

Empowered Women Represented in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of the analysis on Rupi Kaur's poems compiled in her book entitled *Milk and Honey*. It focuses on how Kaur portrays women from their breaking to healing stages until finally they become strong and empowered figures. This study employed a qualitative-descriptive method for analyzing the poems. By her poems, Kaur speaks her thoughts about women's representation in society. She also criticizes the patriarchal ideology that places women as the servant for men's pleasure. Her works illustrate problems that oppress women such as sexual objectification, mental trauma, and family with patriarchal culture. Throughout the book, Kaur also reveals the journey of women from being hurt to be finally healed and become empowered.

Keywords: empowered, feminism, patriarchy, women

INTRODUCTION

Currently, women all over the world initiate feminist movements to fight for women's right and gender equality. Feminist movements are also done in order to spread more awareness about women's issues. Unawareness about this issue is a result of patriarchal culture in which men are seen to have more privilege than women. This patriarchy belief also leads to the phenomenon where men are thinking that they are more 'important' than women. They assume that men could freely control women as they wish (Widjaja 2020). In this case, women are often put as objects.

Objectification is one of the issues commonly happening in patriarchal culture. This action occurs in some awful behavior such as body shaming, cat-calling, unwanted touching and rape. It makes women feel unsafe and causes women to be anxious. Even worse, these issues lead to mental health problems such as eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Szymanski et al. 2011). Thus, the view of women as objects rather than individuals re-emphasizes the idea that men should be able to determine a woman's worth by her use-value (Davis 2018). It indicates that women's physical appearance is more appreciated rather than women's attitude and intelligence. These issues show oppression against women.

As an effort to diminish that issue, the movement comes in many actions such as campaigns and events on International Women's Day. There are also feminists and influencers who speak up to spread awareness about this issue through social media platforms and literary works. Among those feminists and influencers, Rupi Kaur, a poet who actively posts Instapoetry, participates in the movement by employing her empowering poems. One of her interesting books that covers the issue of women's healing journey is her poetry compilations that is entitled *Milk and Honey*.

Written and self-published by a poet who is a diaspora herself, *Milk and Honey* is Rupi Kaur's first poetry collection which has now become *The New*

York Times' best seller. Kaur writes about love, loss, trauma, healing, and also femininity. The title *Milk and Honey* was inspired by a poem she wrote in 2012, where she used the expression 'milk and honey' as a metaphor of describing the strength and resilience of Sikh widows who survived the Sikh genocide of 1984 (*The Making of Milk and Honey* n.d.). The book was then arranged together thoughtfully for its readers to be able to have a reading experience like a continuous journey. Readers are taken from a journey of trauma and loss and are lifted into a place of healing and wholeness (*The Making of Milk and Honey* n.d.). Specifically, gender issues written in this book are about woman portrayal, female fatale, gender representation and also women empowerment. So far, studies of *Milk and Honey* show us about women's representation especially in relation to Indian culture.

This study focuses on *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur because this book serves poetry with simple understandable words in portraying women and femininity. Unlike other poems, Kaur's poems in *Milk and Honey* present familiar diction. However, McQuillan (2018) in the work entitled *Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility: The Subversive Simplicity of Rupi Kaur's Milk and Honey* counters the simplistic style of Kaur's poetry because it confronts typical poetic difficulty. Kaur's work is considered to subversively allow simplicity and accessibility over complexity and difficulty (McQuillan 2018). On the other hand, a study by Dr. Madhu Jindal (2017) also reviews Kaur's work in *Milk and Honey* as a modern work that performs the style of "confessional poetry", yet often acknowledged as simplistic and trying too hard to attain modernist obscurity, *Milk and Honey* pervade deeper meaning that will be obtained after comprehending the nuance (Jindal, 2017).

