

Gender Construction, Stereotype, and Power Dynamics in Stromae's *Tous Les Mêmes*: Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Tous Les Mêmes is a popular song in the album *Racine Carrée* by Stromae, listened all around Belgium and France. The song was written in French and showed a complex unhealthy relationship within a man and a woman. Song as a popular discourse is a strategic medium to deliver messages and influence its listeners. *Tous Les Mêmes* is believed to advocate gender equality to the surface of the society. However, a critical discourse analysis of the song *Tous Les Mêmes* has not been conducted despite its potential. Hereby, this study aims to examine the song *Tous Les Mêmes*, utilizing Fairclough's three dimensional framework to uncover the hidden ideologies of how it addresses gender inequality through gender construction, stereotype, and power dynamics within the lyrics. It also uncovers whether the song is align with gender equality principles and advocating gender equality awareness. In addition, the ideology in the discourse is contrasted with the perspective of women in gender equality and the historical analysis of gender itself. Moreover, this study finds that the song *Tous Les Mêmes* is ambivalent since it presents both the address of gender inequality through gender construction, stereotype, and power dynamics, as well as advocating a hope for less rigid society that upholds gender equality principles. In conclusion, the song focuses on addressing a woman's perspective in an unhealthy relationship but can also address the need of gender equality within society.

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INTRODUCTION

Tous Les Mêmes is a song composed by a Belgian musician, Stromae. This song is the fifth track on the album *Racine Carrée* that is popular in Belgium and France. Under the label of Mosaert, this song has successfully enlisted some

of the song charts (Hamard, 2013). *Tous Les Mêmes* is a song rich in frustration and contradiction between romantic relationships, presenting the complexity of love and hope for equality (Branch, 2023). For some listeners, this song is considered as a feminist anthem since it presents the

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problematics of rigid traditional gender roles and inspires movement for a change (Branch, 2023).

Nowadays, movements that advocate for gender equality. The issues being raised are varies, ranging from gender-based salary gap, gender-based violence, to the level of participation of gender-based public spaces. This is based on stereotypes, prejudice, and violence (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015). Furthermore, it becomes a concern about gender as a focus of study. Gender, in previous studies that have been conducted, especially among anthropologists, has been limited to the kinship system where gender is focused on the household and family as a basic social organization. Thus, a broader view is required so that gender as a social construction that is formed within society is not merely limited to the household and family, but more complex to modern society, employment, education, and government (Scott, 1986).

Feminist movements have emphasized the prevalence of gender inequality, which shall not be an individual issue, but is rooted in societal structures (Lorber, 2018). In discourse, linguists have examined how language can be utilized as a tool in conveying certain ideologies. Critical discourse analysis is conducted to find out the hidden ideologies in a supposedly neutral discourse (Fairclough, 1995). This analysis has often been used by previous researchers to analyze human products, as for instance advertisements, songs, films, and so on.

Song is one of the media that has been proven to rapidly spread certain ideologies. *Tous Les Mêmes* in particular, is thought to have values that critique gender-based social constructions, stereotypes, and power dynamics between women and men in the context of romance and social relationships. Nevertheless, a critical discourse analysis of this song has yet to be found despite many positive sentiments from netizens and the music industry towards this song. This song presents a number of gender stereotypes where men always blame women for their dissatisfaction and women punish men for their thoughts (Prieur in Cretier, 2017). Therefore, the song *Tous Les Mêmes* is chosen based on Mosaert label's publication of the song through its official account on one of its digital platforms, YouTube.

Furthermore, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model is utilised as a theory to investigate the textual lyrics and identify the presence of ideologies such as gender-based social constructions, stereotypes, and power dynamics between men and women on Scott's (1986) gender perspective to determine whether this song contains ideologies that reveal gender inequality and advocating support towards gender equality on

Fredman & Goldblatt's (2015) substantive equality dimensional framework.

The objectives of this study are to; (1) identify the existence of gender-based social constructions, stereotypes, and power dynamics in the subject of the research, (2) discover forms of gender inequality, and (3) reveal whether or not the subject of this research advocates gender equality movements.

METHODS

The data used in this research were taken from the written lyrics and audio of the song *Tous Les Mêmes* on the album *Racine Carrée* by Stromae through official websites where Mosaert Label released this song, for instance YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Music. The song has an audio duration of 3 minutes 32 seconds.

