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How Poetry Becomes a Therapeutic Method  
to Overcome Loss in Rupi Kaur's *The Sun and  
Her Flowers*

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## 1. Introduction

During human history, trauma has been declared an inevitable feature in societal life as it is a personal emotional response to past wounds which requires an adaptive internal process. For instance, refugees, veterans and victims of war crimes suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a psychiatric illness in which victims identify situations or factors in the present, and tend to relate them to the distressing events that they had witnessed or experienced in the past. Trauma is challenging and there is a popular tendency to think that a traumatized person has to be exposed to a natural disaster, war or sexual assault, in order to experience the symptoms associated with trauma. However, it is not the absolute truth since there is a wide range of common episodes that can threaten the individual's psychological integrity such as unwanted sexual experiences, extreme emotional abuse, significant separations, divorce or losses. Loss or absence are involved in a great number of traumas even though they are not directly the primary cause.

The terms of loss and absence can lead to confusion as they present similar meanings, but LaCapra thinks that there is a problematic distinction<sup>1</sup> between both of them. In a "restricted sense losses may entail absences, but the converse need not be the case" (LaCapra 700). With regards to absence, the past is misinterpreted, but something of the past always persists, even as a phantom. Furthermore, loss implies specific events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level. For that reason, loss is often connected to lack because "loss is for the past and lack is for the present and future"

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<sup>1</sup> It should be emphasized that problematic distinctions are not binaries.

(LaCapra 703). Lack indicates that something which used to be there now is missing. When providing that puzzling information, we come to the conclusion that neither lack always involves a loss nor a loss need to be connected with absence. LaCapra argues that the “ability to make the distinction between absence and loss is one aspect of a complex process of working through” (699). The recovery process consists in looking for ways to face the past and speaking in and out for the healing of hidden wounds.

Further empirical studies have found that, apart from going to a mental health professional, creative and metaphoric verbal and visual forms are efficient methods of coping with grieving. A recent study by Sharon Kahn on Sigmund Freud’s has examined that a group of adults who potentially dealt with traumatic events in childhood have not developed posttraumatic symptoms in adulthood. All of the participants lived a childhood constructed out of creative expressions and an adulthood in which creativeness was willingly imbued. Indeed, metaphor is a way to interpret traumatic events and in Freudian terms, it makes inexpressive consequences of trauma “socially acceptable”. This creative drive is “a direct result of the body’s neurosis chemical responses to traumatic injury” (Jensen 155), so in the revelation of traumatic affliction, metaphor is not only a romantic trope. It is also relevant for “the therapeutic mind/body connection” (156), as psychotherapists believe that metaphor is the core of the traumatic disorders’ care, and a “growing area of research interest” for them, in order to look “for new therapeutic interventions in the treatment of traumatic disorders” (156). In addition, the neurologist Alice Flaherty, states that writing is “a bodily act”(156). For that reason, once traumatized bodies react to what they write, “an embodied exchange” (158) between writer and text occurs by transforming s/her facial

expressions and “the rhythms of [his/her] breath [...] within the moment of composition” (158). One of the major topics to be investigated in this field is poetry since it allows emotions to be expressed and depicted through well-chosen words.

For decades, poetry has played an important role in creating unique works from an autobiographical perspective and has become an indispensable tool for survivors of trauma. John Stuart Mill argues that poetry is “a feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude” (Mill 4), that idea is tied to Dylan Thomas’s definition of poetry. According to Thomas, poetry makes the readers realise that they are not alone in the “unknown world, that [their] bliss and suffering are forever shared and forever all [their] own” (Nastasi). Rupi Kaur writes poetry as a “guttural response to [her] trauma” (Kaur 00:13:56-00:14:02) “with the intention to survive” (00:14:05-00:14:08) . Poetry became Kaur’s “means to reclaim [her] body, to find home [...] again”, and it was writing poetry that “led her to find love for [herself] and with that love, a path lit up.” (00:15:45-00:16:05). During her life expedition, Kaur met several traumas along the way, but poetry provided her a safe exit from pain and gave her a sufficient level of confidence to confront and overcome trauma.

In this dissertation, I am going to argue that poetry turns out to be a therapeutic method for individuals who need to overcome psychological traumas related to abandonment and loss. Rupi Kaur’s life, the thematic, formal and stylistic aspects of her work, and the divergent reviews she has received during her career will be the core information to comprehend her poetry. In the second part of this dissertation, a selection of poems from Rupi Kaur’s *The Sun and Her Flowers* will be the key to understanding,

on a deeper level, the author's hidden wounds that were caused by abandonment and loss. To explore these factors, I am going to use the theoretical background offered by Susan Anderson's study: *A Journey from Abandonment to Healing*, which constitutes five universal stages of abandonment separated into five chapters that share similarities in meaning with those of Kaur's second poetry collection.

## **2. Rupi Kaur**

Rupi Kaur was born into a Sikh family in Punjab, India in 1992. She is a poet, artist and performer, and the author and illustrator of three collections of poetry. When she was only 4, her parents emigrated to Toronto, Canada. Rupi's creativity bloomed when she started drawing at the age of five. She took writing poetry seriously in November 2013, when Anais Nin, Virginia Woolf and Warsan Shire became her daily inspiration. The author was amazed by the way these writers expressed their feelings by transforming them into words. Since that moment, she noticed that poetry could be her best defence weapon. She completed her degree in Rhetoric and Professional Writing at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. In 2015, she published her first collection of poems, *Milk and Honey*, which sold over 1.5 million copies worldwide and was translated into over 23 languages. Rupi has performed her poetry to sold-out audiences around the world. The book that is going to be analysed in this dissertation is her second masterpiece: *The Sun and Her Flowers*, which includes themes such as "love, loss, trauma, healing and femininity" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 252).

