



Going beyond the narrative: Rupri Kaur's *Milk and Honey* as a modern text

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Abstract

This article intends to evaluate the socio-cultural concerns in the poetry of Rupri Kaur, with special reference to her volume of poetry *Milk and Honey*, which has sold over 4,00,000 copies and was listed No. 3 on the New York Times Best Sellers list. Rupri Kaur [b 1992] is a poet of Indian origin settled in Canada. As a diasporic writer, her poetry carries all the joy of the new world, coupled with the pain of loss of one's bearings. Some of the poems in the book, she says, "are biographical or autobiographical with respect to friends and family," or are simply based on things that happen to people across the world. Her work, right now, is focused on feminism, love, race, violence, and more.

Keywords: substituted Li ferrite, magnetostatic and spin waves, microstrip array antenna, X-band frequency range

Introduction

Rupri Kaur, while talking about her writing says: "I would have been a designer if I was not a poet." Holding a degree in Professional writing, rhetoric studies and business, she is a part of the new generation of bestselling poets who use social media to share their work and build a strong community of followers over time – breaking one prejudiced perception after another. In a candid conversation with TBI, she talks about her journey as an immigrant into the mainstream world of a different country from the one she was born in, her poems, feminism and how she is writing through life at the moment. So far as the motivation and inspiration to write are concerned, it was "just a desire to express". She says that "there was a lot of silence at home in terms of a few things I was feeling. It was like, I am feeling all these things and that's okay, but I am not supposed to talk about this and that. My art for me was a way to figure out what it was that I was going through and to figure out the emotions that I was experiencing. Since I was feeling these things so strongly, I was heavily motivated to express them. And when I expressed them I realized that the feelings were universal. That sense of community was so invigorating that I was consistently inspired to share.

Says Rupri, "Milk and Honey' is a collection of poetry about survival... it is about the experience of violence, abuse, love, loss, and femininity." It is a collection of poetry, prose, and hand-drawn illustrations. The book is split into four chapters, and each chapter deals with a different theme. The sections are titled "the hurting", "the loving", "the breaking", and "the healing". Kaur designed the book from cover to cover, illustrating pictures that were woven in with her words. Amidst warnings of being barred from prestigious literary circles, Kaur originally self-published the book of poetry on Amazon in 2014, which was later picked up by Andrews McMeel Publishing in 2015. The book deals with themes of violence, abuse, love, loss, and feminism. As of June 2017, *Milk and Honey* has been translated into over 25 languages,

including a popular Spanish edition translated by the famous Spanish writer Elvira Sastre entitled, *Otras Maneras de Usar la Boca*.

Evaluating the text

This collection of short poems is grouped into four sections: "the hurting"; "the loving"; "the breaking"; and "the healing". For the most part, each page has only a single poem: there are a very few poems that spread over two pages. Several of the poems are accompanied by ink drawings, while several others have titles that come at the conclusion of the poem. Part 1, "the hurting", focuses on the speaker's experience of being emotionally hurt within the context of male / female relationships. The overall tone and content of the poems suggests several things: that the speaker is female; that she was sexually abused at a young age by males in her family, including her father; and that she comes from a history in which women are, in general, mistreated. That history, the poems in Part 1 also suggest, includes both the history of her family, and her family's ethno-cultural origins. Depending on the context and topic being discussed, the combination of the two can have the delicate effect of a needle and thread

you have sadness
living in places
sadness shouldn't live
— Page 25, milk and honey
... or all the brutality of a hammer and nail:
you were so afraid
of my voice
i decided to be
afraid of it too
— Page 15, milk and honey

In Part 2, "the loving", the focus continues to be on male / female relationships, but from a very different point of view. In this part, the speaker celebrates the joy out of a relationship

with a loving, tender, sensitive male partner. This joy is interspersed with trauma of the events in Part I. Nevertheless, the overall sensibility of the poems in this section is celebratory, as the speaker realizes that it is possible for her to enjoy both sex and her body, and that there is reason and validity in that enjoyment.

The third part of the collection, "the breaking", is replete with experience of pain, grief and consequent questioning. It focuses on the speaker's experiences in the aftermath of a relationship coming to an end. The collection never makes the point explicitly, but there is the clear implication that the relationship referred to in this part of the book is also the relationship referred to in Part 2. The attitude of the speaker throughout this section is ambivalent, in that there are explorations of both loss and longing – that is, of trying to self-convince that the relationship is over while, at the same time, continuing to believe that the love and intimacy that both partners in the relationship experienced can bring them back together. This part is pretty self-explanatory. The poems in this section are like jagged glass: they could hurt if you held them wrong but held right, they become pretty handy weapons.

