

## Rupi Kaur –Unapologetic Insta-poet

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### Abstract

*This paper provides an in-depth exploration of Rupi Kaur's Instapoetry, positioning her as a fearless contemporary voice addressing the intersection of trauma and beauty. Kaur's unapologetic approach challenges patriarchal norms through her exploration of relationships, immigrant experiences, and sexual trauma. The study delves into her distinctive instapoetics, analyzing the intricate relationship between trauma and healing, emphasizing self-love and acceptance. The use of language, imagery, and symbolism in Kaur's work is examined, revealing a masterful blend of the concrete and the abstract that creates a haunting and atmospheric landscape. The paper highlights Kaur's digital engagement, particularly on Instagram and Tumblr, and its role in forming a global readership. It explores the nuanced representation of trauma, disrupting conventional narratives by intertwining moments of beauty and grace. In conclusion, this analysis affirms the enduring impact of Kaur's Instapoetry in reshaping cultural discussions on pain, resilience, and wonder.*

**Keywords:** Rupi Kaur, Contemporary poetry, Identity, Healing, Trauma, Beauty, Digital literature

### 1. Introduction

Rupi Kaur is unapologetic in the patriarchal society and shows it through poetry that is characterised by a fearlessness and truthfulness. Her work explores relationships, the immigrant experience, and sexual trauma and is considered to be at the forefront of Instapoetry. Since the publication of *Milk & Honey*, the genre of poetry has become one of the fastest-growing categories in book publishing. “According to one market-research group, 12 of the top 20 best-selling poets last year were Insta-poets, who combined their written work with shareable posts for social media; nearly half of poetry books sold in the United States last year were written by these poets” (Wofford pr.6). Kaur’s written work is meant to be an

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experience that is easy for the reader to follow, with simple drawings to illustrate her words. Rupi Kaur's poetry personifies a fleeting elegance, characterised by its unbridled and unabashed emotional intensity. Named the writer of the decade by Rumman Alam, (2019) Rupi Kaur has secured her place in contemporary history. At the heart of Kaur's work is a deeply personal exploration of the impact of trauma on the self. Her poems often draw from her own experiences, including sexual assault and the loss of a close family member, to delve into the ways in which trauma can leave lasting scars and impact one's sense of self-worth and identity. Despite the heavy subject matter, however, Kaur's poems are often marked by a sense of resilience and hope, underscoring the idea that even in the darkest moments, there is still the potential for light and beauty to emerge. Kaur's use of language and imagery is a key element of her instapoetics, as she masterfully blends the concrete and the abstract to create a haunting and atmospheric landscape. Through the use of simple, everyday language and a distinctive visual style that often incorporates sketches and photographs, Kaur invites her readers into a world that is both familiar and strange, allowing them to connect with her experiences on a deep and emotional level.

This paper argues that Rupi Kaur's Instapoetry comes as a strong and uncompromising work on the nexus between trauma and beauty in contemporary times. In the vanguard of this genre, Kaur unabashedly confronts patriarchal traditions and social conventions using her words to articulate motifs such as relationships, immigrant lives or sex crimes. By means of a detailed examination of her instapoetics, language and digital engagement this study claims that Kaur's work not only defies conventional understanding of trauma but shows how pain cannot be separated from the moments grace. Kaur's poetry contributes profoundly to reframing cultural discourses about resilience self-love and the complicated balance between beauty and trauma.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

The major research question is:

- How does Rupi Kaur's instapoetics challenge conventional perspectives on trauma and beauty?

The research question further analyses the role of contemporary literary criticism in understanding and analyzing this intricate intersection within Kaur's digital platform engagement.

### **1.2 Research Gap**

The research gap identified concerns a dearth of studies by contemporary critics that investigate the complex connection between trauma and beauty in Rupi Kaur's instapoetics. Even with critical attention this lacks a complete investigation, where Kaur's poems challenge notions of the conventional to suggest trauma and beauty as inseparable elements warranting further scholarly exploration into this thematic intersection.

