

SUBALTERN'S VOICE IN RUPI KAUR'S SELECTED POEMS: A REFLECTION OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Poetry becomes Rupi Kaur's way to express her feelings based on her self-experiences. The Indian young poet girl puts on her life-story in poetry books: *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers*, and *home body*. This research tries to reveal the subaltern's voice portrayed in Kaur's selected poems as a reflection for multicultural education. The research was a qualitative study by utilizing Spivak's Subaltern theory. It was found that Kaur is the victim of hatred to the Sikh tribe who then immigrates to Canada. By living in a new environment, Kaur, who previously dominated in her origin country, tries to speak up of her bitter experiences and trauma; raped by her uncle and determined by all men to keep silent in poem. The poem then becomes media for educating and encouraging people, especially woman, to have bravery facing their trauma and speak to public as way to heal the wound. Unfortunately, Kaur's way of speaking up leads to the Western culture representation. The hegemonic practice of Western culture unconsciously penetrates Kaur's way of thinking. As the conclusion, the subaltern woman cannot be fully apart from the determination.

Keywords: *hegemonic practice; migration; Rupi Kaur; subaltern's voice; western culture representation;*

1. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is an act of meditation, improvisation and exploration, and urgency is what guides the writer into (and through) the poetic journey (Rooyen and d'Abdon, 2020). It is a compact language that expresses complex feelings. In addition to qualities of memorability, musicality, imagination and invention, poetry is expected to touch readers at an emotional level (Yadav, 2018).

For an Indian-Canadian young poet, Rupi Kaur, poetry is her way to express her feelings based on her self-experiences. Poetry is the language of human emotion (Kaur, 2022). Rupi Kaur, born in Punjab, 4 October 1992, emigrated to Canada at a young age with her family. In order to symbolize and preserve her mother language (Punjabi), she only uses lowercase and period in all her poems including the title of her poetry books. Kaur further explains in her website, rupikaur.com, that Punjabi language is written in *Gurmukhi* script which there are no uppercase or lowercase letters. By bringing this culture as a visual representation, Rupi Kaur shows to the world about what she wants to see: equalness.

Kaur puts on her life-story in her poetry books: *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers*, and *home body*. All the poems have its own relation one to another; a woman's journey of life becomes the main story to tell (Tarigan, Pardede & Marulafau, 2020). Love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration are touched in her art. Moreover, Kaur, in *home body*, digs her deeper life of racism, classification/capitalism and oppression.

Born in Sikh family, she had been separated from her father before she was born, due to hate crimes against Sikh men, following 1984 Sikh genocide tragedy in India. Then she followed later at her age 4 with her mother to Canada. In order to avoid any harm, as thousands of Sikhs were targeted, arrested and even murdered at hands of the Indian government, Kaur follows her father to leave (Singh, 2019). She experienced oppression and abuse throughout her life. As a child, Kaur experienced deep trauma effects because of being raped by her uncle. Kaur and her mother were not allowed to deliver their argument, women were taught to be silent. When Kaur tries to speak her words, the men in her life would shut her down, including her father.

Because of her poems about women at most, Kaur becomes famous as a feminist. Many researches, analysis or journals discussed Rupi Kaur's poems using feminism approach. A study

written by Hagman (2020) entitled “‘she’s already had everything she needs within herself’”: Representations of Women’s Empowerment in Rupi Kaur’s *The Sun and Her Flowers*’ analyzed Kaur’s poems from her poetry collection in Kaur’s second poetry book published, *the sun and her flowers*, with critical discourse analysis framework and feminism research approach.

In addition, Kaur’s words selection of her poetry has been analyzed by Saddiah and Tarihoran (2021) in “A Structural Analysis of Rupi Kaur’s Selected Poems in *The Sun and Her Flowers*”. It discusses the intrinsic and extrinsic elements found in the poems.

Furthermore, Hussain and Ali (2022) carry out a research of Kaur’s *home body* as a reaction to the patriarchal mechanism of society, where women have always been subjugated, suppressed and surpassed by men in journal entitled “Envisioning the Psychologically Subjugated Women: The Feminist Study of Rupi Kaur’s *Home Body*”. Adapting feminism by Beauvoir, the study reveals women in postmodern/postcolonial India are marginalized on the basis of their gender.

This research tries to reveal different perspectives of Rupi Kaur’s selected poems by analyzing the Subaltern’s voice portrayed in it. Subaltern itself is a terminology conceived by an Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, for any class of people, especially peasants and workers, as subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class (Buchanan, 2018). The concept of the Subaltern stood out increasingly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written in 1988. The ideas from Marxism, feminism and deconstruction were combined by Spivak (Riach, 2017).

As an immigrant, Kaur adopts the western point of view. She applicates hegemonic practice which delivers question ‘does Kaur really represent herself or the product of western representation?’. It becomes a reflection of multicultural education which enables the readers to see the hybridity of Kaur’s cultural identity through her texts. But, a perspective on multicultural education that just focuses on "minorities," either as groups unfairly denied social access or as a good presence, has its own restrictions and challenges (Kalantzis & Cope, 1998).