Women are often required to have standards implicitly set by society. In order to gain social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to correct their bodies and appearance more generally, and to make them conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time, the so-called 'norms of feminine appearance' (the standards of appearance women feel they should be living up to) (Saul 2003, 144). People choose to warn women to protect themselves in order not to be harassed rather than educate men not to disrespect women. Women must not be too beautiful so they will not attract men's attention, yet they also must not be looking bad because women must take care of themselves. Another result of patriarchy, women must be educated, yet do not be too intelligent or no men will choose them. Women mostly shut themselves because a woman who speaks up is considered inappropriate. Women must be compliant to any consideration that has been taken by men. This patriarchal culture also constructs dualistic and gendered thinking of roles. In *milk and honey*, Rupi Kaur presents illustrations about how our culture teaches women that they have to serve men. Moreover, Rupi Kaur illustrates how women suffering from common issues in a tenacious patriarchal environment have finally healed and empowered and found their worth and self-acceptance.

Studies on *Milk and Honey*

One of the previous studies about *Milk and Honey* is a research entitled *Lonely Voice of A Goddess - A Critical Analysis of Rupi Kaur's Collection of Poems Milk and Honey* by Dr. Neelam Tikka (2018). This research results in a notion that women have been exploited by men for their desires for ages. This research is based on the study of various divinities in the temple in India. The most startling words written by her about women is that women are being used for the purpose of creation and recreation (Tikka 2018). Moreover, another research has done by Trishna Deka (2020) emphasizing the feminist perspectives in *Milk*

and Honey. Focusing on interpreting the work, the result of this study is the amalgamation of multiple aspects of feminism (Deka, 2020). Both researches present the analysis of *Milk and Honey* with different focus. Accordingly, this current study examines *Milk and Honey* with a different focus. This study focuses on how it portrays women through their breaking to healing to be finally strong and empowered phases of life using feminist approach.

**Employing
Feminism**

Women empowerment closely relates to feminism. Feminism is known as the women movement to fight for gender equality. Generally known, feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. In simple way, some people associate feminism with equality and women movement. Throughout the history, feminism comprises several waves. In the first wave of feminism, women were fighting for the right to vote and other legal issue. This wave emerged at the end of the 19th century. The second wave of feminism began in 1949. In this wave, according to Lorber in Effiong (2020), women created movement to fight for issues such as discrimination against women based on race, tribe, nationality, religion, and class. This wave fought for sexuality and reproductive rights such as the use of birth control. Last, the third wave is the movement of young generation of feminists who fight for the wider system of gender equality and oppression. To wrap up, Effiong (2020) defines feminism as a reaction to gender inequality problem.

Feminism occurs because women have always been in the lower part of the oppressive system over the years. One of the main purposes of feminist movement is to reach women empowerment. Empowerment, according to Kabeer (2001), is something that is closely tied to a state of powerlessness and refers to a process in which those who have been denied the ability to make choices to create a change. In this context, women who are empowered are ones who rise from adversity and make changes for their life. Empowering women involves an environment in which women can live without fear of oppression, exploitation, fear, discrimination and feelings of abuse that occur by being a woman in a traditional male-dominated structure (Dandona 2015). These aspects are prevalent in the work of Kaur, and thus they are worth discussing in this current study.

**RESEARCH
METHOD**

In this study, qualitative method is employed to examine the representation of empowered women in Rupī Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poetry collection. This research also focuses on the contextualization of poems and the meaning to obtain the interpretation. Since qualitative research deals with meaning, the qualitative method is the suitable method (Dey, 1993). Another reason is because qualitative researchers try to understand people's communication in specific situations and the meaning associated with it (McKinnon, 2014). It supports the research because we study the ideas stated by Rupī Kaur in her poems in portraying figures of empowered women.

The researchers used feminist approach to find out the meaning of Rupī Kaur's poems which contain feminine issues in *Milk and Honey* poetry collection. Feminist approach in research focuses on women's experience in social setting (Holloway and Wheeler in Gelling, 2013). In this study, the data were taken from Rupī Kaur's poems and thesis or articles on the poem by Rupī Kaur. In collecting the data, the researchers did several steps as follows: first is re-reading the book; second is selecting 7 poems which contain women issues and empowering nuance. The selected poems are taken from the first chapter, *The Hurting* and the last chapter, *The Healing*. Third step consists of

undergoing analysis and identification using feminist approach to gain the findings. Last step is to wrap up the result of the analysis and then connect one to another to depict a journey of women to be the figure of empowered women.

DISCUSSION Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poetry collection is worthy of in-depth analysis. The analysis of this poetry collection acknowledges several aspects of feminism. This book wraps a journey of tackling issues specified in oppression, sexual assault and objectification to be finally healed and empowered.

