

**RHYMES OF RESISTANCE: KENDRICK LAMAR'S DISCOGRAPHY AND
THE PARALLEL OF BLACK AND DALIT VISIBILITY**



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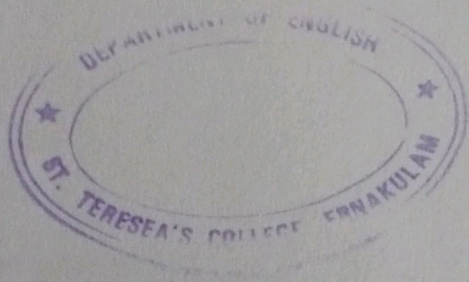
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An Abstract of the Project Entitled:
Rhymes of Resistance: Kendrick Lamar's Discography and the Parallel of Black and Dalit Visibility

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As an artistic and cultural form, rap has long been a platform for marginalized voices to express their struggles and assert their identities. Originating from the African American community, rap emerged as a response to the social and economic injustices perpetrated against disregarded communities. Rap exposes these atrocities by painting stark realities of systemic oppression in the surroundings. This project attempts to have a nuanced understanding of the systemic oppression of marginalized groups by analysing rap music. The first chapter titled "Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality" introduces the theoretical frameworks of this project and details various aspects of critical race theory and its key component, intersectionality. The second chapter titled "Lyrical Resistance of Kendrick Lamar" deals with the analysis of three albums from rapper Kendrick Lamar's discography through the lens of critical race theory and intersectionality and shows how his music criticizes the idea of systemic racism and oppression. The third chapter of this project titled "From Margins to Mic: Dalit and Black Voices" draws a parallel between the black and Dalit community in India and showcases rap as the voice of the voiceless. Thus, this project analyses rap as a site of resistance that holds potential to uplift marginalized communities.



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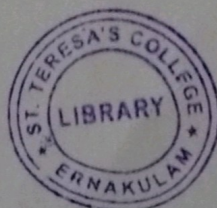
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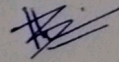
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Rhymes of Resistance: Kendrick Lamar's Discography and the Parallel of Black and Dalit Visibility," is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Dr. Tania Mary Vivera, Assistant Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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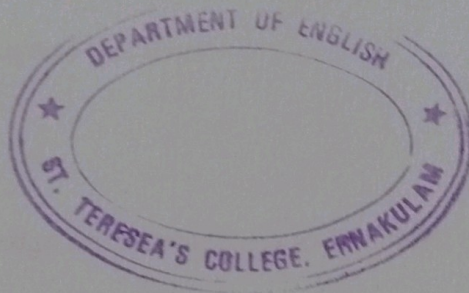
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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Rhymes of Resistance: Kendrick Lamar's Discography and the Parallel of Black and Dalit Visibility," is a record of bona fide work carried out by Bhanu E S under my supervision and guidance.



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Introduction

Recently hip hop celebrated its 50th anniversary and there's a story behind this musical genre becoming a culture. During the early 1970s, Hip hop, formerly known as disco rap, emerged from the Bronx in New York City, as an art movement from the African American community. The genre of hip hop music originated with an anti-drug and anti-violence stance. It consists of stylized rhythmic music (often drum beats) that often accompanies rapping, which results in a rhythmic delivery of poetic speech. Rap developed as a vocal style where the rap artist speaks or chants rhythmically along an instrumental beat. Some other stylistic elements that developed as part of the hip-hop culture are MCing, DJing, scratching with turntables, breakdancing, etc.

In the 1970s, block parties gained popularity, particularly among African American youth. At these block parties, the DJs played percussive breaks of popular songs using two turntables and a DJ mixer. This was done to be able to play from two copies of the same record. During this period, drum machines were widely available and affordable, and the early evolution of hip-hop began with sampling, which is reusing a part of another recording or song.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term hip meaning "trendy" or "fashionable" and hop referring to the leaping movement. It is also believed that a member of the Grandmaster Flash and Furious hip-hop group by the name of Cowboy, created the term while teasing a friend who had just joined the U.S. Army. He sang "hip hop hip hop" which mimicked the rhythmic cadence of soldiers marching.

The terms hip hop and rap are used synonymously, but there is a significant distinction between the two. Hip-hop is a cultural movement that originated during the 1970s in the Bronx, and it encompasses several elements including music, art, fashion and dance. In other words, hip-hop is a way of life. Rap is a musical genre that is a part of hip-hop culture. Rap features a beat over which an artist chants lyrics with a rhythmic delivery. This genre uses street vernacular and focuses on content through lyrics, delivery (cadence) and flow (rhythm).

Hip Hop's evolution was similar to the impact of post-industrial economic decline throughout the 1970s. The economic stagnation lasted from 1973 to 1975 in the post-World War II Western countries. This period was also known as the 1970s recession. Unlike many others, the 1970s recession had a phenomenon called stagflation. It is a situation where high rates of unemployment and inflation happen simultaneously. The factors that were the causes of the recession included the 1973 oil crisis, the financial consequences of the Vietnam War, and the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, which was followed by the Nixon shock. Along with this, the rise of industrialization and the competition from other industrialized countries worsened the problems in the steel industry. The stock market crash during these years was impactful. The inflation remained significantly high until the early 1980s.

From the beginning, Hip-hop music has been described as a voice for the voiceless youth of marginalized communities. Rap culture reflected the social and economic realities of their lives. The early hip-hop artists were DJ Kool Herc, DJ Disco Wiz, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa. DJ Kool Herc is considered the father of hip-hop. They were of Latin American or Caribbean origin. He is also the one credited with inventing the technique of extending the instrumental called

breakbeat on a record during a party in the Bronx in 1973, which resulted in the birth of the genre.

The song *Rapper's Delight* by the hip-hop group The Sugarhill Gang, which was released in 1979, is often considered the first hip-hop song to achieve mainstream popularity. The 1970s rap represented a cultural movement that was a response to poverty and gang violence prevalent in the country. The youth from marginalized backgrounds fought against these adversaries by turning to music, dance, and art as forms of expression, leading to the emergence of a vibrant culture.

The evolution of hip-hop from a small movement in the Bronx to a cultural phenomenon occurred during the 1980s. The themes addressed during this phase were social awareness and real-life issues. Through songs like *Fight the Power* by Public Enemy and *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, hip-hop started to become a platform for activism. These songs boldly spoke on poverty, racial discrimination and economic disparity, confirming the identity of hip hop as being a medium for freedom of expression. Technological advancements of this age also helped artists not only improve production quality but combine various other musical genres such as jazz, funk and soul to hip hop, making it more nuanced. By the end of the 1980s, hip-hop had entered the mainstream.

The 1990s are considered as the Golden Era of hip hop. During this decade, gangsta rap rose to prominence. This also marked the rise of rap as a leading subgenre of hip-hop. By then, artists expanded their skills in the writing and production of rap songs. The major artists in the 1990s were rap groups, namely Wu-Tang Clan and A Tribe Called Quest and solo artists, namely Nas, Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube. The

term gangsta, a non-rhotic of the word gangster, dealt with a rap style that talked about violence with street gangs.

This period was also known for the rivalry between the rap styles of the East Coast and the West Coast of America. Both sides were represented by a team of prominent rappers. Rap battles broke out between these rappers, one of the most well-known being the rap feud between Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. These battles also led to the elevation of the creative abilities of the rappers and the attention and praise that it attracted elevated the genre as a whole.

This project analyses rap as a musical genre that has its roots in rebellion and has the potential to form a site of resistance through the discography of Kendrick Lamar. After more than five decades of hip hop, it can be argued from the over-commodification of rap that the roots of this genre are getting ignored. Kendrick Lamar is among the handful of rappers who recognize its roots and cultural significance. Therefore, analysing his discography through the lens of critical race theory and intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of the same.

The first chapter of this project introduces the theoretical frameworks used. Critical race theory expounded by theorists like Derrick Bell and Kimberle Crenshaw is elaborated in this chapter. The theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw is the second theoretical framework used. The second chapter of this project analyses three albums from the discography of Kendrick Lamar through the lens of critical race theory and intersectionality. The third chapter draws a parallel between the struggles of the black community and the Dalit community in India in the context of the potential of rap to uplift these marginalized communities.

While parallels are often drawn specifically between these two oppressed communities based on the brutality of the struggle they underwent, there is only a limited body of research on how a common art form could help in the visibility of the struggles faced by these communities. The genre of rap has played a significant role in the collective mobilization of the black community. As rap gains popularity around the world, the genre is being embraced with its roots that emphasize freedom of expression. Its potential is used by the communities who are in need of a voice. Marginalized communities such as the Dalits in India could use this potential to bring the community together and embrace their history and culture, while simultaneously building a resistance against the dominant classes that often perpetrate violence against them.

Chapter one

Critic Racial Theory and Intersectionality

A framework for academic research, Critical Race Theory examines how racism is influenced and deeply embedded in societal power structures, culture, and the law. Critical race theory was founded in the United States in the 1970s and 80s. It views racism as a systemic issue that is reflected even in established laws and regulations. The traditional civil rights discourses and ideas were questioned by academics like Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Derrick Bell, and they later developed Critical race theory out of general areas of legal studies. According to these academics, racial disparity is intertwined with institutional procedures, legal frameworks, and social norms. They point out that it is not just the product of personal prejudices in society. Critical race theory acts as a lens through which, these systemic discriminations could be identified and resolved.

Critical race theory, in its crux, explains that racism is not an aberration but something that is normalized and is a feature of social systems. The theory also challenges the notion of colorblindness which argues that ignoring the idea of race will put an end to racism. On the contrary, this perspective often perpetuates racial inequality as it fails to acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages that come with the institution of race. Ignoring race will only ignore the privilege that the dominant classes enjoy that has been accumulated over centuries.

The academics also analyse how property laws were structured in a way that excludes marginalized communities, especially Black communities. This leads the underprivileged communities to be socially and economically backward. These systemic barriers are also the reason for centuries of inequality that they face. Critical

race theory points out that these issues are contemporary social outcomes. Their studies range from areas of wealth distribution to criminal justice practices.

One of the main tenets of critical race theory is its emphasis on race as a social construct. Unlike biology which argues that race is fixed and that it has inherent characteristics, critical race theory emphasizes that racial categories are socially constructed and maintained through social, political, and historical institutions. This social construction is then used to justify systems of oppression. This allows dominant groups to maintain the power and privilege they have in society. The theory exposes and challenges these issues and also calls for transformation in society to dismantle the institution of racism.