### **1.3 Significance of Research**

The study of Rupi Kaur's instapoetics is a valuable contribution to the discourse surrounding the intersection of trauma and beauty. Through her evocative and often heart-wrenching poetry, Kaur invites her readers to consider the ways in which pain, suffering, and trauma can coexist with moments of grace, wonder, and beauty. The poetry of Rupi Kaur delves into the intricate relationship between trauma and resulting beauty. Although a paradoxical concept, upon reading her poetry a clear correlation between trauma and the beauty of healing is established. Through her poems readers are able to experience an approach to beauty that is rooted in self-love and the humble acceptance of one's past experiences. Kaur's work brings a message of hope and healing, providing readers with the support that community often lacks in providing.

## **2. Literature Review**

Mark Edmundson, in his article titled "Poetry Slam: Or, The Decline of American Verse." argues that there must be three qualities for someone to be a good poet, or a poet at least. First, the writer must have a talent for commanding words and making them flow in a perpetual stream. But this in itself is not enough because a poet must also feel the need to share something with the world. The poet is at best a poet when they have undergone a life changing experience, or have witnessed something that serves as a catalyst for the shift in perspective. The poet then must strive to make this perspective approach to their readership as well. The third element for being a poet is "ambition" (pr.17). Courage frees the poet from being trapped within themselves and opens them to share their experience with the world. Confidence in one's abilities is part and parcel of courage and ambition because the said poet "must be willing to articulate the possibility that what is true for [them] is true for all" (pr.17). Theme and creative agencies are often found in contemporary poets but "the muse they invoke is not a fiery one" (pr.18). According to Alam "Kaur's writing is not itself to my taste. But Kaur's achievement as an

artist is the extent to which her work embodies, formally, the technology that defines contemporary life: smartphones and the internet” (Alam). Despite the fact that not everyone will find her poetry appealing, given its detailed and modern qualities, it captures the adaptability of meaning and taste in today's literary scene. Kaur's poetry offers a reflection of the current cultural moment, illustrating the relevance of beauty in shaping the evolving poetic narrative. The comprehensive review of Kaur's work was explored by *The New Yorker* and the symbiotic relationship between text and visuals in her poetry was examined in an article titled “Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur: How to Convey Emotion and Imagery”, which emphasised how Kaur's illustrations visually communicate and intensify the impact of her words (Berve).

One reason why poets and artists now are so focused on their own identity is because they dare not explore another. Such an attitude has given rise to a whole genre of poetry known as Confessional Poetry. This genre emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and is characterised by immensely personal themes, which explore body image, mental illness, family dysfunction, sexual experiences, etc. Confessional Poetry came to the forefront with the publication of “Ariel” by Sylvia Plath, in 1965. In the *Cambridge Companion to American Poetry* since 1945, confessional poetry is said to be lacking “a kind of transparency and artlessness, which made the poems appear to be mere outpourings of feeling and information unmediated by craft” (35). It also mentions that the genre of confessional poetry “exposed the poets' intimate others, was always in danger of destroying someone else, or at the very least wounding them” (41). Political correctness is a respectable notion, but it is becoming apparent now that it is a contributing factor in the gradual diminishing of creative and artistic voices. Literary theorists and critics are playing a part in cementing such ideas, or lack thereof by constantly insisting on establishing barriers which are/should be impermeable - barriers consisting of class, gender, race, sexual orientation and the like. This world of barriers created by “liberal postmodernists” prevents everyone from speaking for anyone. In a thought-provoking piece published in *The Atlantic* by Breuklander he asks a poignant question “How dare a white male speak for anyone but himself...How can he raise his voice above a self-subverting whisper?” (pr.7). Poets like Anne Carson, shut out the common reader because of the obscurity of their texts. While this limits readership, it certainly opens up to an obscurely wide array of critics who are quick to ascribe their own meanings to such a wonderfully obscure

poem. Poets and artists who work to be a commercial success often take such paths and allow the commodification of art and poetry at the cost of its beauty, aesthetics, and universality.

