

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Self-Publishing Phenomenon and Poetry in the 21st Century: Rupi Kaur

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation will explore the great impact that technology has had on many aspects of daily life and, more specifically, the influence and importance that it has had over literature in recent years. Firstly, these important technological advances have dovetailed into new ways of writing and reading literature. There has been an ever-increasing development in the way of reading and searching for information, from the traditional method, characterized by concrete traditional printed sources, to the electronic one (i.e. electronic book devices), with which we are already living. Secondly, technology has not only influenced reading habits, but also the way in which these books come to light as a result of a new phenomenon known as 'self-publishing.' The analysis of this new phenomenon will reveal the advantages and disadvantages that it poses. This dissertation will also focus on Indian-Canadian poet Rupī Kaur, who decided to resort to the self-publishing phenomenon in order to launch onto the market her first collection of poetry *Milk and Honey*. It will tackle the importance that social networks have over poetry nowadays, thus building a bridge and a strong link between poetry and social networks. This dissertation will study her peculiar style of writing poetry, mainly as a means to denounce and protest against certain social issues. In order to carry out this analysis, support my arguments and strengthen my conclusions I will rely on a number of articles, books and websites on the influence of Internet on literature, self-publishing and Rupī Kaur in order to analyse this subversive and most influential collection of poetry, and show it as a wonderful illustration of this new cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: Self-Publishing, Rupī Kaur, micro-poetry, *Milk and Honey*.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the Internet has undergone a big change: from a revolutionary invention that was first used as a network to transport a few bytes or exchange messages between two terminals to a system that we now constantly use in order to upload and download never-ending amounts of information. The arrival of the so-called Web 2.0 in the first decade of the XXI century inaugurated a new era in the Internet that led to the birth and establishment of social networks and other interactive communication tools. Ours is a networked and globalized society. Important social and technological changes prompted the transition from an industrial era to one ruled by networks and the new technologies, which keep on gaining ground and changing our habits and communication possibilities, especially among young people. With the Internet communication has no boundaries; traditional time and space barriers have somehow disappeared. Now we are all potential participants, endowed with the power to create and comment on existing contents. Some people have even begun to speak of the democratization of communication thanks to the impact of all of these social tools (*Openmind*). Not only has the Internet introduced modifications in social relationships, but also in the academic field, in particular with the appearance of a new way of reading and searching for information, that is, a new type of library: an electronic library which covers a wide range of texts, collections, and books. The Internet provides immediate and easy access to information which is only available there, or can be found much quicker there than in conventional libraries (Browner, Pulsford, and Sears, 2000: 2).

Browner et al. speak about both positive and negative effects regarding the Internet library. Although there is a great number of literary works that appear in print before their publication on the virtual world (2000: 23), the Internet provides sources, such as electronic journals or even poetry, that can only be found there, that is, in electronic form, and this because the Internet is an available place for publishing all kinds of works, which thus enables people whose work would by no means have been published years ago to pave their way on the net. As Browner et al. state, “most academic publishers now use the Internet to promote and sell their books”; people who are interested in a book can see and read a few chapters before actually getting it in print or electronic form. It is clear that the Internet is changing the way to publish and advertise texts, which can highly benefit sales and dodge the foreseen collapse of publishing (163). However, they also assert that the Internet library does not cover all

the literary areas that appealing, good and well-stocked traditional libraries can facilitate (5).

The swift diffusion of online resources and digital libraries indicates such a significant impact on Internet users that nowadays it is difficult to find young people who cling to the traditional method of looking for traditional print sources, given that, as Warschauer and Kern assert (2000: 175), an increasing amount of information is already available on line. Another important issue worth studying and taking into consideration, these critics go on to argue, is to find out to what extent some users prefer one or the other method (2000: 175). As Wu maintains, “technology and its advantages—convenience, cost, timeliness—present an appealing future” (2005: 234). This affirmation testifies to the more and more frequent use of electronic sources nowadays, which will in turn play an important role in the academic field.

Internet is lot more than an information tool; it has become one of the main means to enhance literary production and debates. Not in vain is the estimated number of worldwide users of the Internet growing at a high rate in the so-called developing countries (Glave 1998). As recent research has shown, more and more average citizens can obtain ever-increasing amounts of information accessible on line, which in turn means that being able to find, control and evaluate this information is quintessential to acquire digital literacy proficiency. Searching for useful information on the Internet implies knowing how to explore it efficiently and, secondly, being able to skim and scan the information found so as to decide if it is trustworthy and answers the questions posed. Looking for information on the Internet in this way undoubtedly enhances critical literacy (Warschauer and Kern 2000: 175). Given the fact that many young users are developing a clear preference to use and look for electronic information, these competences should be fostered and enhanced, so that this can result in future advantages for research (Wu 2005: 247). Taking into account the accessibility and speed that characterize electronic sources, Tenopir et. al (2003) remark that computer network and its diffusion have managed to enable interactive education and access to the information without borders. In other words, anyone can reach experts and resources from the entire world (2003: 16). For his part, Lenares, in a study carried out in a metropolitan university, concludes that accessibility, receptiveness, timeliness and, above all, the ability to search, are crucial factors to favour the election of electronic sources (1999: 3). In addition, Dilevko and Gottlieb discovered that undergraduate

students prefer electronic resources to printed ones when they want to copy quotations or significant information directly into their essays through cutting and pasting (2002: 386). The Pew Internet and American Life Studies proclaimed that the online version is an easier and more suitable method, which saves both time and effort and is accessible 24 hours a day (in Tenopir, 2003: 16). Furthermore, many scholars claim that, although the information found on the Internet may sometimes be doubtful, it is nonetheless more up-to-date than that found in most library materials because, as Wu explains, “the online citators are updated daily, and all information is incorporated into a single display” (2005: 248). Surfers also declare that the Internet covers a massive variety of themes, while the print format (i.e. books) usually focuses on specific issues. Moreover, students often claim that faster access, together with the wide range of information provided, have improved their academic careers since “the print version often necessitates consulting three or more different books or supplements and is still weeks if not months out of date” (248).

Browner et al. (2000: 174) enumerate a number of differences between texts in books and in electronic form. The first difference is that Internet texts are easier to search, and that there are many more materials on line than in a physical library. Secondly, many electronic texts are interconnected via hypertexts or links, which allows users to move directly and immediately from one text to the other, thus finding additional materials easily, and in such a fast and easy way that traditional texts are often discarded. García Landa (2006: 3) uses the term ‘linkterature’ to refer to these connections and the new kind of literature that is emerging. The third difference is that electronic texts are collectible, since the majority of files can be downloaded as a text file or a source file; and they are also reproducible either electronically or in print, depending on the needs of the user. Last but not least, their easy accessibility (now writers are able to self-publish their own creations without worrying about their trade, distribution, physical appearance, and other elements with which traditional publishing must necessarily deal), also allows readers to have infinite access to new materials (Browner et al. 2000: 170). In short, the net and the new technologies are challenging, not only the way in which authors publish their texts, but also the very reading experience.

There are different opinions about the effects that the Internet might have on literature in the future. It has even been thought that the former implies the death of the

latter, whereas some other critics have reached the opposite conclusion. As Browner et al. claim, the Internet might mean “the death of the author” or, on the contrary, “a new kind of life” (2000: 170). For his part, Nicholas Negropone asserts that the use of the new technologies is a generational, rather than socio-economic, question. He consequently claims that, nowadays, writing a book is rather absurd, since reading print books is not going to last long. On the other hand, Eco asserts that, thanks to their omnipresence, books will never die. He believes that the book is the main literature vehicle, whereas the electronic version is mostly preferred when dealing with reference works. However, he also claims that, providing that the functions and uses of the traditional book and the electronic one are respectively strengthened, they can coexist without one prompting the disappearance of the other (in Bou, 1997: 163-64).

