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Intertextuality and Allusion in Rap Lyrics

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Abstract
Rap music is one of the few music genres in which lyrics play the central part of the song. The stripped down drum beats in the background are there to set the mood of the song and to emphasise the song lyrics. As a consequence of rap being a word heavy music genre, there is a wide range of concepts that rap can cover, from race relations to science fiction. The literary techniques used to convey the more challenging concepts are intertextuality and allusion. This essay will show how those devices were used to integrate literature into the rap song “The Man Who Would Be King” by Billy Woods. It will discuss how intertextuality and allusion were used to convey the concepts of imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, and how sampling was used to enhance and expand those concepts on the musical level. It will also take a look at the function of gender in relation to reflecting imperialism in the song. It analyses how the rap song with integration of intertextuality, allusion and sampling could be seen as contemporary post-colonial writing in the form of a rap song.

Keywords
Rap Şarkı Sözlerinde Metinlerarasılık ve Gönderme

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Özet

Anahtar Kelimeler
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Rap music is one of the few music genres in which the lyrics are the central part of the song. The stripped down drum beats are in the background are there to set the mood of the song and to emphasise the song lyrics. As a consequence of rap being a word heavy music genre, there is a wide range of concepts that rap can cover, from race relations to science fiction. Some of the literary techniques used to convey complex concepts in rap are allusion und intertextuality. This article will focus how intertextuality, allusion and other literary devices had been used in the song “The Man Who
Would Be King” by Billy Woods to convey the concept of western imperialism and colonialization of Africa.

This article is divided into five parts, the first part discusses the main concepts of the song and where the parallels to the pre-existing texts are. The second part analyses intertextuality in the rap song. The third part explains allusions and other literary devices present in the song. The Fourth part shows how the music is connected to the intertextuality and the concepts of the lyrics, and the last part will discusses the position of gender in the song. The song takes the concepts of Kipling’s poem The White Man’s Burden, Dallas McCord Reynolds novella The Black Man’s Burden, H.T. Johnson’s poem Black Man’s Burden and Henry Labouchère’s poem Brown Man’s Burden and combines them.

The song takes the concepts of imperialism and colonialism in those works and reworks them into a rap song. However, before we go further how this has been done in the song, let define the main concepts the song. The four concepts present in “The Man Who Would Be King” by Billy Woods are colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and post-colonialism. Firstly, it is important to differentiate between colonialism and imperialism. Because of how the two concepts are used in literature it might seem that they are synonymous; however, they are not. They do have in common that they are used by a group of people to repress another, but the difference is how and why this is done. Through the history the term empire was used by various countries, regardless if it indicated imperialism or not. There are two main distinctions how an empire was set up, one being that an empire was governed from the centre for ideological and economic reasons. This is then known as imperialism. The other being that an empire has been developed with the intention of being occupied by an individual group for a habitat or by a profit-making aspirations by a commerce enterprise; this arrangement is known as a colony. Therefore, imperialism is driven by the idea of ideological and economic expansion of state power. The main feature of imperialism is that widens it power by invasion of theories and economic domination. Both colonialism and imperialism exercise their power with expedition of institutions and ideologies (Young, 2001, p.27). On other hand, the function of colonialism is peripheral and commerce was driven from the view point of the government, which meant it was at times hard to control. This is in contrast to imperialism, which is always canter-driven display of power. It is also important to note that there were two types of
colonies, the first type being colonies founded for the purpose of settlement and second being colonies founded for commerce (Young, 2001, p.16-17). Before the First World War colonies were seen as an economic necessity; however, after the Second World War it was clear that the system would not work in the future. There were several reasons for the collapse of colonialism, three of the most important being the defiance of the colonized people with support of the Soviet Union, the failure of the war weakened states to financially uphold the system, and the rise of United States as a global superpower in the newfound vacuum in post-war geopolitics (Young, 2001, p.44). The changes that occurred in geopolitics in the aftermath of the war did not eliminate colonialism. The system survived in the form of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism differentiates from colonialism in the following aspects: it does not rely on direct economic and political control of the occupied territory. Its establishment had been possible precisely because of the liberation of the colonies. The territories that gained independence from their former colonizers were still dominated by the leading world powers, which happened to be the same countries that colonized them. Neo-colonialism means the continuity of economic dependence of a freed territory on the former colonizer (Young, 2001, p.45). This leads us into post-colonialism, which can be defined as something that comes after colonialism and imperialism in a colony. After it gained independence, the former colony fell under a new economic dependence of its former colonisers under the global economy. Post-colonialism refers to economic, material and cultural accustomization of the post-colonial nation to the leading geopolitical powers by which the lending geopolitical powers benefit from the newly developed nation (Young, 2001, p. 57).