Rupi Kaur started writing poems for her friends and even her crushes at an early age, and when she graduated in Rhetoric and Professional Writing from the University

of Waterloo in Ontario, Tumblr and Instagram emerged as her new channels of communication. On these social media sites, she posted her poems and reflections in order to gain popularity. In 2014, all her poems were collected together in a book and Kaur chose her own path by using *Amazon's* CreateSpace platform, instead of following the traditional publishers' interests. She published her first collection of poems and baptised it: *Milk and Honey*.

*Milk and Honey* is a preeminent work, which is divided into four chapters; “the hurting”, “the loving”, “the breaking”, and “the healing”— each of which possesses a purpose or a painful cause. In *the hurting*, the author looks closely at a woman's education and “how punishing it can feel when a woman realizes her body is not always her own” (Noel, “The Hurting. The Loving. The Breaking. The Healing.” n. p.), “the loving” deals with falling in love, “the breaking”, with the pain of disillusion and “the healing”, with self-love. This poetry collection has received so much attention because of her speech on subjects such as abuse, family, loss, love and violence. In this book, readers can travel through the most gutting moments in life and may discover that sweetness is everywhere if they desire to look.

In October 2017, Rupi Kaur published her second collection of poems: *The Sun and Her Flowers*, which soon turned into the number one *Sunday Times* bestseller and ranked Number 1 on the *Publishers Weekly* for ten exact weeks. The Tribeca Performing Arts Center witnessed a sold-out event, in which Kaur fired off *The Sun and Her Flowers*. This second collection is “about grief, self-abandonment, honouring one's

roots, love and empowering oneself.” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 254). In the chapters of this collection, the audience may encounter the life cycle of a flower.

However, this is told in reverse, from the perspective of a person who is trying to come to terms with the pain caused by some loss s/he suffered. With respect to this treatment of pain as a psychological process, it is worth noting that Rupi Kaur suffered from the anguish of love loss. This trauma of abandonment altered her life, up to the point of undue hardship, such as suicidal and depressive feelings among other delicate ones. The author’s personal wounds of abandonment are present in the poems and follow a gradual process from grieving over the relationship, to finally finding a way out of those awful feelings. For this reason, it starts from “wilting” and finishes with “blooming.” Taking this into consideration, this dissertation will demonstrate how poetry is presented in this collection as a way to overcome a traumatic loss.

Finally, her third collection of poetry *Home Body* was published in 2020. In this book, readers may visit “the past, the present and the potential of the self” (Kaur, *Home Body*) through raw and honest conversations with oneself. The author of these poems aims to trigger a strong emotional reaction in the readers by reminding them to fill up on love, community, acceptance and family with a view to welcome a change.

Every instance of Kaur’s life, from birth to the present, has been informed by poetry, and as a result, most poems include autobiographical features. She highlights the fact that writing was a response to her trauma and to help illustrate her point, in 2016 she affirmed in a *TED Talk* that “the poetry in [her] books [...] was just a side of fact.”



(Kaur 00:14:09-00:14:14) For this reason, the difference between an author and a lyrical subject is blurred.

This distinction is crucial to understanding poetry and hence these terms should be clarified. On the one hand, the author is the composer of a literary work. On the other hand, the lyrical subject is a conventional literary figure or voice narrating words within the poem itself, although it does not have to be the author who speaks. Nevertheless, in this case, it is Rupi herself who reinforces that the content within the poems is not based on an assumption, but on facts. Therefore, the first person's lyrical subject that is present in the poems, resides in the author's persona.

In terms of inspiration, Kaur states that the universe has a lot to offer, so that she is "soaking it all in" ("Milk & Honey: A Poet Exposes Her Heart" n. p.). Sikh history surrounds her work because she considers Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, as the most soft-spoken collection of poetry ever written. Sikhism followers believe in one God who protects them and accepts that actions are as important as managing a good life. Sikhs believe everyone is equal before God. For this reason, every poem is written in lowercase, a technique that may create an impact on the reader because of its deviation from conventional writings. Punjabi is the author's mother tongue and it can be written in either Gurmukhi or Shahmukhi script.

In the Gurmukhi script, there is not a distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters. In this sense, letters are treated the same, so that uniformity and equality are reflected not just in the content, but also in the form. According to Kaur, she enjoys this simplicity and describes it as "symmetrical and straightforward" (Kaur, "Why do you only use lowercase and periods in your poetry?"). This identical value, in

terms of equality, is her view and desire of what she wants to see, not only in her poetry but also within the world. Thus, it may be argued that the punctuation of her writing seeks to reflect the author's identity.

### 3. Reading Community Reviews

Rupi Kaur's words have roused a massive tide of criticism because her lines tend to alienate themselves from traditional forms of poetry. Rupi Kaur's poetry has been defined as something similar to an ordinary Tumblr post, and her poems as random thoughts on blank paper. Some users from *Goodreads* made harsh reviews about Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. Indeed, @Jessie wrote on 26th February 2016 that this collection does not correspond with the meaning of poetry: "it's shamefully derivative and doesn't employ any poetic devices except for the most cliched —and not to positive effect" ("Jessie's Reviews: Milk and Honey"). This user also states that Kaur's "random line breaks and sentence fragments are used because it is what is expected of a poem" and criticises the author's knowledge about the subject. In other words, this user thinks that the author does not seem to understand that those lines "must contribute to the poem's larger meaning." ("Jessie's Reviews: Milk and Honey" n. p.).