Another important aspect of critical race theory is its emphasis on the lived experiences of marginalized communities. The theory recognizes that traditional and dominant academic discourses often overlook the voices of these marginalized people, who also turn out to be the most affected by racism. As a result, critical race theory calls for storytelling and personal narratives as legitimate forms of knowledge about the marginalized communities whose history have been claimed as unimportant. Their histories are erased by the dominant groups; therefore, the stories that come from these communities provide a more nuanced understanding of their oppression. This results in narratives and insights that legal analysis fails to capture.

Critics of critical race theory argue that the theory focuses too much on race and systemic inequity which risks further division in the society. Some critique that the theory's liberal principles, like equal opportunity for all, are overly cynical. They also argue that the theory dismisses the progress achieved through civil rights movements. Critical race theory makes its stance clear that the intention is not to

dismiss the progress but to make everyone understand the limitations of existing frameworks. These frameworks fail to address the deeply embedded racial inequities. The theory shows that it is important that we acknowledge systemic racism in order to stop it.

Critical race theory is also known to be studied in fields like education, sociology, and public health. The theory is used to analyse disparities present in school discipline policies. It also looks into disparities regarding how people's health is treated. The theory also looks into housing segregation. These examples show the versatility of critical race theory as it analyses racism across various domains. But across America, the theory has attracted attention, in recent years, from debates that discuss its necessity. Critics of critical race theory have misinterpreted it as an anti-white ideology. These arguments completely dismiss the efforts to understand systemic oppression through this lens. The polarizing opinions about the theory across the country challenge its journey to reach its goals.

American lawyer Derrick Albert Bell Jr. (1930–2011), argues that it is unrealistic to think that racial equality can be achieved in the United States. That is an unattainable and ideal goal. Bell observes that racism is not merely a societal flaw or prejudice but a permanently and deeply embedded feature of American society. In his work, he emphasises that laws that safeguard civil rights are a necessary step towards dismantling racial inequality. He also introduced the concept of Interest Convergence, which asserts that the progress of the people of colour is only considered when their lives align with the interests of dominant groups.

Bell argues that even these thoughts about progress are not genuine and only exist so that it maintains the existing power structure of inherent racism. Initially in

the 1970s, Bell's views about the legal systems were optimistic, but as the years passed, he started losing trust, considering the court rulings further segregated schools and communities. He understood from this that relying on judicial and legal aids alone would not yield the required results, that is, racial equality. He also noted that the legal systems would rather preserve the interest of those in power or the majority rather than having a neutral standpoint when it comes to issues such as systemic oppression.

Bell was able to frame racial inequality as a reality, and by establishing this he challenged the mainstream narratives of civil rights. He pointed out that these laws only focused on individual triumphs. His observations emphasized the need for a deeper understanding of systemic oppression and the factors that perpetrated discrimination. As a result, he urged for detailed and transformative approaches than temporary solutions. These studies remain foundational in the concept of critical race theory. It continues to provide a nuanced understanding of the issues of race, inequality and power in society. These ideas continue to influence various disciplines. Critical Race Theory acts as a powerful framework in understanding how racism functions as something that is deeply embedded in the society. The theory emphasizes that race is a social construct and this provides a better understanding about the lives of marginalized communities. Critical race theory also urges the need of counter-narratives that challenge dominant ideologies.

Intersectionality is a key component of critical race theory. Intersectionality analyses how various social identities of a person intersect and create an overlapping system of oppression or privilege. For example, the overlapping of identity in a black woman, through the lens of race, gender, sexuality, etc, will make her a victim of overlapping system of oppression. The term was by American civil rights advocate

Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s. An example given by Kimberlé Crenshaw herself is as follows. A company hired only white women for office work and Black men for manual labour work. Therefore, a black woman was not able to get either an office job as she was not white, and she couldn't get a manual labour job as she was not a man. When the woman sued the company for discrimination, the court ruled that there was no discrimination because the company hired both women and Black people; the law was unable to see the unique discrimination she experienced at the intersection of Black womanhood.

Initially, intersectionality focused mainly on highlighting the unique experiences of Black women. Their struggles were not fully understood as it was analysed by separating the issue of race or gender. As time passed, the concept of intersectionality evolved into a crucial tool for understanding how overlapping identities shape experiences of oppression and privilege. This study offered a more nuanced understanding of systemic inequality.

Intersectionality, in its crux, analyses and challenges how dominant frameworks only talk about social issues in isolation. The various identities of an individual are treated separately, which does not let the study reach a conclusion in the case of marginalized communities. Intersectionality emphasises how deeply connected these identities are, which means that they cannot be detached from each other. As the example suggests the experiences of a Black woman are very different from those of a Black man or a white woman as the black woman exists racism and sexism overlap. Earlier discourses overlooked these nuances and these studies failed to take into account the experiences of the marginalized communities.

Another important aspect that intersectionality points out is how power operates outside and within several social categories. Different systems of oppression namely racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity etc do not function independently but instead strengthen each other. For example, the discrimination that a financially struggling transgender person of colour may experience will be very unique, taking into account their economic status, gender identity, and race. Intersectionality aims to expose these issues and to make them visible enough for people to understand.

Another important contribution of the concept of intersectionality is its ability to break down the issues of the lived experiences of marginalized groups. The theory urges the importance of counter-narratives often dealing with personal experiences written by the people of these communities. Intersectionality exposes how this discrimination is present in even everyday life. For example, a female Mexican immigrant might face not just discrimination based on race and sexism but economic exploitation as well. The ability of the concept of intersectionality to recognize these intersections is essential for developing new discourses that are inclusive and equitable. Intersectionality is therefore a nuanced and detailed understanding of inequality.

Intersectionality is criticized by some, claiming that the overemphasis that intersectionality puts on individual experiences could lead to collective struggles being neglected. Conservatives argue that intersectionality is identity politics and that it is an attempt to gain through victimhood. However, intersectionality counters these claims by emphasizing that the theory does not break social movements but strengthens them by making sure that the voices of the most oppressed are heard. Through addressing overlapping systems of oppression that affect different

marginalized groups, intersectionality promotes solidarity and inclusivity. These are done for the betterment of the community and social change.

Intersectionality has also played a crucial role in the areas of academia, activism, and policymaking. In the field of education, for example, intersectionality analyses and draws attention to the issue of inequality in school discipline. The theory observes that Black girls are disproportionately punished and this is due to the overlapping of racial and gender biases. In the area of public health, intersectionality is used to analyse how economic status, race, and gender could lead to inequalities in health outcomes. In the field of activism, several activists have adopted intersectionality as a framework to call for inclusive policies. These inclusive policies will then become a medium to that address the needs of marginalized groups like queer people of colour, disabled people, and undocumented immigrants. Unlike many other frameworks, intersectionality focuses mainly on practicality and the need to apply this to everyday life.

Intersectionality gained popularity in recent years in the public discourse. But the theory is often misinterpreted by critics and the public alike. Some critics misinterpret the theory as an ideology rather than a framework. Some others use the term without fully understanding its principles. These misunderstandings show the importance of continued discussions and awareness about this theory. There should be a dialogue about the principles of intersectionality. A common misconception about intersectionality is that the theory might be about ranking oppressions. Some even argue that it divides the communities further. But, on the contrary, it calls for an understanding and acknowledgment of systemic inequalities. It is important to have an understanding of how these systemic inequalities work so that they can be dismantled.

Kimberlé Crenshaw hosted a TED talk in the year 2016 titled *The Urgency of Intersectionality*. In this TED talk, she points out the importance of acknowledging how overlapping identities create unique discrimination that affects individuals, especially among marginalized communities. These individuals are at the intersections of race, gender, and other identities that the privileged groups tend to marginalize. She begins her TED talk by introducing the concept of intersectionality, a term she coined. She uses this term to describe how different types of oppression, intersect and create unique challenges for marginalized communities. These intersections then lead to the exclusion of certain groups, alienating them from society. They get excluded from social justice systems and policymaking, making them invisible.

Through various examples, Crenshaw emphasizes the importance of intersectionality. She turns to the issue of police violence against black people. This point is highlighted when she shows how the killing of Black women through police brutality is often overlooked in public discourses. The focus is limited to black men like Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Crenshaw employs a visual exercise where towards the end of her talk, she asks the audience to stand and inquire if they recognize the names of men and women killed by police. While most people in the audience seem to be aware of the men's names, almost everyone is unaware of the women killed by police. This shows how discrimination against black women is excluded from public discourses, even crucial conversations about police brutality. Crenshaw argues that this invisibility is what intersectionality is trying to bring attention to. The visual exercise makes people aware of the importance of looking at the world through the lens of intersectionality.

Crenshaw then discusses the social media campaign #SayHerName. This is an initiative that aims to draw attention to the discrimination faced by black women and it focuses mainly on those affected by violence from the state and systemic neglect. She emphasizes the necessity to include and even center counter-narratives of the marginalized. It is not merely for representation but important in acknowledging systemic oppression. If intersectionality is ignored, the systemic violence against marginalized individuals will continue to be invisible.

Crenshaw concludes by calling for a collective action to draw attention to the problems of the people at the margins. She calls out the society for their discomfort in confronting the issues of the marginalised. She emphasises the importance of acknowledging the interconnected nature of oppression. Adopting intersectionality would mean that people are recognising the complex nature of discrimination. It also ensures that no community is left behind. Crenshaw's TED talk calls for the need to take action. It also reminds people of the transformative power.

Intersectionality is a framework that urges understanding to address the complex nature of identity and oppression. The theory highlights how everything in society is interconnected and how power operates at multiple levels. This power erases the voices of the marginalised. Therefore, these people are alienated and made invisible. Even though the concept of intersectionality has faced criticism and misrepresentation, the theory's contributions are essential and relevant. Intersectionality provides a new perspective that will enable to creation of a more inclusive world.

Critical Race Theory and intersectionality are indispensable frameworks of study for understanding the complex nature of systemic oppression. Both of these

frameworks challenge traditional discourses about equality and how they overlook the interconnected nature of identities. These discourses also ignore the way oppression is deeply embedded in power structures. Critical race theory exposes how racism is deeply interconnected in legal and social systems, whereas intersectionality, which is one of the main concepts of Critical race theory, highlights how individuals face overlapping forms of discrimination because of the interplay between race, gender, class etc. These two frameworks provide a nuanced lens to examine systemic inequalities. It ensures that the most marginalized voices are heard and aims to expose the racism embedded in the very system.