As regards the changes that this electronic era is enforcing, Bou (1997) argues that three literary communicative aspects are suffering modifications due to the rapid growth of the Internet: the author-reader relationship, changes in text codes, and their diffusion. He distinguishes four different periods, depending on the communication means used to achieve literary communication: oral, handwritten, printed, and now digital literature. As far as the first two are concerned, the figure of the author is almost irrelevant; with the advent of the printing press the author acquires a strong position, and by extension the notions of individualism and nationalism. Finally, in the digital era readers/ surfers are able to contact the author by sending her/him an e-mail, which means that the relationship writer-reader is much more direct, notwithstanding the fact that the author might lose some rights sometimes (1997: 165-66).

According to García Landa (2006), the essence of literature will be reconstructed in three basic aspects:

- 1) *Mimetic*: The world is changed by the web, and literature will reflect those changes.
- 2) *Mediatic*: The very basis of literature, that is, the text, is significantly altered by digitization and the web. The text is something that has to be produced, and the economics of text production are changing significantly. Therefore, the new regime of production will necessarily have some economic influence on literature.
- 3) *Poetic*: If literature is a mode of discourse in which the form of what is said is especially relevant to the content of what is said, so much so that form and content often become one, then the transformation of the medium will necessarily entail some radical transformation of the meaning of literature. (2006: 8)

2. Self-Publishing

No invention previous to that of the printing press has had in the publishing field a disruptive effect similar to that caused by the contemporary self-publishing phenomenon. For the first time in the history of written communication, the manuscripts' dissemination does not depend on the will of an external agent –be it a patron, a printer or a printing press, but rather on the ability and determination of the author herself/himself to provide the reading public with the product of her/his own creativity and discipline (Cordón, 2016: 278). This profound transformation allows for a more democratic literature, characterized by the possibility that all the participants in the communication system should have their say by means of establishing conversations between authors and readers, editors and authors, social networks or blogs. As can be seen in the following table, the digital method only relies on two essential elements, the author and the reader; the agent and the editor therefore become optional in the process of publishing a book. On the other hand, the traditional method requires the participation of more elements, indispensable to make it possible (Alonso, Cordón, and Gomez, 2014: 127).

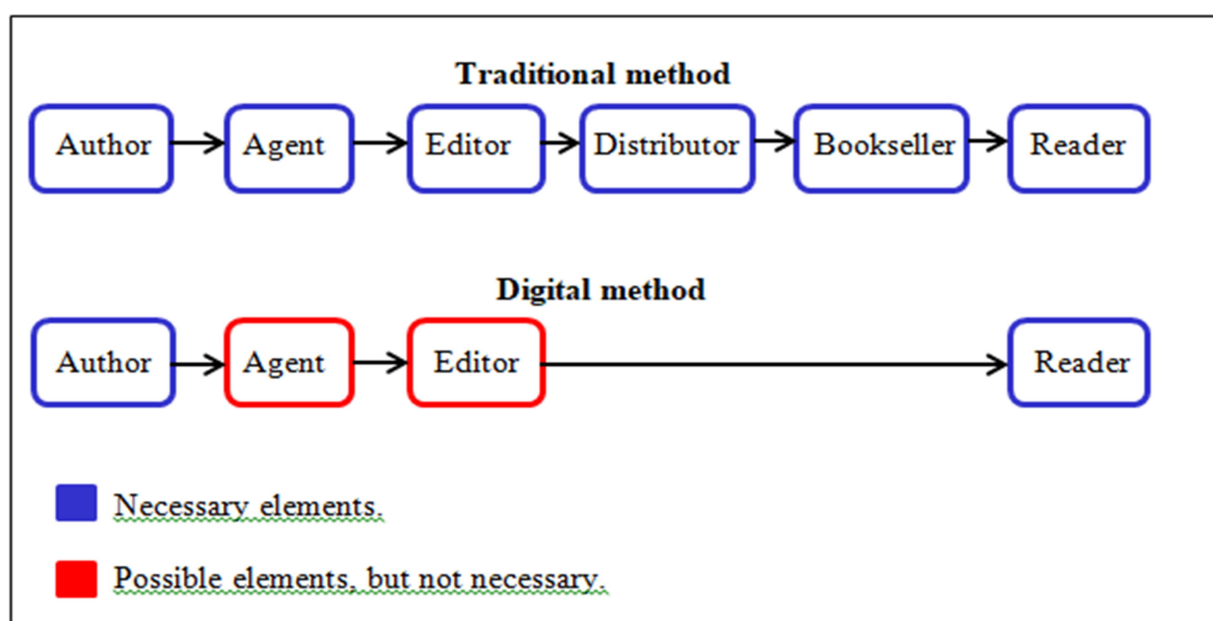


Table 1. Chain of publication (2014: 129)

It must be noted that there are other terms, to a greater or lesser extent used to refer to this new publishing sector: ‘self-editing’, ‘self-publishing’, ‘editing on behalf of the author’, ‘indie editing’, ‘alternative editing’, and ‘handmade editing’, among others. The main terminological problem comes with the words ‘self-editing’ and ‘self-publishing’, and the same is true of ‘editing’ and ‘publishing’, usually regarded as

synonyms although they actually refer to completely different processes (Cordón 2016: 279). On the one hand, the term ‘edition’ can have several meanings. Firstly, it is understood as a set of operations and steps taken before any document is actually printed out; secondly, it refers to the printout or intention of printing a work; and finally, it makes reference to the whole number of copies of a work printed in one edition. On the other hand, ‘publication’ involves the act of revealing, manifesting or disseminating something to the public. This process can be accomplished, either with the help of a publishing company, which is known as ‘self-editing’, or without the intervention of any, which is called ‘self-publishing’. As Eguaras claims (2013), editing and publishing do not mean the same, and neither do self-editing and self-publishing. On the one hand, ‘self-editing’ is the process whereby authors use the broad and variegated computer systems of an editor on their own work. On the other hand, ‘self-publishing’ could be defined as the publication of any book or multimedia resource by the author of the work, in other words, the author is responsible for the whole process, including the specific tasks of the editor, such as the design and layout of the manuscript, the use of certain technical knowledge for its subsequent printing or digital distribution, and the final promotion and marketing activities. Authors can work on the process by themselves or else subcontract part of the process to companies that can offer these services. She claims that authors cannot self-edit their own writings due to the fact that they cannot carry out the specific activities of an editor, nor evaluate themselves, that is: they cannot know it for sure if the story manages to catch the readers’ attention from the very beginning to the end; if the characters look real and undergo believable developments throughout the story; if the ideas are clearly and logically conveyed through the use of suitable terms and, as a consequence, if the text is structurally, lexically, grammatically and syntactically well-written, and thus complies with the norms of cohesion and coherence. They cannot do it on account of the difficulties that evaluating one’s own work in an objective manner inevitably implies (Eguaras, 2013). According to Cahier and Sutton (in Cordón, 2016: 279), self-publishing mainly points to the availability of a text to a big number of readers, whereas self-editing refers to the process whereby the author introduces editorial quality control elements. Taking into account all of this, we could define the phenomenon of self-publishing as the publication of any text or multimedia file by the very author of the work, without the intervention of any external editor, in other words, the author is responsible for carrying out the whole process, which includes his/her own creative work, the design, the cover

and content, the format (digital or printed), the price, and the distribution, marketing and public relations. Although Furtado (in Cordon, 2016: 80) claims that self-publishing is a practice as old as printing, it has only been recently that this concept has become stronger and more well-known, mainly thanks to the birth of new technologies and resources that show how to make the most of this contemporary phenomenon. In keeping with this, it is possible to distinguish three great categories of self-publishing, in accordance with the processes used and their level of originality: classic, electronic and derivative self-publishing.