In like vein, the Insta-poems of Rupi Kaur have been framed as banal, as well as the drawings that couple them, which have been defined as 'child-like drawings'. A critic from the *Gryphon Gazette* asserts that Kaur's poems do not foster any debate because everyone is able to understand her poetry effortlessly. Therefore, Kaur is accused of employing this overly simplified language in her work to rapidly target public appeal and financial profit, which do not elaborate on complexity as good poetry does ("A Criticism of Rupi Kaur and the Culture of Insta-Poets"). Rupi Kaur's poetry

stimulated parody memes on Twitter which consisted of breaking any stale statement into short lowercase lines and sign it “-rupi kaur” (Wilson).

By contrast, there are those who argue that “Rupi Kaur's poetry is unlike traditional” (“ElyseWalters Reviews: Milk and Honey” n. p.) one. @ElyseWalters thinks that Kaur’s first collection is a small book, but it feels like a graphic poetry novel. (n. p.) This user declared that with the delicate simple drawings he forgot he was reading poetry, since those drawings tell a story so that readers can feel emotions from them before reading the words. Most collections of poetry contain poems that have a theme or at least, more than one topic in common. Kaur submitted her first poems individually to anthologies, magazines and journals. This submission determined an immediate response of rejection by the audience, for this reason, she realised that plucking pieces out of the collection by “throwing them out there in the world, hoping they would land” (Kaur) was not the right path. It was at that moment when Kaur understood that the core of her writing was not related to separating poems from her poetry compilation. She was convinced that doing that was a disservice to her symbolic larger work. Since that moment, self-publishing became her target, laying aside the creative writing professor’s thoughts.

In November 2014, after editing and designing the book for approximately two months, she self-published her first collection in CreateSpace. Once Kaur’s books were published, she continued posting on Instagram and automatically her pieces started to make sense from the moment those readers began to familiarise themselves with her books. Instagram became a home for the author as it developed into the personification of Kaur’s artwork, which she associates with the significance of its public nature order.

Instagram became a community to her; she got through to ‘a cyberspatial sisterhood’ and proved that healing across narrative is collective (Kruger, n. p.).

#### 4. A Real Journey Through Emotions

*The Sun and Her Flowers* is a collection of lyrical poems, split into five sections, that deals with “grief/ self-abandonment/ honouring one’s roots/ love/ and empowering oneself” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 254). This dissertation will analyse the form and content of Kaur’s poems and how they are a reflection of the several traumas the author<sup>2</sup> is trying to overcome.

To begin with, the collection’s title, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, is quite symbolic but also, multidimensional as it uncovers more than a meaning. One of the multiple meanings for the author is that flowers are a beautiful representation between love and relationships, especially sunflowers. In an interview with Simon & Schuster UK, Kaur discussed that she was fascinated by “the way sunflowers worship the sun” (FoylesBookshop) and then, they follow it around.

Symbolically, the sun could be taken as the rendering of a woman, while “her flowers” could be said to stand for the love relationships a woman has during her life. For instance, when a love relationship comes to an end, emotional exile occurs, since it is not the abandoned person who chooses to be alone. Nonetheless, if a partner decides to leave that lover, the one left may feel “utterly and helplessly defeated over the circumstances of losing that love” (Anderson 17): “for so long i was lost in a place where there was no sun/ where there grew no flowers” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 250). In these lines, the lyrical subject expresses how painfully unsettled she felt when

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in the previous sections, this analysis has been conducted under the knowledge of the existence of an explicit necessary distinction between author and lyrical subject. However, the author and the lyrical subject of these poems refer to the author’s persona.

her lover left her. As it is suggested in the poem, she was surrounded by darkness, in other words, she had depression. The lack of the sun may be interpreted as the lyrical subject's low self-esteem and love for herself. As a result, flowers did not grow because as the author expresses in her first book: "how you love yourself is/ how you teach others/ to love you" (Kaur, *Milk and Honey* 180).

With regards to the title, another meaning could be a relationship with the self since self-love is one of the themes the reader can encounter when analysing the book: "there is/ nothing left/ to worry about/ the sun and her flowers are here." (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 248). Healing is the best place to find oneself so that a person does not need anyone when self-love occurs: "the sun fell to the ground and rolled away/ flowers beheaded themselves/ all that's left alive here is me" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 61).

In searching for more senses connected to the collection's title, there are those who define sunflowers as spiritual followers of the sun. The existence of the unbreakable connection between a mother and her daughter is an undeniable fact; it symbolizes unconditional love. For this significance, at the back cover, readers can find this poem:

*this is the recipe of life*  
 said my mother  
 as she held me in her arms as i wept  
*think of those flowers you plant*  
*in the garden each year*

*they will teach you that people too*

*must wilt*

*fall*

*root*

*rise*

*in order to bloom*

*-rupi kaur* (emphasis in the original)

Following her mother's advice in the above quotation, this collection is divided into five chapters that summarize the life cycle of a sunflower: *wilting*, *falling*, *rooting*, *rising* and *blooming*. These five chapters may be symbolically associated with the five stages which, according to Susan Anderson in her work *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing*, individuals can encounter in the experience of the loss of love.

Anderson's stage one, "Shattering" may be the pair of "wilting"; "Withdrawal" the pair of "falling"; "Internalizing the Rejection," that of "rooting"; "Rage," that of "rising", and the final stage, "Lifting," might be compared with "blooming", the last chapter of Kaur's collection. According to Anderson, psychologically, the loss of love becomes a trauma, and as with every traumatic experience, it takes some time for the individual to be able to recover from it. The five stages Anderson points out are related to those circular phases that human beings experience when facing a loss of love. When a person confronts this process of loss of love and finally, achieves his/her objective of overcoming it, the individual goes through a rebirth process. Similarly, *The Sun and Her Flowers'* chapters reveal the process of a flower since it wilts as if it was going to be planted again. This may sound confusing, but my own view on the matter is that when a flower wilts or dies, another seed is planted in moist soil as if it was starting a new life.

