



‘DON’T LET HIM DIE’: A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF LUCKY DUBE’S REGGAE SONGS (PART 2)

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Abstract

Lucky Dube is one of Africa’s most influential reggae artists who created music that transcended mere entertainment to reveal deep emotional wounds and survival mechanisms. This article, a Part 2 of a previous one on the same theme, explores how Dube’s lyrical narratives and life experiences reflect key psychological patterns associated with trauma, identity disturbance, and borderline personality traits. After conducting a humanistic textual analysis on another four of his Reggae songs, apart from the earlier ones explored in Part 1 of this study, the authors discovered indications of emotional expressions of abandonment, emotional dysregulation, and self-fragmentation in Dube’s music. The authors were able to identify these psychological dimensions in his songs because instead of engaging in diagnosing Dube’s life through his songs, they aimed at understanding his music as a medium of emotional testimony and resilience. The findings of this exploration suggest that Dube’s music served as both an outlet for personal pain and a voice for reflecting the impact of collective trauma; all of which emerged as a multiplier effect of the implementation of the Apartheid policy in the South African context, where systemic violence, family disintegration, and social despair left lasting psychological scars on the Black population in particular. The authors see the need for greater recognition of artists’ works in Africa as psychological testimonies and consequently advocate for developing culturally sensitive mental health outreach to musicians whose art reveals hidden cries for help.

Keywords: *Lucky Dube, Borderline Personality Traits, Emotional Trauma, Identity Disturbance, Music, Emotional Expression*

1. Introduction

In the first segment of this study, the authors attempted to explore four songs by Lucky Dube, a South African global reggae icon born in 1964 during the height of the Apartheid system. The result shows that his music reveals a deeper psychological landscape beyond political activism, shaped by the invisible, enduring emotional wounds inflicted by systemic oppression in the South Africa of his upbringing (Tewolde, Menkir, 2025). Indeed, the authors' critical exploration of those four songs, namely "It's Not Easy" (1991); "Remember Me" (1987); "Prisoner" (1989), and "Victims" (1993) revealed data that corroborated the view credited to Cooper & Nicholas (2012) that the Apartheid system did not merely impose external political restrictions; it generated a multiplier effect of profound emotional damage, disintegrating families, fueling substance abuse, perpetuating violence, and severing identities. No wonder Lucky Dube's lyrics often resonate not merely because of their political relevance, but because they articulate these hidden emotional experiences that many affected individuals could neither name nor express (Duhoe, 2020). The authors' critical review and psychological analysis of the above mentioned Dube's four songs similarly revealed the silent suffering of those grappling with abandonment, emotional chaos, and existential confusion, people who, trapped in the aftermath of structural violence and childhood adversities (Tewolde, Menkir, 2025), imposed by the Apartheid system, found themselves unable to voice their inner struggles. In this way the initial study of Dube's four songs showed that through his music, Dube became more than a political activist, a point highlighted by Agwu (2021); he became a surrogate voice for the emotionally voiceless, channeling the silent cries of those caught in invisible emotional battles spawned by the deep psychological scars of the Apartheid system in South Africa.

1.2 Aim of the Study

In this Part 2 of the same study, the authors aimed to explore another group of four songs, outside of those explored in Part 1, of Lucky Dube's music through a psychological lens, focusing like in the first study, on how his lyrical narratives mirror features commonly associated with trauma, identity disturbance, and borderline personality traits. In doing this the authors' used a humanistic textual analysis (Belich, 2024; Pozzobon & Accademico, 2014) of this second group of four songs by Dube, namely. "I Am a Slave" (1989), "The Way it Is" (1999), "Big Boys Don't Cry" (1995), "I've Got You Babe" (1997), to engage in a further interpretation of Dube's music as a form of emotional testimony; and a survival strategy for himself and the countless individuals he represented.

2. Review of Related Literature

Since Lucky Dube's lyrical narratives recurrently touch on themes of emotional chaos, abandonment, identity loss, and psychological survival, a focus on borderline traits (Agwu, 2021) would offer a valuable framework for interpreting the above four of his songs targeted for exploration in this second Part of the study. For this reason there is a need to review below, the connection between borderline personality disorder and trauma; a process in which trauma is recognized not merely as a background risk but as a foundational element shaping emotional survival strategies and artistic expression.

2.1 Borderline Personality Disorder and Trauma.

In this review, the term Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is understood to refer to a severe mental health condition characterized by pervasive patterns of emotional dysregulation, unstable relationships, identity disturbances, and chronic feelings of emptiness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Current literature tends to increasingly acknowledge the strong association between early life trauma experienced by many black children in Apartheid South Africa and the development of BPD symptoms, particularly emotional neglect, physical abuse, and disrupted attachment patterns (Mulder et al., 2018; Cluver et al., 2015). Thus research by Zanarini, Temes, Magni, Hein & Goodman (2021) notes that nearly 90% of individuals diagnosed with BPD report significant histories of childhood trauma,

suggesting that trauma is not merely a risk factor but a near-ubiquitous background element. Similarly, studies by Winsper et al. (2020) highlight that emotional invalidation during critical developmental periods contributes substantially to the affective instability and interpersonal hypersensitivity observed in BPD.

Of course, the conceptualization of BPD has now shifted from being seen purely as a personality flaw to being understood within a trauma framework. Hence Guo et al. (2015); Zanarini, Temes, Magni, Hein & Goodman (2021); and Saccaro et al. (2024) suggest that Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) and BPD share overlapping features, including emotional dysregulation, dissociation, and difficulties in identity integration. This convergence underscores the role of sustained relational trauma in shaping the psychological architecture of individuals with BPD.