The type of qualitative analysis used in this research is a discourse analysis method with the aim of identifying hidden ideologies contained in the song *Tous Les Mêmes*. The discourse analysis method applied is critical discourse analysis, which is a study that examines how language is utilized to shape and maintain power relations in society. Van Dijk (2015) argues that critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that can utilize various methods such as analyzing word choice, sentence structure, meaning, speech acts, pragmatics, stylistics, rhetoric, and other linguistic aspects (Nurhayani, 2024). In critical discourse analysis, language is both a discourse and a social practice used to analyze texts, the process of production and interpretation, the interrelationship between texts, and social condition (Fairclough in Kusri, 2020).

The data analysis process in this research was conducted by observing data sources through intensive listening to the song audio and careful reading of the textual song lyrics. The analysis is conducted comprehensively by examining a subset of data that reflects criticism of gender inequality. Afterwards, the subset of data to be analyzed in this research focuses on the factors of gender inequality such as gender-based social construction, stereotypes, and power dynamics. Text analysis in this research is utilized to identify words, phrases, and sentences that refer to the ideology that the singer wants to convey through discourse contained in textual song lyrics and verbal discourse in audio. Thus, this research will focus on linguistic features.

However, Fairclough (1995) argues that the relationship between language and ideology can not be reflected through text analysis alone, which requires conceptualization between research

frameworks on discourse and sociocultural change. Therefore, the ideology contained in the discourse will be analyzed in this research with three-dimensional analysis, a critical discourse analysis method initiated by Fairclough. In addition to text analysis, this method also has two other dimensions such as discourse practice analysis and sociocultural analysis. Discourse practice analysis refers to the production and consumption process of the subjects studied in this research. Nurhayani (2024) argues that this second dimension focuses on text production such as the process of text creation, matters surrounding text creators, formats, and historical and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the consumption of texts in Fairclough's three-dimensional framework is seen as the form of texts, whether print, audio, or video, as well as the groups that can access these texts (Nurhayani, 2024). Furthermore, the third dimension in Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model is to identify the relationship between heterogeneous text features and the accompanying discourse process in the process of sociocultural change (Fairclough, 1995).

The ideology contained in this research subject utilizes Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model, which is a three-dimensional framework which will then be compared with the principles of gender equality (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015) and Gender Historical Analysis (Scott, 1986). This is done to provide verification whether the research subject contains points in the object of research analyzed through the views of women in the four dimensions of substantive equality Fredman & Goldblatt (2015), namely; (1) to repair disadvantages, (2) fight stigma, prejudice, humiliation and violence, (3) change social and institutional structures, (4) facilitate participation both in the form of political participation and social inclusion and in line with the meaning of gender according to Scott's view (1986).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis in this study shows the existence of gender-based social construction, stereotypes, and power dynamics in the romantic relationship between men and women. In the song *Tous Les Mêmes*, Stromae represents two roles at once, namely the man and the woman. There are

various forms of inequality experienced by the woman, causing deep hurt and resentment.

Text Analysis

- 1) *Vous les hommes vous êtes Tous Les Mêmes. Macho mais cheap, bande de mauviettes infidèles.*

[You (men) are all the same. Macho but cheap, a bunch of unfaithful cowards]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 0:08 - 0:15)

Text analysis of example (1) shows that Stromae uses the pronoun *vous* as an address form to refer to men in general. In French grammar, the pronoun *vous* is used to refer to "you" (singular-formal form) or "you guys" (plural). The use of this address form is identified as a form of gender-based power imbalance where men (plural) are represented as superior to women. Brown & Gilman (1960) argued that French pronoun is closely related to the dimensions of power and solidarity intensity. Furthermore, there is semantic power where the superior uses the pronoun *tu* to address their interlocutor while receiving the pronoun *vous* to be addressed by their interlocutor.

The text analysis also shows that the diction *mais* indicates the usage of contradictory conjunction. In this section, Stromae emphasizes the contradiction between male characteristics, namely *macho* and *cheap*. In addition, Stromae also refers to men in general as "unfaithful cowards" which pragmatically means "cheaters". Stromae implicitly suggests the existence of gender stereotypes where men are associated with masculinity traits such as *macho*, as well as their tendency to cheat on their partners. Fairclough (1995) in his research explains the function of conjunctions as markers of salience relations, which strengthens the finding that the conjunction *mais* connects two contradictory gender stereotypes in example (1), namely the adjectives *macho* and *cheap*.