Chapter 2

Lyrical Resistance of Kendrick Lamar

Mainstream music is often centered on catchy lyrics and melodious tunes that help one escape their reality. The imagery it evokes is of a world full of joy and indulgence, something many people have not and will not experience in their lifetime. Rap music on the other hand is a genre that fearlessly portrays uncomfortable truths. The genre openly talks about lives surrounding poverty, racial discrimination, and violence. This art form mirrors the world as it is, and not how we wish it to be.

Rap music is uniquely distinct as it captures the enduring struggles and defiance of those who are neglected by society. The genre goes deeper than the painted picture of love and fame offered by popular culture. It originated to be a voice for the voiceless, telling deeper stories of survival and systematized oppression. This art form is for those who cannot afford to romanticize life. They write their struggles to break away from the oppressive societal norms and, in doing so, they authorise their own stories.

This project analyses the discography of a rapper, who despite being born into a marginalized and oppressed environment, comes out of it to uplift his community from the web of lies and deception of the dominant class. Kendrick Lamar Duckworth is an American rapper born on 17th June 1987 in Compton, California. He is regarded as one of the most influential voices in hip hop. He is known for his lyricism which is a blend of intricate storytelling and social commentary. What makes Kendrick stand out is that his artistry is not merely for entertainment like most of his peers, he uses it to express systemic issues and the complexities of his identity in modern America.

He is the first child of former gang hustler Kenneth "Kenny" Duckworth and hairdresser Paula Oliver. Both of parents are African Americans from the south side of Chicago. When they were teenagers, they relocated to Compton in 1984, due to his father's gang affiliations. But the city they were moving into, Compton, was no better. Kendrick's early life was rough with violence, gang culture and drugs. Pyrus and Crips were just some of the many gangs that Kendrick were involved with during his early days. At the young age of five, Kendrick witnessed his first murder right outside his apartment. Later in an interview with David Greene from NPR music (2015), he confesses that the whole episode did something to him but he had to get used to that lifestyle as he could not afford another. In school, he was introduced to the writings of Martin Luther King and other social activists.

Later Kendrick began to write poetry of his own. He would personify himself as the kid who grew up too fast. In high school, Kendrick started dabbling into gang life. During this era, Compton's crime rate was at an all-time high with 3100 violent crimes per hundred thousand residents. This crime rate was disconcerting when compared to other American cities like Los Angeles where the crime rate was one thousand crimes for a hundred thousand residents, over three times less than Compton. Around this time Kendrick befriended a local DJ named Dave Free, a guy who, years later would become the president of Top Dog Entertainment Kendrick's record label. Anthony Tiffith, former gang member and the founder of Top Dog Entertainment, which was only a neighbourhood name back then, becomes interested in the music of teenager Kendrick, who had released his first mixtape. Over the next several years Kendrick released six full-length projects.

Section 80 is Kendrick's first full-length LP released in 2011 and has a total of 16 tracks. In one of the tracks, Kendrick describes himself as being a non-existent age

due to him doing too many adult activities. This project analyses Kendrick's next three consecutive albums through the lens of critical race theory and Intersectionality which will present the genre of rap music as a site of resistance and an art form that brings a marginalized community together.

Section 80 album was followed up by Kendrick's 2012 album *Good Kid Maad City*, which, over twelve years, has been referred to as one of the greatest hip-hop albums of all time. The songs paint the picture of Kendrick's life as a good kid growing up in a mad city. After almost every song, there is a small interlude with a voice recording and piecing these recordings together results in the plot of the album.

Only a handful of albums transcend our time, leaving a lasting mark on both the genre and popular culture. But even fewer albums have successfully captured that feeling of a lifestyle and experience so strong it feels like the listeners are living in it. *Good Kid Maad City* by Kendrick Lamar is one such album. Analyzing the album through the lens of critical race theory which examines the systematic racism in the power structures of society, allows a deeper dissection of the themes present. Kendrick portrays his city Compton plagued by systematic oppression not just from the outsiders but he presents a community who subjugates themselves. The cyclical violence that perpetrates through gang rivalries in the city pushes even a person who wants a better way out with no choice but to get influenced by the distractions of the community.

The title in the album cover of *Good Kid Maad City* reads, a short film by Kendrick Lamar and that is exactly what the album feels like. It is a day in the life of Kendrick, a good kid trying to survive in a mad city. The album is in many ways, a coming-of-age story of a kid who struggles to maintain his innocence in an

environment that is very far from innocent. He is surrounded by sex, drugs, violence and overall delinquency, but he understands at a young age that there is a way out, even if it is difficult. The album cover is a polaroid of Baby Kendrick with his two teenage uncles and granddad. Everyone's eyes are blanked out except for his and he stares right into the lens, playing into the theme of an innocent kid in a crazy environment.

On the album cover, there is a lot hidden in plain sight. A baby bottle is right beside a bottle of alcohol, a theme Kendrick addresses in the album. There is a photo of Kendrick and his dad on the wall, and the uncle on whose lap baby Kendrick is sitting is flashing a gang sign. A few years after this photo was taken, Kendrick, aged just five, would witness his first murder, a teenage drug dealer gunned down in front of his childhood home.



Fig.1. Album cover of *Good Kid Maad City*

The album is divided into two halves. The first half details a single day in Kendrick's life, while the second explores the aftermath of that day. Each track is like

a scene in the movie, with Kendrick as a protagonist transporting listeners into the gritty streets of Compton; his turbulent family dynamics and his constant struggle between temptation and redemption.

The album is not chronological and the opening track *Sherane a.k.a Master Splinter's Daughter* is not the beginning of the story, but it introduces one of the album's main themes, which is temptation. Sherane is a girl from Kendrick's neighborhood who he is infatuated with, but his desires are soon overshadowed by the fear that she might have ulterior motives and connections to a rival gang. Kendrick then faces the choice between following his desires and staying true to his conscience, a dilemma that repeats itself throughout the album. Most of the songs are followed by voicemails by his parents or friends that tie the plot of the album together. The next song *The Art of Peer Pressure* introduces Kendrick's friends and another central theme of the album -peer pressure. Throughout the track, Kendrick engages in activities that he normally would not, giving into the pressures and expectations of his friends. "Look at me, I got the blunt in my mouth. Usually I'm drug-free, but shit, I'm with the homies" (Lamar 2:02)

The next track, *Money Trees* (ft. Jay Rock), ties right into this theme of peer pressure, but also tackles other aspects of Kendrick's life at the time. Kendrick grew up without a silver spoon, so he felt he needed to hustle to earn money. Alongside pressure from his friends, he had the desire to make money in whatever way possible, even if it was illegal. Kendrick makes sure to tell his friends about it for validation from home invasions to unprotected sex, to even robbing an innocent reverend, as music becomes his escape in the midst of his vices. He prioritized this lifestyle, which he portrays vividly in this song.

Kendrick then runs into a group of men outside Sherane's house who jump him. This is a wake-up call for Kendrick as he realizes that the tables could turn just as easily, making him a target in this mad city instead, and as the album progresses into the second half, Kendrick comes to the realization that unless he finds his way out, then his fate will be sealed forever. A major turning point in the narrative comes in the ninth track of the album, where one of Kendrick's homies, Dave dies in a shootout after his friends seek revenge against the people who jumped Kendrick earlier.

The next track, which is also the longest song in the album, *Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst* is inspired by this loss. Critical race theory's concept of Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw examines how overlapping identities shape different realities and different experiences of oppression. Kendrick reflects on the realities of people around him, including black women, who face exploitation on a different scale in *Sing About Me*. In this track, Kendrick encapsulates all his fears, insecurities, hopes, desires and regrets with poetic storytelling. Reality sets in, that the lifestyle that he wanted to be a part of leads to almost nothing. Death and dysfunction are inevitable if he lives the life, he once desired. Ultimately, Kendrick gains the wisdom needed in order to survive the environment he is thrown into. The track, *Good Kid*, which sets off the album's theme of realization, stands out as the only song in the album without profanities, which emphasizes the idea of him being a good kid in a mad city, guilty only by association.

In the next track *Real*, he reflects his spiritual awakening and questions what he sees as real. He realizes that his definition of being real had just been him living for others and not himself. This makes him question why he had this mindset and comes to the realization that it is from lack of self-love. The world cornered Kendrick into

this reality and his coping mechanism was doing what others thought he was supposed to do. He finds that the only way to be real is by being a good person, taking care of his family and standing by his beliefs, not that of others.

“Any nigga can kill a man, that don't make you a real nigga

Real is responsibility

Real is taking care of your motherfucking family

Real is God, nigga" (Lamar 4:19)

Kendrick also talks about how people in Compton have a backup plan for a backup plan as they never expect things to work out in their favour. This shows their lack of belief in the power structures as well as themselves. Compton finds Kendrick Lamar reconciling with the duality of his city, acknowledging its flaws while celebrating its resilience. In one of the tracks, Kendrick calls himself Compton's human sacrifice as he pledges to work for the betterment of his city and therefore his community. He considers himself a necessary sacrifice for this cause.

The mid-2010s were a transitional period for rap music. The music sounded hollow as if a crucial component that made the genre vital was missing. The art with incredible roots of resilience and resistance now felt apolitical overflowing with commercialization and hyper masculinity. It is in this context; relief arrives in the form of the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar in March 2015.

When asked about the strange album title, Kendrick replied in an interview with *Mass Appeal* (2015) that the album explores something as beautiful as a butterfly getting pimped. This album was unlike anything the rap community had heard till then. It had consciousness with the sound of jazz, which is another powerful music genre that originated from the African American community. This jazz-influenced rap

created a new kind of music that, when mixed with some of the most controversial themes, gave birth to an album that was praised critically and commercially.

The album opens with the track *Wesley's Theory* which samples the song *Every Nigga is a Star* by Boris Gardiner. *Wesley's Theory* establishes the story and theme of the overall album. The album sets off by talking about what Kendrick and many other Compton rappers go through when they break into the industry. They get exploited by the industry and effectively pimped for their own benefit. The second verse of the first track is from the perspective of the fictional character Uncle Sam, who is the personification of the United States and its ideals. The character is considered to be a symbol of the manifestation of patriotic emotion. But from the perspective of the black people, the character represents a country of capitalistic ideas and broken promises.