Therefore, when love ends, there will be life beyond that breakup. This summarises the metaphorical idea that encompasses *The Sun and Her Flowers* by comparing the sun with an individual and “her flowers” with her manifold relationships.

In what follows, I would like to separate the analysis of the collection into five subsections by relating the stages of Susan’s Anderson *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing* to *The Sun and Her Flowers*’ chapters since Kaur’s poems follow the same gradual process: from facing a loss to finally accepting it by loving herself. This section will explore how the form and content of Rupi Kaur’s poetry reflect the author’s traumatic experience and how grieving will be followed by healing through a gradual tough process.

#### **4.1. Shattering/ Wilting**

An individual may feel abandoned when a relationship goes to an end. The pain mostly falls in the part that has been left behind. Abandonment is a “primal fear universal to the human experience” (Anderson 17) and anguishing over a love loss uncovers a preeminent wound. Rupi Kaur exposes that wound in the first poem of “wilting”: “on the last day of love/ my heart cracked inside my body” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 13). It can be said that the first line indicates the time when the break-up, the abandonment, took place. In the second line, “my heart cracked” is hyperbole that reflects a deep feeling, in other words, the painful wound that has been created by the person who has abandoned the lyrical subject.

i spend days in bed debilitated by loss

i attempt to cry you back  
but the water is done  
and still you have not returned  
i pinch my belly till it bleeds 5  
have lost count of the days  
sun becomes moon and  
moon becomes sun and  
i become ghost  
a dozen different thoughts 10  
tear through me each second  
you must be on your way  
perhaps it's best if you're not  
i am okay  
no 15  
i am angry  
yes  
i hate you  
maybe  
i can't move on 20  
i will  
i forgive you  
i want to rip my hair out  
over and over and over again  
till my mind exhausts itself into a silence 25



( Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 18)

This lyrical poem is expressing the lyrical subject's feelings through dramatic monologue as she is addressing another character at the same diegetic level: "you must be on your way / perhaps it's best if you're not" (lines 12-13; emphasis added). The poem is written in free verse as its 25 lines do not follow a strict metrical and rhyme pattern. The line is rudimentary to the perception of poetry because it denotes visual differentiation. Modern poetry sometimes deviates from traditional verse forms, and this deviation gives the poet much more freedom and flexibility. The whole poem is full of run-on lines or enjambment creating audible interest in the reader. This poem contains intense feelings which are vital components of the shattering stage. In the shattering stage, the pain is there and both, mind and body, agree that the feeling of sadness is so profound that the speaker can experience it not only psychologically, but also physically when she says "i pinch my belly till it bleeds" (line 5). This hyperbole has been used to emphasize that agonizing pain. The lyrical subject feels like doing nothing and is spending "days in bed debilitated by loss"(line 1) because what at first was meant to be mental emotional turbulence has led to physical pain caused by bereavement. This shattering stage makes the individual feel in touch with pathological feelings such as depressive illness, which affects sleep and the action of readiness. At this point "your whole body reacts in protest" (Anderson 32). Likewise, the lyrical subject states that she has "lost count of the days/ sun becomes moon and / moon becomes sun" (lines 6-8) and identifies with a ghost. She is suffering from the symptoms of grieving pointed out by Anderson.

The musicality of the lines is not lost as she continues using terminology related to nature when referring to the passing of time, and emphasizes the deepness of her sadness through parallelism: “sun becomes moon and / moon becomes sun” (lines 7-8). In the 10th and 11th lines, those thoughts are the roots of past losses, so the lyrical subject seems to stand in a stage of reexperiencing because she is going through the universal feelings of abandonment by recalling similar bereavement events from the past. In this case, the language is crystal clear as it is not difficult to understand, it is simplistic “i am okay” (line 14), “i am angry” (line 16). Simple words are more universal than complex ones as readers find them easier to understand; the same happens with abandonment survivors, all those who suffer from abandonment in their own shoes, experience the same feelings and go through the same process.

At first, this poem seems to be a clear reflection of relief, as if the author was writing in a diary to bring her hidden feelings to the surface, as it would have a curative effect. Nonetheless, at the end of every poem, a poet wants to clarify the message to the reader, wishing to finish with an image that persists into the reader’s thoughts, and which bounds off in other previous aspects of the poem. The last line produces an alarming effect. It's ending: “till my mind exhausts itself into silence” (line 25) contains a tough meaning related to suicide, a past traumatic battle that the author went through. Although the end of the poem would suggest the desire of an attempt to commit suicide, which might seem surprising, according to Anderson, as powerful as the “desire to end the pain is, these feelings are only part of the initial healing process” (Anderson 41).

#### **4.2. Withdrawal/ Falling**

The withdrawal stage encompasses several symptoms, for example, intense craving and disturbance for the love that an individual is missing. The hurting person may ache, throb and yearn for her or his loved one to return.

“i tried to leave many times but  
as soon as i got away  
my lungs buckled under the pressure  
panting for air i’d return  
perhaps this is why i let you 5  
skin me to the bone  
something  
was better than nothing  
having you touch me  
even if it was not kind 10  
was better than not having your hands at all  
i could take the abuse  
i could not take the absence  
i knew i was beating a dead thing  
but did it matter 15  
if the thing was dead  
when at the very least  
i had it  
- *addiction* (emphasis in the original)

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 27)

In this narrative poem, the lyrical subject is telling her thoughts through a dramatic monologue as she is addressing another character at the same diegetic level: her loved one. The message is clear; it does not matter if she feels content, she just wants to possess him, even though she is aware of the toxicity of that relationship. This awareness is present by her use of the term “abuse” (line 12), which is full of negative connotations. She also employs parallelism, which is interrupted by the negative adverb “not”, to emphasize that she wants him to stand by her: “i could take the abuse/ i could not take the absence” (lines 12-13). Anderson explains such a reaction by arguing that “human beings are genetically heir to a power *need for attachment*” (Anderson 22; emphasis in the original). In the lyrical subject’s case, she is an abandonment survivor who is hungry for getting him back.

