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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Queen B: A Real Feminist or a Product of
Capitalism? An Analysis of Beyoncé beyond
the Music Industry

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Salamanca, 2018



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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies
2018

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Signature

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have been able to bring this project to life without my tutor, Olga Barrios, who has inspired me to focus on feminism thanks to her wonderful subject Race, Gender and Sexuality, Film & Theatre in English Speaking Cultures. Also, I would like to thank her mainly because she accepted my idea of analysing Beyoncé as a feminist, which I thought it was maybe too far-fetched. Her advice and corrections have been extremely helpful and they have encouraged me to polish my work and to stay humble.

My rock during this whole process from start to finish has been my boyfriend Peter. He was as excited as I was to write about one of my favourite singers in the world. I have been able to discuss with him every single step that I was taking in writing and his opinions have been very enlightening most of the time. He has taken the time to revise my work and helped me clarify some ideas, and at the same time he has made sure to tell me that I was doing great. He has also helped me to stay focused and to not give up. I cannot be grateful enough for his care, his patience and his support through this final year of my Degree.

I would like to thank my parents and my sister, who have been always understanding and supportive through these entire four years. They have provided me with everything I needed and have made this final year more manageable thanks to her visits, that were very refreshing and helped me to keep going. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, I would like to thank the Queen, Beyoncé, for inspiring me with her music since I was a little girl and for giving voices to those women who did not have one. Thank you for speaking louder than others.

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I will endeavour to do an analysis of the positive and negative attitudes of Beyoncé's supposed feminism as an artist and as a black woman, in order to comprehend that Beyoncé is using her power status to spread her version of feminism. Beyoncé is a very influential and universal character and that is why many feminists are commenting on the kind of feminism that Beyoncé is portraying: some admire her work and others despise it. Therefore, this essay is divided into two contrastive parts. Firstly, I will discuss Beyoncé's image as a feminist role model focusing on the interplay of three post-feminist attitudes such as being independent, proclaiming one's own identity and celebrating femininity and female sexuality, which give Beyoncé the power to own her body. She expresses this empowerment through her music, conveying an idea of women's union and fight against the oppression, that creates a huge impact in young women who are concerned about feminism thanks to Beyoncé. Secondly, I will study why Beyoncé's feminism might be dangerous and misleading and why she might be using feminism to enlarge her business. To many, Beyoncé represents the beauty standards of a white patriarchal society that leads to the misconceived idea of whiteness as the only standard of beauty. In some of her songs, we can also observe the perpetuation of patriarchal values through sexist lyrics. Therefore, bell hooks criticises Beyoncé's wrong and stereotypical portrayal of the black woman. In spite of this second part and after having examined these points, I conclude that Beyoncé exposes her version of feminism thanks to her influential and lucrative career.

KEY WORDS: Celebrity Feminism, Beyoncé, Post-Feminism, Black Feminism, Independence, Self-Definition, Female Sexuality, Beyoncé's Music, Empowerment, Music Business, Social Impact

RESUMEN

En este ensayo intentaré hacer un análisis de los aspectos positivos y negativos del supuesto feminismo de Beyoncé como artista y mujer negra para llegar a comprender que Beyoncé está usando su estatus de poder con el fin de difundir su versión del feminismo. Beyoncé es una figura muy influyente y universal y éste es el motivo por el cual muchas feministas están opinando sobre el tipo de feminismo que Beyoncé representa: algunas admiran su trabajo y otras lo desprecian. Así pues, este ensayo está dividido en dos partes contrastivas. En primer lugar, trataré la imagen de Beyoncé como un modelo feminista a seguir centrándome en la interacción de tres actitudes postfeministas como ser independiente, proclamar la identidad de una misma y celebrar la feminidad y la sexualidad femenina, que dan a Beyoncé el poder sobre su propio cuerpo. Ella expresa este empoderamiento a través de su música, transmitiendo una idea de unión femenina y de lucha contra la opresión, creando así un gran impacto sobre mujeres jóvenes que están interesadas en el feminismo gracias a Beyoncé. En segundo lugar, estudiaré por qué el feminismo de Beyoncé puede ser peligroso y engañoso y por qué lo está usando como estrategia para agrandar su negocio. Para muchas, Beyoncé representa los estereotipos de belleza de la sociedad patriarcal blanca lo que lleva a la idea mal interpretada de que la blancura es el único estándar de belleza. En algunas de sus canciones, podemos observar también la perpetuación de los valores patriarcales representados a través de letras sexistas. Así pues, bell hooks critica la errónea y estereotípica representación de la mujer negra en su último álbum, *Lemonade*. Finalmente, a pesar de eso y después de haber examinado todos estos puntos, concluyo que Beyoncé expone su propia versión del feminismo gracias a su lucrativa carrera como cantante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Feminismo Mediático, Beyoncé, Postfeminismo, Feminismo Negro, Independencia, Autodefinición, Sexualidad Femenina, Música de Beyoncé, Empoderamiento, Negocio Musical, Impacto Social