The next track is the first of the two interludes titled *For Free?* This song involves two people, it could be interpreted as one being literal and another being metaphorical. As the song plays, Kendrick is explaining to a girl that he is not willing to please her materialistically after she yelled at him to satisfy her money-driven lifestyle. Metaphorically, Kendrick represents the black artist in the industry and the woman represents the standards of the industry that expects the black artist to follow the dominant ideologies and narratives.

The next track is titled *King Kunta* representing Kunta Kinte, a fictional African slave who was the protagonist in Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Kinte is characterized as being resistant to the constant attempts of the slave masters wanting him to be more like the whites, but he chooses punishment rather than do that. Even though Kendrick grew up among gangsters, he

chooses the right way and stays true to himself, while accepting his hometown as it is. The fourth track *Institutionalized* takes a sharp turn from the confident tone of King Kunta. Being institutionalized refers to being so used to living in a certain way that it becomes the only thing you know. The song reflects Kendrick's experience of living in Compton for far too long, that it has started to haunt him. The violence, crimes and drugs of the city eat away at his mind every day.

The walls in the next track titled *These Walls* refer to the walls of a woman's vagina, the walls of a prison and the walls of his mind. The song follows Kendrick trying to hook up with the girlfriend of the guy who's in prison for killing his friend Dave, as revenge. There is a resentment in him against everyone who has wronged him and that resentment takes a toll on his mental health, turning into a deep depression. The sixth track *u*, opens with Kendrick screaming. He speaks to himself in a very negative way, saying that he despises himself and calls himself a big failure. The second part of the song shows a sobbing Kendrick as he begins to question his entire existence. He survived Compton, but he could not redeem everyone with him, which leads him to feel solely responsible for whatever happens in the city.

The seventh track of the album is titled *Alright* and it starts with the lines from Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, "Alls my life, I had to fight" (Lamar 00:03). The song talks about hope, resilience and unity. The electrifying chorus "We gon' be alright" (Lamar 00:18) later was heard chanting by youngsters during the 2015 Black Lives Matter movement. In the song, Kendrick decides to put his faith in God, which enables him to look past his failures and say everything will be alright. The song also protests against police brutality against black people. This acknowledges the systemic racism prevalent in society when one is targeted based on their skin colour. He also references the broken promise of 40 acres and a mule, which

was a wartime order proclaimed during the American Civil War that allotted a plot of land of 40 acres and a mule for agriculture to the freed families of black people. But this order was later reversed, making a fool of the community that eagerly waited for the right to finally own some land. This song is also where he mentions Lucy, short for Lucifer for the first time. At the 2015 BET Awards, Kendrick performed the song on top of a police car highlighting the theme of police brutality, which became controversial. Ironically, a reporter on Fox News observed that Hip Hop has done more damage to African American youth than racism. Kendrick replied in an interview with TMZ (2015), that hip hop is not the problem but the reality of his people is.

In the next interlude *For Sale*, it becomes clear that Lucy is short for the devil Lucifer. Lucy is personified as an attractive woman who tries to tempt him to sign contracts, promising to aid his family and make him rich. Kendrick scrambles for answers when he realizes that the evils of the industry are around him, until he comes home in the next track of the album *Momma*. Coming home could be interpreted in three different ways in this track. One could be about him returning home after the incidents of *Good Kid Maad City* when his mother asks him to come home and give back to the people of Compton through words of encouragement in his music. Another interpretation will be Kendrick coming home to Africa, where he went in 2014, which inspired him to make this album. He said in an interview that when he visited Africa, he felt like he belonged there. The third interpretation is Kendrick returning to his former self before he became a famous rapper. In this song, he thanks God for rap music as it brought him back home. He talks about how he thought he knew everything. “I know what I know and I know it well Not to ever forget until I realized I didn't know shit the day I came home” (Lamar 02:19). In the final verse, he

meets a young boy in Africa who resembles many features of Kendrick himself. The boy tells Kendrick that everything he knows about the world is a lie and Kendrick is living a lie. The boy nevertheless gives him advice “If you pick, destiny over rest in peace, Then be an advocate, go tell your homies especially To come back home” (Lamar 03:26).

In the tenth track titled *Hood Politics*, Kendrick transports us to his past where all he knew was his hood, which is a contrast to the previous track. He also discusses the misconceptions of the hood that are perceived by the public, with media trying to capture the many crimes on camera to paint a picture of the ghetto in a certain light. The line “Obama say, “what it do?”” (Lamar 02:46) which is repeated three times refers to the black president not being able to do much for the black people due to the immovable roadblocks of the American society.

The eleventh track *How Much a Dollar Cost* is an anecdotal piece about Kendrick's experience with a homeless man at a gas station in South Africa. While Kendrick is pumping up his car, the homeless man approaches him and asks for 10 Rand, which is approximately a dollar. Kendrick refuses, mainly because of the suspicion that the guy is going to use it for drugs. The man begs and pleads, telling him that if there is one thing he has defeated in life, it is temptation. But Kendrick still refuses and closes his car. The man stares into the car with disappointment, which Kendrick takes as disrespect. The man then asks him if he has ever read Exodus 14, a section in biblical scripture that talks about being humble in the eyes of God. Kendrick begins to feel guilty and resentful towards the man but still attempts to justify his reasons for not giving him the dollar. Kendrick notices that the man smells of alcohol and he is walking with a stumble but the man ends the conversation by saying “I'll tell you just how much a dollar costs The price of having a spot in heaven

embrace your loss, I'm God" (Lamar 03:45). The meaning of the song could also be interpreted as something to ask ourselves. What would we give up to chase money? meaning that a dollar could cost you your soul.

Track twelve is titled *Complexion*. As the title suggests, the song is about colourism, especially in the black community. Kendrick calls attention to a problem within his community that pulls the community down. He said in an interview with Recording Academy (2016) that his idea was to make a song that reflected the different complexions of black women. Kendrick has observed a separation among his people. "There is a separation between the light and the dark skin because it is just in our nature to do so, but we're all black. This concept came from South Africa and I saw all these different colours speaking a beautiful language." He says in the same interview. *Complexion* is an empowering song that urges the black community to love their own skin tones. Through the lens of intersectionality, this song serves as a mirror to the thoughts of black women who are objectified based on their skin colour. The subtitle of the song references Zulu people, who are an ethnic group from South Africa, which places this issue in the global context of colonization.

The thirteenth track in the album titled *The Blacker The Berry* blatantly addresses the issue of systemic oppression faced by the African American community in America. The title is inspired by Wallace Thurman's 1929 novel of the same name. The novel follows the story of a young black woman and her experiences with colourism within the black community where she is treated as inferior by lighter-skinned black people. Kendrick makes a bold move here, which makes this one of his most controversial songs.

The first verse starts with the line “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2015” (Lamar 00:54) and the reason why he says this is only understood in the last verse. In the first two verses, Kendrick fearlessly points out the manipulation and lies of America to cover up the underlying hatred towards black people. He criticises ignorant people who think the present age is a post-racial society and do not believe in institutional racism. Kendrick says that this system made him a killer. “You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga” (Lamar 01:45). In the final verse, Kendrick tells the reason why he called himself a hypocrite in the first verse. He calls out his own community in this verse, who internalises this hatred and expresses it towards their people. Kendrick talks about how the South African tribes Zulu and Xhosa and the gangs in Compton fight among each other to win a war in which only death settles the score. He asks his community how they can condemn violence when they kill their own people. “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street. When gang-banging make me kill a nigga blacker than me? Hypocrite!” (Lamar 04:27)

The fifteenth track is titled *i* and it completely juxtaposes the perspective of the earlier track *u*. In this song, instead of self-hatred, Kendrick has learned to look past it and realize that not everything can be in his control and therefore is not his fault. He bluntly states that he has seen enough violence against his community from outside and within. Now he thinks that what he can try to achieve is to love himself, which becomes the first step to resistance.

The closing track of the album is titled *Mortal Man*. In this song, Kendrick makes a reference to Nelson Mandela in the chorus of the song, seeing it as the torch passing, hoping he can continue his legacy of the fight for social equality. Throughout Kendrick's career, he has tried to emulate the feeling that he was able to make it despite the effects of the Compton lifestyle he has preached in all of his mixtapes and

albums. But this album gives him a staunch realization that he was not able to fully escape it, but it is not bad to embrace where you came from; to appreciate your roots; to be a mortal man who is capable of making mistakes. At the very end of *Mortal Man*, Kendrick talks to the late rap legend Tupac Shakur, one of his greatest inspirations not only as an artist but as a black man. Kendrick then goes on to read a poem that metaphorically describes the process of metamorphosis, in other words, the process of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, as a symbolic meaning of being set free and finally spreading your wings into the open world. Through the lens of critical race theory, which appreciates counter-narratives of the oppressed community, this closing track sums up the ideas of the album and Kendrick's principles. Young Kendrick compares himself and his people to a caterpillar; an organism that eats away the environment around him in order to survive.

Attempting to break free, Kendrick begins the process of building a cocoon that institutionalizes him. When it finally reaches its potential, the caterpillar breaks free from the walls of the cocoon, emerging as the butterfly. Now free, the butterfly reveals concepts to the caterpillar it never thought of before. Finally, understanding each other, the butterfly and the caterpillar set aside their differences and come out united. Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same. Through this poem, Kendrick provides a perspective where he has lived as both the caterpillar and the butterfly. *To Pimp a Butterfly* presents a profound critique of systemic racism, internalized oppression, and the complexities of Black identity in America. Kendrick's lyrics expose the contradictions and hypocrisies of a society built on discrimination while also celebrating the resilience and beauty of Blackness.

condition of lacking strength or quality which is regarded as a disadvantage whereas wickedness means the quality of being evil or morally wrong and these two themes will constantly oppose each other in this album. Starting from *BLOOD*, throughout the album Kendrick presents similar opposing themes as choices for the listeners to make, and this choice will result in an outcome which will decide whether you will live or die.

