

## EXPLICATING GENDER ISSUES IN TUPAC SHAKUR'S POETRY

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### ***Abstract***

*Over the years, gender differences and social margins have led to the outcry of the female folks against their male folks and the society generally seeking for what is best for women. Concerned men too have joined in this crusade in order to enlighten mischief makers who recourse to nature or tradition to dampen the interest of women in the society. In this work, an analysis of Tupac's "Changes" and "Dear Mama" is carried out with the aim to drawing out the rapper's tackling of gender issues through his music as he is able to draw out those misgivings about women and also enlighten the people of the need for gender equality and equity. The work uses Queer theory which is a strand of Feminism that denotes or relates to gender identities which do not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender especially heterosexual norms as its theoretical framework to base its analysis. This is suitable for this analysis of these selected songs because they are a call for a change; a deviation from the status quo. Through this analysis, it is discovered that gender inequalities existed from time immemorial and have continued till date and anytime the society tries to fight back hence the murder of the Shakur. It is recommended that all hands must be on deck to fight this menace as it has continued to resurface in different ways.*

***Keywords: Queer theory, Feminism, Tupac, Gender***

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## Introduction

Gender inequality and feminist issues are pervasive challenges faced by women in many societies around the world, including Nigeria. In the Nigerian society, women often face discrimination, oppression, and violence due to traditional gender roles, cultural norms, and systemic biases. Feminism, as a social and political movement advocating for gender equality, has gained traction in Nigeria as women strive to challenge and change the oppressive status quo. Nigeria, like many other countries, has long-standing gender inequalities that affect women's lives in various aspects. Women in Nigeria face discrimination and marginalization in areas such as education, employment, health care, political representation, and social status.

Traditional gender roles and cultural norms often limit women's opportunities and confine them to domestic roles, while men hold positions of power and authority (Ibaba, 2018). For example, women in Nigeria have lower rates of education compared to men, with fewer opportunities for higher education and professional advancement (UNESCO, 2018). Women also face challenges in accessing quality healthcare, as gender biases in the healthcare system often result in inadequate and unequal treatment (Adebowale et al., 2017). Additionally, women's participation in politics and decision-making processes is limited, with low representation in leadership positions (Onyishi, 2018).

Violence against women is also a prevalent issue in Nigeria, including domestic violence, sexual violence, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage (UN Women, 2020). These forms of violence further perpetuate gender inequality and undermine women's rights and well-being in Nigerian society. Over the years, there have been significant efforts by women's rights organizations and activists in Nigeria to address feminist issues and promote gender equality. These efforts have led to some progress, including legal reforms, policy changes, and increased awareness about gender inequality. For example, Nigeria has adopted several legal frameworks to protect women's rights, including the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) and the Child Rights Act (CRA), which aim to prevent and address violence against women and children (National Assembly, 2015). These legal reforms are important steps towards addressing gender-based violence in Nigeria.

In addition, there have been increased efforts to promote women's empowerment and leadership, including initiatives to increase women's political representation and participation in decision-making processes (Omotosho, 2016). Women's rights organizations and activists have also

engaged in advocacy campaigns and public awareness programs to challenge harmful traditional practices and promote gender equality (Oyediran, 2017). Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain in addressing feminist issues in Nigeria. There is often resistance to change, as traditional gender roles and cultural norms are deeply ingrained in Nigerian society. Additionally, gender-based violence continues to be pervasive, and women continue to face discrimination and marginalization in various aspects of their lives (Olojo-Kosoko, 2019).

Despite the challenges, feminist activism and advocacy for gender equality continue to thrive in Nigeria. Women's rights organizations, activists, and allies are working tirelessly to challenge patriarchal norms, promote women's empowerment, and create a more inclusive society. For instance, the Bring Back Our Girls movement, which gained international attention after the kidnap of over 200 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014, has been a powerful advocacy campaign calling for the rescue and protection of girls' rights to education in Nigeria (Ezeilo, 2017). Other grassroots organizations, such as the Women's Aid Collective, Women in Nigeria (WIN), and the Women's Rights and Health Project, are also actively engaged in promoting gender equality, advocating for women's rights, and providing support and services to women facing discrimination and violence (Afolayan, 2020).

Furthermore, Nigerian feminist writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have gained global recognition for their literary works that challenge gender norms and shed light on the experiences of women in Nigerian society. Feminist scholars and researchers in Nigeria are also actively contributing to the discourse on gender equality through their research, publications, and advocacy. They highlight the need for intersectional feminism that addresses the specific challenges faced by different groups of women, including women in rural areas, women with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ women (Okeke, 2020). In this write up, however, we are going to use two tracks of the famous Tupac Shakur's poetry titled "Changes" and "Dear Mama"

### **Brief Biography of Tupac Shakur**

Tupac Amaru Shakur was born on June 16, 1971, in East Harlem, New York. He became one of the most iconic and controversial figures in hip-hop history due to his thought-provoking lyrics, outspokenness on societal issues, and his untimely death in 1996. Tupac's music frequently tackled topics of social injustice, police brutality, poverty, and the struggles of urban life. While his lyrics often addressed broader societal issues, some of his songs

also touched on gender dynamics and women's roles in society. It is important to note that Tupac's perspective on gender was not always consistent and has been a topic of discussion and analysis.