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Introduction

In recent years, society has met celebrity feminism. This is due to famous figures taking a stand for feminism such as Emma Watson, Lena Durham or Beyoncé. The advantage of this kind of feminism is the spreading of feminist awareness in a universal manner. Nonetheless, celebrity feminism is not celebrated by other feminists, arguing that it is misleading and distracting from the actual purposes of feminism. In order to understand how feminism affects celebrities, I have chosen to focus this essay on Beyoncé and her portrayal of feminism.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles was born in 1981 in Houston, Texas. Beyoncé started to like performing and participate in many talent shows from an early age. Thanks to these talent shows, she was able to become part of the music industry by being part of girl bands such as Girl's Tyme and Destiny's Child. The latter meant her breakthrough in the industry and her path to becoming a solo artist and her own manager. Beyoncé is a hard-working empowered woman that has created a whole empire around her. She has created the *Beyoncé* brand. It is widely known how much Beyoncé can influence her fans who are, mostly, young women; furthermore, her self-made brand reaches women and girls from all around the globe. Due to this fact, many academic feminists are concerned with Beyoncé's portrayal of feminism since they do not see it as truly authentic. In this essay, I will explore and contrast two points of view regarding Beyoncé's feminism: on the one hand, the one claiming she is a real feminist and she is actually empowering women; and, on the other hand, the one affirming that she is using feminism as a label to build a lucrative empire. However, this issue of Beyoncé's feminism can be flexible; therefore, I will argue that Beyoncé is a mixture of both perspectives and that this mixture does not interfere with her purpose of helping women to find their voices.

1. The Figure of Beyoncé as a Feminist Role Model for Oppressed Women Fighting for Independence.

The fact that Beyoncé had stood in front of a bright sign saying *Feminist* during her VMAs performance in 2014 has been considered a step forward in the acknowledgement of feminism in the celebrity's environment. Beyoncé's feminism can be seen from different branches of feminism and it can, also, convey different messages to her followers. Hence, in this section of my essay, I will explore Beyoncé's feminist attitude looking at the post-feminist sensibility, analysing some of her songs and assessing her social impact on young black women.

1.1 Enhancing Self-Identity and Erasing Gender Roles in a Post-Feminist Approach

In order to understand this section, I would like to start by inserting a generic definition of post-feminism. According to Alessandrini, “[p]ost-feminism sensibility has been theorized as an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas as well as marked by a series of specific themes such as stress on individual empowerment, practices of self-surveillance and discipline and celebration of female sexuality” (3). This means that the post-feminist female has to be able to embrace her femininity, present herself as a sexual subject and be a strong and independent woman. My aim in this section is to outline the interplay between these post-feminist issues and Beyoncé. In spite of being criticised for her revealing looks and provocative lyrics, Beyoncé is still a woman that owns her body and her destiny as an artist. Furthermore, she conveys her values of self-definition, independence and female sexuality to the world, to her female fans.

Linked to this previous idea of self-definition and independence, Beyoncé has created a powerful aura of strong identity around herself and, also, around those who follow her and her music. Owning and knowing who you are as a person or woman is a key aspect for her.

She has demonstrated that self-identity is important in both her music, which I will cover in the next section, and her personal life. Deciding to manage herself was a crucial event in her life. In her documentary titled *Life is But a Dream*, Beyoncé addresses this issue: “I think one of the biggest reasons I decided it was time for me to manage myself was because at some point you need your [own] support system . . . I needed boundaries,” she needed to break free from her father in the professional environment. Hence, it can be observed that, by taking control of her career, Beyoncé shows that women can be independent in every aspect of their lives. It might be stressful and tiring but it is worth it. This life event happened in 2011 and since then everybody has been aware of how much Beyoncé has grown as an artist. Accordingly, this brave action of being her own manager is empowering, in the sense that she does not need to depend on a man or anyone else in order to be successful.