- 2) *Si prévisibles, non je ne suis pas certaine, que-que-que tu l'mérites. Z'avez d'la chance qu'on vous aime. Dis-moi "merci".*

[So predictable, I'm not even sure you deserve me. You guys (men) are lucky because we (women) love you. Say to me, "thank you."]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 0:16 - 0:24)

- 3) *Rendez-vous, rendez-vous, rendez-vous au prochain règlement. Rendez-vous, rendez-vous, rendez-vous sûrement aux prochaines règles.*

[See you, see you, see you in the next quarrel.
See you, see you, see you at that (arranged)
time]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 0:25 - 0:34)

The text analysis in example (2) identifies the use of colloquial contraction as in example (2), namely in the diction *Z'avez* (*Vous avez*) and *d'la* (*de la*). The use of these contractions is identified as an informal form in discourse as well as a close extension of the use of vernacular language. Stromae (in his role as a woman) utilizes these diction as a sign that women's position is equal to men. Women are synonymous with the usage of standardized language to implicitly indicate their social status and level of education in order to be accepted in society, so the usage of vernacular language in this passage indicates controversy. However, the use of the pronoun *vous* in example (2) *Z'avez* still functions as a marker of solidarity, indicating that Stromae's position (as a female role) still has a solidarity distance (in this case not solidary) towards men. Brown & Gilman (1960) explain that the usage of pronouns can indicate inequality, so in this case, according to the two semantic dimensions, it is identified as equal but not solidary.

Meanwhile, the text analysis in example (3) shows that Stromae plays the role of a man with a heavier tone of voice compared to the part where he plays a woman. There are repetitions of "*rendez-vous au prochain règlement*" and "*rendez-vous sûrement aux prochaines règles*" addressed to the woman in a directive manner to refer to a situation of frequent quarrels. This also shows that quarrels in romantic relationships are considered common in the male perspective. This perspective is part of a gender-based social construction where women's actions are often judged through their relationship with men. This gender-based social construction is initiated from problematic gender relations and is characterized by significant features where it is further explained by Fairclough (1995) that women and men are often unsure of being able to talk to each other thus identifying frequent communicative dilemmas.

- 4) *Cette fois c'était la dernière, tu peux croire que c'est qu'une crise. Mate une dernière fois mon derrière, il est à côté de mes valises.*

[I swear this is the last time, you may think that I am just angry. Look at my arse one last time, it's ready to go with my suitcase]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 0:45 - 0:52)

In example (4), there is the sentence "*tu peux croire que c'est qu'une crise*". In this passage, the text analysis indicates that the word *une crise* has a referential meaning to the woman's action of wanting to end the quarrel in her romantic relationship (ending an unhealthy relationship). However, the man only considers this as normal because of the stereotype that women are easily emotional. The text analysis in example (4) indicates the existence of female gender stereotypes from the male perspective, which then forms a social construction. The association of a woman's feminine nature as emotional with how she is viewed by society in resolving conflict is wrong. Scott (1986) argues that interpretations that categorize men and women are problematic because they promote that masculinity and femininity are not necessarily underlying characteristics of an individual, but are subjective constructions.

- 5) *Tu diras au revoir à ta mère, elle qui t'idéalise. Tu n'vois même pas tout c'que tu perds avec une autre ce serait pire.*

[Say goodbye to your mother, who idolizes you. You don't know what you're missing, with another it would be much worse]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 0:53 - 1:02)

- 6) *Quoi toi aussi tu veux finir maintenant? C'est l'monde à l'envers. Moi, je l'disais pour t'faire réagir seulement, toi t'y pensais.*

[What, you want to end the relationship (break up) now? You are mistaken. I'm just talking like that to get a reaction out of you, but you're thinking of (really) doing it]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 1:02 - 1:10)

Text analysis of example (5) indicates the referential meaning of the noun phrase *ta mère*. This noun phrase refers connotatively to Stromae's role as a woman, not literally to the man's "mother". The woman shows her disgust at being a mother to the man she idolizes. While in example (6) it can be identified that the woman wants to end the relationship with the man to test his loyalty "*Quoi toi aussi tu veux finir maintenant? C'est l'monde à l'envers*", and ironically the man takes her seriously "*Moi, je l'disais pour t'faire réagir seulement, toi t'y pensais*". Furthermore, the text analysis of these examples shows the existence of gender stereotypes where women are stereotyped as always emotional as well as the social construction where the role of women is always expected to take care and love men. Gender becomes a way to denote cultural

constructions of the whole shaping social ideas about how appropriate roles are for women and men (Scott, 1986).