1) Classic self-publishing

This type of self-publishing is linked with the traditional model, and is based on the direct relationship between author and printer or editor. It could also be regarded as the model of vanity publishers. In the past, authors who were discarded by editors looked for other means to publish their own books, such as vanity publishing. But, what is the function of vanity publishers? They make sure that the author's manuscript is printed, and print a certain number of copies of the book, but without seeing to the marketing and distributing process. Their main task is not to make profit by selling copies of the book, because the author paid them to do that in advance. Vanity publishers do not keep contacts with bookshops and, in some cases, they can do a bad service to authors, as the latter can end up with a large number of books they cannot sell. This practice is as old as the world, but can provoke some kind of rejection on the part of readers when books are not properly produced and edited. As regards the author-editor relationship, the editor does not practise as such, but rather works as a facilitator of the publishing process, providing an ISBN and certain visibility although, in many cases, for this type of collections, white editorial marks are used.

2) Electronic self-publishing

This is the one that allows for the publication of a text through any means or resources existing on the net. This innovative category is the most important phenomenon in the editorial field over the last years, since, unlike in the traditional method, authors can have much more freedom, autonomy, and visibility. According to Cahier and Sutton, this category can in turn be divided into two groups: direct or derivative self-publishing (in Cordon, 2016: 280-82).

➤ Direct self-publishing

This type of self-publishing comprises sites dedicated to authors in which it is possible to bring to light all kinds of creations without any other intervention than that stipulated both by the network and the place where the creations are finally inserted. Moreover, these sites include a combination of intertextual and intratextual features that make it possible to reproduce texts in an exponential way, without the help of any kind of mediation. Some interesting sites with these innovative features are blogs, personal websites or wikis, that is, websites on which the users have the possibility to modify or create content from the web browser. Hereinafter, the term ‘blogger’ became more and more widely used, until it acquired the popularity it enjoys at present.

➤ Derivative self-publishing

Its main function is to allow anyone who wishes to publish her/his own work to use the resources provided by the network, including the editorial resources whose principal aim is the creation of new works. For instance, *Wikipedia* has the option ‘create a book’ with which it is possible to order a copy of the book or to obtain it in different formats, such as PDF or ODF. Another popular site that is emerging in the field of self-publishing is *Amazon*, which provides the option ‘Independently Publish with Us’ or ‘Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP)’, a tool that allows anyone to publish their own works in two versions, either Kindle eBooks, that is, electronic format, or paperbacks, for free. In this way, anyone can make her or his own creations public in a free, clear and easy way, and there is no need to convince anyone that your book deserves to be published. Furthermore, there are also specific applications for the creation of books, such as *GrabMyBooks*, a service of conversion from web pages to epub format characterized by adopting the form of a book.

Self-publishing offers significant and evident advantages for authors, but it also has certain disadvantages. According to Alonso et al. (2014: 134), one of the advantages that the author of a work has when self-publishing a book is the control that s/he can have over both content and design; content, marketing and commercialization of the product are the sole responsibility of the author. In addition, they can also control the prices of their books, increasing or reducing them according to their own judgement, and can visualize the results of sales in real time, thus checking the result of their marketing campaigns. Moreover, unlike the traditional method of editing, which could last for months, self-publishing means that a book can be immediately revised, changed

and actualized thanks to online platforms. It also implies a change in terms of income, because self-publishing profits exceed in 40% those of the traditional method, that is, authors make bigger profits. Whereas in the traditional method the publication of a book could take months, an electronic book can come out in a couple of weeks, even hours. Just as the time of commercialization is reduced, the distribution of these products is also fostered, as self-publishing allows for worldwide distribution. Finally, one of the most important improvements regarding the relationship author-reader is that they are able to maintain a direct and close connection from the very first moment. Cahier and Sutton (in Córdón, 2016: 282) talk about the emergence of the figure of the enterprising author, that is, one that is not passive any more, but who plays an active and dynamic role as s/he is responsible for creating, editing, diffusing, selling and promoting her/his own works by making use of the digital resources. The main aim of these authors is to take advantage of each possibility and means available to them so that they can make their creations visible and thus reach the widest possible public. As is well known, at present social networks are quintessential as regards commercialization and advertising. As for the disadvantages involved in publishing a book, the one that most affects authors is their responsibility for covering all publication expenses, such as editing, design and production. Editing a book implies that authors should be able to revise and correct their own work, although they can always hire a professional company to carry out the editing activities and make sure that the book has a better edition. Finally, prestige also matters: a conventional publishing house with a certain reputation can grant the book a distinctive identity that an author cannot have at the very beginning of her/his career (Alonso et al. 2014: 135).

In spite of the emergence of this new phenomenon, there is no confrontation between these two ways of publishing, as they often complement each other. And, in any case, electronic self-publishing allows authors to bring their writings to the surface, thus escaping the control of conventional publishing houses, which often condemned many unknown writings to absolute invisibility (Córdón 2016: 282). The Internet is playing an important role in promoting literature and, in particular, poetry. Years ago, bringing together poetry and technology was simply impossible. Nowadays, however, the link between both of them is undeniable; among other things, the ever-increasing use of social networks gives access to poetry with special characteristics, such as Rupi Kaur's micro poetry, which the next section of this dissertation will try to analyze.

3. Rupi Kaur

Rupi Kaur is a twenty-five-year-old poet, performer and illustrator. She was born in Punjab (India) in 1992 and belongs to a family that practises Sikhism, a monotheistic religion that plays an important role in Kaur's life and writings. At the age of four she emigrated to Canada with her parents, and it was there that she actually learnt English, whose influence on her writing style will soon be discussed. Encouraged by her mother, she soon began to be interested in art; she started drawing and painting at the age of five, and also became interested in writing as a means of self-expression at school, when she was exposed to great influential poets, such as Virginia Woolf or Anais Ning. In an interview, Kaur describes her reaction to these marvellous authors' writings as follows:

I was astounded by the way they were able to put all my intricate feelings into simple words. I was completely transfixed about how heavily their poetry moved me. That form of expression, the ability to knock the breath out of someone's stomach with a sentence, to me that was power. ("Milk & Honey: A Poet Exposes Her Heart")

However, it was not until she reached high school that she started to pair her drawings with her writings. As she confessed in "Rupi Kaur on Love and Pain": "The reason I bought the illustrations in was because I thought that I cheated on my life first love" (Howes 2018). She got a degree in Rhetoric and Professional Writing at the University of Waterloo (Ontario), which undoubtedly helped her to develop her love for writing and to recite her own work on stage. She started posting her work on blogs in 2011 under a pseudonym, until in 2013 she plucked up enough courage to use her own name on the blogging site Tumblr. She stopped drawing for a while, and in 2014 she decided to bring it back, mixing simple line illustrations with her poetry and sharing it with a large audience on Instagram in an interactive and immediate way ("faq," *rupikaur*).

