

Recontextualizing American Rap: A Study of the Cultural Exchange and Female Empowerment in the Arab Female Rapper Soultana's Lyrics

✉ DRID Fatma

Doctoral Student at University of Badji-Mokhtar, Annaba (Algeria)

Laboratoire Langues Etrangères, Civilisation Universelle, Communication et Réalité Algérienne (LECUCRA)

fatmadrid606@gmail.com

✉ BARKAOUI Miloud

Professor at University of Badji-Mokhtar, Annaba (Algeria)

Laboratoire Langues Etrangères, Civilisation Universelle, Communication et Réalité Algérienne (LECUCRA)

miloud.barkaoui@univ-annaba.dz

ABSTRACT:

This study explores how American hip-hop discourse is recontextualized within Arab sociocultural and gendered realities through the lyrics of the Moroccan female rapper Soultana. Through the use of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study examines how global hip hop's linguistic and stylistic resources are appropriated to express female empowerment and political resistance in the Arab context. The research puts Arab female rap on debates of globalization and American cultural influence to emphasize tensions between traditional values and modern expressions of women's rights. A close textual and discursive analysis of Soultana's songs *Sawt Nssa* and *38.28* reveals how pronouns, metaphors, euphemisms, and sentence structures function as tools of empowerment and social review. The findings show that Soultana localizes hip-hop discourse to address Moroccan gender inequality and patriarchal norms, which positions hip-hop as a space of cultural exchange rather than domination.

KEYWORDS: Hip-hop discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Arab feminism; Female rap; Cultural globalization

إعادة تأطير الرب الأمريكي: دراسة في التبادل الثقافي وتمكين المرأة من خلال كلمات أغاني مغنية الرب العربية سلطنة

✉ دريد فاطمة

طالبة دكتوراه، جامعة باجي مختار-عناية / الجزائر

مخبر اللغات الأجنبية والحضارة الإنسانية والتواصل والواقع الجزائري (LECUCRA)
fatmadrid606@gmail.com

✉ بركاوي ميلود

أستاذ تعليم عالي، جامعة باجي مختار-عناية / الجزائر

مخبر اللغات الأجنبية والحضارة الإنسانية والتواصل والواقع الجزائري (LECUCRA)
miloud.barkaoui@univ-annaba.dz

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل كيفية إعادة تسييق خطاب الهيب-هوب الأمريكي داخل السياقات الاجتماعية-الثقافية والنوعية في العالم العربي من خلال كلمات مغنية الرب المغربية سلطنة. واعتمادًا على نموذج فيركلاف ثلاثي الأبعاد للتحليل النقدي للخطاب، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية توظيف الموارد اللغوية والأسلوبية العالمية للهيب-هوب وإعادة تشكيلها للتعبير عن تمكين المرأة والمقاومة السياسية في السياق العربي. وتندرج الدراسة ضمن نقاشات أوسع حول العولمة والتأثير الثقافي الأمريكي والحركات النسوية العربية، مبرزة التوتر القائم بين القيم التقليدية والتعبيرات الحديثة عن حقوق المرأة. ومن خلال تحليل نصي وخطابي لأغنياتي "صوت النسا" و"38.28"، تكشف النتائج عن دور الضمائر والاستعارات والتلطيفات والبنى التركيبية كأدوات للتمكين والنقد الاجتماعي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الرب يشكل فضاءً للتبادل الثقافي لا للهيمنة الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: خطاب الهيب-هوب؛ التحليل النقدي للخطاب؛ النسوية العربية؛ الرب النسائي؛ العولمة الثقافية.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hip hop has emerged as a global cultural movement that transcends its origins in African American communities in the United States. It has developed into a powerful medium of political expression and identity construction worldwide. As it travels across borders, hip hop is reappropriated and reshaped to reflect local sociocultural realities, especially in postcolonial contexts marked by the lasting effects of colonization and globalization, as well as ongoing struggles over power, identity, and representation. In the Arab world, hip hop has become an important platform for marginalized voices to enable artists to express social injustice, economic inequality, and patriarchal norms. Dealing with this global movement, Arab hip hop has gained increasing attention as a form of resistance and cultural expression. Female participation in this scene is mostly important, as Arab female rappers negotiate both artistic expression and restrictive social norms. Despite the male-dominated and often misogynistic nature of hip-hop culture, female artists have reshaped the genre to articulate feminist concerns and advocate for women's rights.