Then it is a seamless transition into the second track *DNA*, and this song acts as a proper introduction to Kendrick's character in this album. The music video of this song shows Kendrick dressed as his martial arts alter ego Kung Fu Kenny. This act is inspired by American actor Don Cheadle's character of the same name in the movie *Rush Hour 2* and the music video of *DNA* features the actor himself. By then, he is an established rapper winning awards after awards and life is almost too perfect which comes as no surprise as he had just released *To Pimp a Butterfly* which is already considered one of the best albums of all time. In the first verse Kendrick lists 23 things that are in its *DNA*, the same number as the number of chromosome pairs in the human *DNA* and the list contains both positive and negative things like war, peace, power, poison, pain, joy etc. But the majority of things point towards one of the two prominent themes of this album yet- wickedness, which also makes sense considering the aggressive way in which he is rapping in this track. When analysed through the lens of critical race theory, *DNA* shows Kendrick's pride in the heritage of his community but he never forgets to remind the listeners that when he says his community, he is acknowledging a community that encompasses generational trauma of slavery, systemic racism, as well as gang violence within. So, when the first track is about weakness and the second about wickedness, the listeners are prone to guess the theme of the third track, *YAH*.

Two years later, Kendrick released his Pulitzer Prize winning album *DAMN*. It became a historical win as it was the first time in the history of the Pulitzer Prize that it has been given to an artist outside of the classical or jazz community.

Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN* (2017) is an album that presents the introspection of a Black man navigating the complexities of his identity amid systemic oppression. The album is an integral part of his discography as it shows the rapper diving within to question his internal struggles, fears and triumphs, which are caused as a result of the environment that he grew up in. The culminating thoughts of this art piece serve as a representation of every individual in an oppressed community. Through its complex themes and layered storytelling, the album serves as a guide to every confused person in this repressed setting as it reminds them that it is time for introspection. *DAMN* is a stepping stone to resistance where one accepts their own identity before joining together for the community. *DAMN* is considered to be one of Kendrick's darkest projects to date, filled with religious ideals, contradicting and opposing dualities. It could also be read as the twisted journey of a man who is cursed and as he introspects his past, his rap career and his many sins he realizes that all of this ties back to one terrifying thought, being damned to death and hell.

The story of *DAMN* begins strangely with the death of Kendrick Lamar. The first song in the album *BLOOD* tells a simple story. Kendrick is walking down a street and he stumbles upon a blind woman. He notices that she seems frustrated as she has dropped something on the sidewalk and is trying to find it. Kendrick decides to help her but the woman oddly replies that he has lost his life and shoots him. The song *BLOOD* opens with the lines "Is it wickedness? Is it weakness? You decide. Are we gonna live or die?" (Lamar 00:00). With this line Kendrick introduces the two main themes of the album, wickedness and weakness. Weakness means the state or

When transitioning to the song *YAH*, it draws attention as this song is way less energetic than *DNA*. It is also pessimistic and vulnerable. So, it seems that every song on *DAMN* alternates between wickedness and weakness. In this song, Kendrick is reflecting on his massive fame and even though he is one of the best rappers worldwide, he is worried that his creativity is going to burn out. The title *YAH* is not just an abbreviation of the expression 'yeah' as one might think, but it is referring to Yahweh the closest estimation to God's actual name in Hebrew, which adds to the religious themes in this album. Surprisingly, in this song Kendrick also says that he is not religious but he mentions that he identifies as an Israelite. According to the Bible, Israelites are God's chosen people, and they're often linked to the book of Deuteronomy where a verse from this book states that these people will be cursed with confusion, frustration and illnesses until they follow God's will. Later in this album, it is said, according to Kendrick's cousin Carl, that Israelites are all people of colour. Carl reasons that all the struggles that the black people in America are going through are because they are God's chosen people and until all these people follow God's true Commandments they're going to be cursed.

The next song *ELEMENT* starts with rapper Kid Capri shouting the lines "Ain't nobody praying for me Y'all know, what happens on Earth stays on Earth" (Lamar 00:07). Kendrick realizes that nobody's praying for him and no matter what he does on this Earth, he is going to end up damned. But he also keeps asserting himself as the best rapper in the game even more than on *DNA* which tells that he doesn't care whether he is cursed.

The transition from *ELEMENT* to the next song *FEEL* is important because here Kendrick says the same words in a different tone, as if realizing that nobody is praying for him. Kendrick tries to take refuge in his rap career to escape the fact that

he is cursed, but when he realizes that he cannot hide there either, he opens up about what he feels, showing vulnerability, which is considered a weakness. The lyrics are straightforward but he also plays with dualities. For example, Kendrick feels like nobody is looking out for him, but he also feels like he is isolating himself. The most crucial takeaway from this song would be Kendrick's realization that he might be cursed because, as the Deuteronomy says, he is confused and frustrated.

The next track *LOYALTY* is a direct response to *FEEL* where Kendrick realizes that nobody is praying for him, so now, he wants loyal people close to him who are going to pray for him. The seventh track of the album titled *PRIDE* starts with the lines "Love's gonna get you killed, But pride's gonna be the death of you and you and me" (Lamar 00:04) and here Kendrick makes a clear distinction between the words 'killed' and 'death' where he explains that Pride will infect your mind and destroy you along with the ones around you. This song could be read as the blind woman in the first track saying he has lost his life by being too focused or blinded by the success of his career. Pride, one of the worst sins according to the Bible, makes him feel like he is more worthy and above everyone, but in Christianity, nobody is supposed to feel Superior to God.

HUMBLE is the eighth track on *DAMN* and is a braggadocious rap song where Kendrick takes shots at other people but also himself. The first verse is written in the form of a typical braggadocious rap where Kendrick is talking about how great he is but, in the chorus, he is reflecting on what he just said and realising that he should be humble. *HUMBLE* is the turning point in the album and it is where he acknowledges that even if it is difficult, he has to overcome his sins by being humble.

LUST is the ninth song in the album and is another one of the seven deadly sins. Lust is a very strong sexual desire, but it is considered a sin only when sexual pleasure is sought for itself, isolated from its procreative purposes. The first verse of the song tells the routine of a man and a woman who just live for temporary pleasures and go back to sleep to do it all over again. The second verse, talks about the routine of Kendrick, a rapper who is stuck in his ways, wanting to change but doesn't. He is lusting after sexual pleasures, fame and money. But Kendrick now seems to fear God because of this and it is the first time in the album he talks about the fear of being damned by God. This fear will only grow stronger in the coming tracks as he slowly starts to drift more toward weakness.

LOVE is the opposite of *LUST* and in this song, Kendrick talks about his relationship with his partner but he emphasizes that he values loyalty more than love. Kendrick starts this song by presenting another pair of choices, love or lust? He chooses love. Kendrick overcomes his pride with humbleness and lust with love. He is letting go of his wickedness.

The eleventh track *XXX* paints a picture of America that is far from perfect. The first verse talks about the mindset of young black men growing up in poverty and crime-infested streets of America. The verse also introduces a character by the name of Johnny who is Kendrick's young cousin. Johnny doesn't want to go to school, instead wants to be a rapper like his big cousin, reflecting the mentality of the people growing up in his community. In the second verse, Kendrick gets a call from a friend who says his son has been killed because of insufficient funds. Here Kendrick is referring to Martin Luther King Jr's infamous speech *I Have a Dream*, where he criticises the excuse of insufficient funds in a country of opportunities and riches. The usually peaceful Kendrick advises the man to take violent revenge as his principles

involve being loyal to his family and community in general. Kendrick then abruptly ends the call by saying he has to speak at a convention about gun control. In the coming chorus and verse, Kendrick criticises America's hypocrisy starting from its foundational idea of the American Dream and conditional nature of freedom. He calls out America, which is turning a blind eye to corruption, gun violence and its willingness to condemn violence abroad while ignoring the systemic violence against Black bodies within. He also criticises the audacity of reporters to blame the cause of racism in the victims themselves, because, according to them, hip hop has done more damage to the African American community than racism. "The Great American flag is wrapped and dragged with explosives" (Lamar 03:00).

FEAR is the twelfth and longest song on *DAMN*. It starts with a voicemail from Carl Duckworth, Kendrick's cousin, who explains to him that they are cursed. He believes that they need to embrace their true identity as God's people for their punishment to subside. The song consists of three verses, each verse representing one or more of Kendrick's fears. In the first verse, the listeners are taken back to 1994 when Kendrick was 7 years old living with his abusive parents. At this age, Kendrick's worst fear was being violently punished for even simple actions like crying in public or jumping on the couch. The second verse takes place 10 years later in 2004, when Kendrick was 17 years old, living in Compton and taking part in gangs and illegal activities. Here Kendrick mentions his fear of death. In a city like Compton, he could die from anything, whether it is from police violence or even trying to diffuse a fight between his two friends. "I'll prolly die 'cause that's what you do when you're 17" (Lamar 03:31). The last verse again jumps 10 years ahead. It is 2014 and Kendrick is working on an album. He has garnered fame and money but he has only grown accustomed to more fears, accumulated 10 times over the years.

Among others, his biggest fear is losing it all. Losing his career as a rapper, creativity or his entire self or identity. Towards the end, he wonders whether he is living through fear through rap, which references back to the first line of the album where Kendrick wonders if he is alive because of fear or weakness or because of his rap career and his wickedness. *FEAR* is an eye-opening track for Kendrick where he reflects on the previous events in his life and decides to finally change his ways. Critical race theory values counter-narratives to the dominant ideologies and *FEAR* presents the psychological journey of a black man growing up in America with paranoia about the perpetual violence and weight of generational trauma.

In the next track *GOD*, Kendrick decides to follow God, leading the listeners to think that he is finagling on his way to salvation. *DUCKWORTH* is the last track of this album which tells the story of two men- Anthony and Ducky. Anthony was the oldest of a family of seven who turned to crime and drugs at the age of 15. He goes to work at a KFC with the hidden intention of robbing it. The guy who worked at the window there, named Ducky, having a history of gang affiliations, knew about this. Ducky was a social guy who also had a young son whom he wanted to send to college. Ducky tried to get on the good side of Anthony by giving him some free chicken and biscuits and it worked. Ducky is revealed to be Kendrick's father and 20 years later when Kendrick got signed to Anthony's label Top Dog Entertainment, meeting at the recording studio both of them could not help but burst out laughing as they realized that if Ducky did not do what he did and Anthony had robbed the KFC killing everyone inside including Ducky, Anthony would've been arrested for murder and Kendrick would've grown up without a father along a path of wickedness. This story is placed at the end of the album for a reason as it breaks the curse of Deuteronomy, the curse of violence for once.