Rupi Kaur is usually associated with self-publishing as she resorted to this phenomenon in 2014, when her first collection of poetry, *Milk and Honey*, came out. Since then, she has become a #1 New York Times bestselling author and illustrator, selling millions of copies over the last years and getting her book translated into many languages. After several unsuccessful attempts at publishing individual pieces in different literary media, such as magazines, journals or anthologies, she decided to sign up for a 'createspace' account in Amazon in order to self-publish her collection of

poetry. She felt that she was being true to her work without picking and choosing individual pieces, which literally destroyed the unity that all the poems have when being kept together. Using the Amazon platform gave her total control over her work: she designed the cover, the size, the font, the colours and the arrangement of the poems. She describes this process as being easy and fast. It only took her a week to have her collection “submitted. ordered. approved. put it out online.” (“faq,” *rupikaur*). It was only four or five months after her self-publication that the publishing house Andrews McMeel Publishing contacted her because they wanted to print her book, which finally came out in 2015.

After the tremendous success of her first poetry collection, she felt the need to have a break, as she was unable to create on account of the excessive pressure she was suffering to publish another book. In her interview with Lewis Howes, titled “Rupi Kaur on Love and Pain”, she compares the way she felt with a train that does not want to stop but at the same time feels the compulsive need to run fast. Such was the pressure to equal and even surpass the impact that *Milk and Honey* had had. It was in 2017 that she released a second collection of poetry, titled *The Sun and her Flowers*. However, as was said before, this dissertation will exclusively focus on the analysis of several aspects of *Milk and Honey*. But, before doing that, something must be said about the origins of micro poetry, a literary genre which is becoming more and more popular these days, mainly thanks to social networks.

3.1 Micro poetry

Micro poetry is a highly powerful and unconventional art form, through which it is possible to transmit a lot of emotions, thoughts and imagery with only very few lines. However, this does not mean that micro poetry is a brand new literary genre. What is the origin of micro poetry, then? This literary form was already used by the ancient Greeks. The Greek poet Sappho, for example, wrote short lyric poems such as “Tonight I’ve Watched” (*Poemhunter*):

The moon and then
the Pleiades
go down

The night is now
half-gone; youth
goes; I am

in bed alone

Another distinctive form of micro poetry is the Haiku, a very short Japanese poem that consists of three lines with 5, 7 and 5 syllables, respectively. As can be seen in “Examples Of Haiku Poems”, Matsuo Batsho is considered to be one of the masters in the writing of haikus such as this (*YourDictionary*):

An old silent pond
a frog jumps into the pond,
splash! Silence again.

Another genre that could be labelled as micro writing are proverbs, which date back to the X century BC, when Solomon was the king of Jerusalem and the book of Proverbs was written (“Introduction to the Book of Proverbs”). Since then, proverbs have been popular in all cultures, mainly on account of their oral diffusion for centuries. As is well known, a proverb is “a short, well-known pithy saying, stating a general truth or piece of advice” (*English Dictionary, Thesaurus, & Grammar Help*). “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” could be a good example of this.

Later on, in the XIX century there were also writers endowed with the gift to write micro poetry. To give but one example, American poet Emily Dickinson wrote numerous poems like this, such as “To make a prairie” (Dickinson and Johnson 1990: 710):

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
one clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
if bees are few.

In the early XX century, in particular between 1910 and 1920, Imagism emerged in England and America as a reaction against the sentimentalism and sensibility that characterized the Romantic and Victorian eras. This poetic movement focused on simplicity, clarity of expression and accuracy through the use of visual images. It comprises well-known prestigious poets such as William Carlos Williams and James Joyce, who got their inspiration from previous writers and introduced similar elements in their poems (“A Brief Guide to Imagism”). However, its main representative and the figure who is considered to be the founder of this movement is American poet Ezra Pound. “In a Station of the Metro” (*poets.org*) is one of his most famous Imagist poems:

The apparition of these faces I the crowd;

petals on a wet, black bough.

Moreover, in the 1920s the Harlem Renaissance blossomed within the Afro-American community in the United States. Its members also used elements characteristic of micro poetry in order to tackle a variety of subjects and forms. They strove to break free of many Victorian ideas and clichés, so present in the white society of the time, and which fostered racist ideas against black people. A distinguished and significant figure in this movement is Claude McKay, a Jamaican writer and poet who fought against segregation as shown in his poem “Polarity” (*Poemhunter*):

Nay, why reproach each other, be unkind,
For there's no plane on which we two may meet?
Let's both forgive, forget, for both were blind,
And life is of a day, and time is fleet.

And I am fire, swift to flame and burn,
Melting with elements high overhead,
While you are water in an earthly urn,
All pure, but heavy, and of hue like lead.

With the rapid growth of social networks in the XXI century, a group of poets called ‘Instapoets’ (the name made reference to the well-known Instagram social network) emerged. They basically aim at giving poetry the importance it deserves, thus preventing it from falling into oblivion at a time when this genre seems to be literally dying away. In addition, the term micro poetry also alludes to the limited number of words that these poems can contain. In these poems simplicity and precision are a must; they make use of an easily accessible style of language, which can be understood by a wide readership, immediately and free of charge. This poetry is therefore ideal for sharing it in social media, as it conveys a profound message by using only a few words, while evincing how deeply literature has been affected by the shift from a print-based to an electronic-based model. Some well-known Instapoets are Nayyirah Waheed, Warsan Shire and, of course, Rupi Kaur. They speak in favour of the democratization of literature thanks to virtual space, and encourage any person who has the desire to write and publish to do so without any filter, without submitting it to any editorial or reading committees, thus favouring closer contact between author and readers and, by extension, equal gender diffusion. This type of poetry usually deals with issues related to self-love, one of the main characteristics of the third feminist wave of the XXI century, as portrayed in this poem by Nayyirah Waheed (Waheed, 2013: 221):

‘i love myself.’
the
quietest.
Simplest.
most
powerful.
revolution.
ever.

— ism

Topics such as self-love and acceptance are also present in Rupi Kaur’s *Milk and Honey*, as will be shown in the final section of this dissertation.

3.2 Analysis of *Milk and Honey*

Milk and Honey is a collection of lyrical poems divided into four sections which make reference to different emotional stages: hurting, loving, breaking and healing. Although each poem has its own meaning, all together create “a comprehensive and all-encompassing account of the human experience” (Varzi, 2017: 20). As regards the title, *Milk and Honey*, Kaur chose it on account of the connotations that these words have for her. Milk and honey remind her of the time when her parents took care of her and recommended her mixing milk with honey when she got sick. In this context, then, both milk and honey are central symbols used to heal, just like her poetry. Moreover, the title refers to a poem she wrote about the 1984 genocide of Sikhs in India, also known as the 1984 anti-Sikh riots or the 1984 Sikh Massacre. The poem deals with the rough times the people of her community had to face, especially women, who had to endure the murder of their whole families and the trauma of being raped and tortured. She writes that those women came out “of that terror as smooth as milk and as thick as honey” (“faq,” *rupikaur*). Kaur did not want the words of that poem to be forgotten. This was one of the reasons why she chose this title for her first poetry collection.

In the following sections, this dissertation will examine form and content as reflected in *Milk and Honey*, a collection in which one of Kaur’s main contentions was to question socially constructed ideas on women’s body and stories, as well as do away with female sexuality and biology taboos, still present in nowadays society.