Neuroscientific studies further support these connections. A systematic review by Saccaro et al. (2024) found that individuals with BPD exhibit altered functioning in brain regions responsible for emotional regulation (such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex), patterns often mirrored in individuals with histories of chronic trauma exposure. Moreover, Dvir et al. (2014) demonstrated that unresolved early attachment traumas are directly predictive of the severity of identity disturbance and emotional dysregulation later in life.

Importantly, trauma-related models of BPD suggest that behaviours such as self-harm, unstable relationships, and emotional outbursts are better understood as maladaptive survival strategies, originally developed in response to overwhelming early experiences (Weiss et al., 2021). This trauma-adaptive perspective reframes BPD symptoms not as character defects but as emotional scars from relational injury.

Conclusively, contemporary research converges around the view that trauma, particularly developmental and relational trauma is a core etiological factor in the emergence and maintenance of borderline personality disorder. This understanding offers a compassionate framework for interpreting emotional chaos and survival strategies, both clinically and artistically, as will be explored in the case of Lucky Dube's music.

2.2 Emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance

Emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance are widely recognized as central features of borderline personality pathology and related trauma adaptations (Chapman et al., 2013). Emotional dysregulation is the difficulty in modulating emotional responses, often resulting in rapid mood shifts, intense affective experiences, and maladaptive coping behaviours (Weiss et al., 2021). Identity disturbance, on the other hand, involves unstable self-image, chronic feelings of emptiness, and fluctuating perceptions of one's worth and role in relationships (Saccaro et al., 2024).

Current research suggests that emotional dysregulation and identity confusion emerge primarily from disrupted attachment systems during childhood, often exacerbated by environments marked by neglect, inconsistency, or emotional invalidation (Gilgoff & Singh, 2020; Carlson et al. 2016). In individuals exposed to early adversity, emotional reactions can become disorganized and overwhelming, leading to difficulties in self-soothing and maintenance of a cohesive sense of identity over time (Crow et al., 2021).

Wanrong Peng and his team emphasize that emotional dysregulation operates as both a cause and a consequence of identity instability (Peng et al., 2021). Individuals who lack stable emotional regulation frameworks are more likely to experience fragmentation of the self, characterized by sudden shifts in goals, values, and interpersonal styles. These shifts are often attempts to manage unbearable inner states rather than deliberate manipulations, contrary to older misconceptions about borderline behavior.

Neuroscientific evidence supports these findings. Imaging studies show that individuals with heightened emotional dysregulation exhibit hyperactivation of the amygdala and impaired prefrontal

cortex regulation, neural patterns that also correlate with unstable self-perception (Leichsenring et al., 2024). Furthermore, identity disturbance has been conceptualized not simply as confusion but as a trauma-linked fragmentation of self-representation, where survivors internalize inconsistent or abusive relational templates (Russolillo et al., 2025).

An emerging model by Gerami & Pourmohamadreza-Tajrishi (2025) and Mullins et al. (2025) proposes that the chronic emotional turmoil seen in individuals with identity disturbance can be understood as a learned survival strategy; a way to adapt to unpredictable and emotionally dangerous environments. Instead of developing a stable inner world, such individuals remain highly reactive to external cues, constantly adjusting their emotional and identity states to maintain psychological equilibrium in unstable settings.

In the context of artistic expression, emotional dysregulation and identity disturbance often find voice through lyrical narratives that oscillate between hope and despair, love and rejection, belonging and alienation. As this paper hopes to demonstrate, Lucky Dube's music reflects precisely these oscillations, offering a unique lens into the lived emotional realities of trauma survivors navigating fragmented selfhood and volatile emotional worlds.

2.3 Music as a form of emotional expression and survival

Music has long been understood not only as an artistic pursuit but also as a deeply embedded psychological mechanism for emotional expression and regulation. In recent years, research has intensified around music's role in helping individuals to process trauma, construct identity, and navigate emotional distress. Music, especially lyric-based genres, offers a unique symbolic language through which people articulate inner emotional experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken (Umezina, & Esimone, 2020). Psychological studies demonstrate that music can function as a form of emotional regulation, particularly in individuals with histories of adversity. Tewolde, Menkir (2025) found that listening to and creating music significantly helps individuals modulate mood, process emotional memories, and experience cathartic release, especially in emotionally challenging contexts. In trauma survivors, music-making often becomes a non-verbal narrative tool for expressing fragmented or repressed experiences (Belich, 2024).

In populations exposed to systemic violence or marginalization, such as those impacted by apartheid in South Africa, music has operated as both resistance and refuge. Jemiluyi (2026) emphasized that for artists emerging from oppressive regimes, music becomes a site of survival, identity formation, and socio-emotional release. Beyond activism, the lyrical content often reveals complex emotional and psychological realities, including grief, abandonment, rage, and longing for connection; themes closely linked to borderline personality traits and trauma recovery. Neuropsychological evidence further supports music's role in processing trauma and emotional pain (Daynes, 2010). Music engages brain regions associated with affect regulation, such as the amygdala, insula, and medial prefrontal cortex - the same areas often dysregulated in individuals with trauma-related disorders (NAML I et al., 2022). Thus, music is not simply therapeutic in a cultural sense; it operates on a neurobiological level as a tool for self-regulation and emotional organization.