Body as a concept implies presence, that is, the opposite of absence. For this reason, the lyrical subject deploys body parts such as “lungs” ( line 3), “skin”, “bone” (line 6), and “hands” (line 11). The musicality remains despite the hostile implied meanings the poem carries with it. For instance, through the metaphor; “my lungs buckled under the pressure / panting for air i’d return” (line 3-4), the image of lungs as buttons, makes the reader imagine the anxiety<sup>3</sup> She was suffering. This anxiety is one of the symptoms that Anderson highlights in her explanation of the psychobiological process of withdrawal.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Hofer, it is a special set of response tendencies that have resulted in avoidance of similar dangers during events in the organism’s past development and in the evolution of the species” (Hofer, *An Evolutionary Perspective* 36)

During withdrawal, the person experiences a giant aggressive mental battle. Mental health professionals believe that feelings of abandonment are existing symptoms of depression or anxiety. However, these symptoms are not just present in the second stage, they can be found during the whole process. Rupi Kaur makes this statement clear in her poem: *ghosts* (emphasis in the original). These “ghosts” may be associated with those past relationships or preceding losses she has faced throughout her life, and who keep on disturbing her, since they have been traumatic experiences for her, but she has not completely overcome them: “they leave / and act like it never happened/ they come back/ and act like they never left/” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 51).

In addition, in the withdrawal stage, there is a lack of appetite which leads many people to lose weight due to the breakup. Robert Sapolsky declares that CRF<sup>4</sup> and ACTH<sup>5</sup> set up a fight-or-flight response by closing down the individual’s appetite as well as other digestive processes (Anderson 93). These psychosomatic symptoms<sup>6</sup> are present in this poem: “I think my body knew you would not stay” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 38). In addition, readers can encounter a poem, whose title, “*hunger*” (emphasis in the original), may emphasize not only how she physically feels, but also how hungry for news of him she is.

the hummingbirds tell me  
 you’ve changed your hair  
 i tell them i don’t care  
 while listening to them

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<sup>4</sup> Corticotropin Releasing Factor

<sup>5</sup> Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone

<sup>6</sup> It is related to both the mind and the body together, used where physical symptoms have no obvious physical cause. A physical cause may exist but is not apparent at the time of diagnosis. Symptoms may be caused by psychological factors.” (*Glossary of Trauma Psychology Terms*)

describe every detail 5

- *hunger* (emphasis in the original)

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 24)

The lyrical subject of this quintet is on the lookout for hints of her old partner. The poem's message simplifies the desire of knowing what the lost person is doing in her or his new life without her. It is a kind of hypervigilance because when abandonment occurs, the "conscious mind is preoccupied with all matters pertaining to the missing person" (Anderson 95), assisting the emotional brain in its search. The first line of this poem has the same meaning as the expression "heard it through the grapevine". However, Kaur's essence is there. She is alone, but always speaking through the beauty of nature. She does not need carrier pigeons, but hummingbirds. In real life, hummingbirds are very smart species as their brains allow them to remember the location of every flower they have visited. They generally symbolize happiness and positive energy and could thus be said to be the messengers of Heaven when grief is present.

This search for hints is as common as looking through photos together and as usual as remembering "the last moments of contact, hoping to discover clues to why it had to end" (Anderson 93): "i tried to find it/ but there was no answer/ at the end of the last conversation */-closure*" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 52; emphasis in the original). The title of this poem, "closure" which is given at its very end, is quite ambiguous because "closure" implies multiple connotations. In its wider meaning, the word "closure" can be "the act of closing", as if the relationship would be completely broken down or as if the person that has been abandoned is simply trying to close a cycle. Raw feelings might be perceived in order to build new connections. It

could be said that it is a person becoming that person for the first time; individuation. However, in the field of psychology, its significance has to do with “the tendency to see an entire figure even though the picture of it is incomplete, based primarily on the viewer's past experience” (“Closure”). In addition to this search for hints, the person who is suffering from a loss always tries to relive the memories s/he keeps of the lost person in the finest details. This is a tendency on which Kaur keeps on reflecting on her subsequent poems. In one of them, the lyrical subject wonders: “why is it/ that when the story ends/ we begin to feel all of it” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 54).

In conclusion, as the poems analysed in this subsection have shown, during the withdrawal/ falling stage the individual cries and faces the world as a helpless infant because the former relationships which surrounded her are not there anymore.

### **4.3. Internalizing the Rejection/ Rooting**

Internalizing means “incorporating an emotional experience [...], an insidious process” (Anderson 128). It “is the most critical stage of the abandonment process” (128) because it damages the individual’s self-esteem, and it is the “abandoned” part, who condemns her/himself by wondering what should have been done to prevent that breakup or to avoid making those past mistakes. The rage and frustration towards oneself start, and self-doubt and fear also appear.