The story of *DAMN* does not end there. At the end of the last track, the listeners hear a gunshot that kills Kendrick's father. The song also had some reversed audio which did not make sense until fans started finding clues from Kendrick releasing the collector's edition of the same album with the track list in reverse. The same tracks with the same content and themes tell an entirely different story when played in the reverse order. When the first story tells the story of Kendrick on his path to salvation from wickedness to weakness, this story begins with the death of Kendrick's father and follows his path of wickedness. The choices that Kendrick talks about in the album are given to the listeners to choose their path and see whether they end up living or dead. According to intersectionality, this album can be seen as a masterful account of a person's overlapping identities that shape experiences of oppression in his mind as well as the outside world. The oppression is internalised and this duality is central to intersectionality.

After *DAMN* Kendrick Lamar took a five-year hiatus from the industry before returning in the year 2022 with the album *Mr Morale and the Big Steppers*. The entire album is structured around his narrative about being in therapy and the importance of finding inner peace.

In the year 2024, a major shift happened in the rap music industry and the flagbearer of this change was Kendrick Lamar. The medium of this shift was a rap beef or battle between two very successful rappers of this time. A diss track is a song aimed at verbally attacking another artist as a result of some feud between the two artists. This often culminates in what is known as a rap beef, where the artist goes back-to-back releasing tracks criticizing each other without any sugar coating.

In this project, the events that happened during the rap beef are not as important as the cultural significance that followed. It is crucial to the trajectory of Kendrick's role as an artist who wanted to uplift his community and stand together against the oppressor. Kendrick Lamar and Aubrey Graham, aka Drake, are two of the biggest rap artists in the world. Since Kendrick's last album was about choosing one's peace and the importance of therapy, it was surprising, to say the least, that Kendrick would start a rap battle and most importantly with one of the most if not the most successful artists in the genre, Drake.

Analysing Kendrick's diss tracks throughout the beef, one can understand the reason why he did this. The reason is explained specifically in the song *Not Like Us*, which garnered love from both the public and critics. Kendrick calls out Drake for being the number one artist in a culture that he doesn't understand and has no interest in understanding. Kendrick exposes a truth that has been out in the open for years, but nobody paid attention to that Aubrey Graham is the polar opposite of the street rappers that he associates himself with. He is a Canadian child actor who was raised by a white Jewish mother. He appropriates rap music and uses the black aesthetic when it is convenient for him or fame and financial gain. The track calls out Drake for his exploitative behaviour towards hip-hop, where he uses Black rappers for street credibility, which he has not experienced first-hand. Kendrick also says that Drake has no right to use the n-word even though he is half black as he has not lived or grown up like them, calling him a colonizer of the rap game. This reminder from Kendrick makes people realise that Drake is "not like us".

Kendrick's image as a rapper who speaks for the culture comes full circle with the event called The Pop Out Concert. After the rap battle, Kendrick announced a concert event that he would hold in California on June 19th aka Juneteenth, which is a

federal holiday that celebrates the end of slavery in America. Kendrick wanted to use this moment as a symbolic victory lap now that the battle was over. The concert featured a bunch of artists ranging from local underground rappers from California to the greatest rappers of the West Coast including Dr Dre and Tyler the Creator.

In the concert, Kendrick performed the song *Not Like Us* for the first time not once but five consecutive times with a united audience yelling the lines to the outsiders who tried to exploit their art form. Kendrick used this platform to show Drake as a symbol of hip hop when it becomes over-commodified. It becomes a product or a trend rather than an art form built to resist some of these very ideas. The Pop Out Concert tied everything together perfectly and powerfully when Kendrick brought out even the rival gangs of the city to unite on that stage. A rapper with unshakeable principles from the start was able to bring together one of the most diverse states in the country for at least a moment, creating a powerful image celebrating the victory of the genre of hip hop and reviving its original purpose. The concert closed with a beautiful photo of many black men, women and children on stage, unified for their culture. The image was also observed as having an unintentionally striking resemblance to the album cover of *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) which shows many black men standing in front of the White House, symbolising the collectiveness of the marginalised community.

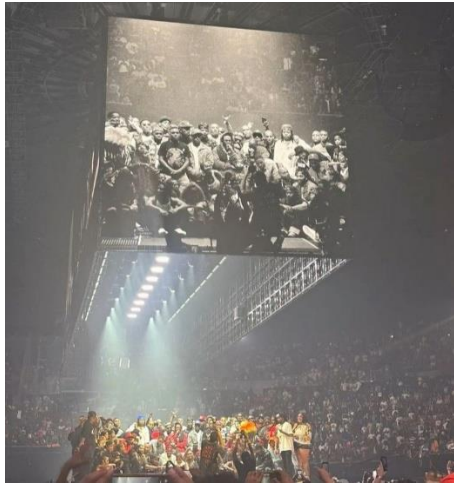
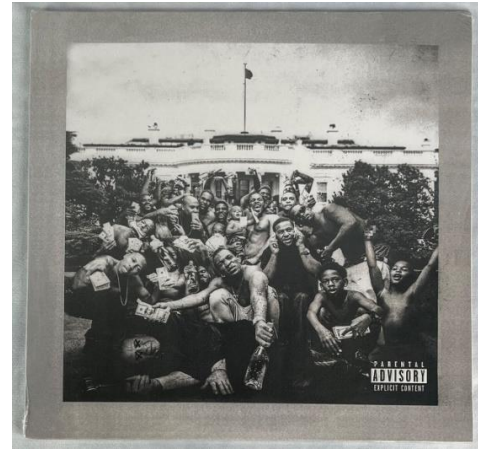


Fig. 2. The Pop Out Concert

Fig. 3. Album cover of *To Pimp a Butterfly*

Through his music, Kendrick Lamar presents his reality as that of an individual belonging to a marginalized community. The practice of storytelling through rap, which has its roots in the act of rebellion, serves as a way of self-expression that resonates with his people and oppressed people around the world. While *Good Kid Maad City* talks about innocent children growing up helplessly in toxic environments, *To Pimp a Butterfly* embraces the environment as it is, to build a community with self-respect which the dominant ideologies try to erase from them. *DAMN* explores the inherent dualities of one's mind, that shape their identity giving them a choice to be better people. Kendrick Lamar uses the potential of an art form like rap to bring together marginalized lives against the oppressor.

Chapter 3

From Margins to Mic: Dalit and Black Voices

The objective of this chapter is to analyse the possibility of the upliftment of other marginalized communities through rap music. Rap is gaining popularity around the world and India has embraced the genre along with its roots of rebellion. Rap has been introduced to Indians for over three decades now. Even though these rappers were inspired by the rappers of the West, they made a collective unspoken decision to rap in their languages, even their own dialects, in the coming years. This shows the acknowledgment of the necessity that rap needs to be understood by its audience as it speaks of resistance.

Rap culture in the East emerged during the 90s with Baba Sehgal's album *Thanda Thanda Pani*, which was praised and embraced by the Indian youth. This album introduced rap to the mainstream radio and sold over 100,000 copies. The 2000s were dominated by the Pakistani-American rapper Bohemia, who brought a more sustained interest into desi rap, the term desi alluding to the South Asian diaspora, with the release of his debut album *Vich Pardesan De*. Later he released his 2006 album *Pesa Nasha Pyaar* to an eagerly waiting crowd, gaining commercial and critical success. Rap was not underground anymore. It even started drawing attention from Bollywood.

In the early 2010s, desi hip hop hit a new wave with artist Yo Yo Honey Singh. He mastered the art of producing hits with the help of platforms like YouTube, and it was attracting attention all over India. In 2011, his album *International Villager* became a sensation in the country. But at this point the roots and the cultural

significance of rap were forgotten, instead, it was all about catchy hooks and topping charts. India's rap culture underwent a significant change during the mid-2010s.

In the year 2014, Mumbai rapper Naezy, released his song *Aafat!* which sparked a new movement for rap culture in India as it talked about the lives of ordinary dwellers in the streets of Mumbai. The year 2015 saw the release of a joint project from Mumbai rappers Divine and Naezy titled *Mere Gully Mein* which changed the Indian rap community forever. This song introduced the movement of Gully rap. Gully rap emerged from the streets of Dharavi. The Hindi word gully translates to narrow lanes and the music video for *Mere Gully Mein* was shot in these dingy paths between the houses in Mumbai slums where barely two people could walk side by side.

From the streets of Mumbai, the Indian rap community started understanding and appreciating the origins and cultural significance of rap. Even though these songs were celebratory in nature compared to the fierce and dark rap that originated among the African American community in Bronx during the 70s, they were still able to connect to the youth of India, who nodded yes to the need for an art form that will allow freedom of speech for everyone including the marginalized. This became even more revolutionary when American rapper Nas, who is considered one of the greatest ever, signed Divine into his record label Mass Appeal Records. "Hip Hop has no language" Divine observes in an interview (2019) with Nas, to which Nas replies that he remembers a time when people said Hip Hop wouldn't last but this moment proves it wrong. Nas comments that hip-hop is a universal language that identifies with the people who need a voice.

Invisible from the mainstream media is South Indian rap, which also had almost the same timeline of origin as the North. As often was the case, the pop culture of India was not inclusive of all parts of the country, it was almost always dominated by only the Northern part of the country. The states that dominated the South Indian rap culture were Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In the early 90s, the movie *Kadhalan* featured a rap song called *Pettai Rap*. The 2010s saw the rise of rappers like Brodha V and other Tamil rappers. Malayalam rap gained popularity in the late 2010s with rappers like Fejo and Tirumali and they were welcomed by the youth. The 2020s saw the rise of rappers from the Malabar region in Kerala, namely Dabzee, Baby Jean, MC Couper, Parimal Shais, etc. Dabzee also became the first-ever artist from Kerala to perform at the Earth Soul in the Coca-Cola Arena of Dubai. In the year 2023, the Ocha Music Festival was introduced, one of the leading hip-hop festivals in Kerala, boosting the appeal of the genre in the state. But something as revolutionary as the gully rap of Mumbai streets is yet to grace the Malayalam hip-hop community.

The success of hip hop came from the youth who were ready to acknowledge the need for social change in their country and to accept an art form that resisted a system that ignored the voice of the poor and marginalized. This explains the scope of rap, which rang true among the African American as well as the Indian youth. In the Indian context, several communities in the country live in the most terrible conditions both economically and socially. Most of the time, these problems are ignored by governments led by corrupt leaders, which makes these people feel they are invisible. But as history has witnessed, art has the ability to make these issues visible.