For many artists, particularly in contexts marked by violence and familial disruption, music becomes an existential anchor, a place where fragmented identities are temporarily held together. Tewolde, Menkir (2025) describe this as a form of "emotional scaffolding", where music provides stability, meaning, and expression without secure attachment or consistent emotional support. Moreover, music can serve as a bridge between internal chaos and external connection. In communities where emotional expression is stigmatized or unsupported, music becomes a socially acceptable way to express vulnerability, foster empathy, and validate shared pain (Vuust et al., 2022). This makes music a potent medium for trauma survivors who feel emotionally silenced or invalidated.

In the case of Lucky Dube, his music functioned not merely as social commentary but as a psychological mirror, articulating complex emotional realities of abandonment, confusion, longing, and resilience. His lyrical storytelling created emotional space for personal survival and collective healing, positioning music as a vital psychological and cultural resource in the face of invisible emotional battles.

2.4 Previous research on musicians and trauma

Over the past decade, scholarly interest in the psychological lives of musicians has grown significantly, particularly regarding how trauma shapes artistic identity, expression, and emotional coping. Musicians often experience elevated rates of mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and emotional instability; frequently linked to early life adversity, social marginalization, and the emotional demands of artistic labour (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Musgrave, 2023). Recent studies suggest that trauma may serve as both a catalyst and a constraint in the creative process. While some musicians describe their art as a form of emotional healing, others struggle to separate their creative identity from unresolved psychological pain (Ascenso, & Williamon, 2016). Trauma-informed perspectives increasingly emphasize that music often functions not only as expression, but as survival; offering containment, coherence, and community for individuals whose early emotional experiences were disorganizing or invalidating (Vermeersch et al., 2023).

Notably, trauma is especially prevalent among musicians from oppressed populations, whose identities are formed within histories of violence, family disintegration, and systemic marginalization. Jemiluy (2026); and Tewolde (2025) highlight that in such contexts, music becomes a form of resistance and repair; a way of re-authoring the self in response to cultural trauma. Similarly, Belich (2024) demonstrates how artists from disadvantaged backgrounds often use lyrical storytelling to metabolize psychological suffering and reclaim agency (Doua, 2020).

However, despite their expressive capacities, many musicians remain psychologically unsupported. Möller & Vincent (2026) found that professional musicians report high levels of emotional distress yet are less likely to seek mental health care due to stigma, financial insecurity, or cultural expectations of emotional endurance. This disconnection between emotional need and clinical support contributes to a cycle where trauma becomes embedded in artistic identity but remains unprocessed outside of performance spaces.

This review shows, on the whole, that from a cultural psychology perspective, artists like Lucky Dube are seen as witnesses and translators of collective pain (Duhoe, 2020). That their music reflects not only individual trauma but shared emotional landscapes shaped by structural violence. The extant literature shows such musicians perform a dual role: they are both *subjects of trauma* and *agents of emotional meaning-making* for their communities (Agwu, 2021). It will be interesting to see which is revealed in the critical review and exploration of Dube's four songs undertaken in this second part of this study.

3. Conceptual Framework

Understanding Lucky Dube's music as a vessel for emotional survival and psychological expression requires an interdisciplinary framework that integrates developmental, emotional, and expressive dimensions of trauma. This study is anchored in three interrelated theories, namely *Attachment Theory* (Bowlby), *Emotional Dysregulation Theory* (Linehan), and *Art as Psychological Expression*, drawing from creative coping models. These perspectives provide a conceptual lens for analyzing the emotional subtext and psychological resonance embedded in Dube's lyrical narratives of Dube's undertaken in the second part of the study.

3.1 Attachment Theory (Bowlby)

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982), posits that early interactions with primary caregivers significantly shape an individual's internal working models of self and others (Crow et

al., 2021). According to Bowlby (1969/1982) secure attachments foster a stable sense of identity, emotional regulation, and trust in relationships, whereas insecure or disorganized attachments often lead to difficulties in affect modulation, relational instability, and self-concept fragmentation; all, major features of borderline personality traits (Leichsenring et al., 2024).

In support of this theory empirical research underscores the link between childhood attachment disruptions and the development of emotional and personality difficulties later in life. In this way, the understanding is that disorganized attachment, often resulting from inconsistent, neglectful, or abusive caregiving, is associated with the emergence of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and chronic affective instability (Zanarini, Temes, Magni, Hein & Goodman, 2021). Bogaerts et al. (2024) observe that individuals with such attachment histories frequently experience a pervasive fear of abandonment, difficulty maintaining stable relationships, and oscillations between idealization and devaluation patterns often mirrored in the affective tone and lyrical themes in Dube's music.

Furthermore, Bowlby (1982) emphasized that attachment injuries are not only personal but can be intergenerational and systemic, particularly in contexts of societal disintegration and historical trauma (Crow et al., 2021). In apartheid South Africa, it is now known, forced family separations, state violence, and socio-political exclusion disrupted traditional caregiving structures, rendering secure attachment development nearly impossible for many. Dube's songs, we assume, reflect this relational vacuum and the yearning for connection, often portraying themes of abandonment, betrayal, and longing for unconditional love (Agwu, 2021). These recurring motifs suggest unresolved attachment wounds, making Bowlby's framework essential for interpreting Dube's music as a medium of relational mourning and psychological protest.