The present study is motivated by the limited academic attention given to Arab female rappers and their role in challenging dominant gender ideologies. Although their presence in the music scene is growing, there is still a gap in understanding how these artists use hip hop as a form of feminist resistance and how they reinterpret global hip hop discourse within local cultural contexts. This gap highlights the need to explore the ways in which gender, power, and identity are constructed in their musical productions. Thus, the study aims to analyze how Arab female rappers use hip hop to express feminist discourse and how American hip hop is recontextualized in Moroccan rap. It also seeks to examine the representation of gender and resistance in selected songs. So, this research is important as it contributes to discourse analysis, gender studies, and cultural studies through highlighting the role of Arab female rappers in reshaping hip hop culture. It also sheds light on how marginalized voices use music as a form of social and political resistance in contemporary Arab societies.

This study focuses on the Moroccan rapper Soultana as a representative figure of Arab feminist hip hop. By analyzing her songs *Sawt Nssa* and *38.28* using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, it investigates how global hip-hop discourse is recontextualized to express localized forms of resistance and sociopolitical critique in Morocco and the broader Arab world. This research also highlights how Soultana's lyrical production transforms hip hop into a platform for voicing women's experiences and interrogating political and social inequalities. In doing so, it demonstrates how her work contributes to Arab feminist discourses through drawing the link between the artistic expression with activism to reveal how global cultural forms are localized to articulate resistance.

2. Review of Literature

Rap music is a forum of expression, which came into existence along with the historical events that confronted the Bronx, New York City. The Bronx endured a chaotic period marked by economic and social struggles. These difficulties contributed to years of decline and devastation, which led to a division between the South Bronx, often referred to as the "bad Bronx," and the North Bronx, known as the "good" Bronx (Price, 2006, p. 7). The South Bronx was home to marginalized communities, living in "urban decay, substance abuse, gang activities, and high levels of criminality" (Price, 2006, p. 7). In response to these circumstances, underprivileged youth in the South Bronx used rap music and hip-hop culture as tools for self-expression and empowerment.

Despite the dominant connection of hip-hop culture with dance, it extends that particular aspect to embed various artistic expressions, including music, graffiti, dance, and DJing. However,

the main focus of this research is rap, which originated in the 1970s. In fact, rap music is not merely a passing fad; rather, it serves as a mode of resistance that Arab rappers have adapted and localized to address local issues. This demonstrates the global relevance of hip-hop as a flexible cultural form that adapts to different social contexts. As highlighted in *The Hip Hop Obama Reader*, “the poetic element of rap lyricism is part of what has allowed Arab artists to make the genre truly their own, something new and separate from American hip hop” (Rose & Rose, 2016, p. 103). Thus, rap functions not only as a cultural import but also as a transformative practice shaped by local contexts. Furthermore, as William Jones (2025) explains in *Rhythms of the Soul: The Power of Music in Black Culture*, hip-hop emerges as a powerful cultural expression rooted in Black experiences, where music becomes a tool of identity formation, resistance, and social commentary (Jones, 2025, p. 137). Therefore, it is important to examine the extent to which Arab rap has been influenced by American rap, whether as a form of cultural dominance or as a process of cultural exchange.

3. From Global Rap to Local Voices

This section reflects the cultural transition of hip hop from its American origins to its localized forms within the Arab world. It underlines how global rap aesthetics and stylistic features are revisited by Arab female artists to express issues of identity and empowerment. Precisely speaking, it highlights how these global influences are adapted to reflect local sociocultural realities while maintaining the core expressive and activist tone of hip hop.