Women Objectification The following poem—which is originally has a background picture of a naked woman body—illustrates women's objectification in a patriarchal culture. This poem tells us that women's bodies are a place for men to rest. Objectified women are treated as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson 1997).

you
have been
taught your legs
are a pit stop for men
that need a place to rest
a vacant body empty enough
for guests but no one
ever comes and is
willing to
stay

The first sentence indicates that women objectification is inheritance because over the years, women in patriarchal culture are told to be an object for men to use. Therefore, the notion that women's bodies naturally are made for men is taught from generation to generation. Then, this poem also shows that women's bodies are vacant and empty enough for men who want to visit. It states the traditional role of women. Women in traditional culture is acclaimed as an empty soul whose nature is to be male's complement. This can be seen from the social rules for women that existed long ago such as the prohibition for women to get proper education also the prohibition for women to speak up and get involved to make decisions. This idea results in arbitrary treatment. Kaur uses 'guest' to symbolize men and their unsteady behavior. Relating to the poem, Kaur describes that men who come are not willing to stay. This means that men only used women's bodies to fulfill their desires and they may then leave as they wish to. It reveals men's irresponsible action, yet women cannot do anything about it and must take the risks alone. This is a common issue in patriarchal culture.

Mental Trauma

the therapist places
the doll in front of you
it is the size of girls
your uncles like touching
point to where his hands were
you point to the spot
between its legs the one
he fingered out of you

like a confession
how're you feeling
you pull the lump
in your throat out
with your teeth
and say *fine*
numb really
- *midweek sessions*
(*The Hurting*, 15)

The second poem above depicts the suffering of mental trauma. It tells an experience of being touched by an uncle figure at the age of five that causes a numb feeling. Next, she touches the part between its legs, telling the therapist the spot in which her uncle touched. This action is considered as sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse happens in all cultures (MacLeod 1988). Sexual abuse can be defined as sexual contact with a child that occurs under one of three conditions: when there is a large age or maturity difference between the partners; when the spouse is in a position of authority over or in care relationship with children; when the act is committed against a child through violence or trickery (Finkelhor 1997). Even though Kaur does not specify the age of the uncle, an uncle is generally considered as an adult compared to a girl in the age of 5. Sexual abuse by a family member is mostly hidden, so it is the most difficult type of sexual abuse for children and young people to detect (Cheshire SARC n.d.). In the poem, she was in the therapist with a doll to embody a young girl's body. Contextually, the doll also symbolizes vigorous control because the doll is a toy that can be played and we have complete control over it. It metaphors her body as a minor who is clueless about how to react towards such issues. Young children are often confused about what is happening and some children may think their situation is normal (MacLeod 1988).

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

Furthermore, Kaur's *Milk and Honey* encloses women's issues in society that value patriarchal culture. This poem particularly talks about women's voices. Being afraid literally means a feeling of fear, apprehension, distaste, and unhappiness. There are two words of 'afraid' in this poem, firstly and contextually, it means that 'you', which refers to the society, were deplored towards women's voices because women are not supposed to speak up. The second, 'afraid' refers to her own voice. It is uneasy to stand up and speak in a culture that is often unforgiving to women who speak up (Tripathi 2017). Speaking up about this culture is not concerned and often rejected. Therefore, women mostly stay silent rather than telling the truth. This unfair treatment finally makes women decide to keep their issues by themselves. This silence creates inner conflict. This silence culture is also portrayed in the next poem.

More sources of trauma for women, even within their own inner family, can be seen from the following poem:

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

(*The Hurting*, 35)

This poem illustrates women's subordination to men in a family. The father forbids the mother to speak and the mother must obey. A substantial passage is enclosed in the last two lines. The line "this is how the women in my family, learned to live with their mouths closed" shows that silence for women has become a culture in that family and is followed as a tradition in patriarchal structured families. Women are not involved in the decision-making because women are restricted by their lower status in the house compared to men. Also, women must not speak against men's decisions. Women must display great reserve, respect and submissive mannerisms when they speak to men (UK Essays 2015).

Empowered Women

Finally, after a journey of struggle fighting trauma, suppression in various aspects and reclaiming herself in 'the hurting, loving, and breaking', Kaur displays *The Healing* which we begin to see women's strength after three chapters of vulnerability. The last section yields empowerment, assertiveness and self-acceptance. The writings define boldness and high self-recognition. The healing section ends up removing self-hatred and the author knows how to glorify self-respect (Deka 2020). Kaur also teaches the readers to move on from sadness by accepting pain as a humane experience and it will pass eventually. Kaur in *CBS This Morning* (2018) mentions that she sees herself in the place of 'survivor' instead of taking the place of a 'victim'. This idea is illustrated well in this chapter.

The poem below uses the word 'dragon' to metaphor women. Dragon is a mythical creature that shows up in many legendary stories. Dragon is illustrated as a strong winged-animal who has various powers, such as spit fire.

you were dragon long before
he came around and said
you could fly
you will remain a dragon
long after he's left

(*The Healing*, 178)

Kaur uses dragon to affirm that women are naturally strong and have powers within themselves. It also emphasizes that women's power is not given by men. Therefore, with or without men, women can remain strong.

Society nowadays sets a strict beauty rule for women that is unachievable for all women. Accordingly, for some women, their body is a source of insecurity. It also becomes the pressure to meet current beauty ideals. When a woman began to portray herself through the lens of social standards, she began to discover that she was flawed (Deka 2018).

we are all born
so beautiful
the greatest tragedy is
Being convinced we are not

Hence, in this chapter, Kaur portrays a physical self-acceptance. Body image is an important part of self-concept, including self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-identity (Chrisler 2018). The acceptance of body image supports women's psychological condition. Nowadays, the definition of physical beauty covers several unrealistic characters. Zones in Calogero (2007) implies three characteristics of beauty standards which are youth, whiteness, and flawlessness.

Women empowerment in the next poem can be seen in the use of the word 'gold'. Gold holds various meanings depending on the context. According to *Oxford Dictionary*, it has two meanings. First, gold is a yellow precious metal, the chemical element of atomic number 79, used especially in jewelry and decoration and to guarantee the value of currencies. It refers to the physical existence of gold as the chemical element with a high value. Gold is considered a traditional asset. In the past, gold was the medium of exchange. Nowadays, gold is still popular as a valuable investment. Second, gold is defined as a deep lustrous yellow or yellow-brown color. Gold is a popular color that has been used since ancient times. Through the centuries, gold has always been a symbol of light and beauty, and an incomparable value that embodies the immunity and immortality of the gods (Betz 1995). Gold as an expensive item also symbolizes wealth and prosperity.

the world
gives you
so much pain
and here you are
making gold out of it
- there is nothing purer than that

Based on the elaboration, the 'gold' in this poem encloses several meanings. First, it means grace and beauty. As the poem says "the world gives you so much pain", it means it is painful just being a woman. Kaur shows that the pain women experience is the thing that makes women feel empowered and it makes them beautiful and precious. Second meaning of the word "gold" in this poem is wealth. This poem refers to Kaur personally because she turns her pain and hurt into poems and art which leads her into a better life quality.

Finally, this analysis of the poetry of Kaur discovers numerous aspects of feminism centering around the sexual assault issue, women objectification, social and cultural problems about women. It unravels the oppression disguised in the name of love which is transmitted from age to age. The female identity seen in feminism perspective is also portrayed in this book. Society's expectation about women such as to be a servant for men and being beautiful based on particular standards has become social norms and created several problems for women. These social norms gradually become more destructive for women. Therefore, in this book, Kaur tries to spread awareness about women's rights. Demonstrated in the last chapter, Kaur hopes women always move forward. She also convinces other women to be resilient in facing women issues.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of this poetry collection acknowledges several aspects of feminism majoring in gender role and social culture issue related to women. The poems of Rupī Kaur in *Milk and Honey* portray the journey of being empowered women. It shows the situation in which women are overwhelmed by the pressure of patriarchal society norms, sexual abuse in family

environment that causes mental trauma in such young ages and also social pressure and expectations towards women that become oppression against women. Through this illustration, the author finally narrates the portrayal of empowered women who cherish self-acceptance, courage, and patience. The empowered women in this book are shown as a female identity from feminism perspective.

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