3.2 Emotional Dysregulation Theory

Marsha Linehan's biosocial theory of borderline personality disorder offers a complementary lens by focusing on emotional dysregulation; the core mechanism underlying BPD symptomatology (Linehan, 1993). According to Linehan, emotional dysregulation arises from the interplay between heightened biological sensitivity to emotional stimuli and chronic exposure to invalidating environments during development. In this understanding the individual becomes unable to effectively identify, manage, or express emotions, leading to impulsive behaviors, unstable interpersonal relationships, and chronic affective pain. Indeed, we now know from Linehan's model that emotional dysregulation is not merely an internal deficit but an adaptive response to early experiences of emotional invalidation; when one's feelings are ignored, trivialized, or punished by caregivers or the broader environment. In Dube's sociopolitical context, widespread invalidation occurred not only within families fractured by systemic violence but also at the societal level, where Black South Africans were routinely dehumanized and stripped of emotional agency. This dual-layer invalidation fostered emotional chaos that often lacked language or social space for articulation.

Dube's lyrics exhibit many hallmarks of emotional dysregulation: rapid shifts between despair and hope, idealization and rejection, longing and detachment. These themes parallel the inner emotional turbulence described in Linehan's framework and suggest that music functioned for Dube as a compensatory regulation tool, a means of externalizing, organizing, and surviving overwhelming affective states. Through singing, songwriting, and performance, according to Peters et al. (2024), Dube may have accessed a temporary emotional equilibrium otherwise unavailable in his socio-emotional milieu.

Neurobiological evidence supports this intersection: the same limbic structures (e.g., the amygdala and anterior insula) implicated in emotional dysregulation are activated during musical engagement, particularly in emotionally evocative genres like reggae (Agapaki et al., 2022; Koelsch, 2020; Sayal et al., 2024). This reinforces the idea that Dube's artistic output was not merely expressive but biologically grounded in affect regulation, consistent with Linehan's conceptualization of emotional instability as a psychophysiological process shaped by trauma and context.

3.3 Art as Psychological Expression and Creative Coping

The third pillar of this framework draws on theories of art as psychological expression (Journal & Boker, 2025), where creative activity functions as a mechanism for emotional processing, narrative reconstruction, and identity preservation. Scholars in expressive arts therapy and trauma studies (e.g., Malchiodi, 2023) argue that creative expression provides symbolic pathways for survivors to externalize internal pain, especially when language fails to contain overwhelming affect. This means that music enables the communication of fragmented or dissociated emotions through metaphor, rhythm, and tone, forms that resonate deeply with trauma's non-verbal imprint on the psyche (Umezina & Esimone, 2020).

For individuals navigating identity disturbance and affective fragmentation, the act of music-making offers a structure through which chaotic inner experiences can be symbolically organized. Commenting in this regard, Carlson et al. (2021) describe this function as “emotional scaffolding,” whereby music provides temporary coherence and containment to disrupted emotional states. This is especially pertinent in contexts where individuals lack access to secure relationships, therapeutic support, or culturally relevant mental health resources like in apartheid, South Africa.

In the case of Lucky Dube, music appeared to have functioned as both *auto-therapy* and *collective catharsis*; offering personal healing while simultaneously giving voice to a community traumatized by apartheid's brutality (Agwu, 2021). His songs contain autobiographical elements of loss, alienation, and resilience, suggesting that Dube engaged in a form of self-narration where his musical identity became an emotional safe space, a re-authored self in defiance of emotional annihilation.

Creative coping theories also suggest that trauma survivors often use music to access “emotionally safe” expression, a culturally sanctioned medium that allows vulnerability without direct disclosure (Vuust et al., 2022; Tewolde, 2025; and Carlson et al., 2021). This function is especially important in African contexts, where emotional restraint is often valorized, and psychological suffering may be stigmatized. Dube's ability to weave deeply personal anguish into universally resonant narratives illustrates the potential of music as a culturally valid form of psychological resistance and self-repair.

4. Study Approach

This study employs a qualitative, humanistic study approach to explore the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of Lucky Dube's music (Waterman, 2014), as could be seen in the four songs earmarked for exploration in this second part of our study. In this way, rather than pursuing a clinical diagnostic approach, the authors aim to interpret his four selected lyrical songs as reflective texts - emotional narratives that carry within them expressions of trauma, identity disruption, and psychological survival. Central to this approach is the belief that art, particularly music, can function as both a repository of internal experience and a site of meaning-making, especially in contexts marked by systemic violence and emotional silence.

4.1 Humanistic Textual Analysis

The primary analytic approach employed is *humanistic textual analysis*, a method rooted in interpretive and phenomenological traditions. This method focuses on the subjective meanings embedded in texts (in this case, song lyrics) and aims to uncover the emotional and existential layers that underlie artistic expression (Chacón-López et al., 2016; Smith, 2024). Humanistic inquiry privileges depth, nuance, and empathy in interpreting the lived experience behind words and metaphors (van Manen, 1990; Wertz, 2011).

This is in contradistinction to content analysis, which seeks frequency or objective categorization. Humanistic textual analysis on the other hand explores the *emotional texture* and *symbolic resonance* of

language. This allows for a psychologically rich and culturally contextualized interpretation of Dube's lyrics, examining how particular phrases, tonal shifts, or narrative arcs express psychological states such as longing, fragmentation, hope, despair, or existential confusion. Using this textual analysis approach, the songs will be treated as *emotional artifacts*, bearing witness to both individual suffering and collective historical trauma.

Given Lucky Dube's socio-political background and the emotionally charged content of his music, this method is considered the most appropriate to adopt. This is because it allows the authors to situate Dube's lyrical expressions in the four songs under study within both personal and historical contexts without reducing them to simplistic clinical labels or solely political interpretations.