One song that particularly stands out in terms of discussing gender issues is "Keep Ya Head Up." In this song, Tupac addresses the challenges faced by women, particularly black women, in society. He raps about the importance of respecting and supporting women and criticizes the way they are often mistreated. Some lines from the song include:

"And since we all came from a woman  
Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman  
I wonder why we take from our women  
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?  
I think it's time to kill for our women  
Time to heal our women, be real to our women"

Tupac's lyrics in "Keep Ya Head Up" reflect his concern for women's well-being and his call for men to take responsibility for their actions and attitudes toward women. However, it is worth noting that Tupac's catalog is extensive and diverse, and his perspectives on gender and other social issues can vary across his different songs. Some of his songs may contain misogynistic or objectifying language, which has led to debates about his attitudes toward women. These complexities in his lyrics showcase the multifaceted nature of his artistry and the challenges of interpreting his views on gender issues. In the broader context of his life and work, Tupac's impact on the music industry and his willingness to address pressing societal problems have solidified his legacy as not just a rapper but also a cultural and social icon.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Queer theory for Dobie (2009) has been referred to as a third wave of feminism because of its interest in essentialist [the idea that a person's true identity is composed of fixed and unchanging properties] verses social constructionist [supporters of the idea that human identity is formed by the culture into which one is born] theories that the earlier movement had explored. That is the thinking of the early queer theories that the earlier movement had explored. That is the thinking of the early queer theorists often centres on questions about how sexuality is contrived: Is it socially created or naturally given? Can it be changed, or is it inescapable?

Queer theorists look at gender, sexual practices, identity, defining choices, assumed norms, types of masculinity and femininity, and other such

issues. Dobie (2009:114) opines that “realistic fiction which assumes fixed identities of characters and which usually maintains consistent points of view is less interesting to the queer theory critic than narratives that feature the surprising and unusual. Traditional moral outlooks, a linear sequence of unfolding events, and recognizable and socially sanctioned characters provoke less curiosity than does fiction that interrupts or disturbs the realistic outlook”. She summarises that queer theorist critic should pose the following questions when approaching a text, thus:

Does the work challenge traditional ways of viewing sexuality and identity? Does it depict human sexuality as more complex than the essentialist terms male and female suggest? What ranges of male and female identity do you find? Does the work assume an essentialist view of gender – that is, does it accept that there is a fixed, unchanging self? Does the work or narrator assume that the self is a constructed one? If the self is assumed to be constructed, what performative acts construct a character's? What sexual topics do you find in the works that are odd or peculiar- that is, queer? Where is gender destabilized? What destabilizes it? Does the work show how sexual identities are determinate, overlapping, changing? If so where? Does the work complicate what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual? (Dobie 2009:114)

From this long quotation, it is gathered that the queer critic browses through a work with the intention of finding out sexual issues that are rather abnormal as long as the society is concerned. Issues like homosexuality and bisexuality will appease the critic. Odd identities too will be of equal importance to him or her; especially those identities that are determined base on what an individual does at a particular time and not what the society has ascribed to him or her.

### **Analysis of “Changes” and “Dear Mama”**

"Changes" by Tupac Shakur is a thought-provoking song that touches on various societal issues, including gender dynamics. While the song does not explicitly focus on gender issues, it does touch on themes of transformation and the challenges people face in their lives. Here are some lines from "Changes" that can be related to gender issues, along with an analysis:

"We gotta start makin' changes, learn to see me as a brother instead of two distant strangers"

This line reflects the need for people to bridge the gap between themselves

and others, moving beyond stereotypes and biases. In the context of gender issues, it can be seen as a call to view individuals as equals regardless of their gender identity, promoting mutual respect and understanding.

"I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse, I'm black / My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch"

While not directly related to gender, this line can be interpreted in the context of how poverty and social inequalities can disproportionately affect different genders. Women, especially those from marginalized communities, might face additional challenges due to their gender, such as limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

"Cops give a damn about a negro? Pull the trigger, kill a n\*\*\*\*, he's a hero"

While this line addresses racial issues, it can also be connected to discussions about toxic masculinity. The glorification of violence and dominance can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and contribute to an environment where aggression is rewarded or seen as a sign of strength.