Kaur combines different language registers in order to question literary conventions. Throughout the whole collection, it is possible to observe a wide variety of

texts taking the form of prose, dialogue, free verse or lists, intermingled with visual elements and drawings. In spite of using so many different modes, Kaur's poems are characterized by their minimalist, simplistic, concise and expressive style which, contrary to what some critics have said, namely, that this minimalism testifies to her lack of experience and practice, clearly contributes to reinforcing Kaur's main arguments. As Varzi asserts (2017: 16), "there is an element of truth to the fact that Kaur's poetry is not quite as rich as that of some of her predecessors", but it is that rawness and those basic sentences that make her work so powerful, subversive and cheered by millions of followers. Her poetry particularly appeals to young women who listen for the first time to their own fears, traumas, insecurities, joys or ideals, that is, feelings which they are unable to express with clarity and simplicity. Simple and brief poems like the following ones make her work especially powerful (2015: 156, 180, 186):

i have
what i have
and i am happy

how you love yourself is
how you teach others
to love you

i've lost
what i've lost
and i am
still
happy

if you were born with
the weakness to fall
you were born with
the strength to rise

-outlook

Another feature that deserves being mentioned in Kaur's work is her exclusive use of lowercase letters and periods, with a view to deconstruct language conventions. Once again, Kaur introduces elements that make her work astonishingly groundbreaking as far as aesthetics is concerned. This is how she explains her preference ("faq," *rupikaur*):

although i can read and understand my mother tongue (punjabi) i do not have the skillset to write poetry in it. to write punjabi means to use gurmukhi script. and within this script there are no uppercase or lowercase letters. all letters are treated the same. i enjoy how simple that is. how symmetrical and how absolutely straightforward. i also feel there is a level of equality this visuality brings to the

work. a visual representation of what i want to see more of within the world:
equalness.

and the only punctuation that exists within gurmukhi script is a period. which is
represented through the following symbol: |

Moreover, in an interview given to CBC Radio (2017), Kaur admits that she likes “how it looks visually to the reader so I only use lowercase, I wanna basically get rid of the many distractions as I can so that the reader can just pour themselves into the work”. As she explains in her collection, one of her main goals is to achieve “kind of equality of the letters”, which she also extrapolates to questions of gender and racial equality, so important in her works (2015: 170):

my issue with what they consider beautiful
is their concept of beauty
centers around excluding people
i find hair beautiful
when a woman wears it
like a garden on her skin
that is the definition of beauty
big hooked noses
pointing upward to sky
like they're rising
to the occasion
skin the color of earth
my ancestors planted crops on
to feed a lineage of women with
thighs thick as tree trunks
eyes like almonds
deeply hooded with conviction
the rivers of Punjab
flow through my bloodstream so
don't tell me my women
aren't as beautiful
as the ones in
your country

This poem, Kaur argues in CBC Radio (2017), denounces the Western standard of beauty which “centers around excluding people”, that is, it makes reference to the exclusion of South Asian women, who are characterized by “the color of earth [her] ancestors crops on” since they are brown-skinned. Kaur also underlines the different types of beauty that can be found in a woman's body, notwithstanding the fact that they

do not comply with society's beauty standards, this suggesting that whiteness is by no means a synonym of beauty, just as darkness is not a synonym of ugliness. Not only does she reinforce this idea by highlighting and praising their "big hooked noses" and "thighs thick as tree trunks", but it also points out the beauty of the body hair, which clearly deconstructs many of the norms imposed by society.

Kaur also intends to bridge the gap between Western and non-Western cultures by "being in half way", as she goes on to assert in CBC Radio (2017). Although she regards herself as a Punjabi-Sikh woman who emigrated to Canada, she makes no secret of her unconditional connection to her Indian roots and family heritage as shown in the next poem, in which she defines herself as both "a woman of sikhi" and "a woman of color" (2015: 184):

the name kaur
makes me a free woman
it removes the shackles that
try to bind me
uplifts me
to remind me i am equal to
any man even though the state
of this world screams to me i am not
that i am my own woman and
i belong wholly to myself
and the universe
it humbles me
calls out and says i have a
universal duty to share with
humanity to nurture
and serve the sisterhood
to raise those that need raising
the name kaur runs in my blood
it was in me before the word itself existed
it is my identity and my liberation

- *kaur*
a woman of sikhi

It is worth noting the importance that Kaur gives to her ethnic roots by emphasizing the pride she feels towards her family and ancestors. The name "kaur" is particularly significant in this. As Lakhpreet Kaur (*Ms. Magazine Blog*) explains:

Many of the women have the last name Kaur. They are not necessarily related. Many women of the Sikh faith share the name Kaur as a way to indicate equality

and sisterhood. The 10th Sikh Guru, or prophet, asked all Sikhs to adopt a collective name reserved for royal families to signify the inherent equality and nobility of every individual: Kaur for women and Singh for men. This challenged the Indian caste system, in which traditional family last names were used to signify one's social status, and undermined the patriarchal practices of taking the husband's name.

The relationship between words and line drawings, which could also be labelled as text-image hybridity, is central in Kaur's work, since both types of art play a significant role in the construction of her identity. This is not the first time that textual and visual expressions are blended in literature; there are poets, such as Stevie Smith, who already considered this juxtaposition to be particularly useful and subversive, as can be seen in her most famous poem, "Not Waving but Drowning" (2018):

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.



Barbera explains this hybridity as "mirroring relationships [which] do not alter one's reading experience but reinforce it in another way, adding a 'thickness' to the text. But there are also relationships of dependence, in which a poem seems completed by its drawing, and vice versa. Finally, there are the drawings whose relationship to the poems [...] is decorative" (1985: 232-33).

Milk and Honey illustrates the changeable relationship that can exist between words and fine line doodles: sometimes they will be inextricably related; some other times their connection will be rather more difficult to find and explain. Rupi Kaur often uses illustrations in order to highlight certain elements of the text, as can be seen in the next poem:

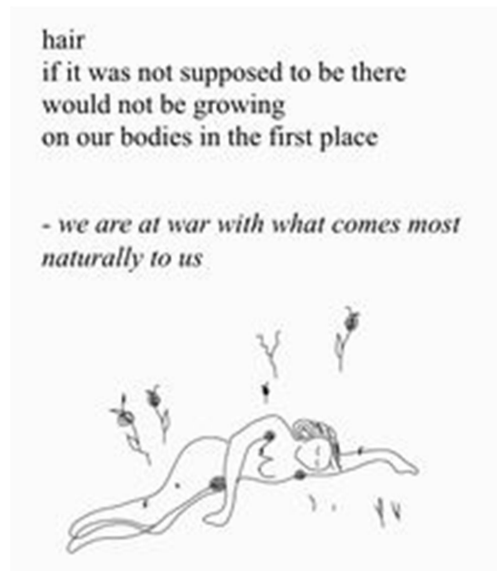


Figure 1 (2015: 193)

Unlike this poem, in which the illustration emphasizes the main idea expressed by words, there are drawings which make reference to the vehicle of the metaphor or simile employed, that is, the sketch refers to what is used to represent the tenor, the figurative term. The poem in figure 2 conveys the comparison between the idea of a woman's leg "spread apart" and a canvas waiting for a painter "begging for art". As can be observed, the drawing refers to the vehicle of the simile, the canvas:

the very thought of you
has my legs spread apart
like an easel with a canvas
begging for art

Figure 2 (2015: 57)

- rupi kaur



Figure 3 also illustrates the metaphor's vehicle. The poem establishes similarities between a body with "a museum of natural disasters" which is "stunning" and the feeling experienced when seeing a swirl. The illustration is as follows:

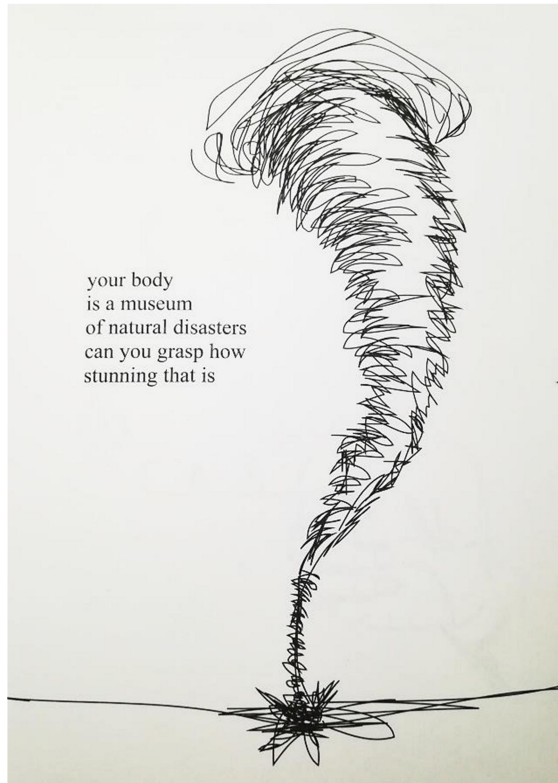


Figure 3 (2015: 173)

There are cases in which, at first sight, the drawing does not seem to be connected with the text, but encapsulates some implicit meaning, as in figure 4, whose main aim is to spread the feeling of sadness by focusing attention on two isolated child figures. It could be argued that solitude is one of the saddest feelings a person can experience, which explains the drawing's choice:

you have sadness
living in places
sadness shouldn't live

- rupi kaur

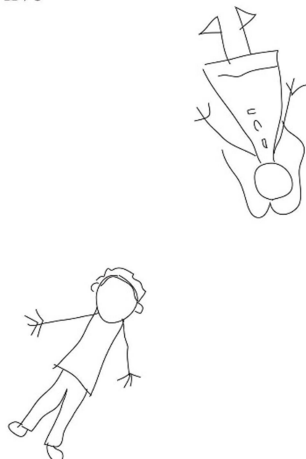


Figure 4 (2015: 27)

In figure 5 the vague connection between verbal and visual expression is also made clear. The poem mainly aims at encouraging a high level of self-esteem and self-confidence. To convey this idea, Kaur has chosen the illustration of planets as they revolve around themselves to represent the ‘movement’ that people should always do: turn around themselves, take care of themselves, and love themselves as if they were twin souls.



Figure 5 (2015: 189)

Finally, the juxtaposition and contrast that can be found between written and visual expression is also worth mentioning, in particular the contrast between, on the one hand, the harshness and complexity of the subjects the poems deal with, and on the other the simple and vague black and white line drawings. Whereas the texts encapsulate a high level of maturity in their tackling of serious and complex subjects (the struggles normally experienced by an adult person, most of which are rather difficult to overcome), the inclusion of abstract illustrations resembles the doodles made by children. Therefore, there are two elements that enhance and complement Kaur's work: on the one hand the poems, which stand for maturity, and on the other the illustrations, which represent childishness.

The next section will analyse how Kaur loads her poems with feminine activism through her careful choice of content. The book broaches a wide variety of subjects,

ranging from general topics, such as love, to rather thornier ones, such as abuse or feminism. Kaur defines her first collection of poems as follows (2015: 208):

milk and honey is a
collection of poetry about
love
loss
trauma
abuse
healing
and femininity
it is split into four chapters
each chapter serves a different purpose
deals with a different pain
heals a different heartache
milk and honey takes readers through
a journey of the most bitter moments in life
and finds sweetness in them
because there is sweetness everywhere
if you are just willing to look

- *about the book*

Kaur's feminist struggle is present both on her private and public environment, the two spheres depicted in *Milk and Honey*. On the one hand, Kaur fights against the patriarchal ideology within the South-Asian community and her family environment (private sphere) and, on the other, she refuses to comply with the notions constructed by society about feminist biology and sexuality (public sphere). In an interview conducted by Lewis Howes (2018), she was asked what kind of things she was reacting to when she wrote poetry, to which she answered:

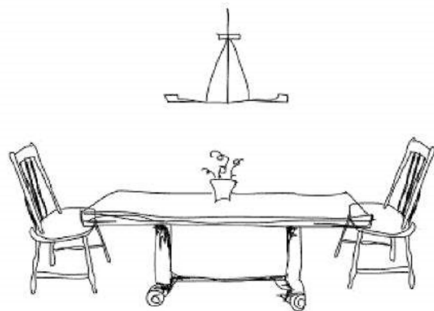
I guess some of the earlier things for sure were how I was being treated as a woman in my world and how the women around me were being treated, and that sort of tension between them having to fight for their space was really what pushed me into writing poetry. In fact, hundred percent of my poems were about the domestic violence that women experience whether it was within my community or another community; or the sexual abuse that I saw the sisters around me experienced [...]. So, when I started out I was like I won't never be able to write anything other than this cause I needed to navigate that so much.

As regards women's role within the Sikh community, the Sikh scripture, which is called Guru Granth Sahib, theoretically supports equality between men and women and rejects any kind of gender discrimination. However, this is not the treatment that women

often receive in their surroundings since, as Kaur argues, there is still no society in which women are completely equal to men. Writing about this fact, Kaur rejects the silence often imposed on women and defends her right to have her say through poetry. This is how she testifies to the way in which her father silenced her mother:

when my mother opens her mouth
to have a conversation at dinner
my father shoves the word hush
between her lips and tells her to
never speak with her mouth full
this is how the women in my family
learned to live with their mouths closed

Figure 6 (2015: 35)



When her father tells her mother “never speak with her mouth full”, he basically tells her not to give her personal opinions and always remain with her mouth shut. Moreover, the setting/drawing conveys the idea that these situations frequently happen within the home, that is, within the community and family. By describing a personal event she denounces what happens in the whole Sikh community.