A community that has long suffered this discrimination in the country is Dalits. Dalits are the people occupying the lower stratum of the caste hierarchy existing in India. It is believed that the term Dalit was first used by Indian social

activist Jyotirao Phule and it means ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’. Originating in the ancient text *Manusmriti*, the Indian caste system or the Varna system hierarchy is acknowledged in the book as the basis of order in society. According to this caste system, the religion of Hinduism was divided into four castes, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. There’s also a belief that the caste system originated from the Hindu God, Brahman. According to that legend, the top of the hierarchy is occupied by the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have stemmed from Brahma's head. Then came the Kshatriyas, who are considered warriors and rulers, to have their origin from his arms. The third position is for the Vaishyas, or the traders, who are said to have come from his thighs. At the very bottom are the Shudras, who did all the menial jobs and came from Brahma's feet. Excluded from this fourfold Varna system were the Dalits or the Untouchables.

Dalits have been ostracized and dehumanized throughout history. Rooted in ideologies about purity, Dalits were given a place that was even below animals. They were made to do menial jobs and denied access to temples, houses of people from other castes, and even public spaces as their existence itself was seen as pollution. Even in contemporary India, Dalits still face injustice and segregation from mainstream society. After independence, the constitution of India under the authorship of Dr B R Ambedkar, who is also a Dalit man, banned discrimination on the basis of caste. In the Indian constitution, they are protected through reservations that help empower them socially and economically and are officially referred to as Scheduled Castes. Despite these protections, delays in implementing justice and the caste-based mindset of people that often results in murders, Dalits are still a marginalized and oppressed community.

In fact, violence against Dalits is unfortunately a daily occurrence. According to the Indian National Crime Records Bureau, 1 crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. 13 Dalits are murdered every week. 27 atrocities are committed against Dalits every day. Around ten Dalit women are raped every day. According to this report, 45,935 cases of violence are recorded each year.

One of the most well-known figures who fought for the rights of Dalits is Dr. B R Ambedkar, the father of the Indian constitution. In his speech at the Chavdar Lake at Mahad, Maharashtra, Ambedkar organized a protest that resulted in the burning of the text *Manusmriti* from where the caste system originated. Dalits were denied access to the lake by the upper caste on the claim that their impure bodies would pollute the water. But Ambedkar says that that's not the real reason. The real reason is the fear of the upper caste that permitting the Dalits to access the lake will be to acknowledge that the caste who had been declared inferior, are their equals. Ambedkar points out that the lake had no prohibition on birds and animals.

One of the crucial points put forward by Ambedkar was that this dehumanization must be stopped, and to stop that Dalits themselves have to fight together. The society which hates them will not come to speak on their behalf and so the Dalits must fight against this injustice. He proclaims "Untouchability, it is the mother of all our poverty" (Ambedkar 231). Ambedkar draws a parallel to the French Revolution which saw the uprising of the peasants and the fall of the aristocrats. He proposes that there is a dire need for the Dalit uprising and the entire caste system should be eradicated. Another important point that Ambedkar puts forth is his view that the abolition of untouchability and the emancipation of the Dalits is a benefit to the nation as it is a benefit of the Dalits. Ambedkar concludes his revolutionary

speech by proclaiming that the only way to abolish untouchability is to invigorate Hindu society.

Even though there are several organisations formed to help fight the atrocities against Dalits, they still become victims to hate crimes. Courses have been introduced in colleges to promote Dalit studies. In an essay titled *Towards a Prologue to Dalit Studies*, author TM Yesudasan highlights the need for the introduction of Dalit studies. T M Yesudasan is a former professor and Head of the Department at CMS College, Kottayam in Kerala. His parents were Dalit Christian converts and he uses his words as a weapon against the atrocities he and his ancestors faced at the hands of the upper caste in Kerala. Dalit Christians, as the name suggests, are people who converted to Christianity to escape the discrimination that was perpetrated towards the Dalits. These people knew they would be losing their Scheduled Caste privileges if they converted, but the brutality of the treatment was such that they had no choice. After conversion, they were still regarded as Dalits and alienated from the hierarchy that existed in the Christian religion.

In the essay, *Towards a Prologue to Dalit Studies*, T M Yesudasan talks about the roots of Dalit consciousness being from the awareness of casteism and Suvarna supremacy. He sees a dire need to revive the lost literature and history of these people to bring back their lost pride and honour. This will also redefine their sense of self. The oppressed all over the world are alienated as 'other' and their histories erased. Therefore, it is essential to retrace these steps and write a history that will provide an identity to these individuals.

An important point that he makes in this essay is that history is for people who initiate politics of self-representation. Dalit studies are introduced with the intention

that it will generate discourse among the students about the history and future of Dalits and help them to find a place in history and culture. He acknowledges the possibility that the introduction of such a field of discipline will not be embraced in a Savarna society.

Dalit studies attempt to critique hegemonic discourse perpetrated by the upper caste and counter them with “eruption of Dalit voice and truth” (Yesudasan 613). The reason why Yesudasan emphasizes this is his awareness that knowledge is produced and distributed through a social control dominated by the dominant class. The knowledge that is left out is often the history of the oppressed people. Therefore, there is a need to reclaim these parts of history that were left out.

T M Yesudasan, like Ambedkar, draws a parallel between the struggles of Dalits in India to the struggles of African Americans. This is the parallel that will be emphasised in this project. He starts drawing this parallel by introducing the concept of Double Consciousness by W.E.B Du Bois. The idea of Double consciousness was first published in the author’s autobiographical work *The Souls of Black Folk* in the year 1903.

The concept talks about the experience of oppressed and colonized people having a dual self-perception. It elaborated on the way oppressed people looked at themselves through the eyes of the people who dominated them and looked back with contempt. While T M Yesudasan acknowledges that Du Bois explained this concept in the context of the African-American lives, a parallel could be drawn to the Dalit lives in a Savarna society.

According to T M Yesudasan, this double consciousness splits the Dalit mentality and strips them of self-respect. A society that drains the self-respect of these

people is also making sure that they can never dream of emancipation. This lack of self-respect and definition of self, based on the ideologies presented by the dominant class, produces a community that does not understand even the necessity of their emancipation. As a result of this, violence and contempt among the people of the Dalit community can also be seen around the country. Former Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh in December of 2006, drew a parallel between the practice of untouchability in India towards the Dalit community and the practice of apartheid in South Africa and America, becoming the first sitting prime minister in doing so.

This is a parallel that was observed during the making of this project. In the previous chapter, while analysing the discography of African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar, there are instances in his songs where he talks about being born into a community that faces violence from the outside and within. The violence among their own people stems from the lack of self-respect, a quality that was erased by the dominant class. The previous chapter of this project also details how the marginalised art form of rap, to an extent, was able to uplift the African-American community from this dilemma.

Dalits themselves possess a lot of art forms that emphasize the significance of their culture, the most popular in Kerala being Theyyam. Theyyam is a Hindu ritual practiced in the northern region of Kerala. The etymology of Theyyam originates from the word "Daivam", meaning God. Dalits who have passed on this art form of dance, over generations, are believed to embody the deity during the performance and even the upper caste are said to be devotees to this deity. The costumes, headgear, and face paintings used during the performance can be recognised as art forms of their own.

Many art forms are in possession of the Dalits but today, very rarely do they connect with the youth. At a time when Dalits are in need of resistance against the prevailing Hindutva ideology, they are at a dead end in the direction of art as resistance. But this dead end was what led the African-American community in the 70s to emerge with the idea of an art of rebellion which resulted in the birth of rap. But as previously mentioned in the above paragraphs, something as revolutionary as gully rap, which originated in the streets of Mumbai, has not entered the rap culture of South India. In the context of Kerala, the rap music genre is dominated by rappers from the Malabar region.

Recognizing the parallel between the struggles of the African-American community and the Dalits, the visibility a genre like rap could provide the Dalit community would be immense. The present-day has a necessity for an art form for the Dalit community that will resonate with the youth. The growing popularity of rap would be an apt opportunity to make use of.

In the context of Kerala, there is one and only one Dalit rapper in the mainstream who goes by the stage name, Vedan. In 2020, Vedan released a song titled *Voice of the Voiceless* which talked about the toxic environment in which he grew up and recognised the need for his voice as the voice of his voiceless community. The song garnered attention around the country as it exposed the casteist divides that still persist. This shows the power of a single spark. When asked about his inspirations, he replied that he is his own inspiration, which also highlights the lack of representation of the Dalit art forms the youth can look up to.

As part of this project, an aspiring rapper from the Dalit community was interviewed. Anandhu Sajan is a twenty-six-year-old crane operator who has been

carrying the dream of becoming a rapper for over seven years now. He began to go by the stage name, Emistan. Inspired by the West rappers, he thought rapping was supposed to be in English, a language that was not his expertise. He constantly approached his English teachers in school to write his songs in English. But soon he realized that in order to get his message across, he should create the narrative in his language. This decision was also inspired by the rappers in North India who embraced their language to voice their thoughts.

He believes a rapper is someone who is the voice for the oppressed. Emistan is aware of the world that favours some and oppresses others. He opines that it is not fair that only a certain section of people gets to win in life. This shows the artist's awareness of the cultural roots of rap and its distinction from other musical genres.

Rap is often criticised for the lyrical depiction of gruesome violence in the songs. Emistan paints a perspective by expressing his views on this topic. As an art form built on freedom of expression, rap refuses to talk about anything other than stark reality and the songs reflect the truth of their environments. Unlike other musical genres, rappers cannot romanticize life as they cannot afford to. The violence that is portrayed is part of their lifestyle. "Unfortunately, these rappers are talking about what they've experienced. They grew up amongst this violence. From an outsider's perspective, these vulgar depictions may look unnecessary, but that's their truth" (Sajan)

Emistan also talks about the mainstream rap industry of Kerala. He cites the example of some of the most popular rappers in the state who have garnered success by appealing to the masses and commercializing the genre. This part of the interview

shows his determination to use rap as a medium that will allow him to bring some change in society.

The fearlessness inherent in this genre is one of the reasons why Emistan chose rap as his medium to express his thoughts. In the interview, he states that his vision as a Dalit rapper is to succeed in a society that is against his growth. He wishes to talk about the injustices that he has faced in this society. He recalls the days when he was made fun of, by his friends and family, as to them, rap did not sound “melodious”. This type of view limits the potential of music. Rap is a genre that focuses on rhythm and flow, which can be seen as melody.