4.2 Psychological Interpretation of the songs' lyrics

The second level of analysis introduced in this study is the psychological interpretation approach, in which the authors endeavoured to draw from trauma theory, attachment psychology, and affective neuroscience to explore the emotional content of the four selected songs explored in this Part 2 of our study. This process, like carried out in Part 1 involves:

- Close reading of lyrics to identify recurring emotional themes (e.g., abandonment, betrayal, identity confusion, yearning for connection).
- Interpreting metaphors and symbolic language as expressions of psychological states (e.g., "prison" as emotional entrapment; "house of exile" as identity dislocation).
- Linking lyrical patterns to concepts such as emotional dysregulation, identity disturbance, and traumatic memory.

This interpretation is informed by contemporary trauma-informed frameworks (e.g., (Herman, 2022; van der Kolk, 2014), which view emotional chaos and fragmentation not as pathologies, but as adaptive responses to overwhelming or disorganizing environments. Through this lens, Dube's lyrics embedding the four songs under this Part 2 of our review become case studies in lived trauma, not clinical symptoms, but emotional narratives seeking containment, validation, and coherence.

Most importantly, like emphasized in the first Part of this study, psychological interpretation in this second Part of the study does not seek to diagnose Lucky Dube posthumously. On the contrary, it aims to use psychological theory as a language of empathy and understanding, interpreting Dube's artistic output as an authentic and culturally embedded mode of emotional survival.

4.3 Like in Part 1, Focus is on Emotional Themes, Not Clinical Diagnosis

A key methodological commitment in this second Part of the study like in the first Part is the avoidance of retrospective diagnosis or clinical labeling. While the paper draws on psychological theories, particularly those relevant to borderline personality traits and trauma-related conditions, the goal is not to pathologize Dube or his experiences. Instead, the focus remains on emotional themes; how his music articulates states of inner turmoil, resilience, fragmentation, and healing.

This approach aligns with trauma-informed research ethics, which caution against imposing clinical frameworks on individuals without context, consent, or direct assessment (Elliott et al., 2005; Kearns et al., 2026). It also reflects the broader aim of the entire study: to elevate music as a legitimate and culturally grounded form of psychological testimony.

5. Song Analysis

Reported below is a psychological interpretation of second of the four selected songs by Lucky Dube, each of which has been examined through a trauma-informed, humanistic textual analysis. These four songs like the other four in Part 1 examined in the previous article were chosen for their thematic richness and emotional resonance with core constructs explored in this study: emotional dysregulation,

abandonment, identity disturbance, systemic oppression, and the use of music as a medium of survival and psychological testimony. Again like was reported in the first arm of this article, the lyrics are treated as emotionally symbolic texts that reflect not only Dube's personal experiences but also collective trauma shaped by apartheid, systemic injustice, moral fragmentation, and relational disintegration.

Having said this, we now report below in the order in which they are mentioned, our review and analysis each of the four songs explored in this second segment of the study as follows:

5.1 Song A: *"I Am a Slave" (1989)*

Core Message:

This song is a raw, first-person confession of alcohol dependency. The narrator acknowledges that ministers of religion have repeatedly urged him to leave his drinking habit; that he has tried and failed; that his friends both mock and enable him simultaneously; and that his wife dreads his return home each night. He laments the loss of his dignity. Unfortunately, his crying brings no relief. He names himself explicitly, not metaphorically "a liquor slave"; and in one devastating phrase, a slave in his own country. The song locates addiction not only as a personal wound but as a form of bondage that survives political liberation; a condition in which the body remains enslaved long after the South African nation has been freed from the political bondage of the Apartheid system.

Psycho-Humanistic Analysis of Song A: "I am a Slave".

"I Am a Slave" is the most clinically explicit song in Dube's corpus. A lyrical case study in alcohol use disorder as experienced from the inside. Unlike songs that evoke addiction through metaphor or political allegory, this track names the condition directly and with unflinching specificity - the narrator is a liquor slave. Within the DSM-5 framework (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), the song maps with striking fidelity onto the diagnostic criteria for substance use disorder: persistent craving, repeated failed attempts to control use despite genuine desire to stop, continued use despite relational harm, and the progressive erosion of social functioning and self-respect. Every element is present not as an abstraction but as lived lyrical testimony; the ministers who visit and urge him to stop, the failed attempts, the friends who undermine his resolve, the wife who dreads his homecoming every night, the tears that bring no relief. What makes this analysis clinically significant within this paper's framework is the relationship between the addiction and the emotional dysregulation that underlies it.

Linehan (1993) identifies substance use as one of the primary impulsive, dysregulation-driven behaviours in borderline presentations; not a separate pathology but a behavioural expression of an internal emotional state that has become unmanageable. The narrator's crying that never helps is a precise lyrical description of affect dysregulation without resolution capacity, the emotional pain is felt acutely, but the internal regulatory apparatus cannot process or discharge it. Alcohol fills that gap: it does not resolve the distress, but it anesthetizes it temporarily, making the cycle of dependency both neurobiologically rational and psychologically self-defeating simultaneously. Kolk (2014) describes this particular experience as somatic numbing - the body's learned strategy for managing trauma states that the mind cannot contain.