Following the issue of identity, we encounter the post-feminist idea of the celebration of femininity and female sexuality. Beyoncé is a visible example of a sexual subject. Black women’s bodies “[are] under constant subjugation, scrutiny, and marginalization”, meaning that black women have tried to conceal their body and not to protrude in a sexual manner (French, Mowatt and Malebranche 648). History has put them under the male gaze as hypersexualised commodities ready to be consumed. However, the interesting point of Beyoncé’s open femininity is that she uses this hypersexualised view as a means to empower her body. Therefore, she has reversed a negative stereotype to make it a positive issue in black women. Moreover, her fans understand that and admire her for this reversal. As Duan explains in her essay, “Beyoncé’s devoted fans, the BeyHive, claim that her brand of [*fierce feminism*], in which she is unabashedly sexy, is empowering and aspirational because she stringently controls her own image,” (1096) consequently she is demonstrating that being sexy and being a feminist are not two opposed concepts. Likewise, her fans, mostly young

women, learn from Beyoncé's actions that they can reverse gender roles through being independent and taking control over their own bodies.

1.2 Beyoncé's Healing, Self-Confident and Empowering Touch

Following the topic of female empowerment, Beyoncé's music reaches women, especially black women, and guides them through difficult, traumatic, discriminatory experiences, as well as, happy times. In this section I will analyse three songs that I have considered suitable to prove my above statement.

Firstly, the song that made people aware of Beyoncé fierceness and power as a woman was "Run the World (Girls)." This song is an anthem for all women in the world willing to take control over their lives. In this song, Beyoncé is recognising the work of many women as college students, workers and mothers. It gives a sense of unity. The lyrics of the song are revealing and straightforward. When she sings "You can't hold me / I work my 9 to 5 and I cut my check," Beyoncé is addressing the current situation of women who are not dependent on a man. She is implying that women are economically independent and that they can work as hard as men. Obviously, Beyoncé knows that our patriarchal society regards women as the weaker sex and challenges this idea when singing: "Strong enough to bear the children (children) / Then get back to business." Essentially, she is telling the world that women can have children and a career at the same time because they are as strong as men. Apart from the lyrics, the beat of the song is equally important. Since it is a chant of women's togetherness, the rhythm has to accompany and help the lyrics to convey Beyoncé's message. The beat is strong and aggressive, comparable to a military rhythm.

Secondly, "Beyoncé's 'Flawless' featuring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a feminist anthem writ large" that openly confirms her status as a feminist (Mitchell 1006). By using the voice of this recognised feminist and an excerpt of her talk from Ted Talks, she tries to inform

her fans about feminism. This song is a bold vindication of women's power and self-confidence. Women are flawless in spite of their flaws, because they are unique: "We flawless, ladies tell 'em / Say 'I look so good tonight'." She needs *her sisters* to believe that they are powerful and beautiful and that they do not need to prove it to any man. Again, she is restating that women are independent, and at the same time, she is empowering those women who listen to her.

These two songs are a clear representation of Beyoncé's attitude towards female empowerment and self-confidence. Beyoncé wants these songs to be heard by women, "[she is] always thinking about women and what we need to hear . . . we need that support and we need that escape sometimes." Furthermore, she uses her status as an artist and influencer to spread this consciousness of female power among women themselves.

1.3 Beyoncé's Social Impact on Millennial Black Young Women

In order to understand how the messages that Beyoncé is conveying with her feminist attitude are received by black young women, I have found it suitable to present a study conducted at the University of Georgia. This study gathers testimonies from millennial black women regarding Beyoncé, in terms of race, class and gender. By looking at the answers that many of the interviewees gave, it can be asserted that Beyoncé is bringing feminist consciousness to her black female fans. Ashley, one of the interviewees, said: "Even if I never thought about [her points] . . . she actually brought them to my attention. I really was never interested in feminism, so when I . . . listened to Beyoncé and what she was saying . . . it just opened my mind and made me think more about it." (Taylor 84). As it has been discussed in the previous section, Beyoncé is raising awareness through her music.

Nevertheless, the key and significant point that this study aims at is that Beyoncé is seen as the Ideal Black Womanhood for these Millennials. Besides, the interviewees

recognise that they can aspire to be the ideal black woman because Beyoncé's lyrics encourage them and motivate them "to achieve their dreams, build an empire, and demand authority and respect in their lives" (Taylor 85). Hence, the empowering ambiance of Beyoncé's figure not only surrounds herself as a black woman, but also encloses these inspired black young women.

2. The Other Side of the Icon: Beyoncé's Dangerous Portrayal of Feminism

The fact that Beyoncé calls herself a feminist presents an issue for many feminists. Even though she has tried to defend feminism in her own way, as I have explained previously in this essay, these feminists are convinced that "feminism professed by celebrities is incredibly self-serving and commercialised which undermines the political basis of feminist movements" (Jiang). Therefore, this chapter will explore the negative view of Beyoncé's feminism in contrast to the previous section. In order to do so, I will analyse Beyoncé's physique and its controversy, her blatantly sexist songs and, finally, I will disclose the thoughts of bell hooks on Beyoncé as a feminist and as a black woman.

2.1 Representing White Patriarchal Visions of Female Beauty

Nowadays every individual body is subject to scrutiny and criticism, mostly the looks of popular figures like Beyoncé. Her most criticised feature is her whiteness. As many other artists, Beyoncé has been accused of lightening her skin both with chemicals and photoshop. This last procedure is very noticeable in one of her advertisements for L'Oréal Paris in 2008. Her skin looks flawless and surprisingly white. As Jacqueline Bryk states, "[i]t is ironic that the same female singer who famously coined the term [*bootylicious*] to praise the voluptuous figures of black women allowed this digitally manipulated white version of herself to . . . misrepresent her black image in a national beauty campaign." Apparently, instead of

embracing her black roots, Beyoncé is succumbing to the white male gaze in order to be more universal.

Furthermore, her father, Mathew Knowles, has made some statements about the fact that colourism affects music careers. Colourism involves “prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.” (Oxford Dictionary). With his statements, Mr. Knowles is implying that light-skinned black artists have more chances succeeding than other black artists, including his daughters: Beyoncé and Solange. Beyoncé might be aware of this fact and she could be using her *whiteness* to make profit, “[h]er Eurocentric standard of beauty (light skin, long blond hair, a sexualized body, etc.) and a hypersexualized performance of gender provide enormous opportunities for her to live beyond her blackness,” likewise her mixed ancestry¹ also counts as a privilege for her (Chandler 3841).

Then, with all this criticisms against her, could we still argue that Beyoncé acts as a feminist role model for young black girls? A recent study shows that this is not the case. Instead of empowering the interviewed girls, Beyoncé is making them feel vulnerable because of the white beauty standards that she is representing: “[H]er blond hair extensions and light (bleached) skin remind black girls that appearing beautiful is akin to appear as white as possible” (Utley 6). These girls are being exposed to a standardization of the stereotypical white female beauty through one of the most influential artists of the black community, which argues against the motto *embrace yourself* that Beyoncé, as a black woman, is trying to convey.

¹ African American, Native American and French.

2.2 Perpetuation and Exposure of Sexism and Women's Vulnerability in Beyoncé's Songs

When looking at Beyoncé's lyrics, we can definitely find some contradictions from song to song. Despite arguing in the previous chapter that Beyoncé's songs are empowering, there are some of them that acknowledge sexism and female vulnerability. In order to show Beyoncé's contradictory behaviour in her music, I will focus on two songs: "Why Don't You Love Me" and "Partition."

Firstly, "Why Don't You Love Me" is a chant for attention. Apparently, as the listener can hear from the beginning and the hook of the song, Beyoncé's lover has left her, and she is trying to understand why. Hence, from the first few verses the listener encounters Beyoncé's submissive attitude. The hook is repeated three times saying: "Why don't you love me? / when I make me so damn easy to love? / Why don't you need me? / tell me, baby, why don't you need me / when I make me so damn easy to need?" I think that the repetition of this part of the song shows that Beyoncé has a needy and clingy tone; she needs to know what her faults are in order to change and be the perfect woman. Beyoncé tries to include in the following verses that women are intelligent, but this part is blurred by the reference to the sexual satisfaction of her lover: "I got moves in your bedroom / keep you happy with the nasty things I do." It seems that sex is just a chore that a woman should do to make her partner happy. All in all, it can be argued that this song exposes female vulnerability, represented as the fear of rejection that can be seen as a negative stereotype for women in our society.

Secondly, "Partition" is an explicit sexual song that follows the theme of fearing rejection. In this song, Beyoncé is completely subdued to the sexual desire of her lover, which happens to be her husband Jay-Z. The first verse illustrates how Beyoncé depicts a sexual encounter with Jay-Z: "Oh he so horny, yeah he want to fuck / he popped all my buttons, and

he ripped my blouse.” Apparently, the moment is rushed and harsh, and she ends pleasing only him, as she sings: “He Monica Lewinsky-ed² all on my gown”. In this song, Beyoncé is following the societal norms that say that women have to satisfy men’s sexual wishes. From the suggestive lyrics of the song, Jay-Z represents the male gaze that Beyoncé is trying to seduce. This does not represent the feminist persona that Beyoncé is trying to embody. Trying to link feminism with herself, Beyoncé includes a soft female French voice saying that men think that feminists hate sex³. However, the statement is lost in the song mainly because it is in French and not many people would be able to understand it, consequently the message does not get a great impact. Consequently, this song represents the acknowledged sexual submission of women, even though Beyoncé tries to change this meekness for women, as I argued in the previous chapter.

2.3 bell hooks on Beyoncé: A Black Feminist Critique

Black feminism is quite difficult to define, but when reading *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins we get the idea that black feminism is a school of thought that deals with the oppression of black women as a result of the intersectionality of sexism, class and race (17-18). One of its most known activists is bell hooks. She is very worried about the fact that social media and visual media are assaulting the foundations of feminism and black feminism, in the sense that they are misleading. As a result, she has been very critical with Beyoncé’s new feminist label calling her *terrorist* and *anti-feminist*⁴.

In one of hooks essays, she discusses Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* regarding the portrayal of black women’s identity. Even though Beyoncé’s album “challenges us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see the black female body, . . . this radical repositioning of

² Meaning “to ejaculate” (Urban Dictionary). It refers to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

³ “Les hommes pensent que les féministes détestent le sexe.”

⁴ See “bell hooks – Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body | Eugene Lang College” on YouTube.

black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity” (hooks). hooks comments on this black women’s portrayal because Beyoncé is exploring the black female body as a victim that celebrates violence and wrath in her album *Lemonade*. This is not the right way to empower and liberate black women. hooks also implies that the stereotypical image of black women that Beyoncé is conveying in *Lemonade* is essentially an excuse to do business, in that, “Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color.” All in all, bell hooks is trying to convey the idea that Beyoncé’s feminism and black feminism is not authentic mainly because Beyoncé has created a feminist image in order to fit in the female society and to sell more CDs.

To sum up, one can argue that Beyoncé might be using this feminist label to be more universal and to enlarge her business. However, we cannot forget the points made in the first chapter: her post-feminism, her empowering lyrics and her positive impact in young black women. Therefore, I truly believe that even though her success is important, Beyoncé is still concerned about empowering women and inspiring them to be strong and independent. She has given a voice to many women, including me. She showed me that girls can do anything they aim for.

Conclusion

Beyoncé is a successful artist and business woman that aims to introduce feminist awareness in order to share her feelings about sexism with her fandom, as we can see at the stage whenever she performs “Flawless.” It is easier for Beyoncé to express her concerns through her songs, “which gives [her] an instantaneous voice through which to mould [her] identity . . . beyond the iconic” (Hobson). This does not directly imply that her music is only made to be sold. In an interview for *ELLE Magazine*, Beyoncé claimed: “I put the definition

of feminist in [“Flawless”] and on my tour, not for propaganda or to proclaim to the world that I’m a feminist, but to give clarity to the true meaning.” This statement proves that Beyoncé believes in feminism and is aware of the amount of negative interpretations that feminism might have and that she uses her status of power and success in the music business to promote feminist awareness. In this essay, I have explained that Beyoncé embraces this feeling through her celebration of independence, self-identity and sexuality as a black woman. Besides, her music is the means to express these empowering attitudes to the world. At the same time, I have disclosed the *dangerous* side of her feminism such as her whiteness, her somewhat sexist lyrics and her inaccurate portrayal of black female bodies that succumb to the expectations of the patriarchy in order to build Beyoncé’s business. Nonetheless, even though many feminists argue that Beyoncé is using feminism in the wrong way to make profit, she is spreading the meaning of feminism thanks to this business she has built, meaning that economic success and feminism do not have to be necessarily opposed.

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