Emistan also points out a parallel between rap and the folk songs of his ancestors. “I feel like we’re using rap now the same way our ancestors used folk songs (naadan paatukal) to express their pain and struggle” (Sajan). These folk songs were written in vernacular language and the writers are mostly unknown. These songs originated as part of the oral history of Kerala. This art form also focused on expressing the struggles of the writers based on their caste, faith and culture.

The rapper also points out his financial struggles as the reason he is unable to make music, and he commends the rapper Vedan’s efforts in bringing forth Karupp Records, which helps financially struggling artists. The name of the record label suggests several meanings. It could be read as a critique of colourism existing in the community. It could also refer to the first step of embracing one’s identity to build self-respect for oneself and the community as a whole.

Emistan is one of those few artists who recognise the cultural significance of rap and the potential of the genre to be used to represent his community. The interview is concluded with a powerful statement from the emerging rapper “I would

like to say one more thing before I stop, if there's another life, I wouldn't hesitate to be born as the same dark-skinned, Dalit boy." (Sajan). This shows self-respect toward his identity that the dominant ideologies have failed to erase.

Even though rap is attracting attention worldwide, people tend to forget its roots and the cultural significance of the art form being used as a site of resistance. The genre is getting over-commodified, taking advantage of its popularity as something that makes people dance in a club. However, from the interview mentioned above, the importance of its roots is not missed by the people who need it to be their voice, in a system where it is silenced.

Through the analysis of the potential of rap around the world, parallels can be drawn between the struggles of different marginalized communities. Rap could bring marginalized individuals together to form a resistance. This urge to make themselves visible can be seen in young artists like Emistan who wants to help uplift his community from the atrocities perpetrated against them.

The potential of the genre of rap as an art form that brings a community together and presents itself as a site of resistance can be seen in the case of the African American community as well as the street rappers in India. This should open the discourse of the possibility of the emancipation of Dalits through art forms like rap that resonate with the youth. As American rapper Nas says, their generation was discouraged by statements like hip hop wouldn't last. But the youth now and the upcoming generations are proving it wrong. As the saying goes "No one is free until we all are free" and rap is proving to be a genre that is stubbornly pursuing the need to free everyone by giving voice to the voiceless.

Conclusion

Through the discography of Kendrick Lamar, this project presents rap as an art form, that holds immense potential in the upliftment of marginalized communities. Kendrick's albums showcase his journey ranging from personal catharsis to collective mobilization. The selected three albums from his discography are analysed through the lens of critical race theory. As an art form born out of the need for resistance, rap lends voice to the voiceless. Several rap songs have become anthems during protest marches, which led to social change. Therefore, a rapper speaks not just for himself but for his community as well.

Critical race theory serves as an adequate lens through which this art form can be studied, as both the genre of rap and the theory acknowledge the reality of systemic oppression on the grounds of race. Both focus primarily on race and discrimination on the basis of race. Critical race theory argues that oppression is not merely individual acts of prejudice but is deeply embedded in the power structures of society. The theory encourages counter-narratives to oppose the dominant ideologies perpetrated against marginalized communities. These counter-narratives point out the flaws in the dominant narratives, while simultaneously producing stories that paint the perspective of the oppressed.

Intersectionality is introduced under the topic of critical race theory, which talks about the overlapping systems of oppression that result in a unique combination of discrimination or even privilege. While critical race theory acknowledges systemic oppression, intersectionality acknowledges that every experience of oppression is not the same. It also mirrors critical race theory's need to have a more nuanced understanding of oppression. Intersectionality challenges limiting frameworks that fail

to take into account the problems faced by those who exist at the margins and intersections.

The analysis of the discography of rappers through these frameworks provides a nuanced understanding of the artists' upbringing in an environment where oppression and racism in particular is not an aberration but deeply embedded within the social institutions. The first album studied in this way is Kendrick Lamar's 2012 album *Good Kid Maad City*. As the title suggests, the album details the experience of growing up in a community that not only faces oppression from outside but internalizes this and subjugates themselves. Through this album, Kendrick presents a reality that is often left out of dominant narratives. He paints the picture of a community that is broken and in a loop of destruction as a result of the oppression perpetrated against them for centuries. Structured in the form of a non-linear story, Kendrick touches upon several crucial themes such as peer pressure, desires, broken promises, hopes etc, criticizing a country that tells them to dream but gets crushed when they do.

During the early 2010s, when rap was becoming commercialized and its roots of rebellion forgotten, Kendrick Lamar releases his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Even though it was unlike anything the rap community had heard before, they embraced it as it resonated with their struggles. This shows the potential of a genre like rap in a world hungry for truth, but is instead filled with superficiality and lies. The album explores various themes like systemic oppression, racism, self-respect and love, which also paints the history of black people as a lesson of resilience and resistance. Kendrick delves into the idea of self-respect and self-love as the first step towards resistance against the powers trying to erase their culture. He also boldly calls out the internalized violence and colourism practiced in the African American

community, which leads to their own subjugation. He points out that this will only fuel systemic oppression. Visiting Africa, which inspired the making of this album, also gave Kendrick a sense of belonging. He uses rap as a medium to express this to the rest of the world and he urges his own community to make the struggles visible.

Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize winning work *DAMN* was the third album analysed in this project. This album stands out in his discography as the previous albums talked about systemic oppression but *DAMN* turns to inner struggle. Kendrick, representing the black man, discusses in detail the psychological dilemma of an oppressed individual. The introspection reveals the complexities of one's identity. Kendrick also presents a struggle of opposing dualities of one's self and the world. The album portrays counter-narratives and complex struggles of overlapping identities.

The project also presents the journey of the rapper navigating his fears and hopes of bringing his community together and ultimately achieving it to an extent. Being one of the most important and influential voices in the industry, Kendrick was able to inspire a community to imbibe self-respect and form a resistance against dominant ideologies. His music also teaches us to reject the commercialization of an art form that has its roots in rebellion and resilience. The importance of not standing as an obstacle to each other's growth is also highlighted.

The third chapter of this project draws a parallel between the struggles of the black community and the Dalit community in India. This parallel is drawn to show the potential of the art form of rap to uplift a marginalized and ostracized community like Dalits in India. As rap gains popularity around the world, it is embraced along with its roots to be the voice of the voiceless. The streets of Mumbai came up with Gully rap,

which became a medium for speaking about the struggles of ordinary dwellers. The success of rap came from the youth who were ready to acknowledge the need for social change in their country and to accept an art form that resisted a system that ignored the voice of the poor and marginalized. This explains the scope of rap, which rang true among the African American as well as the Indian youth. This potential of rap opens a platform for oppressed communities such as Dalits to express their struggles and gain visibility. Even though the issues underlying caste are studied in universities, it is limited to academic circles.

Rap has been giving a voice to the silenced for more than half a century now. The scope and relevance of rap were questioned from its infancy, but the art form continues to prove the criticisms wrong and provide platforms to the people who were unfortunately born into a hostile environment. Rap also teaches us to embrace our roots and culture even if it is not perfect. Sometimes, the art form tends to shift to commercialization and focus more on profits than its cultural significance. This poses a challenge to rap artists who recognize the potential of the genre to be the voice of a community that needs it. This highlights the importance of an art form that brings people together to speak out against atrocities no matter from which part of the world. Rap will continue to be a platform to question, disrupt and transform the world for the better.

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Appendix

Interview transcript

This is the transcript of a telephone interview of the aspiring rapper Anandhu, who goes by the stage name Emistan, conducted on 19th January 2025 by Bhanu E S.

Bhanu E S: How would you describe rap music?

Emistan: Rap music is a genre that is quite different from other genres of music. It speaks for a certain section of people. In this world, someone or the other is always oppressed. A rapper is someone who speaks against oppression and for the oppressed. I believe everyone has the right to win in life and not just a section of the world.

Bhanu E S: What is your opinion on the lyrical depiction of violence in rap music?

Emistan: I've heard that argument often in the context of rap. Some say that rap is corrupting the youth or is inappropriate for children due to the art form being too violent, too reckless, too ghetto, etc. But I look at it differently. Unfortunately, these rappers are talking about what they've experienced. They grew up amongst this violence. From an outsider's perspective, these vulgar depictions may look unnecessary, but that's their truth. For these artists, rap is a medium through which they can express the emotions and experiences they've gathered growing up in such an environment. The people who listen to this and who have gone through the same resonate with it.

Bhanu E S: What is your opinion about the mainstream rap culture that has emerged in Kerala now?

Emistan: When you look at the mainstream rap culture in Kerala, for example, the artist Dabzee, his music aims to entertain people or cater to the audience who wants to

dance to some beats and as a result, he is the most successful rapper in the industry right now. I focus more on rappers like MC Couper, Vedan and VKDKV. I think they use their talent to bring out some change in the society. All the rappers I mentioned above are talented, but I resonate or aspire to be more like the artists who use their art as a medium to bring about change.

Bhanu E S: Why do you want to become a rapper and why did you choose rap specifically as your genre?

Emistan: From what I know, rap gained popularity and acceptance among our youth only a handful of years ago. I started rapping before that, inspired by the West rappers. At that time, my friends and family used to make fun of me saying things like “What is artistic in just spitting out random words” or “There’s no melody in it” etc. But I feel like we’re using rap now the same way our ancestors used folk songs (naadan paatukal) to express their pain and struggles, at least we’re supposed to.

I have things to say, about the pain I’ve endured and I felt rap will be the best medium to do so. Most of the time people use music to describe the beauty of life. I’m not saying it’s bad. I listen to that music too. But to express my life, I have chosen the medium of rap as it emerged from a community that has endured pain. I’ve been trying to become a rapper for about seven to eight years now, but due to many obstacles including financial constraints, I’ve not been able to make it. I heard that Vedan has introduced an independent record label called Karupp Records to help financially struggling artists, which is very commendable.

I would like to say one more thing before I stop, if there’s another life, I wouldn’t hesitate to be born as the same dark-skinned, Dalit boy. I’m proud of my identity even though I’ve faced numerous setbacks because of the same, from my friends, family

and even teachers. So, if that child me didn't budge in the face of all those negative remarks, nothing can pull me down now. And when I win in life, I want my people who have gone through the same to win too.