



Evolution of Canadian Poet Rupri Kaur

Dr. Tamali Neogi

Assistant Prof. of English
Gushkara College,
Purba Bardhaman (West Bengal), India
Tamalineogi13@gmail.com

Abstract

Rupri Kaur is an Indian-Canadian poet and artist who had immigrated to Canada with her parents as a child. She is an alumni of University of Waterloo (Canada). She stormed the world poetry scene and carved out a niche for herself among millions of readers with self-published first poetry collection, *Milk and Honey* in 2014, followed by *The Sun and Her Flowers* in 2017, both bestsellers across the world, “sold more than 11 million copies and translated into over forty three languages.” Her third poetry collection, *Homebody*, was released in 2020. In 2022 she released her 4th book *Healing Through Words which chronicles a journey of guided writing exercises to help the reader explore their creativity*. The present article puts in sharp focus her evolution as a poet whose oeuvre is informed by feministic/human concerns.

Keywords: immigrant, trauma, diversity, resilience, domestic violence, instapoets.

Rupri Kaur is an Indian-Canadian poet and artist who had stormed the world poetry scene and carved out a niche for herself among millions of readers with self-published first poetry collection, *Milk and Honey* in 2014, followed by *The Sun and Her Flowers* in 2017, both bestsellers across the world, “sold more than 11 million copies and translated into over forty three languages” (<https://ruprikaur.com>). Her third poetry collection, *Homebody*, was released in 2020. In 2022 she released her 4th book *Healing Through Words which chronicles a journey of guided writing exercises to help the reader explore their creativity*. Her writings include simple drawings to illustrate her words, which makes it easy for the reader.

She told Molly Fischer that “she’d been putting her writing on blogs for years, and kept a Tumblr before switching over primarily to Instagram.” In March 2015, as a part of her university project, she was told to photograph the societal menstrual taboos. Rupri Kaur posted a series of photos, with menstrual blood stains on her clothes and bedsheets. She was trolled and harassed because of it, and Instagram removed them twice. Rupri instantly filed a response for the removal of her images, she claimed it to be “an attack on my

humanity.” Rupi’s response went viral, and Instagram apologized immediately, it increased her popularity. According to Kirsty Melville, the president and publisher of Andrews McMeel Publishing, “She’s given voice to things that people may not have been able to articulate for themselves.” Rupi Kaur belongs to a Sikh family from Indian Punjab and immigrated to Canada with her parents when she was four years old, did schooling at Turner Fenton Secondary School, Brampton and graduated from the University of Waterloo, Ontario (Canada).

Prelude to Poetry

Like Saul Bellow who thought that his imagination at the most susceptible period of life was coloured by what he had been exposed to in his childhood, Rupi Kaur too gratefully acknowledges “My first encounter with poetry was probably when I was a very little girl. Poetry is something that I was constantly surrounded by while growing up. It is a large part of my faith and spirituality. Sikh scripture written in poetic verse is sung when a child is born, it is recited when someone gets married, or when they pass” (Monica Bozinoski).

Creative Process

It is difficult to universalise how and when the creative process is triggered as it varies from writer to writer. Rupi Kaur avers: “Starting from a young age, I was always writing and drawing..... in my loneliness I turned to drawing . . . At the time, I didn’t have the words to describe what I was feeling. Then years later, drawing wasn’t cutting it anymore. I needed more. That’s when I began to write small phrases in the top corners of my drawings. After years of doing that, I began to write these long poems that I would perform at open mics. Thus mastering the craft of poetry, she realized, “Poetry is how I move through life. Through my best and worst moments. Poetry is how I process my experiences. How I reflect. How I recover. And in the end, the poems are a result of all my reflections and lessons learned.”

Inspirational Factors

There are quite a few intrinsic and extrinsic inspirational factors which shaped and inspired the poet and the artist in Rupi Kaur. Besides Sharon Olds, Marina Abramovich, Adele, Beyonce, Kahlil Gibran, Nizzar Qabbani, Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo, Kaur was inspired by her mother to draw and paint and continued her art into her teens, but at seventeen, she shifted her focus to writing and performing. The persona of her father “who was a very moral and ethical person . . . very passionate about standing up for communities being oppressed is really imbued into who I am today” (Monica Bozinoski). Besides,

“heritage means everything to me. Heritage is where I root myself. It’s where I find my truth. Where I find my people. Where I find my spirituality. And where I connect.”

Poetry as Therapy

Though her poetry touches upon issues as abuse, sexual assault, the immigrant experience and trauma, she writes what comes: “Each day, I write what I feel, what’s honest and happening to me in that moment . . . I realize it is essential for me to share, because when we share, we connect. And when we connect, we feel less alone, and can help one another recover.” In order to be objective about the experiences of others, the poet writes about the stories of other people which touch her deeply: “I can’t help but to step inside the bodies and minds of other people and process what they’re going through . . . spend a lot of time contemplating their pain, admiring their resilience, and feel the need to celebrate how they have overcome life’s greatest challenges.”

In an Interview Rupi Kaur elaborates on the therapeutic effect of the written word: “Writing is one of my favorite forms of therapy. I leave it all out on the page. It allows me to reflect on everything and sometimes I’m surprised about what flows out of me. Poetry in its most sincere form is thoughts that are eloquently formed together. Through writing poetry, I found community in so many others” ([Meera Navlakha](#) September 17, 2022)

Odyssey of the Poet

Transition from sharing poetry on social media to publishing the first book, *Milk and Honey* was really fun. “It was thrilling because I had these ideas for years, but kept them to myself. When I began sharing, my readers began to find me. We would have dialogue and conversation that would further help me grow as a person. It was my online audience who asked me for a book. So I owe a lot to my readers for their constant love and support. But writing *The Sun and her Flowers* was her biggest creative challenge as she had to overcome her fear, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome to complete it. The two books are also very different. *Milk and Honey* is a journey inward though *The Sun and her Flowers* on the other hand is a journey outward. It’s stepping outside of yourself and walking out into the world. In this second book I begin to consider a lot of themes outside of me, which was fun and different (Monica Bozinoski).

Since 2013, Kaur has been sharing poems about love, heartbreak and womanhood that perfectly exemplify the self-care movement. Most are bite-size affirmations in lower case, accompanied by Kaur’s own delicate line drawings, that go down easy when scrolling

through Instagram (Shannon Carlin). Uncomplicated and concise, Kaur’s poetry has been criticized for being too simplistic, insinuating how easy it is to write a Rupi Kaur poem like taking any conversation, formatting it in all lowercase and inserting random line breaks. On the contrary, as Kaur contends it is simple and straightforward, “like a peach. You have to remove everything and get to the pit of it.” So what it is that connects millions to her poetry:

“People will understand and feel it because it all just goes back to the human emotion. Sadness looks the same across all cultures, races, and communities. So does happiness and joy.” With her evolution as poet of substance and fine articulator of human emotions, “she’d like the literary world to take her more seriously.”

Rupi Kaur is not alien to controversies that dogged her journey as a phenomenal poet. In 2015, Nayyirah Waheed, a poet who had self-published two collections by the time *Milk and Honey* came out, accused Kaur of “hyper-similarity,” though Kaur declines to comment on Waheed’s specific allegations. No doubt Instagram has catapulted a number of poets, especially those of color, to share their work with a larger, younger and more diverse audience but not everyone relishes the pejorative nickname “Instapoets” because no two Instapoets are exactly alike though similarities between writers cannot be wished away.

The poet has also been criticized for blurring the lines between her own experiences and the experiences of others when writing about the multiple traumas women face all over the world. Quite unfairly Chiara Giovanni in “The Problem with Rupi Kaur’s Poetry” makes the case that the poet’s “use of collective trauma in her quest to depict the quintessential South Asian female experience” is a way of forcing universality to reach mainstream audience,” though she concedes that Rupi Kaur is considered a much-needed voice of diversity in a literary scene that’s overwhelmingly white. Kaur’s poem, “Women of Colour,”

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine
to carry

epitomizes her anguish at the dearth of the narratives about the resilience and greatness of women. She writes, “the sikh widows of widows colony in Delhi who survived the 1984 genocide of sikhs are a symbol of resilience for me . . . remind me that the work for justice, dignity and freedom is still ongoing . . . shows me that we have to keep speaking up, especially those of us in the diaspora . . . when i feel down, when i feel like giving up then i think of the sikh women before me who contributed to my survival and progress, and i realize they put their lives on the line so i could live . . . means giving up isn’t an option. . . we have so much work to do, books to write, stories to document

and generations of women to lift to the mountaintops.” Each of her poems inspires, empowers, speaks and touches the delicate chords of human heart:

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

Rupi opines: “we remain quiet because we haven’t given ourselves permission to burst open and let the world hear our song. so we have to speak up. be louder. we have to share our stories. even if it makes us uncomfortable. we have to pull each other up. create a new normal.” In the poem, “Legacy,” she writes:

i stand
on the sacrifices
of a million women before me
thinking
what can i do
to make this mountain taller
so the women after me
can see farther

Her commitment to the cause of women and sensitivity to their tales of woes is undeniably sprinkled over the pages of her anthologies and utterances in multiple interactions:

our work should equip
the next generation of women
to outdo us in every field
this is the legacy we’ll leave.

With the mellowing of poetic craft and burgeoning popularity Rupi Kaur is now writing more authoritatively about the South Asian experiences, love, domestic violence, multiple abuses and heartaches that are intertwined with the specific experience of being a woman, being Punjabi and being a child of immigrants in contemporary times.

Works Cited

- Bozinoski, Monica. “When we connect, we feel less alone.” in *Vogue*. Oct. 18, 2019
- Carlin, Shannon. “Meet Rupi Kaur, Queen of the ‘Instapoets.’” December 21, 2017
<https://www.rollingstone.com › culture › culture-features>
- Giovanni, Chiara. “The Problem With Rupi Kaur’s Poetry” in *BuzzFeed* Aug. 4, 2017.
<https://rupikaur.com>
- Navlakha, Meera. “Rupi Kaur on using Poetry to heal.” <https://mashable.com> Sep. 17, 2022
- Punjabi Celebrities*. Rupi Kaur Biography. <https://punjabicelebrities.com>