3.1 American Cultural Influence and Arab Female Empowerment in Rap Music

The influence of the western world on the Arab region through colonization, postcolonialism, and globalization is pictured through women's rights and fostered in feminist movements in the MENA region. Notably, this coincided with the efforts of prominent “Muslim and Arab thinkers during the Nahda period (Awakening), such as Rifa’a Tahtawi (1801–873), Buturs Al-Bustani (1819–883), Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani (1838–897), Muhammed Abduh (1849–905), Qasim Amin (1863–908)” (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 19), who advocated for women's freedom as a means of advancing Arab societies. However, being influenced by western cultural values might cause people to stop following traditional social norms. One example of this is found in the works of “the Iraqi poet Jamil Sidqi Al-Zahawi (1863–936) wrote poems encouraging women to remove their veils, often citing gender equality in the West (Masliyah, 1996)” (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 19). This keeps an ongoing debate surrounding the cultural consequences of such influence.

One of the means that achieves influence is globalization which creates chances for influence through which countries spread their reach and impact. Ahmed Al-Rawi (2020) defined globalization as “the compression of the world and its global interconnectedness” (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 20), which suggests multifaceted exchanges that enable the encounter between the West and East. Though Al-Rawi (2020) acknowledges that globalization reached different parts of the Arab world, he highlights those local cultural values “remain powerful forces in any society” (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 20). He emphasizes the deep seated and influential social values in Arab communities.

Globalization has given some women in Arab countries the chance to become more empowered and active in feminist causes. However, in more traditional communities, there has been a rejection to these changes. For instance, some female Arab activists belonging to “Femen”, a feminist movement, have defied patriarchal Arab societies. Notably, Amina Tyler from Tunisia and Aliaa Elmahdy from Egypt posted pictures on social media “to express their rejection of the misogynistic nature of their societies” (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 21). However, their defiance brought about outrage and anger and led to patriarchal attitudes. This highlights the complex interaction between globalization and local culture in shaping women's experiences.

As in the US, rap in the Arab world had remained male-dominated until recently. Although female singers in the Arab world have acquired prestigious titles in other musical genres, they were not able to achieve a similar presence in hip-hop music. Partly, this is due to a cultural barrier that

has been stopping female artists from getting into a musical genre linked with strong language and not respecting established beliefs. Another problem that faced female artists in rapping is how to be a part of an artistic genre that had incorporated misogynistic lyrics, which are driven from the objectification and the sexualization of women. A few women, inspired by black female rappers in the US in the late 1980s and 1990s, decided to create a feminist way of rapping. They focus on the challenges faced by Arab women, both in society and in the world of hip hop (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 21).

Hip-hop culture has come from the United States and spread globally; thus, the impact of the American hip-hop culture on Arab female hip-hop music is inevitable. Boutheïna El Alouadi, a Tunisian female rapper, explains that to get the appeal, you should follow ‘the track’ of the American hip hop culture (Personal communication, October 1, 2019). Arab female rapping and attitudes are imbued by the imprints of the American hip hop culture, whether language or style of clothing. To put it another way, they tend to develop a complex cultural phenomenon, which embeds an interaction between a global and local culture.

In order to truly bring change to women issues, some Arab female rappers use their lyrics to address the unequal life the women are living; they wish to put an end to oppression against women. For instance, Mayam Mahmoud, an Arab Egyptian rapper, was a pioneer in rapping about women’s issues in Egypt; “she sings about rape, abused women and sexism, as in her song ‘I won’t be the shamed one’” (Badri & Tripp, 2017, p. 24). Besides, another Arab female rapper named, Sultana, from Morocco, has also brought changes through her rapping, leading to adjustments at the level of “the Moroccan law on rape, following the suicide of Amina Filali, who committed suicide after having been forced to marry her rapist, and these legal reforms were introduced as a result of an outpouring of protest after her death” (Badri & Tripp, 2017, p. 24).

Accordingly, Arab female rappers are striving to be representatives to women voices and defend them against abuse and any sort of discrimination. They mainly attempt to address uplifting messages to inspire women to make their lives better. Arab female rapping mostly celebrates themes that aim to liberate women and offer insights about leading them to take action and counteract the oppression and exploitation they face. Arab female rappers have developed their music and suggested a way to reconstruct their identities and pursue their dreams without being subjugated and marginalized. Soultana’s lyrics, in songs such as *Sawt Nssa* and *38.28*, exemplify how Arab female rappers’ appropriate American hip-hop discourse while recontextualizing it within local sociocultural, political, and gendered realities. The influence of American culture on Arab women, shaped by colonization, postcolonialism, globalization, and feminist movements, has long sparked debates about preserving traditional values versus embracing modern ideas of women’s rights (Al-Rawi, 2020, pp. 19-21).

4. Methodological Framework

This section frameworks the research design and the procedures used to conduct the study. It explains the methods adopted to analyze the data in a methodological and reliable way. The outline ensures that the research is see-through and aligned with the study’s objectives to provide a clear structure for interpreting the findings.

4.1 A Critical Discourse Analysis Based on Fairclough’s Model

Norman Fairclough (2001) examines language through the lens of three main areas. Firstly, “description” is the structure and formal properties of the writing. Second, “interpretation” delves into how people use texts to communicate and highlight the link between “text and interaction” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 21). Lastly, “explanation” explores the influence of social factors on people’s

interactions (Fairclough, 2001, p. 21). Fairclough's method illuminates the nexus between language and society to reflect how they shape one another in diverse ways.

In the first phase of Norman Fairclough's approach, known as description, the text, which includes linguistic components like vocabulary and grammar, is the main subject. In order to understand these aspects, Norman Fairclough (2001) advises, "It is generally necessary to take account of what other choices might have been made" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 92). Analysts may learn more about the author's goals and the writing techniques used by interpreting the justifications behind the author's linguistic choices. Fairclough's extensive study of the text addresses three fundamental values, expressive, relational, and experiential, in connection to language and grammar. The following image represents Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis.

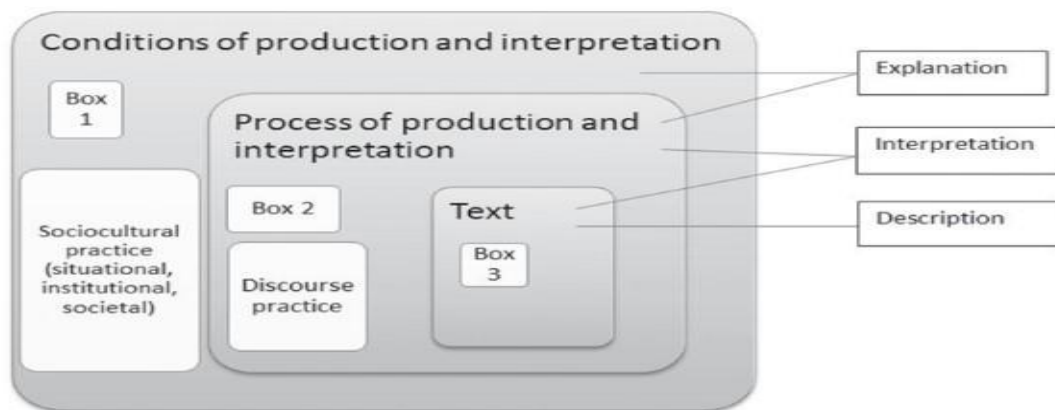


Fig.1. Fairclough CDA Dimensions of Analysis

Source: Fairclough, N. (1995). Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language. Longman.

4.2 Textual Analysis of Soultana's Lyrics

The following lines focuses on the examination of Soultana's lyrics to uncover the linguistic and stylistic features that shape meaning. Through a close reading of selected songs, the analysis highlights how language contributes in expressing identity and social commentary within her music.

5. Language, Syntax, and Empowerment in Sawt Nssa

"Sawt Nssa" is one of Soultana's songs that shares themes related to women's voices and social constraints. The song serves as a rich example for analyzing how discourse is constructed to face dominant norms and give space to marginalized viewpoints.

5.1 Linguistic and Semantic Patterns in Sawt Nssa

This subsection examines the main textual elements of the song, which are vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, and rhetorical devices. It explores how these linguistic features are used to convey meaning and discourses that reflect empowerment and resistance present in the lyrics.

Values in Lyrics	Lexical Type	Extracts from the Song
Experiential Values	Antonym	Loved / Hated
	Hyponymy	Mother
	Euphemism	She is selling her body
	Metaphors	You looked at her like a cheap thing
Relational Values	Formal Language	She could be your mother
	Informal Language	The woman's voice is what I'm calling

Expressive Values	Positive	A rose is still a rose
	Negative	He gave her lies and violence

5.2 Syntactic Structures and Discursive Strength in Sawt Nssa

This table examines the structure of *Sawt Nssa* in order to understand how linguistic features contribute to the construction of meaning and discursive strength. It focuses on how pronouns, sentence types, and modality are used to express a message of empowerment and resistance.

Feature	Extracts from the Song
Pronouns	“I” : I am lost in the dark, in search of the light “She” : She could be your mother / sister “You” : You looked at her like a cheap thing
Sentence Type	SVO : I lost my beauty SVC : This is a Moroccan girl
Sentence Mode	Declarative : The woman's voice is what I am calling Imperative : Don't humiliate her
Modal Verbs	Stating a fact : A rose is still a rose

6. Language, Syntax, and Empowerment in 38.28

“38.28” is another important track by Soultana. The lyrics address themes of identity and social struggle. Through powerful and direct language, the song confronts dominant narratives and highlights issues related to marginalized voices.

6.1 Lexical and Discursive Features in 38.28

This part focuses on the linguistic and stylistic features of “38.28.” It examines particular aspects such as word choice, repetition, tone, and figurative language to uncover how these elements contribute to constructing meaning.

Values in Lyrics	Lexical Type	Extracts from the Song
Experiential Values	Antonym	Democracy / Injustice
	Synonym	Oppressed
	Euphemism	They encircle you with walls
	Metaphors	Sometimes the people see red
Relational Values	Formal Language	The policy of excommunication and deception
	Informal Language	My silence and your silence made the official oppress the people
Expressive Values	Positive	Call me a free Moroccan woman
	Negative	The policy of excommunication and misguidance

6.2 Syntactic Patterns and Modal Expressions in 38.28

This syntactic analysis demonstrates how linguistic form reinforces the song's critical and activist discourse. It focuses on the use of pronouns, sentence structures, and modality to highlight how the artist expresses collective identity and political critique

Feature	Extracts from the Song
Pronouns	"I": We rapped about the country to bring change "You": If you start, it's impossible to finish
Definite Article	"The": The Injustice
Sentence Type	SVO: Democracy is a rumour SVC: It is hard SV: The world speaks
Sentence Mode	Declarative: My voice and your voice, they counted them as a period at the end of the line Imperative: Stay silent; it's better for you not to speak Interrogative: What do you think? The situation is getting better
Modal Verbs	Stating a fact: The prohibited is being legitimized

7. Discussion of the Key Findings

The interpretation of the tables reveals that Soultana's lyrical production is not merely descriptive or expressive but rather constructed to perform social, and discursive practices across multiple levels.

At the textual level, as shown in the tables on *Sawt Nssa* and 38.28, the distribution of lexical choices and syntactic structures demonstrates a careful use of language to construct resistance and empowerment. First, the experiential values highlight that antonymic pairs such as "loved and hated", "democracy and injustice" are not neutral oppositions but ideological markers that structure moral judgment within the songs. Similarly, metaphors such as "you looked at her like a cheap thing" and "sometimes the people see red" function as cognitive framing devices that transform abstract social violence into vivid and a charged imagery of emotion that make oppression linguistically visible and affectively powerful. Euphemisms like "she is selling her body" and "they encircle you with walls" further indicate indirect representations of sensitive realities to suggest both censorship awareness and discursive negotiation of taboo subjects. Second, relational values also show a shift between intimacy and authority, where formal expressions such as "she could be your mother" construct moral appeal and social respect, while informal structures such as "the woman's voice is what I'm calling" establish closeness and collective identification. Third, expressive values reinforce this ideological polarity, as positive expressions like "a rose is still a rose" construct resilience and dignity, whereas negative formulations such as "he gave her lies and violence" explicitly condemn patriarchal aggression, revealing a clear evaluative stance embedded in the discourse.