The identity dimension of this song is equally interesting and critical to review. The narrator speaks of having 'lost the dignity I had before'; a statement that locates addiction squarely within the framework of identity disturbance central to BPD. There was a prior self-dignified, coherent identity that dependency has progressively dismantled. This is not merely low self-esteem; it is the lived experience of watching one's own identity erode in real time; unable to arrest the process despite one being aware of it. Russolillo et al. (2025) describe this condition as the *psychache* of identity diffusion; the unbearable internal pain of a self that can no longer recognize or sustain itself. The detail that some friends say he looks better drunk while others say he looks worse captures a further dimension of identity instability: the self becomes entirely dependent on external appraisal for any sense of worth, oscillating between

contradictory social mirrors with no stable internal reference point of its own. The relational and systemic dimensions are equally devastating and richly rendered. The wife's dread; she knows she's got double trouble with him coming home, illustrates how addiction radiates outward, collapsing the attachment bonds that Bowlby (1982) identifies as foundational to psychological stability. The enabling peer group that mocks his attempts at sobriety represents precisely the invalidating social environment that Linehan (1993) identifies as perpetuating dysregulation: a relational field that punishes change and rewards the continuation of destructive patterns.

Most devastating of all is the phrase 'a slave in my own country.' Political liberation has been achieved, but the body remains chemically enslaved. This is the post-apartheid paradox at its most intimate and tragic: the external oppressor has been officially removed, but the internal one installed partly through the Apartheid system's deliberate weaponization of alcohol dependency, most infamously *the dop system of paying labourers in liquor* (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012); remains in full command. Cluver et al. (2015) document the direct developmental pathway from apartheid-era childhood adversity to substance use disorder in South African communities; establishing that what Dube confesses here is not individual weakness but the *inherited wound* of a structurally manufactured dependency. In naming himself 'a liquor slave in his own country', Dube renders one of the most honest and psychologically complete portraits in his entire body of work: the man who survived the Apartheid system, only to discover that survival and freedom are not the same thing.

5.2 Song B: "The Way it Is" (1999)

Core Message:

"The Way It Is" focuses on social inequality, exclusion, and the emotional consequences of climbing or being excluded from systems of power. The narrator reflects on being actively engaged in struggle and resistance "raising a voice," "raising fists," and risking rejection, only to be later ignored or forgotten by those who benefited from or moved beyond that struggle. The song highlights how people can become disconnected from their origins once they gain success or social mobility. The repeated chorus, "That's the way it is," reflects resignation in the face of persistent structural injustice. It also includes a warning about social relationships and power: that those who rise should remain mindful of those who supported them, because power positions are not permanent.

Psycho-Humanistic Analysis of Song B: "The Way it Is"

"The Way It Is" reflects emotional and relational dynamics consistent with personality features expressed through relational experience, particularly abandonment sensitivity, emotional intensity, and instability in perceived reciprocity. The narrator's strong emotional investment in collective struggle, followed by the experience of being forgotten after social mobility occurs, reflects a pattern of abandonment-related emotional dysregulation, where relational bonds are experienced as deeply significant yet unstable (Linehan, 1993; Gunderson & Lyons-Ruth, 2008). The lyric "you don't even know my name" reflects a psychologically significant experience of relational invalidation and symbolic erasure, where recognition from others is withdrawn after being previously present during shared struggle. This disruption contributes to identity strain, as self-concept becomes dependent on external affirmation and is destabilized when that affirmation is lost (Leichsenring et al. 2024).

The song reflects an internal shift toward resigned cognitive accommodation, where repeated exposure to unresponsive and unequal relational systems leads to acceptance of injustice as fixed reality. This functions psychologically as a stabilizing response to chronic disappointment, reducing affective escalation through *cognitive narrowing of expectations*. The song expresses how *relational betrayal* and social mobility within hierarchical systems can produce *identity disruption*, *abandonment distress*, and *emotional resignation*, consistent with borderline-related patterns of affective and relational instability.

5.3 Song C: “*Big Boys Don’t Cry*” (1995)

Core Message:

Opening with a meditation on reincarnation as the only remaining space in which a missed love might be recovered, this song narrates a grief that is inseparable from its own cause: two people who felt deeply for each other but said nothing until time ran out. The love was real but never spoken; the connection was mutual but never acted upon. Now the narrator cries; not, he insists, because of pain or hurt, but for a reason he struggles to name. He traces his emotional poverty back to its origin: love was first encountered only through his parents’ words, leaving him unprepared to recognize, name, or express it when it arrived in his own adult life. The face of the lost beloved appears only when his eyes are closed - present in imagination, unreachable in reality. The chorus “big boys don’t cry” is not a boast but a wound: the cultural sentence that helped produce the silence that destroyed the relationship.

Psycho-Humanistic Analysis of Song C: “Big Boys Don’t Cry”