### **2.1 Instapoetry as an Expression of Trauma**

Kaur's artistic output is informed by her personal struggles with adversity. Her verse explores themes of self-admiration, body acceptance, and recovery from sexual aggression. These subjects are especially applicable in today's societal backdrop. "How you love yourself is / how you teach others / to love you" (179). The link of Rupi Kaur to healing and trauma is not something new but one that has been explored multiple times by various critics and scholars. "You / are your own / soul mate" (182). A recent article by Navlakha titled "Rupi Kaur on using poetry to heal" explores similar themes. Just like the Mona Lisa is synonymous with a beautiful woman, and Shakespeare's sonnets synonymous with love poems, the article states Kaur's name is synonymous with contemporary poetry. While it explores the widespread fame it also does not fail to mention the criticism that her poetry has garnered. Kaur's instapoetics and her engagement with the digital space is characterised by a close relationship with social media, as she shares her poems on platforms like Instagram and Tumblr, where they have been widely read and shared by a global community of readers. This digital connection allows her work to reach a diverse and engaged audience, further expanding the cultural impact of her poetry. Kaur's work has also garnered critical attention, with literary scholars and poets exploring the ways in which her poems challenge traditional notions of beauty and trauma. Kaur's poems destabilise the relationship between trauma and beauty by presenting the two as inextricably linked. It can be argued that Kaur's poems offer a nuanced and nuanced representation of trauma that refuses to reduce it to a mere spectacle and instead ask us to consider the complex ways in which trauma can intersect with moments of beauty and grace.

Another important aspect of Kaur's work is her use of imagery and symbolism. Her poems often make use of simple, evocative imagery to illustrate complex emotions and experiences. For example, in her poem "the sun and her flowers", Kaur writes, "she is water / nourishing roots / that have grown so long / they've forgotten what it's like / to be thirsty". This metaphor for growth and healing is representative of the themes that run throughout Kaur's work. The use of symbolism adds to the perplexity

of her poems, enriching their meaning and allowing readers to connect with her message on a deeper level.

### **3. A Poetic Exploration of Trauma, Healing, and Empowerment**

Rupi Kaur's compelling and evocative poetry embarks on a collective exploration of themes such as trauma, healing, and empowerment. In the poem "your body/ is a museum/ of natural disasters" (167), Kaur employs the museum as a metaphor for the human body - a repository of pain and suffering, yet also a haven of beauty and resilience. The poet recognises the gravity of trauma and its impact on one's life as is evident from the lines in the poem mentioned above, but in the lines "can you grasp how / stunning that is" (Kaur 167) also underscore the significance of locating strength and empowerment within oneself. Kaur probes the concept of healing as a process that involves moving beyond the pain and suffering. She believes that "life is moving" (Kaur 143). This moving onward is not letting go per se, but rather an acknowledgment of the hurt one has suffered. Kaur makes it obvious in the poem "evolving" that healing is not necessarily forgetting. In this she claims that being hurt is a part of life and the human experience is not devoid of pain; also urging her readers to "not be afraid / open yourself" to the pain (Kaur 145). Her works illustrate that healing does not involve erasing the pain, but rather, learning to live with it in a way that no longer dictates one's life, as mentioned in Milk and Honey "to be/ soft/ is/ to be/ powerful" (159). This theme of empowerment is a recurring motif in Kaur's poetry, with the poet urging her readers to embrace their inner power. Kaur has challenged the dominant patriarchal narrative of women being the fairer and feeble sex. Through her poetry Kaur demonstrates that "another person" is not meant to complete you, rather "the most they can do is complement" you (147). Her work is testament against the conventional assumption that women are feeble and less valuable than men, and emphasis that women have, since the beginning of time, possessed the power within themselves to be strong, capable, and independent. She states that "loneliness is a sign you are in desperate need of yourself" (146). Kaur incorporates vivid and powerful imagery to express the emotional weight of trauma, as well as the transformative potency of healing. In poems such as "The next time you/ have your coffee black/ you'll taste the bitter state/ he left you in" (Kaur 83), and in "I am water" Kaur uses this metaphor to convey her ability to be destroyed and to heal, in the following lines "soft enough/ to offer life/ tough enough/ to drown it away" (131).