"I'm sayin', the war is wrong, but it's the first that we attack / Then I'd smoke a blunt and get high"

In the context of gender issues, this line could be interpreted as a critique of how society often prioritizes certain problems over others. Similarly, certain gender-related issues might be overshadowed or ignored due to the broader focus on other societal challenges.

"Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares? / One less hungry mouth on the welfare"

While this line does not explicitly address gender issues, it can be linked to discussions about reproductive rights and responsibilities. Women's reproductive choices and access to contraception can be impacted by societal views on poverty and welfare, which can disproportionately affect women's lives.

It is important to note that "Changes" primarily focuses on racial and societal issues, and while it might not delve deeply into gender issues, its overarching themes of transformation, unity, and the need for societal change can still resonate with discussions surrounding gender dynamics and equality.

"It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes / Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live"

These lines emphasize the need for collective action and societal transformation. In the context of gender issues, they can be interpreted as a call for challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. This could involve changing the way society views and treats individuals based on their gender, encouraging equality and breaking down harmful stereotypes.

"And still I see no changes; can't a brother get a little peace? / There's war on the streets and the war in the Middle East"

These lines highlight the persistence of social problems despite the desire for change. In terms of gender, they can reflect the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the challenges that persist in achieving it. Women still face disparities in various aspects of life, including pay, representation, and safety, despite efforts to address these issues.

"And although it seems heaven sent, we ain't ready to see a black President"

This line can be interpreted more broadly as society's resistance to change, even when positive opportunities arise. In the context of gender issues, it reflects the challenges that women face in breaking through societal barriers to attain positions of power and leadership, often due to deeply ingrained gender biases.

"It's time to fight back, that's what Huey said / Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead"

This line references Huey Newton, a prominent figure in the Black Panther Party. In a gender context, it raises the issue of violence and its impact on different genders. Women are disproportionately affected by various forms of violence, including domestic violence and sexual assault. The line highlights the need to address violence against women as part of societal change.

"I got love for my brother, but we can never go nowhere / Unless we share with each other, we gotta start makin' changes"

While not directly focused on gender, these lines emphasize the importance of unity and collaboration for progress. In the realm of gender issues, this sentiment can be applied to the need for both men and women to work together to challenge and dismantle gender stereotypes and promote equality.

"Changes" by Tupac Shakur is a multifaceted song that speaks to various social issues, including gender dynamics. While the song does not centre on gender, its themes of transformation, unity, and the struggle for a better society are applicable to discussions surrounding gender issues, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts to achieve equality and change. This takes us to the analysis of the second song, "Dear Mama"

"Dear Mama" by Tupac Shakur is a heartfelt song that pays tribute to his mother and addresses various aspects of his life and upbringing. While the song does not explicitly focus on gender issues, it does touch on themes related to family dynamics, women's resilience, and the challenges faced by single mothers. Here are some aspects of "Dear Mama" that can be related to gender issues:

**Single Motherhood and Resilience:**

"And even as a crack fiend, mama / You always was a black queen, mama"

These lines acknowledge the struggles his mother faced, including addiction, while still emphasizing her strength and dignity. This highlights the resilience of many single mothers who work hard to provide for their families despite facing numerous challenges.

**Economic Struggles:**

"I finally understand / For a woman, it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man"

This line recognizes the difficulties faced by single mothers, especially in raising male children. It underscores the economic and emotional challenges mothers often face as they navigate the responsibilities of providing for their families and guiding their children.

**Unconditional Love:**

"There's no way I can pay you back / But my plan is to show you that I understand"

These lines express Tupac's deep gratitude and love for his mother. It also reflects the strong emotional bonds that often exist between mothers and their children, highlighting the importance of family relationships regardless of gender.

**Supportive Role of Women:**

"Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place"

This line emphasizes the unique and irreplaceable role of mothers in their children's lives. It underscores the nurturing and supportive role that women, particularly mothers, play in families, emphasizing the significance of their contributions.

**Societal Struggles and Empathy:**

"Pour some liquor out for your homies, pictures in my pocket / And still want to war, until the day I get to see my casket"

While not gender-specific, these lines reflect the broader societal struggles and violence that many individuals, including women, face. It's a reminder of the importance of empathy and understanding for all those affected by social challenges.

"Dear Mama" ultimately speaks to the love, sacrifices, and challenges that mothers, particularly single mothers, often experience. While the song doesn't explicitly delve into gender issues, it indirectly sheds light on the complex roles and experiences of women, especially mothers, within



families and society at large.

### Conclusion

Obviously, Tupac's views on gender were complex and multifaceted, reflecting the broader discussions and debates of his time. While his music often conveyed messages of empowerment and respect for women, his lyrics and actions also sometimes included elements that were criticized for being misogynistic or contradictory. The message, however, is about the fact that his music especially the tracks chosen were gospels for the emancipation of women; a task that must be taken seriously by the government and society generally.

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