“Big Boys Don’t Cry” is one of the most psychologically layered songs in Dube’s catalogue, operating simultaneously as a grief narrative, a developmental confession, and a critique of the emotional socialization that made both inevitable. Its opening; an appeal to reincarnation as the only space left in which a missed love might be reclaimed - is not merely a spiritual sentiment. Psychologically, it reflects the unresolved grief of a love that was never permitted to exist; not lost through abandonment or betrayal, but through the mutual paralysis of two people who felt deeply for one another and yet said nothing to claim it. This particular form of grief is among the most clinically complex: there is no tangible event to mourn, no specific rupture to name, only the accumulating silence of an opportunity irreversibly missed. Herman (1997) notes that grief without a nameable object is among the hardest to process, precisely because its loss cannot be located, assigned, or mourned in the conventional sense. The narrator’s curious insistence that he cries not because of pain, not because of hurt is a psychologically precise detail. It describes a state of emotional affect without adequate language; the narrator knows he is moved to tears but cannot name the affect driving them because the emotion he is experiencing lies outside the emotional vocabulary available to him. This is the clinical phenomenon known as *alexithymia*; the difficulty in identifying and articulating emotional states, which is strongly associated with both emotional dysregulation and early emotional invalidation (Dvir et al., 2014). The feeling is present and overwhelming, but its name is not. He can only point at what it is not. The developmental confession at the heart of the song is its most clinically significant moment: “the only time I knew about love was when mommy and daddy told me they loved me.” This is not presented as warmth recalled, it is presented as emotional poverty acknowledged. Love was known only as declaration, only as word, only as parental pronouncement - never as embodied relational experience that could be recognized and learned, or modelled and internalized as a felt capacity. Within Bowlby’s (1982) attachment framework, this describes a developmental environment in which love was named but its affective grammar was never taught. The consequence is precisely what the song enacts: an adult who could feel love with intensity but possessed no behavioural or emotional language with which to express it. He reached the moment when love arrived in his life and found him emotionally inarticulate; unable to speak what he felt until the window had permanently closed. This is attachment poverty producing relational paralysis, the self that was never taught how to love cannot act when love demands expression (Crow & Levy, 2021). The image of the beloved’s face appearing only when eyes are closed; you reach out for me, I reach out for you, but in real life we cannot meet, captures the dissociative quality of unresolved loss: the beloved lives in imagination with full vividness but is inaccessible in reality. Mulder et al. (2018) describes this as a characteristic feature of unprocessed grief, where the lost object is preserved in the internal world with an intensity that reality can no longer match. The relationship that never happened haunts and hurts more powerfully than many relationships that did.

Finally, the chorus “big boys don’t cry” must now be read not as cultural defiance but as the narrator’s own internalized verdict against himself. This was the sentence he was given. It is the very rule

that sealed his silence when love needed words. In Linehan's (1993) terms, it is the invalidating injunction that taught him his emotional experience was illegitimate, and that teaching cost him the relationship he is now mourning. The song's deepest tragedy is that the rule which destroyed the love is the same rule the narrator is now, tearfully and too late, beginning to disobey.

5.4 Song D: "I've Got You Babe" (1997)

Core Message:

The narrator has searched the entire world for a woman who will understand him. Every previous relationship has failed on precisely this criterion: none of those women understood him. Now, having finally found her, he declares his search permanently over. The language escalates rapidly beyond ordinary affection: his life depends on her, she is his future and everything he has; she must never leave him. What presents superficially as a celebration of found love is, on closer reading, a lyrical map of a self that has no internal foundation of its own; one that has relocated its entire identity, stability, and future into another person, and whose emotional survival now rests on that person remaining present.

Psycho-Humanistic Analysis of Song D: "I've Got You Babe"

"I've Got You Babe" is among the most clinically transparent songs in Dube's catalogue, presenting with remarkable lyrical directness the psychological architecture of a self-organized entirely around external affect regulation and fearful attachment. The opening framing is psychologically significant before a single declaration of love is made: the narrator has gone right round the world in search not of love as such, but of a woman who will understand him. This is the relational quest of a person experiencing chronic emotional invalidation; the defining environmental wound in Linehan's (1993) biosocial model, who has internalized the belief that his inner emotional world is fundamentally opaque or unacceptable to others.

The global scope of the search is not romantic hyperbole; it is a measure of how profound and enduring this experience of not being understood has been. All previous women failed not as partners but as validators. The new woman is not loved first; she is recognized first, as the one who finally sees him. What follows confirms that the relationship is functioning not as mutual partnership but as *psychological prosthesis*; a relational structure that performs the regulatory and identity functions that the self cannot perform for itself. The chorus, repeated six times, declares: "I've got you babe to make me feel alright." This is not contentment; it is external affect regulation stated with clinical precision. The other person's presence is the mechanism by which the narrator's emotional state is managed. Without her, there is no "alright." Linehan (1993) identifies this reliance on external sources for emotional containment as one of the defining features of dysregulated interpersonal functioning: the individual who has never developed internal regulatory capacity must locate that capacity in another person, creating a dependency that is simultaneously genuine and structurally fragile.

The third verse makes the full clinical picture unmistakable: "my life depends on you, you are my future, you are everything I got." These, in one way, are not expressions of love's intensity; they are a precise description of identity vacuity. They show that the narrator has no self that exists independently of this relationship. That his life, his future, and everything he possesses are located in her. Bogaerts et al. (2024) describe this as the relational dimension of identity disturbance, where the boundaries of self and other collapse, and the other person becomes the container of the self's coherence rather than a separate individual to be loved. This is the logical terminus of chronic identity instability; if the self has no stable internal foundation, it must be constructed externally, and the relationship becomes not a choice but a structural necessity.

It is possible that these ways of interpreting Dube's third verse mentioned above bothers on a kind of over emphasis on the negative dimension of it. This is because in some instances a husband with an impressive wife who makes enormous contributions to the growth of the family and the relationship may

have some genuine reasons for making such a statement that might be influenced not by identity disturbance or vacuity on his part, but due to a genuine recognition by him of the positive value of the woman of his love. Making such statements does not always mean that the one who speaks that way has lost confidence in himself; believing that he is but a nonentity in the absence of his wife; or that it is only through his wife that his identity can make any meaning. Statements of recognition made in respect of one another in a stable marriage do not always mean that those making such statements are lacking confidence in the stability and strength of their own identity.