In the poem “if you were born with / the weakness to fail / you were born with / the strength to rise” (Kaur 149), she depicts the pain of trauma as an unrelenting ache that is all consuming but also does not fail to highlight the possibility of healing through self-discovery and acceptance. Poems like this acknowledge that healing is a challenging and painful journey but one that is worth taking. In the poem “there is nothing purer than that” Kaur writes “the world/ gives you/ so much pain/ and here you are/ making gold out of it” (lines 1-5), Kaur underscores that the pain and trauma can be transformed into something beautiful and valuable. In the poem “your body is a museum of natural disasters”, Kaur illuminates the effect of trauma on the body. She recognizes the scars and wounds that trauma can inflict, but also emphasises the body’s beauty and resilience as a work of art.

In another poem Kaur shed light on Carl Jung’s idea that “i am not what happened to me, i am what i chose to become”, Kaur implores her readers to reclaim their agency in the aftermath of trauma. She asserts that our horrifying experiences do not define us, and that we have the power to chart our own paths and shape our own futures. The choice of words, such as “bloom beautifully / dangerously / loudly” (Kaur lines 5-7) in the poem “to the reader” and the way Kaur uses language, and form also adds to the potency of her poetry. She provides bite-sized nuggets of uplifting prose and poetry, frequently employing short, concise sentences that convey a powerful message in minimal words e.g., in *Milk and Honey*, she states:

“i know it’s hard  
believe me  
i know it feels like  
tomorrow will never come  
and today will be the most  
difficult day to get through  
the hurt will pass  
as it always does  
if you give it time and  
let it so let it  
go  
slowly  
like a broken promise  
let it go” (Kaur 161).

The pace of such short lines also hints at the rawness of her experiences with trauma, while at the same time they are expressive of the urgency with which she herself, and her readers want to get over the traumatic experience. When reading out poems like “boat” and “circumstances”, by the time the poem ends the reader becomes short of breath, and can for a moment, have a glimpse of what the poet felt. Furthermore, her use of line breaks and spacing creates a visual rhythm that contributes to the emotional impact of her work.

Kaur’s poetry also contains a palpable feminist undertone that empowers women to reclaim their strength and know their worth. Through her poetry and her life, she challenges societal norms that frequently view women as inferior. As a response to this narrative her poems testify to the resilience of women in the face of adversity, like the poem “when my mother was pregnant” which goes:

“the closest thing to god on this earth  
is a woman’s body it’s where life comes from  
and to have a grown man tell me something  
so powerful at such a young age  
changed me to see the entire universe  
rested at my mother’s feet” (Kaur lines 6-11).

In the poem “what’s the greatest lesson a woman should learn?”, “that since day one/ she’s already had everything she needs within herself/ it’s the world that convinced her she did not” (lines 1-3), Kaur underscores that women possess everything they need within themselves; it is the world that has convinced them otherwise. Such poems provide hope and strength to her readers throughout the world. Contemporary poetry frequently functions as an avenue for expressing trenchant observations on society. Through its succinct and potent language, the poem “the next time” (Kaur 158) vividly portrays the principles of empowerment, agency, and personal limitations in relationships, serving as a striking example of the genre. The poem’s striking visuals and insightful verses convey a potent message regarding personal autonomy and confidence. The poem’s opening lines immediately draw attention to the female body and the act of scrutinising it: “the next time he / points out the hair on your legs is / growing back” (lines 1-3). This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of bodily autonomy and the assertion of personal boundaries. This phrase symbolises the natural characteristics of the body that do not



conform to cultural definitions of beauty. The metaphor itself opens up channels of exploration into larger concepts regarding identity and personal autonomy. Central to the poem are the ideas of independence and the articulation of personal territories.