Figure 7 indirectly points to the fear that men feel when women decide to stop being speechless. They are afraid because, if women dare to speak, the whole patriarchal system and their very authority can be put to the test and destroyed. However, this poem seems to have chosen to show the opposite, namely, women who are afraid of their own voices and thus remain voiceless. Interestingly enough, though, the drawing shows how a man’s hand covers a woman’s mouth so that she is unable to speak.

you were so afraid
of my voice
i decided to be
afraid of it too

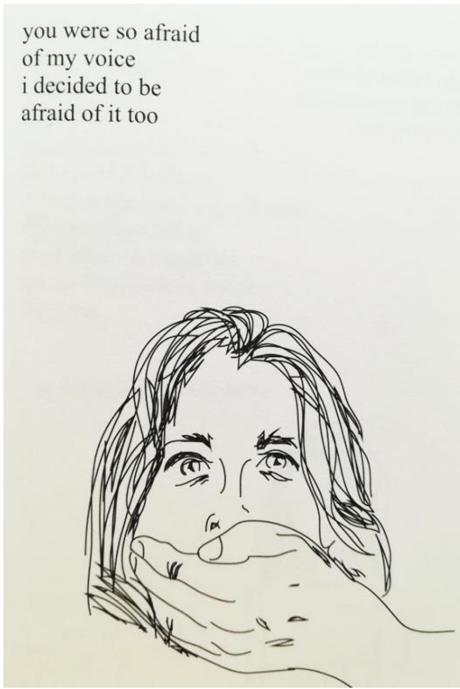


Figure 7 (2015: 33)

Another example of women's absolute suppression can be seen in Figure 8:

emptying out of my mother's belly
was my first act of disappearance
learning to shrink for a family
who likes their daughters invisible
was the second
the art of being empty
is simple
believe them when they say
you are nothing
repeat it to yourself
like a wish
i am nothing
i am nothing
i am nothing
so often
the only reason you know
you're still alive is from the
heaving of your chest

- the art of being empty

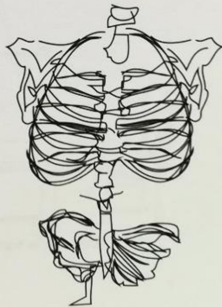


Figure 8 (2015: 33)

This poem denounces women's invalidation as human beings from the very moment they are born. In South-Asian communities, as Kaur claims, women do not have any value from the moment they "[empty] out of [their] mother's belly", which points out their "first act of disappearance". She asserts that the second act of disappearance occurs when people make them believe that they are invisible, which contributes to enforce their feeling "of being empty". Moreover, the use of anaphora in lines 12-14, "*i am nothing*", emphasizes how women try to convince themselves of the notions that society instills into their heads, repeating over and over again the sentence "like a wish". They only know they are alive "from the heaving of [their] chest". This poem conveys the harsh reality in many cultures nowadays, in other words, the high price that women often have to pay to stay alive. Kaur apparently describes this situation as being rather simple, as if it were easy to deny your own existence and deny yourself as a woman; however, she uses direct and plain language to make it clear that, contrary to what many people may think, this is not a choice, as this is the one and only thing that they can do.

Figure 9 represents, by means of using a simile, those women who try to find some space for themselves and are able to raise their voices in a society which strives to prevent them from doing so. Kaur draws a parallel between being part of society/patriarchy and writing with the right hand ('right' comprising both senses of the word). It underlines the idea of determinism: women are determined by birth and cannot change their fate.

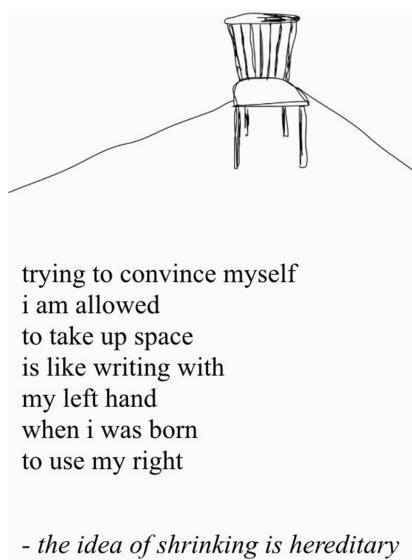


Figure 9 (2015: 29)

Kaur also condemns the high rate of sexual abuses that South Asian women endure during their life. As she affirms on her website: “we know sexual violence intimately. we experience alarming rates of rape. from thousands of years of shame and oppression. from the community and from colonizer after colonizer” (“faq,” *rupikaur*). She describes the individual traumas that she has experienced, in an attempt to represent the collective trauma that the “larger South Asian community and diaspora” have inflicted “onto [them] as children”. This collective trauma has been suffered by several generations: “my experiences have happened to my mother and her mother and her mother before that. it is generations of pain embedded into our souls.” (“faq,” *rupikaur*). Kaur’s use of the plural pronouns “our” and “we” only highlights the collective trauma that makes them afraid “in a bed full of safety” (2015: 36):

our knees
 pried open
 by cousins
 uncles
 and men
 our bodies touched
 by all the wrong people
 that even in a bed full of safety
 we are afraid

The poem in figure 10 points to the tradition whereby women inherit the obligation to accept their absolute submission to male figures, while men inherit the “smell of starvation” which they “picked up from [their fathers] feasting on [their mothers] at 4 a.m.” instead:

the first boy that kissed me
 held my shoulders down
 like the handlebars of
 the first bicycle
 he ever rode
 i was five

he had the smell of
 starvation on his lips
 which he picked up from
 his father feasting on his mother at 4 a.m.

he was the first boy
 to teach me my body was
 for giving to those that wanted
 that i should feel anything
 less than whole

and my god
 did i feel as empty
 as his mother at 4:25 a.m.

Figure 10 (2015: 29)

Since the moment they are born they have to “challenge that narrative every single day” (“faq,” *rupikaur*). They have been taught that their bodies are not their property and that they belong only to men (see figure 11). It is thought that their body only functions as a pleasure object, used by “guests” who are not willing to stay for long. Moreover, the drawing perfectly illustrates the main idea of the text: men’s desire for women’s most private zones. She is quite graphic in the language and illustration used; the violation of a woman’s body is clearly shown. As Kaur stated in an interview (“Rupi Kaur brings *Milk and Honey* to studio q”): “these are things we have to whisper because it only happens into a few people and we don’t talk about them. But I remember that me and my best friends started to share our own experiences, whether they happen to our mothers, our grandmothers, our aunts, our sisters. So, in regards to what’s happening in India and most of South Asia at this time, it’s been happening for so long. I write because I think it is so necessary to heal from it and that’s the only way that we can break the cycle and create real change”.

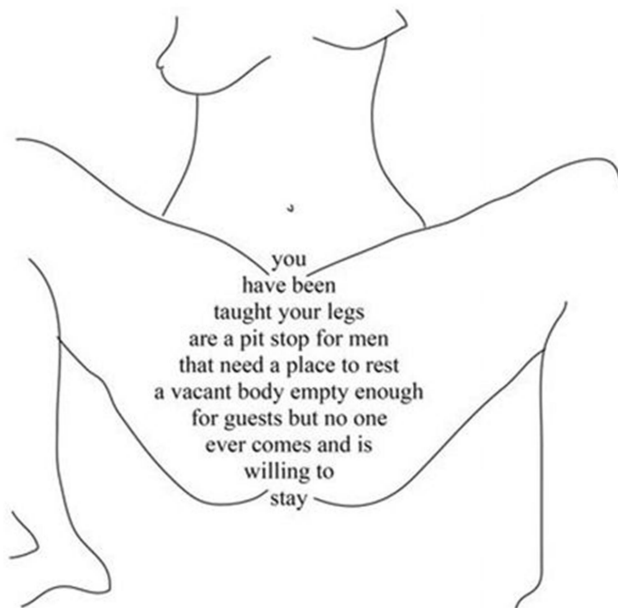


Figure 11 (2015: 13)

Kaur attempts to reframe notions constructed by society about feminist biology and sexuality. Nowadays, she has become a symbol of female self-expression and feminist activism, like writers such as Virginia Woolf or Angela Carter before. Just as these writers prompted the dialogue between women, the most important achievement of Kaur’s poetry is the proliferation of an ideal platform for conversation, collaboration, and support among women, which the new technologies of information and

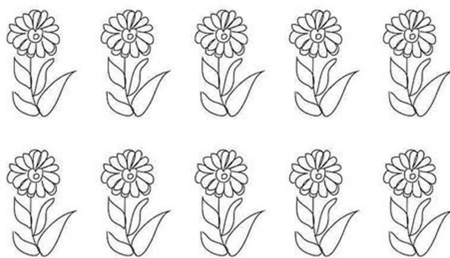
communication facilitate. She also seeks to eradicate the competition and lack of support between women: “other women’s bodies/are not our battlegrounds” (2015: 175).

Derogatory comments that women make about other women’s bodies, when they should support and fight together as sisters instead, only contributes to making their situation even worse. As Kaur affirms, “we all move forward when/we recognize how resilient/and striking the women/around us are” (2015: 191). The next poem compares women who help one another with flowers “ach[ing] for spring”; this relationship is essential, as none of them can live without the others. Furthermore, identical flowers represent equality between women, no matter their race.

my heart aches for sisters more than anything
it aches for women helping women
like flowers ache for spring

Figure 12 (2015: 191)

- rupi kaur



Kaur deconstructs socially prescribed thoughts about women’s bodies in a world where people only give importance to appearances, and not to what really matters: inner beauty. Kaur thus demonstrates that being pretty and soft is not the key to happiness and success:

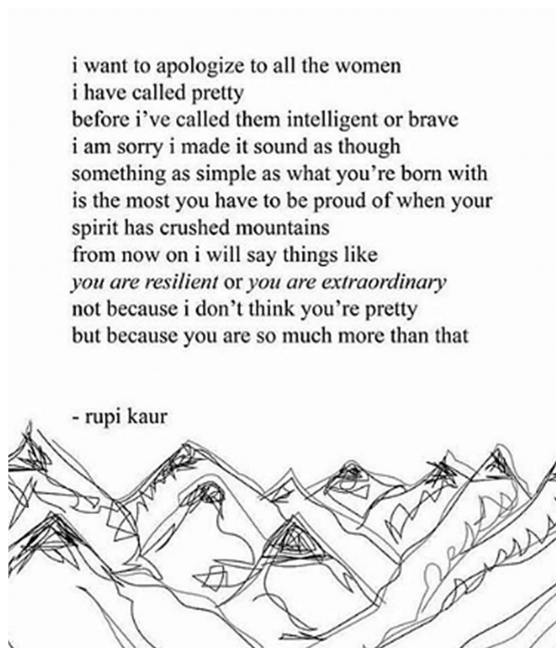


Figure 13 (2015: 179)

Kaur aims to defeat the female biology taboos that suffocate womanhood. Women's body hair, stretch marks and menstruation are central issues in her work. As figure 14 shows, women are the only owners of their body and rules. Their bodies can welcome guests, but these can never become the owners of their own house, that is, their bodies and perceptions. "Guest" clearly means invited, of course. Her poems also connect women with nature: in the next illustration, hair on the woman's body is subversively associated to leaves and flowers growing on her legs, thus rejecting socially constructed assumptions of body hair's ugliness and removal.

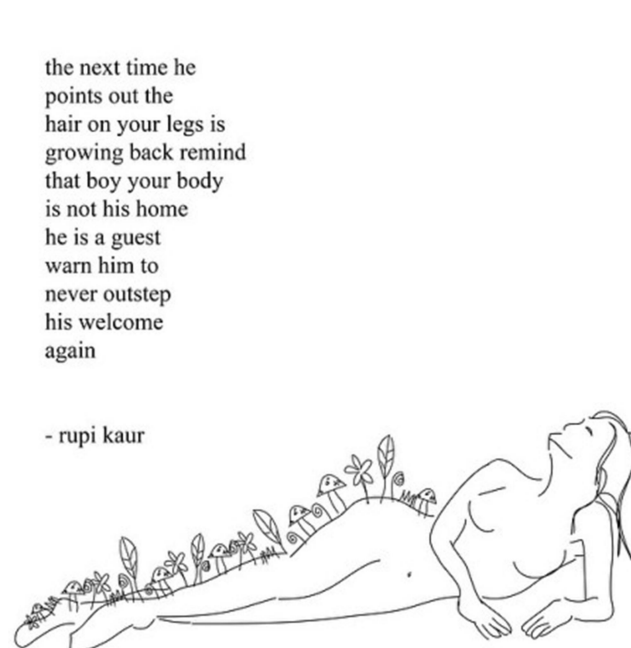


Figure 14 (2015: 165)

Rather, Kaur finds beauty where most people see imperfections. In figure 15, women are described through antitheses, “we’re so soft yet/rough and jungle wild”, “how capable we are of feeling/how unafraid we are of breaking”. These contrasts show the chameleonic nature of women. Self-love and acceptance are what can alone make a woman feel “utterly whole/and complete”.

i like the way the stretch marks
on my thighs look human and
that we’re so soft yet
rough and jungle wild
when we need to be
i love that about us
how capable we are of feeling
how unafraid we are of breaking
and tend to our wounds with grace
just being a woman
calling myself
a woman
makes me utterly whole
and complete

Figure 15 (2015: 169)

apparently it is ungraceful of me
to mention my period in public
cause the actual biology
of my body is too real

it is okay to sell what’s
between a woman’s legs
more than it is okay to
mention its inner workings

the recreational use of
this body is seen as
beautiful while
its nature is
seen as ugly

Figure 16 (2015: 177)



Taboos related to female biology, such as menstruation, are also tackled. Figure 16 shows two different sides of the coin: on the one hand, the feminine biological nature is synonym of prejudice and, on the contrary, “the recreational use” of the female body embellishes women. This poem reminds us that society makes us see ugliness where

there is only beauty, especially as regards women. The menstrual cycle is considered as an issue that women should avoid in conversations (especially in the presence of men). Notwithstanding, no one is against when women are incessantly objectified and sexualized as much as they do with the regular function of female body. The relationship between feminine attributes and nature is again brought to the fore. The drawing illustrates a woman's vagina from which flowered branches, that represent blood, emanate. Finally, Kaur's goal is to bring people together against these oppressive ideologies and encourage women not to be ashamed of their menstrual cycle. As Kaur affirms and we should take as example, "there is sweetness everywhere/if you are just willing to look" (2015: 208).

4. Conclusion

This dissertation has studied the influence of social and technological changes on literature. The Internet has affected social relationships and the academic field, changing traditional methods of reading and publishing works. The emergence of self-publishing is part of this phenomenon. As was stated, many critics have tried to put forward the advantages and disadvantages of this. One of the most important advantages is, without doubt, control over the whole process of publication: content, design, marketing, commercialization and price. Moreover, self-publishing facilitates both the fast revision of texts and their worldwide dissemination. Finally, a significant improvement is the creation of a direct and close author-reader relationship. However, self-publishing a book in turn implies that authors are responsible for covering all publication expenses, and sometimes they must also face up to their lack of prestige for not having resorted to a renowned publishing house.

The never-ending growth of social networks has enabled the emergence of new contemporary literary genres, such as micro-poetry, a powerful art form which can convey lots of emotions with a few simple and straightforward lines, as is shown in Rupi Kaur's work. *Milk and Honey* has undeniably contributed to enforcing women's empowerment in society. This collection aims, among other things, to reframe socially constructed notions about female biology and foster gender equality and self-acceptance. As I see it, every woman should have a copy of *Milk and Honey* because it invites readers to reflect on crucial topics such as feminism, self-love and women's ultimate value.

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