The rap song takes the concept of colonializations from Kipling poem *White Man’s Burden*. The glorification of the colonization of the Philippines (Brantlinger, 2007, p.173) is transformed in the rap song “The Man Who Would Be King” into colonization of Africa. The song portrays how the colonization has been done and its aftermath. This is where Kipling’s concepts are expended with H. Rider Haggard’s novel *King Solomon’s Mines*, which portrays the search of the lost mines of King Solomon in South Africa and the entitlement of the colonisers towards African resources and people. In the poem *Brown Man’s Burden* by Henry Labouchère, imperialism is shown form the perspective of the colonized. That is a parallel to the rap song in which the colonization and atrocities of Africa are portrayed. The aftermath of colonization in the rap song is the parallel to the novella
Black Man’s Burden by Dallas McCord Reynolds. The science-fiction novella shows the possible aftermath after African countries gained independence and neo-colonialism started shaping the countries.

Intertextuality is the most common way of integrating literature into rap music. Before further analysis, it is important to define what intertextuality is. One of the definitions of intertextuality is when a literary text incorporates specific parts of a pre-existing literary text. It exchanges the hypertext for hypotext. This can be seen as adaptation or recontextualization of the text or homage to the original author (Ramel, 2009, p.9). The first occurrence of intertextuality is the title of the song “The Man Who Would Be King”, which is intertextuality on the short story The Man Who Would Be King by Rudyard Kipling. In the song the colonisers are seen as gods and the colonialization of Africa as their god giving right. This is shown with the usage of intertextuality of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. It is used as a metaphor to portray the perception of Africa, which is a continuation of the first stanza of the first verse of the rap song where the indigenous people are portrayed as children. The concept of moral and theological superiority is continued with the intertextuality of the novel the Empire of the Sun by J.G. Ballard. The novel narrates the experience of boy named Jim in Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the Second World War. The phrase, the empire on which the sun never sets is paraphrased and used to describe the necessity of the empires. It was a common phrase that was used by the Victorian politicians to describe the British Empire in the 19th century (International Business News 2015). The idea that empires are necessary is further expended with religious imagery. This corresponds with French imperialism, whose ideology was to “civilize” the colonized territories. The colonized population was given the opportunity to get French education, but in exchange they had to adapt the French Culture (Young, 2001, p.30). In the 19th century it was considered a status symbol and an economic necessity for a state to have a big Empire. In Britain the prevalent sentiment was that if the British Empire was necessary to prevent internal unrest of the underclass (Young, 2001, p.22). The idea that Christian empires are necessary for a society to function was a prevalent sentiment of that time. The colonialization intertextuality is continued in the sixth stanza from the first verse of the rap song with the novel King Solomon’s Mines. It refers to the battle that took place in the novel before the protagonist could resume his search for the mine of King Solomon. The last literary intertextuality is the refrain of the song. The third stanza of Kipling’s poem the White
Man’s Burden is used as the refrain. In the context of the song it functions as the imperial soldiers’ anthem. It is their song for the colonialization of Africa. It is repeated twice after each verse in the song. The song also includes Musical intertextuality. It expends the idea of colonialism with the integration of the refrain of the song the “World Is Yours” by Nas from the rap album Illmatic. It can be seen as a parody, because in the original song it functions as an uplifting statement for a young Afro-American person in the inner-city. In the Billy Woods song it is taken as an encouragement for colonizing that the world is available for western civilisation to take.