At first, the abandonment survivor diminishes her/himself by idealizing the part who has left; something that most friends and family find difficult to understand.

where do we go from here my love  
 when it's over and i'm standing between us  
 whose side do i run to  
 when every nerve in my body is pulsing for you  
 when my mouth waters at the thought 5  
 when you are pulling me in just by standing there  
 how do i turn around and choose myself

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 49)

In this septet, the lyrical subject is projecting her subordinate position, because she is traumatically bonded, and the attachment to him is evident as it is expressed in the following line: “when every nerve in my body is pulsing for you” (line 4). The deviation in syntax is obvious, as in most lines there is a lack of question marks because as has been mentioned in the sections above, Kaur’s collections do not include punctuation marks. However, every line of the poem starts with a question word “where” (line 1), “when” (line 2,4-6), “whose” (line 3), and “how” (line 7). There is an anaphora in which the word “when” is repeated four times (one per line). This anaphora serves the purpose of bringing an artistic touch to the poem by choosing the path of syntax and morphology. The word “when” implies time in its own meaning, and that is what she is asking for. However, the power of syntax allows the reader to understand, that the word “when” in every line does not function as a question mark, but as a declarative statement: “when it’s over and i’m standing between us” (line 2), “when every nerve in my body is pulsing for you” (line 4), “when my mouth waters at the thought” (line 5), “when you are pulling me in just by standing there” (line 6), whereas



the questions are: “where do we go from here my love” (line 1), “whose side do i run to” (line 3), “how do i turn around and choose myself” (line 7).

In the first line of the poem, she is standing between her and her lost partner, because she is astounded by the power of his absence. The lyrical subject feels he is pulling her in “just by standing there” (line 6) because she has placed him on a pedestal. In the third line, there is a direct question. The reader knows who is the addressee as in the first line she has addressed someone as “my love”. There is a metaphor in “when every nerve in my body is pulsing for you” (line 4), since nerves are as uncontrollable as her feelings towards her lost partner. It could be said that this loss leads to an increase of stress hormones and represents what the person experiences subjectively at the biochemical level (Anderson 142). However, the most relevant question is in the last line: “how do i turn around and choose myself”, which is the most difficult one for him to answer. In this stage, the individual feels “powerless, subordinated to the one who has left, and down about yourself” (Anderson 142), so this reduces her sense of confidence.

One of the most important symptoms to be investigated in this internalizing rejection stage is rage, although it is mostly present in the fourth stage, it comes in small doses. In this stage, rage is named victim rage, that is to say, it is the “abandoned” person who becomes the object of her/his own rage. It is a way of frustration towards the self. This aggression can end up in tears and the person will be “making unrealistic emotional demands upon others” (Anderson 145). Victim rage is worth noting as it derives to isolation, which turns out to be the result of this victim rage, and which it is also a piece in the internalizing stage puzzle: “the irony of loneliness/ is we all feel it /

at the same time/*-together*” (emphasis in the original) (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 79). There is a marked distinction between being alone and loneliness. Being alone means that you are physical with yourself. Nonetheless, loneliness is an emotional state of feeling alone even when people are next to you. During the shattering stage being alone was devastating. In the withdrawal stage, “being alone was an unwelcome condition that intensified” (Anderson 146) that grief. While being alone during the internalizing stage pushes that human to see it as evidence of being unworthy of love. As a result, that aloneness transforms into self-deprecation.

Indictment is one of the main characters in this scenario because introspection may become obsessive when internalizing the rejection. These thoughts are conceivably destructive, but they serve a temporary purpose. When a person holds herself guilty, she realises that the power of changing the things which brought that relationship to end is in her. However, this responsibility for the failure “can lead to further self-injury” (Anderson 148) such as constant identity crises, as occurs in the following poem: “yes/ it is possible/ to hate and love someone/ at the same time/ i do it to myself/ every day” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 101). In addition, “the individual who is suffering from abandonment begins to worry about how others see” her (Anderson 148). This problem can be seen in this poem by Kaur:

i wonder if i am  
 beautiful enough for you  
 or if i am beautiful at all  
 i change what i am wearing  
 five times before i see you 5  
 wondering which pair of jeans will make

my body more tempting to undress  
 tell me  
 is there anything i can do  
 to make you think 10  
*her*  
*she is so striking*  
*she makes my body forget it has knees*  
 write it in a letter and address it  
 to all the insecure parts of me 15  
 your voice alone drives me to tears  
 yours telling me i am beautiful  
 yours telling me i am enough

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 40)

This lyrical poem is expressing the lyrical subject's feelings through a dramatic monologue as she is addressing another character at the same diegetic level: "five times before i see you" (line 5). The poem reflects her insecurities and the need for her lover's approval so she can feel beautiful. She wants to know what he does not like about her in order to change it. Her insecurities are so prominent that the lyrical subject ends up transforming them into a person you can send a letter to: "write it in a letter and address it/ to all the insecure parts of me" (lines 14-15). In the last two lines, the reader can find parallelism which connects two ideas—"yours telling me i am beautiful /yours telling me i am enough" (lines 17-18)—to emphasize that she only needs his perception, his approval, his opinion and his voice.

Most of the time, these insecurities are blended with recrimination. Consequently, recrimination brings oneself to make powerful affirmations just to keep her self-esteem afloat. (Anderson 147). Following this statement, in the poem “not your hobby”, the lyrical subject states: “you cannot/ walk in and out of me/ like a revolving door/ i have too many miracles/ happening inside me/ to be your convenient option/ (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 34).

In conclusion, the internalizing stage is the heart of the self-injury course. The most relevant feelings are related to “rejection and anxiety about being alone” (Anderson 170), and the person who experiences these issues, silently judges herself as unlovable or unworthy. Internalizing brings the individual to a place deep within, where she “wrestles the demons of doubt and fear” (Anderson 171). However, in any event, love is the most powerful weapon. An individual cannot control the love of another, but increase one’s capacity for love and its energy will be unintentionally redirected.

#### **4.4. Rage/ Rising**

The fourth stage of the abandonment process is rage, which would share implied meanings with Kaur’s “rising” concept, as it is a stage at which the individual is prepared for new positive prospects but who is previously full of negative feelings. Rage is a refusal, a protest towards the person who has abandoned her/his partner. During this stage, the individual is consumed with negative emotions and angry thoughts, which are ready to explode. At a psychological level, rage represents one of the “body’s self-defence options” since it is “choosing to fight instead of flee or freeze.” (Anderson 177). In fact, a common action in this stage is to reverse “the effects of

rejection” (185) by expelling hurtful feelings. This can be seen in this poem by Kaur, whose title gives off an outraged feeling: “- *i don't need more friends*”

you ask  
 if we can still be friends  
 i explain how a honeybee  
 does not dream of kissing  
 the mouth of a flower 5  
 and then settle for its leaves  
 - *i don't need more friends*”

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 53)

This septet is a dramatic monologue again because the lyrical subject is addressing her lost partner, who is on the same diegetic level. The presence of botanical imagery and the rawness of the poem boosts a bitter-sweet taste. The extended metaphor; “i explain how a honeybee/ does not dream of kissing/ the mouth of a flower/ and then settle for its leaves” (lines 3-6), makes the reader imagine a bee flying over a flower. In this sense, the vocabulary that the author has employed is considerably visual. If there is a break-up, and one of the parties feels the loss as an abandonment, then keeping in touch is not the best way to accept the reality and move on. The entire metaphor is a personification: the lyrical subject is the honeybee, whose desire is to kiss her lost partner in the mouth. The “mouth of a flower” (line 5) represents her lost partner’s lips. She is still in love with him, but she has to “settle for its leaves” (line 6), meaning that she will stand by his side, not under the function of a lover, but of a friend. Nevertheless, the lyrical subject does not support that proposal.

When an individual loves another person and this one leaves, the anger of the abandoned person “is fueled by deep and personal wound” (Anderson 192). Unlike sadness, anger is energizing and “one of the most seductive of the negative emotions” (192). Indeed, Daniel Goleman asserts that “physical threats as well as threats to our self-esteem or dignity —such as being treated unjustly or rudely—can both lead to rage” (Anderson 177).

In this poem, the reader may find this anger:

you call to tell me you miss me  
 i turn to face the front door of the house  
 waiting for a knock  
 days later you call to say you need me  
 but still aren't here 5  
 the dandelions on the lawn  
 are rolling their eyes in disappointment  
 the grass has declared you yesterday's news  
 what do i care  
 if you love me 10  
 or miss me  
 or need me  
 when you aren't doing anything about it  
 if i'm not the love of your life  
 i'll be the greatest loss instead 15

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 48)

Through dramatic monologue, the lyrical subject is reproaching her lost lover for his constant lies. The tone of the poem is much more bitter than the one used in the previous poem. Negative connotations of words are conveyed through the use of its lexicon “to face” (line 2), “disappointment” (line 7), “greatest loss” (15) and poetic devices such as the personification used in the 6th and 7th lines “the dandelions on the lawn/ are rolling their eyes in disappointment.” The lyrical subject has filled the dandelions with her emotions as she also feels disillusioned with him. However, the lyrical subject feels protected by nature as if it was her platoon, and botanical lexicon; the author's weapon: “the grass has declared you yesterday’s news” (line 8). In the last two lines, the lyrical subject makes a strong statement through dramatic monologue technique: “if i’m not the love of your life/ i’ll be the greatest loss instead” (lines 14-15). Daniel Goleman asserts that “physical threats as well as threats to our self-esteem or dignity —such as being treated unjustly or rudely—can both lead to rage” (Anderson 177).

On top of that, at this point, the lyrical subject is facing facts through acceptance in an unexpected and radical manner. The duty of acceptance is to stimulate one’s energy and enhance that “capacity for life and love in the moment” (Anderson 190), this can be proved in this poem: “if i am the longest relationship/ of my life/ isn’t it time to/ nurture intimacy/ and love/ with the person/ i lie in bed with each night/ - *acceptance*” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 108; emphasis in the original). Accepting all those conflicting emotions and situations will make the individual grow on her own: “when i

hit the rock bottom/ that exists after the rock bottom /and no rope or hand appeared/ i wondered/ what if nothing wants me/ because i do not want me/ - *i am both the poison and the antidote*" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 104), by realising that the answer has always been inside her, she just needs her own approval, not anyone else's.

To sum up, in the rage stage, the individual confronts this stage of trauma by acting without thinking. As the lyrical subject of Kaur's poems in the chapter "Rising" the person uses anger as a form of justification for her behaviour. However, constructive anger does not perpetuate pain as it leads to personal growth instead of provoking a negative effect in individuals lives. The lyrical subject is open to self-criticism now. For these factors, it is the energy a human needs in order to rebuild herself and her relationships.

#### **4.5. Lifting/Blooming**

*Blooming* is the last and the most beautiful step of a flower, and *lifting* is the hardest, but the most desired stage to achieve in the abandonment or loss process. Once a human has "lifted above the turbulence of rage" (Anderson 224), and the outer child defences have been weakened, that person can defend herself. This stage is summarised in this poem: "like the rainbow/after the rain/ joy will reveal itself/ after sorrow (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 89). The rainbow is the joy she was looking for during the process of her trauma. However, as it is explicitly described in this poem, rain and sorrow were necessary in order for the rainbow, i.e. the flower and thus the self, to bloom and feel joy again. For this reason, when an individual feels sadness or grief, she must feel the whole emotion even if it hurts, and then, accept it. To put it in Kaur's words, "let it go/ let it leave/ let it happen/ nothing/in this world/ was promised or/ belonged to you



anyway/ - *all you own is yourself*” (emphasis in the original) (*The Sun and Her Flowers* 99; emphasis in the original)

According to Anderson, lifting “is a time of hope” and life in all its fullness starts to distract that person from her sense of personal injury and loss. In the next narrative poem, the lyrical subject tells a story in which both, the moon and the sun, take part so that Kaur’s essence is not abandoned. This poem has been labelled as *-time* (emphasis in the original), which is the key to success.

*rise*

said the moon

and the new day came

*the show must go on*<sup>7</sup> said the sun

life does not stop for anybody 5

it drags you by the legs

whether you want to move forward or not

that is the gift

life will force you to forget how you long for them

your skin will shed till there is not 10

a single part of you left they’ve touched

your eyes finally just your eyes

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<sup>7</sup> This is a common business expression. However, it should be worth noting that the intertextuality of Queen’s song: *Show Must Go On* has been decoded. *Show* is a representation of life in general, and this song was written for those heroes who had to be strong and move on, despite the obstacles.

not the eyes which held them  
 you will make it to the end  
 of what is only the beginning 15  
 go on  
 open the door to the rest of it  
 - *time*

(Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 55)

These lines, “life does not stop for anybody/ it drags you by the legs/ whether you want to move forward or not” (lines 5-7), are a summary of the three first stages of a person who undergoes the trauma of abandonment and loss. Then, that person leads to the rage stage, where she finally accepts and faces reality: “your eyes finally just your eyes/ not the eyes which held them/ you will make it to the end” (12-14). This end is the lifting stage: “what is only the beginning” (line 15) of a new life, doors close, but others open. This is not the end of love, but the end of a relationship. She will find love in every corner, starting with herself.

For some people, traumatic experiences from their past “have created automatic responses to signs of emotional danger” (Anderson 257). There will be moments in which the person feels guilty or apprehensive, as is the case of the lyrical subject when she is having a conversation with her new partner: “i feel apprehensive/ cause falling into you/ means falling out of him and/ i had not prepared for that/ - *forward*” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 157; emphasis in the original). However, the deepest realization that takes place during this lifting stage is the moment when the individual becomes aware that s/he will be able to love again as one of Kaur’s poems clearly states: “never feel guilty for starting again,” (*The Sun and Her Flowers* 160). Illusions

with a new love can flourish, due to the experience of the individual's deep personal change. For this reason, the most important part of the learning is "not [to] lose touch with the emotional wisdom gained" (Anderson 232): "when you are/ full/ and i am/ full/ we are two suns" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 183). There are those who will choose to stay on their own as they truly enjoy their "newfound emotional independence" (Anderson 245), because they have discovered a lot of advantages in being single, there are others, however, that may prefer to sail through life by complementing each other, without being emotionally dependent.

In conclusion, lifting implies relief from grief and insecurity. The lesson that has been taught during the whole abandonment process is gold in emotional wisdom, so this is a time to honour the individual's feelings. To put it in Anderson's words, it is the moment to keep that energy and transform it into "lifelong personal growth and connection" (273).

## **5. Conclusion**

This dissertation has considered five stages in which trauma of abandonment and loss has been claimed to benefit the understanding of a psychological process from start to end. In each phase, it has been found that the understanding of the process was dependent on the person who has been abandoned. Nevertheless, it has been proven that every person, who faces this traumatic process and feels the fleeing of her/his loved one as a significant loss, experiences the same feelings. The claim that poetry is an effective method for the improvement of the expression of bottled up feelings inside and, thereby, for the overcoming of psychological trauma, is based on Rupi Kaur's affirmation on using poetry not as an assumption, but as a fact. With this in mind, this

claim can be observed in the analysis of Kaur's poetry, which has shown a gradual change that resided, from the beginning, in the author's persona, and which has been compared and made clear with a considerable number of strong statements of Susan Anderson's theory, and the symptoms found in the book can also be successfully found in the poems. In addition, Rupi Kaur's poems were criticized because they appeared to alienate themselves from traditional forms of poetry. Rather than a critic, this deviation has served to show that the stylistic forms of her poetry have highlighted the feelings of each statement of Anderson's stage theory. Those random thoughts on blank paper (mentioned in section 3) have really helped to study the most sincere expression of her feelings. This study has demonstrated that Rupi Kaur has achieved her aim of inserting equality in her poetry and within the world by reflecting the suffering of abandonment survivors in this traumatic process. Furthermore, the author has also gone through the same stages as individuals who face this duel and has given them a message of hope. Lastly, further research suggests that the feelings of abandonment are existing symptoms of depression or anxiety which as with PTSD, the appearance of a personal emotional response to past wounds appears and it requires an adaptive internal process. It is a giant aggressive mental battle because there are those who likely relate their feelings to distressing events they have not overcome yet, so this procedure may devote more time as anguishing over a love loss uncovers a preeminent wound from the past. However, if there are existing symptoms of depression or anxiety, it may lead to drastic consequences.

Although this dissertation has argued that poetry is an effective method for the improvement of the expression of bottled up feelings inside and, thereby, for the overcoming of psychological trauma, this traumatic process of course should be

followed up with a mental health-care specialist. However, poetry is an effective method that turns out to be a great help when combining therapy, especially at times of tension or solitude, in which the individual is suffering greatly. As words are blown with the wind, revealing some of the fears and expressing emotions on paper, will lead to release and overcoming trauma much quicker than expected. In the traumatic suffering of loss, the outer child needs to be deconstructed. At that point, the solution to true recovery is in him. For this reason, Rupi Kaur states that “to heal/ you have to/ get to the root/ of the wound/ and kiss it all the way up (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 235) because “you do not just wake up and become the butterfly/ - growth is a process” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 87). For those suffering from a loss, it would be worth mentioning that the achievement of self-love and acceptance is the best part of the process and once you have reached it, “there is /nothing left/ to worry about/ [because] the sun and her flowers” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers* 248) will be there.

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