The plea “please never leave me” is the emotional centre of the entire song and its most diagnostically significant moment. It is the direct expression of abandonment terror, the ninth and final criterion of BPD in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. The plea is not incidental; it is the emotional engine that explains everything preceding it. The global search, the relief at being found, the declaration that she is everything he has, the repeated chorus seeking to feel “alright”; all of it is organized around the foundational terror that she might leave. Bowlby (1982) describes this as the activated attachment system in its most desperate register - the individual for whom separation from the attachment figure is psychologically equivalent to annihilation. Heard as the final song in Dube’s eight

-song arc, “I’ve Got You Babe” does not resolve the psychological journey, it exposes its deepest wound. The self that survived addiction, imprisonment, betrayal, grief, and systemic violence has arrived at what feels like salvation, but salvation constructed entirely on the continued presence of another. It is not healing. It is the closest thing to it that emotional dysregulation, without intervention, is able to find.

6. Discussion

The preceding lyrical analyses reveal a coherent set of psychological patterns across Lucky Dube’s music. His work, when interpreted through trauma-informed and humanistic frameworks, emerges as a sustained emotional narrative reflecting not only personal suffering but the broader psychic toll of systemic oppression, familial disintegration, and historical displacement. This discussion synthesizes the recurring motifs, emotional expressions, and psychological constructs present across the selected songs to illuminate the deeper implications of Dube’s artistry for trauma scholarship and mental health practice. Across the corpus of analyzed songs, a clear thematic convergence emerges around attachment rupture, identity instability, and emotional dysregulation; all, three interrelated constructs that closely mirror contemporary understandings of trauma-related psychopathology, particularly those associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).

Songs such as “The Way It Is” and “I Am a Slave” illuminate the psychological cost of betrayal and structural entrapment. In “The Way It Is,” the narrator’s political solidarity is met with abandonment by those who rose through shared struggle, enacting what Freyd (1994, as cited in Shin, Tang, & Freyd, 2012) terms *betrayal trauma*: its injury proportional to one’s dependence on the betraying party. The refrain “that’s the way it is” is not mere resignation but a form of trauma accommodation (Van der Kolk, 2014), wherein the psyche rescales its expectations downward after repeated relational disillusionment. Simultaneously, “I Am a Slave” employs the prison metaphor not as allegory but as lived psychological testimony: the self remains chemically enslaved long after political liberation, locating addiction as an inherited wound of systemic manufacture rather than individual moral failure. Together, these songs render Dube’s emotional landscape as simultaneously internal and structural, personal pain inseparable from collective socio-political disempowerment.

Thus, Dube’s work may be viewed not as a pathological display of emotional volatility, but as a resilient adaptation, one that allowed him to metabolize unresolved emotional material through creative output. In this sense, his music becomes a form of existential witnessing, wherein the unspeakable is rendered speakable, and emotional isolation is transformed into communal recognition. However, a critical reading of Dube’s biography alongside this framework demands one further qualification. But pursuit of that further qualification is a task to be taken up in a future study.

To conclude, Lucky Dube's selected works function not only as reggae compositions but as lyrical case studies in trauma adaptation, identity negotiation, and emotional survival. His songs articulate the silent suffering of those navigating invisible wounds; namely, those whose lives have been shaped by the absence of safe relationships, coherent identities, and psychological refuge. Recognizing musicians as emotional historians and healers challenges traditional boundaries between art and psychology and offers fertile ground for trauma-informed engagement with artistic communities. Dube's music, therefore, should be understood not just as performance, but as psychological testimony, deserving of due scholarly attention in the field of African psychology particularly.

6. 1. Implications and Recommendations

Despite the emotional labour embedded in their work, many musicians lack access to trauma-informed care, psychological support, or culturally relevant mental health services. The industry's emphasis on performance, productivity, and resilience often obscures the psychological vulnerability of artists, particularly those from marginalized or postcolonial contexts. Institutions; whether educational, governmental, or clinical, must develop and fund targeted mental health outreach programs for musicians and other creative professionals. These efforts should include the need for: (1) Psychological first aid training for artists and producers; (2) Peer-support networks tailored to the unique emotional demands of creative life; (3) Low-barrier counselling services, offered in collaboration with artist unions or cultural centres.

By attending to the emotional well-being of musicians, we not only support individual healing but also preserve the cultural ecosystems that depend on emotionally attuned artistic production.

Similarly, there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary methodologies that incorporate artistic narratives into the broader field of trauma research and mental health education. Music, poetry, and other forms of creative expression provide rich terrain for understanding how trauma is symbolized, remembered, and transformed. Integrating lyric analysis, music therapy frameworks, and creative coping models into psychological curricula and trauma-informed research can: (1) Enhance clinical sensitivity to non-verbal trauma expression; (2) Promote culturally responsive diagnostic and therapeutic practices (3) Expand the epistemological boundaries of psychological science to include emotional storytelling and symbolic language. Such integration not only elevates the role of art in trauma discourse but ensures that the emotional languages of marginalized communities - often expressed through music, are not dismissed, pathologized, or overlooked.

Conclusion

Lucky Dube's music serves as a compelling case for why artistic expression must be understood as both psychological evidence and emotional intervention. His work reminds us that behind every melody may lie a wound, and within every lyric, a call for healing. It is incumbent upon scholars, clinicians, educators, and cultural institutions to listen more deeply, respond more compassionately, and build bridges between the arts and mental health.

Similarly, Dube's music reminds us that emotional truth is not always spoken in diagnostic terms or clinical interviews. Sometimes, it is sung; in the cry of a forgotten child, the lament of a fractured self, or the melody of survival. To truly advance mental health understanding and care, scholars and practitioners must learn to listen not only to symptoms, but also to songs.

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