Allusion is the second most prevalent literary device in the rap song. It can be defined in literature as a reference to person, event, object or parts of other literature. It is expected that the readers shares the common knowledge with the writer, therefore the allusion can be understood. Traditionally allusions that appear in literature are from the Bible and Greek mythology, but since modernism the types of allusions have been expanded. As a literary device, allusion is frequently used to expend a text or to express irony (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). In the rap song we can find mythological, biblical, historical and literary allusions. There are two mythological allusion, first being Prometheus and second Quetzalcoatl. The allusion of Prometheus being contextualized as blue-eyed Prometheus in the song is expended and used as a metaphor for white colonizers in Africa. As the imperial ideology dictates, the colonisers come to create civilization on the occupied territory and are superior to the native population. In the Greek mythology Prometheus created humans and taught them how to live (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). The second allusion is from the Aztec mythology. It refers to Quetzalcoatl, which was an Aztec deity of priesthood and knowledge (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). This allusion is used in the same way as the previous. It functions as a metaphor to emphasise the superiority of the colonisers, who compared themselves to gods in relation to the colonized people. The next set of allusions is biblical. They refer to holy trinity, the Egyptian night, St. Peter’s preaching, the Philistines, the land of Nod, the mark of the beast and East of Eden. All are used for the portrayal of colonialism. The allusion of Egyptian night is used to refer to the destruction of native population. In the Bible this refers to events when God killed all the new-born sons of people in Egypt who did not have lamb blood on their front door. Those were deemed nonbelievers. (King James Bible, Exodus.12:42) In the same way the colonialists killed everybody who resisted or did not want to submit
to their rule. This was also common practice in Africa at the time Belgium colonized Congo under King Leopold II. If the Congolese workers refused to work, they would be severely punished or killed (Frost, 2001, p.86). The holy trinity is the next allusion. In the rap song gold, guts and guns are compared to the holy trinity. The colonizers were theologically more advanced; therefore, according to imperial ideology, it is their right to take from the natives and the imagery of god is continued with the divinity under the red suns. This is also an intertextuality on the bible when Peter was preaching how the sky will look before God will come (King James Bible, Acts. 2:20). The allusion of the Philistines is used to portray the destruction of the native population. Philistines where slain by Samson with a donkey jaw. The Philistines could also be interpreted as people guided by materialism, disliking intellectual or artistic values (King James Bible, Judges. 15:16). Despite that the colonisers brought a possibility of the education of the natives and advancement of the personal social status, the natives frequently rebelled. The flight from oppression is portrayed again with an allusion from the Bible with the land of Nod. The land of Nod was the place where Cain was exiled after he had slain Abel (King James Bible, Genesis. 4:16). Every time there was a feeling of unrest from the native population the colonizers felt betrayed. According to the Bible, the land of Nod was located east of Eden. The last biblical allusion is the mark of the beast, when Cain was exiled; he was marked by God with the mark of the beast. The mark was a warning to everybody who wanted to kill Cain that bad things would happen to them. The parallel to imperialism is that regardless how big the empire grew and how many people it oppressed and killed, in the end all empires fall once they get too big. The third biggest group of allusion in the rap song are the historical allusions. Those are Kipling’s dead son, Dr. Livingstone and Maxim guns. The allusion of Kipling’s dead son explores the dark side of the colonization. It is used to explain that there were also casualties in the process. Kipling’s son John was killed in the First World War (Scragg 2016, p.179). This is the connection to the concept of imperialism. The First World War was an Imperial War; it was the war in which the 19th century Empires were destroyed in the process. This is ironic because Kipling idealized imperialism and his own son died in an imperial war. This is further expanded with the allusion of the monkey paw, which is a title of short story by W.W. Jacobs. The monkey paw is a magical item in the story that grants three wishes to the user. The wishes, however, come with a price. The wish will be
granted, but in return something bad happens. The protagonist of story wished for 200 dollars and as a result his own son died. The 200 dollars were the compensation of the company for his death. The second historical allusion used for the portrayal of the aftermath of colonization is Dr. Livingstone. The last two stanzas conclude the concept of colonialization. Since many died in the colonial conquest and only the most prominent explores where remembered, it was very rare that a last person was found. This is continued with the intertextuality of the famous question asked by Henry Morton Stanley, whom was searching for the explorer David Livingstone. When he found him in Tanzania, he asked him, Dr. Livingstone I presume. Livingstone answered with yes, I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2015). This allusion shows that those who did survived the colonial conquest still held on the ideals of imperialism. The allusion of maxim guns in the song is used to portray the technological superiority of the colonizers, but it also refers to the novel King Solomon's Mines. The protagonist uses guns to convince the native population of his divinity. This then connects to the previous set of mythological allusion.