- 7) *Facile à dire, je suis gnangnan. Et que j'aime trop les bla-bla-bla, mais non, non, non, c'est important. Ce que t'appelles les ragnagnas.*
[Easy to say, I'm an emotional person. And I'm a talking too much, but no, no, no, it (is) important. That thing you call "menstruation"]
(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 1:37 - 1:45)
- 8) *Tu sais la vie, c'est des enfants. Mais comme toujours, c'est pas l'bon moment. Ah oui pour les faire là, tu es présent, mais pour les élever y aura qu'des absents.*
[You know, life is for (having) children. But it's always, "It's not the right time". Oh, sure, you're there to make them, but will you be there to raise them too?]
(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 1:46 - 1:54)

Text analysis of examples (7) and (8) indicates gender-based social construction. In example (7), there are the diction *gnangnan* and *ragnagnas*. Both of these diction are *argot* in French. *Argot* or slang is used for everyday conversation. Thus, in this context, Stromae, who plays the role of a woman, is equalizing her social position with the man utilizing vernacular language. In example (8), there is a frequency adverb *toujours*, which functions as an emphasis/intensifier to the actions taken by the man.

In examples (7) and (8), gender-based social construction is identified by how women are always considered insignificant in arguing because they are easily emotional due to the impact of menstruation. In addition, it is also evidenced by the inconsistency of men who want children but never find the right time in the sentence *Mais comme toujours c'est pas l'bon moment*. Hereby, the sentence also indicates the absence of the man as a father figure for his children. This shows the double burden for the role of women who are expected in social construction to be a good mother and wife but do not get support from their men.

Yulianeta (2021) argues that in society, gender ideologies are socialized that believe and encourage men to be masculine and women to be feminine. This ideology is then socioculturally constructed so that it becomes something that is maintained or tends to be forced.

- 9) *Lorsque je n'serais plus belle ou du moins au naturel. Arrête je sais que tu mens, il n'y a que Kate Moss qui est éternelle.*
[When I'm not beautiful anymore, or at least not naturally beautiful. Stop it, I know you're lying, only Kate Moss is (eternally) beautiful]
(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 1:55 - 2:02)
- 10) *Moche ou bête (c'est jamais bon). Bête ou belle (c'est jamais bon). Belle ou moi (c'est jamais bon). Moi ou elle (c'est jamais bon).*
[Ugly or stupid (This is not right!). Beautiful or ugly (This is not right!). Beautiful or me (This is not right!). Me or her (woman) (It's not right!)]
(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 2:03 - 2:11)

In examples (9) and (10), text analysis indicates the existence of gender-based social construction and power dynamics. For example, in lyric (9), Stromae in his role as a woman tells her male lover's expectation for her to remain naturally beautiful "*Lorsque je n'serais plus belle ou du moins au naturel*". Stromae in the sentence utilizes *futur simple* which indicates her lover's expectation that in the future she will remain beautiful despite the fact that she will age. In lyric (9) there is also a referential meaning that refers to a famous model, "*...il n'y a que Kate Moss qui est éternelle*". Kate Moss is a supermodel. Stromae refers to Kate Moss as a form of sarcasm to the man. This social construction can be concluded to be present in the form of the expectation that women should be beautifully natural and timeless.

Generally, individuals voluntarily conform to the customs of the society around them where gender status becomes the norm and social expectations are embedded in the sense of dignity and identity (Lorber, 2018). Therefore, maintaining beauty is constructed as a natural responsibility for a woman to survive in society.

Furthermore, in example (10), Stromae's defense of the male role of *c'est jamais bon* uses repetition to refute the woman's arguments such as "*Moche ou bête (...). Bête ou belle (...). Belle ou moi (...). Moi ou elle (...)*". The repetition in these lyrics is identified as a form of power dynamics where men emphasize a message so that the recipient's focus is not distracted.

Language can be easily manipulated to express ideologies and ideas through sentence structure and word choice (Fairclough in Al-Saeedi, 2017). Repetition can be considered as a method to emphasize a message or rhythm in developing an

idea or understanding (Jasim and Aziz in Al-Saeedi, 2017).