The lines “remind that boy your body/ is not his home” (4-6) reminds readers of their authority which they always possess, but rarely exert. The “boy” (5) can be any person who tries to take power away from another person, or one who undermines this power by coaxing them. In this way the poem stresses the importance of boundaries in relationships. The idea of the lover being as a “guest” (8) underscores their temporary role in the woman's existence. The notion conveyed here is that their position is transitory and they ought to honour her limitations. The subsequent line, “warn him to/ never outstep/ his welcome” (9-11) highlights the significance of equality and harmony in partnerships. This serves as a cautionary tale regarding the significance of recognizing and revering demarcated lines. The last line of the poem, featuring the only word in the line “again” (12) lends a sense of resolution to the speaker's assertion. It appears that this lady has been subjected to circumstances where her limits were disregarded, yet she is currently asserting her authority and requesting deference. Such assertion of control allows individuals to reclaim their bodily autonomy, defying oppressive norms that restrict feminine expression. Additionally, the poem utilises figurative language to communicate its meaning forcefully. The rugged growth on one's limbs can serve as an allegory for the embrace of individuality and rejection of societal expectations of beauty. The poem's theme is given greater applicability through the widening of its focus. The poem explores a central idea of self-authority, physical liberty, and the significance of setting individual restrictions. Poignant language and thought-provoking imagery in the poem challenge readers, especially women, to embrace their authority and demand respect through their relationships. These poems demonstrate the capacity to engage with significant social themes and inspire measured musings regarding personal and collective principles.

The poem "i like the way stretch marks" (Kaur 162) fosters female empowerment by applauding their bodies, feelings, and personalities as foundations of might, appeal, and unfiltered realness. With its stirring imagery and empathetic topics, the verse invigorates females to appreciate their intrinsic worth, instilling a feeling of potency that transcends the

material sphere. With its thought-provoking imagery, the poem exalts the extraordinary potential of women and gracefully conveys their underlying sensitivity. The poem's vivid imagery of "stretch marks" (line 1) and sensory language craft an impassioned story of personal empowerment and self-love. By emphasising the appeal of idiosyncrasies, the poem urges women to embrace their bodies as indicators of their singular paths, fostering a sentiment of dignity and possession over their bodily forms. The poem's portrayal of women as both "soft yet / rough and jungle wild" (3-4) resonates deeply with the multifaceted nature of womanhood. The poem further juxtaposes how women handle distinct difficulties while preserving their true identities. The poem's focus on feelings, fortitude, and the practice of tending "to our wounds with grace" underscores the ability of women to manage their emotions with power and dignity. It further challenges traditional notions that belittle women's emotional acuity, instead upholding the notion that their emotional sensibilities possess genuine worth and significance. Through its focus on recovery and expansion, the poem invigorates a feeling of independence in women, granting them the courage to overcome adversity. Of the most electrifying moments in the poetry is the assertion "just being woman / calling myself / a woman/ makes me utterly whole" (10-13) which symbolises the regaining of individuality as well as the repudiation of social expectations designed to undermine or narrow the definition of women. The act of affirming their womanhood enables females to redefine their identity. Freedom from validation comes from recognizing a complex and distinct personality.

In this way Kaur's poetry uplifts women by defying established beauty norms and celebrating unique natural beauty. By embracing their natural appearance, women are urged to recognize that their self-value is unrelated to societal norms. Through its contents, the poem offers an alternative account of self-perception and urges women to embrace their inherent worth unvarnished. In a similar poem "my issue with what they consider beautiful" (Kaur 163) begins by confronting the confined and exclusive notion of beauty that is commonly accepted. This notion of beauty maintains exclusivity and ostracization by favouring some features over others. By challenging the conventional notion of beauty, the poem creates an opening for a transformative reinterpretation of beauty standards. Kaur's assertion that she finds beauty in hair "like a garden on...skin" (line 6) introduces an alternative perspective on beauty. Through these striking images, the humble lock is transformed into a potent symbol

of fertility and vigour. The analogy of the garden highlights how beauty extends beyond man-made narrow parameters. The poem is also significant in its exploration of a person's roots and the link to their homeland. The following lines "the rivers of punjab/ flow through my bloodstream" (18-19) are testament to the strength and pride Kaur feels because of her roots. Through this she aims to convey the message so that future generations do not look down upon their past.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Rupi Kaur's instapoetics provides a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the intersection between trauma and beauty. Through her deeply personal and evocative poems, she invites her readers to consider the ways in which pain, suffering, and trauma can coexist with moments of grace and wonder. The poetry of Kaur is a powerful tool in recalibrating cultural discourses of resilience, self-love and beauty that entwines with trauma. Her work offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing cultural discourse surrounding these complex and often challenging topics, and will continue to inspire and challenge readers for years to come.

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