At the level of syntactic structures, the tables indicate that power and agency are encoded through systematic variation in pronouns, sentence types, and modalities. The frequent use of "you" creates direct interposition, which functions as a confrontational strategy that implicates the listener and reproduces the dialogic and combative style associated with hip-hop discourse, while the alternation between "I" and "we" signals a shift between personal vulnerability and collective

activism. Besides, sentence structures such as SVO in “I lost my beauty” and SVC in “This is a Moroccan girl” reflect a balance between emotional narration and identity construction, while declarative forms dominate to assert ideological claims as factual realities. However, the presence of imperatives such as “Don’t humiliate her” introduces resistance and moral injunction to reinforce the activist tone of the lyrics. Modal expressions and factual assertions like “A rose is still a rose” and “The prohibited is being legitimized” contribute to a discourse of certainty and critique, which shows social injustice as an established and undeniable reality rather than a subjective interpretation.

Furthermore, a closer analysis of 38.28 reveals that the lexical and discursive features reveal a more explicitly political and systemic critique compared to *Sawt Nssa*. The opposition between “democracy” and “injustice” constructs a direct ideological conflict, while the synonymic relation with “oppressed” emphasizes collective victimhood as a central thematic concern. Euphemistic structures such as “they encircle you with walls” symbolize systemic repression to suggest institutional rather than individual forms of control, whereas metaphors like “sometimes the people see red” strengthen the emotional and collective dimension of political anger. Relational values again draw the link between formal critique, as in “the policy of excommunication and deception,” and more experiential or localized expressions of complicity, such as “my silence and your silence made the official oppress the people,” which shifts responsibility toward collective social behavior. Positive expressions like “call me a free Moroccan woman” function as identity reclamation and empowerment, while negative formulations reinforce systemic critique of ideological and institutional injustice.

Besides, 38.28 demonstrates a stronger political voice through the use of collective pronouns in “we rapped about the country to bring change”, which underpins collective agency and activism. The presence of “you” in conditional threats such as “If you start, it’s impossible to finish” establishes tension and confrontation, while the use of the definite article in “the injustice” transforms abstract inequality into a concrete, identifiable entity. Sentence structures such as SVO in “Democracy is a rumour”, SVC in “It is hard”, and SV in “The world speaks” reflect a varied syntactic strategy that combines assertion, evaluation, and observation. Declarative sentences dominate to present social critique as factual reality, whereas imperatives like “Stay silent; it’s better for you not to speak” expose oppressive discourse itself, and interrogatives such as “What do you think?” simulate engagement and highlight the illusion of participatory dialogue. Modal constructions like “The prohibited is being legitimized” support a critical worldview in which social norms are portrayed as distorted and unjustly constructed.

Accordingly, the tables demonstrate that Soultana’s lyrical discourse operates as a layered system of resistance in which linguistic choices, syntactic patterns, and evaluative meanings meet to construct a powerful feminist and socio-political critique embedded within a localized and global influenced hip-hop forum.

8. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Soultana, as an Arab female rapper, uses hip-hop not only as a musical style but as a tool for social and cultural expression. Through her lyrics in *Sawt Nssa* and 38.28, she addresses issues of gender inequality and social injustice in Morocco to reflect how global influences like American hip-hop can be adapted to local realities. At the textual level, her use of pronouns, metaphors, euphemisms, and sentence structures reflects the stylistic features of hip-hop, while at the social practice level, her music empowers women and contributes in raising awareness about important social issues and can even adjust legal reforms. Soultana’s work links global and local cultures. She adopts the expressive and combative elements of American hip-hop but reshapes them to fit Moroccan social and cultural values. This shows that cultural exchange can be a creative

process where global forms inspire local voices without giving up local identity. In fact, Arab female rappers like Soultana seek to highlight the importance of hip-hop in empowerment and social change.

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