- 11) *Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes et y'en a marre. Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes et y'en a marre. Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes et y'en a marre. Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes et y'en a marre. Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes.*

[All (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, and we (women) have had enough. All (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, and we (women) are fed up. All (men) are the same, all (men) are the same, all (men) are the same]

(*Tous Les Mêmes*, 2:55 - 3:12)

The text analysis in example (11) indicates the repetition of the sentence "*Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes, Tous Les Mêmes et y'en a marre*", where Stromae, who plays the role of a woman, emphasizes that she is fed up with her lover, and even men in general because of the similarity of traits and behaviors in men.

Repetition can be used to create stylistic and poetic effects to influence the feelings of the reader/listener (Al-Saeedi, 2017). In this case, Stromae uses repetition as a persuasive strategy to promote gender equality and criticize stereotypes and conservative gender-based social constructions.

Discourse Practice Analysis

The analysis of discourse practices on the consumption of *Tous Les Mêmes* song tends to get positive sentiments from listeners. Listeners' interpretations can vary (Fairclough, 1995). For example, Cretier (2017) thinks that *Tous Les Mêmes* is a song that contains problems in a relationship between men and women. However, the song does not contain a solution to the problem where the solution is left to the listener's interpretation.

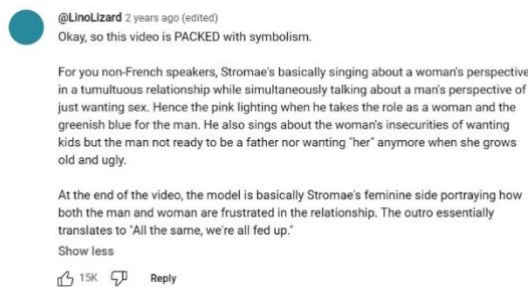


Figure 1. Screenshot of Listener Commentary on the Song *Tous Les Mêmes* on the Official Stromae's YouTube platform

Furthermore, @LinoLizard argues that Stromae's *Tous Les Mêmes* is steeped in symbolism. In short, @LinoLizard interprets *Tous Les Mêmes* as a song that is rich in representing women's perspectives and power dynamics controlled by male supremacy, especially in unhealthy romantic relationships.

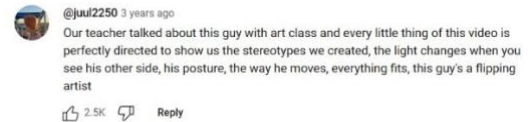


Figure 2. Screenshot of Listener Commentary on the Song *Tous Les Mêmes* on the Official Stromae's YouTube platform

Unlike @LinoLizard, @juul2250 thinks that the song *Tous Les Mêmes* is very well done by Stromae. @juul2250 believes that this song displays stereotypes formed by society that lead to inequality, especially in terms of gender.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis

Sociocultural practice analysis in this song shows indications that power dynamics and gender-based stereotypes are real and prevalent issues in the society, especially in romantic relationships. For example, in Macedonia, there are rigid gender stereotypes that emphasize women's gender roles as mothers and wives. This has an impact on power dynamics where women are then limited in their power to achieve social, political, educational and career status. Applied practices are needed to spread awareness of the importance of gender equality (CEDAW in Fredman & Goldblatt, 2014).

In addition, the analysis of sociocultural practices in this song also identifies the existence of gender-based social construction, especially in a household relationship. In reality, for example in Indonesia, which is still attached to a systematized patriarchal culture characterized by the absence of public spaces for women to express themselves as well as spaces to argue or discuss. This indicates a social construction where men are considered superior and women are inferior (Rahmadani in Firdausy, 2022). Songs are a medium for channeling expression in language. Through language, gender-based identities are then constructed (Scott, 1986).

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the parts of Stromae's *Tous Les Mêmes* that contain social criticism of gender-based social constructions, stereotypes, and power dynamics to identify the ideology that this song exposes about gender inequality in its application in romantic relationships in the society, as well as its alignment with the potential to advocate gender equality. Based on the findings and discussions, the author argues that this song is rich in social criticism especially in providing awareness of the phenomenon of gender-based social construction, stereotypes, and power dynamics present in society. Although the scope of the phenomenon is limited to the context of a romantic relationship, this song is believed by the author to have spoken out forms of gender inequality to the surface of its listeners. The author also believes that this song is a media that has the potential to support gender equality.

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