In the collection's fourth part, "the healing", the emphasis is on healing and recovery from the bruises suffered in Part I, Part II and Part III. The primary focus is on taking steps towards an experience of self-value and self-worth. Here, there is a certain shift in the language with a strong sense of self-affirmation or self-nurturing about many of the poems, which at times seem to take on the form and style of slogans from self-help books. Also in this final section, the self-identification of the speaker is complete. Previously, there have been hints and suggestions, but, here, there are clear references to the autobiographical nature of her poetry. In this context, and looking at the other poems in the collection with hindsight, there emerges a very strong sense of a personal, lived experience of transformation.

Stylist Devices

Intermixing of Idea and Image

Milk and Honey is written in the style of "confessional poetry," with the first-person speaker relating her own thoughts and experiences. Kaur doesn't capitalize the first words of her lines or sentences, and she uses punctuation sparingly, often foregoing commas and periods entirely. When Kaur does use punctuation, it generally means that she's playing with the form of the poem, writing it as a long prose poem or, in one case, a list. In place of punctuation, Kaur uses line breaks to indicate where a reader should pause during their reading. Kaur being a talented visual artist, her sketches accompany almost half the poems in the book. These sketches are hand-drawn in ink and complement the poems, visually representing the themes, characters, and situations described in the text. In some cases, the poems are written around or even within the sketches, forcing the reader to examine the interplay between text and image. One perfect example of this is found on page 13, where Kaur situates the poem between a woman's open legs.

Imagery

Kaur repeatedly uses images of 'fire' and 'water' in her

poetry. She uses symbols to make her message clear. One of the best examples of this can be found in the second chapter, 'The Loving', when Kaur writes, "how do you turn a forest fire like me so soft in turn into running water?" This "forest fire" represents many things: love, passion, energy, rage, determination. Throughout the book, 'fire' stands for the speaker's complex, sometimes volatile emotions as she faces her past and wrestles with the psychological damage it caused. Water, then, has a kind of cooling effect, allowing the speaker to dampen that fire, however briefly, and become vulnerable.

Kaur introduces the symbol of the 'rose' early in the first chapter, "the hurting". She writes, "she was a rose in the hands of those who had no intention of keeping her".

The rose reappears in the third chapter, "the breaking", not as text but as an image. Kaur draws a rose underneath her poem, visually alluding to that old adage, "Every rose has its thorns." The book is utterly beautiful and devastating and reading of *Milk and Honey* does take an awareness of a trend in poetry: the lack of capital letters for anything at all. She doesn't capitalize her name, much like e. e. cummings and bell hooks. This shifts the focus from the author to the work and minimizes the importance of the self.

Milk and Honey departs from the established tradition as it blends the twin genres of writing and drawing, poetry and art. It is a visual as well as textual work, and most of her writings are accompanied by drawings, which help to orient the poem and are also really beautiful. It is concise, it strikes deep and unrelenting. It is feminine. Kaur herself admits "It's like wow! It is so cool and so humbling. Most importantly, it allows me to believe in myself every day because even though I have come so far, there are still days, and there will always be days, when I don't believe in myself and all the negative feelings come up. *Milk and Honey* is like an anchor. It helps me know that I can do this, and I can do it again. It is proof of my power." The lines: To hate / is an easy lazy thing / but to love / takes strength / everyone has / but not all are / willing to practice/ are sparkling examples of her powerful feelings expressed through powerful diction. To love and not hate is something lying deep, yet something really shapes a person. Also the phrase "milk and honey" reminds some of the best times ever! Besides, not capitalizing her name... This is indeed thought provoking, especially when one is looking into the relationship between the author and his or her composition.

Conclusion

Milk and Honey, has often been dubbed as simplistic, or trying too hard to attain modernist obscurity. Yet it is imbued with a far deeper meaning as it comes out after digesting its meaning, comprehending its contours and patterns, understanding its nuances. Kaur adapts to the fluidity of the modern age whilst retaining a sense of heritage, culture, and power. Emerging from a dusty shelf where a book lies untouched like a classic, *Milk and Honey* is meant to be read out loud, written in texts to loved ones, and learnt by heart. In order to understand poetry's future engagement with a modern audience, Kaur's work must be read and appreciated. *Milk and Honey* discusses many important issues about being human. Her poems capture themes of hurting, loving, breaking and healing. Any young woman needs milk and honey in her life. Survival, feminism,

abuse, love, healing, and loss, are definitely the core themes of *Milk and Honey*. Her poems are unique written in simple, relatable language but are hard-hitting, strong poems that often say a lot more than a page can carry.

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