

Homohop: A Study of Sexuality and Music

Ved Prakash

Abstract-The genre of African-American Hip Hop has been captivated with so called 'normative masculine behaviour' to such an extent that it was not shocking to cognise the disappearance of Hip Hop which is sung and performed by rappers with "non-normative gender-sexual orientations." It was believed that one had to be a "macho" with innumerable girls around him to be a "successful male" rapper so that there won't be any apprehension concerning the 'hetero-normative' sexual predilection of the rapper as many rap artists believe that one with alternative sexual orientation cannot be acknowledged in the Hip Hop industry because this genre of music doesn't belong to 'emasculate' men. For instance, Snoop Dogg, a well known rapper remarked in *The Guardian* that "I don't know if 'gays' will ever be accepted because rap is so masculine." Hip Hop's golden era during 1980s began with gangsta rappers such as Ice T from New Jersey and N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) from Compton, California. These groups represent an aggressive form of rap through their songs which would be full of physical and visual violence perhaps that is the reason most of the rappers portray an essentially hyper masculine picture of themselves. Even though Rap started in late 1960s in Bronx in America, interestingly till 1990s there was not any iconic rapper who could represent the LGBT community in America. This paper will focus on the etymology of Queer Hip Hop in America and argue how this has become a significant sub-genre of 'mainstream' hip hop. This paper will also look at the songs and lyrics of selected male and female LGBT rappers such as Tori Fixx, Tim'm West, Azealia Banks and Frank Ocean to analyse if there is a distinction with regard to how they address the issues of identity and queer issues? This paper will also attempt to discover why Homohop is resented and how 'hetero-mainstream' rappers respond to this art? Queer Hip Hop is not just a form of art rather it has become a site of struggle and revolution and this revolution needs to be studied, understood and performed.

Keywords : African-American music, Queer hiphop, Sexuality.

Music cannot be looked at in isolation as it has always been an integral component of a society. Music is just not about the sound, beats or lyrics but in fact it delineates the culture and subsistence of a society. One can essentially contest that music works as a mirror of a culture. If one scrutinizes the whole contextual setting of music within the historical and socio-political context of African-Americans then it would not be an exaggeration in claiming the fact that music for them has been much more than just music. Music rendered a sense of space, tolerance and credence for African-Americans in a world where the colour black was never considered beautiful in comparison to white. Music has served as an apparatus of both resistance and power to blacks.

S. H. Fernando Jr. in his preface to *The New Beats: Exploring the music, culture, and attitudes of hip-hop* substantiates that music portrays an innermost picture of a culture and it is true about

all cultures of the world. Fernando Jr. writes: "Some people consider music as purely entertainment, when, in fact, it is one of the most intimate reflections of a culture. Like other modes of artistic expression, music also offers a direct insight into the soul...¹ "

Hip Hop has become a global phenomenon in the present scenario. In its voyage from being an art of a minority faction to an art of the mass, Hip Hop has evolved in the troubled terrain of politics, culture and race. Hip Hop is a youth movement which evolved in the Bronx, New York. It is claimed that the term Hip Hop became renowned after the release of Sugar Hill Gang's 'Rapper's Delight' in 1979. When 'Rapper's Delight' got released it gave a newfangled recognition to the phenomenon of Hip Hop. People started accepting Hip Hop both overtly and covertly. However, there are Hip Hop critics who gestate that Rap which is a foremost constituent of Hip Hop has led to a cultural

revolution but this revolution represents culture in a very negative way. On the contrary, for many Hip Hop artists like Run D.M.C, Public Enemy, N.W.A etc. rap has become a site of voicing the marginalised and unheard voice which doesn't get attention.

Even though Hip Hop began in 1960s in America, It wasn't perceived as a legitimate form of music for a long time as Hip Hop was associated with marginalised black people who were in search of their identity. Bronx, the place Hip Hop originated from was always considered a place of uneducated and unruly blacks by the mainstream America. A lot of people would avoid going to Bronx. Moreover, there was a popular assumption that the art of rap is only violent, misogynist and sexist as most of the black youths tend to indulge in gang violence and many other grievous crimes in ghettos at an early age and perhaps this is the reason when Hip Hop emerged out of the not so developed and respectable streets of America many were apprehensive regarding the nature of Hip Hop. Some considered it to be an art of low stature which should not be allowed any space to exist or flourish as it might influence the landscape of music in a negative way. Here I would like to make a clarification regarding Hip Hop being violent. There are songs by Snoop Dog, Lil Wayne, Jay Z and Ice T which fall within the framework of misogyny but at the same times there are songs like '*Fight the Power*' by Public Enemy and '*Ghetto Music*' by KRS-One which highlight the ghetto reality and black struggle.

However, after the years of repression and exploitation of the black body by the Whites, African Americans had a desire to construct a dignified identity for them. Post The Civil Rights Movement, African American youths got various forms to express their 'self' in order to establish their 'identity' and music became one such form which facilitated blacks in performing their individuality and formulating their language. Music functioned as a solitary source of strength and power for blacks at a time when not only black voice but black psyche too was suppressed but more than strength and power music furnished a cognisance of collectiveness and

integrity within blacks. It connected the veins of African-Americans regardless of their class, colour, religion and social prominence. But unfortunately sexuality became a primary site of difference when it came to Hip Hop music. One had to be a hard core masculine heterosexual to be a rapper as Hip Hop was not meant for musicians or artists who were feminine or non-hetero normative. If one looks at the journey of Hip Hop then one would realise that from Gangsta Rap to Contemporary Rap, Hip Hop has always been very masculine. What is the reason that sexuality has always been given so much of importance in our society? And why sexuality becomes central to someone's existence?

Michel Foucault² in *The History of Sexuality* argues the fact that the whole institution of sexuality has been enormously rigid as the discourse of sexuality is confined within the structural boundaries of marriage. In most of the societies the foundation of marriage is based on the hetero-normative pattern of social behaviour. Foucault coins the term 'repressive hypothesis' which denotes that after the rise of the bourgeoisie, sex became a private and political affair. Foucault suggests that according to 'repressive hypothesis' power is exercised to repress any form of free discussion on sex. The point which needs to be noticed here is that Hip Hop too is political and it is a form of music which has always been attentive and conscious about its hyper masculine image which was crafted very carefully over the period of time by the so called 'masculine' rappers. Hip Hop too repressed and avoided any free discussion on Queer Hip Hop. The genre of Hip Hop has been frightened to death by gay hip hop and artists. Power is exercised by hetero rappers to repress songs and artists who share an affiliation with homo hip hop or LGBT Hip Hop perhaps this is the reason that the gangsta rapper The Game claims in one of his interviews that there are many closet rappers in the hip hop industry in America but they are afraid to come out as Hip Hop is like a performance which supposedly can only be performed by "macho rappers". Furthermore, there is this fear that if anyone finds out regarding a rapper being non-hetero normative then Hip Hop Community might

refuse to acknowledge the presence of that particular rapper.

LGBT Hip Hop emerged in 1990s as an underground movement primarily in California. LGBT Hip Hop is also known by names such as Homo Hop or Queer Hip Hop. Tim'm West of Deep Dickollective, a Queer Hip Hop group from California, coined the term 'Homohop'. He argues that the term was invented to promote LGBT artists and a different form of music. Soon Queer Hip Hop became a sub-genre of mainstream Hip Hop. Queer Hip Hop had the same beats and musical instruments which any Hip Hop group would use but the only point of divergence was that Homohop placed the question of 'marginalised and suppressed identity' of LGBT groups at the very centre of the production of this sub-genre. LGBT Hip Hop became a site of mobilising queer artists. From 2001 to 2007 The Peace OUT World Homo Hop Festival, an annual event of Hip Hop music and culture by LGBT people strengthened the Homohop Movement. Subsequently, a new wave of LGBT Hip Hop artist emerged in 2012 when Azealia Amanda Banks, a rapper from Harlem and Frank Ocean from New Orleans revealed their sexual orientation which further inspired the LGBT people to be proud of their existence and sexual preference. Moreover, the release of the LGBT pro-songs by mainstream "heterosexual" artists such as Murs and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis empowered and revolutionised Homohop movement.

This paper will focus on the etymology of Queer Hip Hop in America and see if Queer Hip Hop is any different in comparison to 'mainstream' Hip Hop. This paper will also look at 'sexuality' and queer issues through the songs and lyrics of LGBT rappers such as Tori Fixx and Tim'm West. This paper will also attempt to discover why Homohop is resented and how 'hetero-mainstream' rappers respond to this art? Queer Hip Hop is not just a form of art rather it has become a site of struggle and revolution and this revolution needs to be studied, understood and performed.

First to understand why Hip Hop is so

ridiculously obsessed with everything which is "manly" goes back to 1960s-70s when more or less everybody in the Bronx belonged to gangs. There were more youths in gangs than out of gangs. Every street belonged to some squad or the other. There were gangs such as the Black Spades, the War Pigs, Bronx Aliens and so on. Many youths would join gangs because it would give them a sense of power and recognition. Gangs and Hip Hop share a very close association with each other. Many of these gangs would carve out a space for themselves through live performances in ghettos. The sound of gigantic boom boxes would help in spreading the substance of dominion and power across streets. Schoolly D, Boogie Down Productions, N.W.A and Ice T are considered to be the groundbreaker of Gangsta rap which glorified masculinity. African-American writer, bell hooks has a huge problem with black men performing their masculinity while singling, walking or even talking. This execution of manhood never stops.

bell hooks in her book *The Will to Change: Men Masculinity and Love* explores the milieu of masculinity and according to her it is not the blunder of men to be obsessed with manhood but rather it is patriarchy which conditions them since their childhood that violence and anger are the signs which make someone a man. bell hooks writes:

There is only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men; that emotion is anger. Real men get mad. And their mad-ness, No matter how violent or violating, is deemed natural- a positive expression of patriarchal masculinity.³

I would like to state that black male body has always been stereotyped since the time of slave trade. For instance, during 19th century the blackface minstrel shows represented a negative image of blacks by portraying them ignorant, naive, violent, and irresponsible and so on. Most of the rappers today do not realise that they are further stereotyping their bodies through violent and misogynist songs which represent an

extremely masculine image of themselves. Byron Hurt made a documentary in 2006 called “Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes” which initiated a whole new discussion in the hip hop world about manhood and sexism. This documentary highlights how most of the rappers stay in a box in which one has to be strong, tough, affluent and dominating else there is always a fear of being called soft, weak, chump or a faggot and nobody wants to be addressed by any of these terms. The documentary features interviews about masculinity with rappers such as Fat Joe, Chuck D, along with hip hop mogul Russell Simmons and others. One rapper in the documentary confessed: “before hip hop (black) man was seen as docile but when hip hop came around it brought masculinity back into the game and some of it is a bit misguided.” Byron Hurt highlights that most of the rappers have two sides to their self. First, what they essentially are and second, how they want them to be seen or projected as. When it comes to act masculine many rappers get trapped in the predicament of being and becoming.

Snoop Dogg, a well known rapper remarked in *The Guardian* that “I don't know if 'gays' will ever be accepted because rap is so masculine⁴.” Even though Rap started in late 1960s in America, interestingly till 1990s there was not any iconic rapper who could represent the LGBT community in America. Tupac Shakur, a well known rapper who was shot in 1996 in a gang violence, treated the LGBT community in a very degradable manner through his songs. The lyrics of his song “All Out” clearly gives a glimpse about how people with alternative sexual orientation were perceived by gangsta rappers. Tupac in this song says-

we goin all out
 We goin all out
 We goin all out, watch ya motherfuckin
 mouth niggaz
 That's right fuck these fag niggaz
 Do it do it do it.⁵

Eminem too has been accused of homophobia by Gay Lesbian Association Against Defamation (GLAAD) for his 2000 album *The Marshall*

Mathers LP. In this album the lyrics of most of his songs are soaked with violence and full of damaging and condescending comments about many groups and social factions including lesbians and gays. The song “*Marshall Mathers*” represents a boisterous imagery. The song goes like-

*I'm anti-Backstreet and Ricky Martin
 With instincts to kill N'Sync, don't get me
 started
 These fuckin brats can't sing and Britney's
 garbage
 What's this bitch retarded?...
 New Kids on the block sucked a lot of dick
 Boy/girl groups make me sick
 And I can't wait till I catch all you faggot in
 public.
 Think I was put here to annoy the world
 Plus I was put here to put fear in faggots
 who spray Faygo root beer
 And call themselves clowns cause they look
 queer
 Faggot2dope and silent gay
 Claimin Detroit, when you all live twenty
 miles away
 And I don't wrestle and I will knock you
 fucking faggots⁶*

The song goes on and on stating queer as repulsive. I believe somewhere production houses who produce the videos are also to be blamed as they play a very conscious role with regard to what should be consumed by the youth or people at large. These selective bodies control the product and they make sure that mass media must notice the product. Weitzer and Kubrinin in their essay

*“Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content
 Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings”*
 argue that
*Rap artists are also influenced by pressures
 from elites in the music industry. To
 maximize sales, record industry moguls
 encourage provocative, edgy lyrics.
 Producers not only encourage artists to
 become “hardcore” but also reject or
 marginalize artists who go against the
 grain. As a result of such practices, a*

*directly proportional relationship has developed between rap music's explicitness and the sale of its records. In response to corporate pressure, many rappers abandon political and social message and focus instead on material wealth and sexual exploits.*⁷

Moreover, some rappers believe that Hip Hop should be identified as one universal genre. Multiple categories such as; Gangsta Hip Hop, Conscious Hip Hop or Queer Hip Hop more than helping Hip Hop is actually harming it. The moment one mentions 'Queer hip hop' the entire perspective changes. In this case scenario music gets defined not by the artist but by his or her sexual orientation by virtue of it pertaining to the category of gay Hip Hop. There are still several rappers who are afraid that the moment they will reveal their sexuality it might sabotage their music and their existence consciously or unconsciously.

For instance, one of the legends of hip hop Mister Cee was arrested in 2011 for receiving oral sex in his car from a man. After this incident the entire media in America started talking about his sexuality. Whether is he a gay or not? He was asked continuously about his sexual orientation. Mr. Cee gave multiple explanations by stating he is straight. I wonder the circumstances if he had confessed that he was gay then how would the media, rap lovers and Cee's fans have reacted? Would people have started hating and disliking his music just because he was not a hyper masculine Hip Hop artist? Well these are the questions which are looking for an answer but answers are not easy to find.

However when Frank Ocean came out of the closet in 2012 a lot had changed. People had become much more tolerant towards rappers with alternative sexual orientations. The New York Times writes that

When Frank Ocean a rising star in the R&B world, announced that his first true love had been a man, he seemed to be taking a giant risk with his career...No

*other mainstream R&B artists have acknowledged having homosexual relationships. For decades even the rumour of homosexuality had ruined artists in hip hop circle.*⁸

Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African-American studies at the Duke University opines that things were different ten or fifteen years ago. At that time Frank Ocean could never have come out. Now, many big names from the hip hop industry such as Jay Z, Mr. Simmons, the founder and former owner of the Def Jam Label and Joie Manda, the president of Island Def Jam are supporting Frank Ocean. Joie Manda said that Mr. Ocean broke down an old wall that should never have been built.

On the other hand, Deep Dickollective, a black Queer Hip Hop group from California was making pro- LGBT songs. This group was formed in early 2000 by Tim'm T West, Juba Kalamka and Phillip Goff. These three came together and started jamming on Stanford campus and soon they came up with 20 songs and 13 out of these became a part of their debut recording named 'BourgieBohoPostPomoAfroHomo'. The track "Straight Trippin" by Deep Dickollective (D/DC) completely disregards any idea which might suggest that gay rappers lack necessary skills to be in the hip hop world.

Furthermore, Tori Fixx is one of the first openly gay Hip Hop artists. In the mid 90s Tori Fixx dj-ed for various parties and gatherings and soon he became a part of many illustrious LGBT groups. In 2005 he appeared in a documentary titled 'Pic Up the Mic'⁹. This documentary primarily highlights the issues of LGBT in Hip Hop. Later on Tori also became a part of the "Homo Revolution Tour" in 2007. His album 'Code Red' talks about the "LGBT issues" and 'hot boys'. This album was perceived well and through World Wide Web a lot more people were talking about it. Another thing which has been a sheer blessing for young LGBT artists is that through technology and internet it has become easier to reach out a wider audience without shelling out a lot.

Finally I would like to say that there are so many aspects to Gay hip hop and it is not possible to cover them all in one paper. Nonetheless, as far as the current scenario is concerned, more and more people are accepting queer hip hop and this genre is getting stronger. Finally I would like to conclude the paper with the lyrics of a song 'Same love' by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis.

*“When I was in 3rd grade
I thought that I was gay
Cause I could draw...
And I kept my room straight...
Call each other faggots
Behind the keys of a message board
A word rooted in hate
Yet our genre still ignores it...
No law's gonna change us
We have to change us
Whatever god you believe in
We all come from the same one
Strip away the fear, underneath, it's all
the same love
About time that we raised up.”¹⁰”*

Notes and References

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