Intertextuality is not only present in the form of text. The music of the song is also based on intertextuality. The reason being that rap music is a sample based. It takes parts of pre-existing recordings and combines them into a musical collage over a drum break (Schloss, 2014, p.35). The two main sample sources of the rap song “The Man Who Would Be King” are two films; Mogambo and Empire of the Sun. Those two films enhance the concept of the colonialism in the lyrics, because story of the film Mogambo take place in pre-liberated Africa. It tells a story of a big game hunter and his romantic escapades in the Africa. The second film, Empire of the Sun, is directly connected to the intertextuality in the lyrics, because it is the film version of the book Empire of the Sun. The intro of the song samples almost the complete trailer of the film Mogambo. The second big sample is from a scene from the film Empire of the Sun. The sample is the singing of Jim as he observes the kamikaze ritual from the prison Kamp and is sympathising with their fight. This is also connected to African colonialism. Despite being under oppression, there were certain classes of native population which where sympathizing the colonial powers. Those classes were usually those whom held a certain position of power. This shows that the samples where not randomly chosen but are directly expanding and connecting to the concept of colonialism and imperialism.
The last important aspect of the analysed rap song is gender. This aspect is interesting, because of the perspective from which the song is written. Rap is traditionally written from an Afro-American perspective, specifically male perspective. Women’s perspective in rap is a minority. Rap songs are usually written from Afro-American, heterosexual and male perspective. They document the environment and personal experience of Afro-American men’s positon in American society (White, 2011, p.18). The rap song “The Man Who Would Be King” deviates from all those aspects. It is written from a white male colonizer’s perspective and it experience of expending the empire. The imperative voice, which would traditionally be black, is in the song white; furthermore, it is used to voice white supremacy and racism towards the native population. This can be seen as the final connector of the concept of colonialism is the song.

As it was noted in the introduction, intertextuality can be seen as homage to a pre-existing work. In the case of Billy Woods it certainly is; however, it is not only homage to Rudyard Kipling. It is a nod to his roots, New York rap and classic English literature, himself being the son of Zimbabwean intellectuals who were active in the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe in the 80s. His father was a revolutionary, who helped to overthrow the Rhodesian regime and his mother is a feminist writer and an English literature professor at a university. Billy Woods stated in several interviews that he was equally influenced by New York rap and classical English literature, because those where the things he was surrounded while growing up (Woods January 2013, Woods July 2013, Woods February 2014, Armand Hammer 2014). Taking his background in consideration, it is not surprising that he tackles colonialism in his rap writing. The rap song “The Man Who Would Be King” could be considered contemporary post-colonial writing, because it combines traditional colonial literature with rap music and the rappers personal experience as a progeny of immigrants from a former colony.

The discussion of intertextuality in rap lyrics is far from complete. There are still several questions that need to be answered. Where did intertextuality occur in rap for the first time? Are the any other rappers that use intertextuality and allusions? Has English literature influenced any other rappers?
References

Discography:


Filmography:


Literature:


