or disempowering.

The example from “Buss It Down” presents a shift of self-direction throughout the five selected song lyrics. The song celebrates bodily agency, where Raye is no longer in a restrictive environment where she couldn’t express herself.

“I’m gon’ buss it down”

“Buss it down” is a colloquial expression commonly associated with bodily movement, sexual expression, or celebration, often through dance. Raye decides to buss it down, meaning she chooses to perform and express herself physically on her own terms. This directly contrasts with being objectified. Instead, she is in control of the performance. As the actor, she chooses how to move and express herself. Not in reaction to pain or oppression, but in alignment with confidence, freedom, and pleasure. This marks a shift from other songs in the album, where self-direction is tied to trauma or survival.

c. Female Agency Self-Definition through Mental Process

Mental processes occur in 55 clauses and support 20 of the 63 instances of self-definition. Although less dominant than relational processes, they are essential in revealing the speaker’s internal consciousness, emotions, and psychological reflections. From “Escapism”, Raye is constantly processing her emotional history:

“Cause I don’t wanna feel, how I did last night”

This line reveals a desire to emotionally separate from a past version of the self, a self-defined by pain, vulnerability, or regret. She does not want her past self to represent who she is. Another example from “Ice Cream Man” shows how mental processes reveal a self-awareness.

“I wish I could say how I feel, how I felt”

Raye wishes to voice her pain but feels unable to, likely due to fear, trauma, or powerlessness. However, by articulating this wish, she reveals a deep self-awareness: she knows what she feels, even if she cannot express it. The mental process *wish* reflects a longing for emotional authenticity, and thus, even in silence, the speaker is engaging in the work of self-definition, acknowledging her emotional truth and desiring a future where she can express it.

The transitivity analysis shows that Raye’s ‘My 21st Century Blues’ embodies Abrams’ (1999) two dimensions of female agency. Out of 114 instances, self-definition is slightly more dominant, largely expressed through relational processes that enable Raye to assert and reconstruct her identity. Self-direction, mainly realised through material processes, highlights her autonomy in navigating trauma and celebrating empowerment. Mental processes further support self-definition by revealing emotional awareness and reflection. Based on the analysis of self-definition and self-direction of female agency through transitivity analysis, Raye’s linguistic choices reveal a discursive shift from victimhood to empowerment. Early relational processes such as “I’ve been a victim” and “I’m your audience” construct her identity through socially imposed roles, aligning with Abrams’ notion that self-definition begins with recognising identity as socially constituted. However, the progression to assertive material processes like “I left the room” signals self-direction,

marking resistance to those roles and positioning Raye as an active agent rather than a passive subject. These results resonate with Ruanglertsilp (2022), who highlighted women as having agency and being powerful in Ariana Grande's 'thank u, next' album. In contrast, Chin et al. (2019) have shown that grammatical power in contemporary English songs is predominantly allocated to men. This study offers a counterpoint as transitivity analysis reveals that women can grammatically assert autonomy, thereby resist the dominant male-centred discourse and present female subjectivity as agentive and empowered.

At the sociocultural level, this representation of female agency reflects systemic gender inequality in the music industry, where women face restriction, exploitation, and pressure to conform to male-centred ideals (Wolfe, 2019). This finding thus complements (Kayany & Riaz Dar (2019) analysis, where musical discourses often portray women as a subject of patriarchal ideologies. Raye's experience with limited creative freedom exemplifies these constraints, while songs such as Ice Cream Man and Oscar Winning Tears illustrate agency as reclaiming voice after marginalisation. Her self-definition emerges within and against these structures of power, making her lyrics both a personal assertion of agency and a critique of the industry that seeks to contain it. This offers a new insight from the previous studies as Raye's lyrics demonstrate that women can grammatically and discursively assert autonomy, challenging dominant ideologies and offering new ways of envisioning female subjectivity in popular music.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the representation of female agency in Raye's My 21st Century Blues through Critical Discourse Analysis using Halliday's transitivity framework and Abrams' (1999) concept of agency as self-definition and self-direction. The findings showed that material processes dominate, expressing self-direction through actions of resistance, control, and autonomy, while relational and mental processes articulate self-definition by redefining identity and voicing internal reflection. Verbal, behavioural, and existential processes further contextualise these acts, adding depth to her agency. Across the lyrics, a discursive shift emerges from victimhood to empowerment, as seen in the movement from relational clauses like "I've been a victim" to material clauses such as "I left the room." At the sociocultural level, the lyrics reflect systemic gender inequality in the music industry, where women face restriction and objectification, yet Raye challenges these structures by voicing trauma, asserting identity, and reclaiming authorship. Her representation of agency thus operates both as personal empowerment and as resistance to broader patriarchal systems, highlighting popular music lyrics as a vital site for expressing resistance, identity, and autonomy.

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