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is qualitative method. The qualitative method excludes numbers or numerical information. There are words or language involved, but there may also be images, photographs, and observations.

Qualitative research is A method for investigating and comprehending the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or human situation. The research process includes developing questions and techniques, data collection that typically takes place in the participant’s environment, inductive data analysis that builds from specifics to broad themes, and the researcher’s evaluation of the significance of the findings. The final report written in flexible structure. This design focus on data collection, analysis, and writing, but they originate out of disciplines and flow throughout the process of research (e.g., types of problems, ethical issues of importance) (Creswell, 2014).

This qualitative method is used by identifying subaltern theory contains in the data especially the main object of this research that are selected poems in three Rupi Kaur’s poetry books: *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body*. To strengthen the study, some supporting data are needed from any sources such as journals, books, articles, video reviews and interviews. Those all data will be analyzed and elaborated further to finally draw conclusion answering this study problems.

2.1 Object of The Study

As the object of the research, it takes several poems written by an Indian-Canadian young poet, Rupi Kaur, which are collected in her three poetry books entitled *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body*. The first book is a self-published poetry book in 2014. The second and the third poetry books follows in 2017 and 2020, printed by publisher company. There are 71 poems of those three poetry books selected to be researched by using Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern theory approach to reveal the subaltern woman’s voices in it.

2.2 Techniques for Collecting the Data

The research data is collected through multi-methods and from multiple sources in order to get the best data to be observed and analyzed further. Primary data comes from selected poems of Rupi Kaur in *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body* poetry books. The secondary data comes from multiple sources, such as journals, articles, books, video reviews and interviews related to the object of the study and the approach. Firstly, to dig the meaning of the poems and learn the author's life story contained, the researchers read all the three poetry books and Subaltern theory to understand and comprehend the points of the theory. The poems then are determined and classified based on the subaltern issues found in it. Texts in the poems selected are highlighted to be analyzed. Next, the researchers browse articles and books related to the author, the book and the theory approach as supporting data. Some video interviews of Rupi Kaur are also watched and analyzed as supporting data to see the author's perspectives.

2.3 Techniques for Analyzing the Data

In analyzing data, the researcher is focused on the oppression, struggle, racism, gender classification consisted in selected poems of *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body* poetry books by Rupi Kaur. The writer uses theory of subaltern by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The techniques in analyzing the data are identifying subaltern theory contained in selected poems of Rupi Kaur's poetry books: *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body* to build the base of the research study; analyzing the base data found in Kaur's selected poems as the main object of the research through Spivak's subaltern theory approach; observing secondary data from multiple sources to support the voices found in Kaur's selected poems; relating and elaborating the points found in order to strengthen the research analyzation; until finally drawing conclusion of the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The three Rupi Kaur's poetry books written in similar style, begin with chapter feeling of pain, as a typical female emotion in an immoral relationship. It begins with a self-destructive, approach, goes through some remedial measures and then arrives at a state of acceptance and reliefs. Any different roles as daughter, lover, mother and, most importantly, woman, tried to be conveyed as the most common female experiences in the poetry books (Islam, 2020).

Misinterpretation of love as sexual relationship dominates the poems' themes. This concept is the result of Kaur's childhood trauma. Kaur asserted that women have been taught that sex is similar to a pit stop for men. They might come and go as they please as stated in *welcome* poem (milk and honey, 2014):

“you
have been
taught your legs
are a pitstop for men
that need a place to rest
a vacancy, body empty enough
for guests ‘cause no one
ever comes and is
willing to
stay”

Welcome, *milk and honey* – p.13

Kaur's first book, *milk and honey*, brings woman oppression and determination from man, especially in her Eastern original culture, India.

By exposing the story of her life, her parents and ancestors in her poems, Kaur hopes to inspire readers to feel a sense of community and to realize the strength of standing together in the face of injustice and inequality. Freedom of believing as Sikhs deprived and capitalism in hierarchy social life experienced by her parents, fire her to voice it out loud. Readers' response even being the trigger, pulls her voicing it bigger and louder. These comments on writing are suggestive of her

writings in verses as well. The popularity of Kaur's poetry creates a 'brand' like the image of her poetry's formulation (Deka, 2020).

*"you want to keep
the blood and the milk hidden
as if the womb and breast
never fed you"*

Poem above in *the sun and her flower* page 223 on the other hand, proposes a change on the way of thinking against East cultural which considers female body as something taboo to be discussed and published. Her Western culture way of thinking appears more in Kaur's second poetry book, *the sun and her flowers*. Her readers target widens from 'coloured-skin' women into all women.

Therefore, Kaur, in line with feminist thought, is also challenging the idea of dualism which has been typical of Western thought (Laurea, 2019). Kaur may have felt a lack of consistency and coherence between her parents' teachings and beliefs and those of her newly adopted culture as a result of being raised by a Punjabi family in Canada. This may have led to doubts regarding the discovery and comprehension of her personal identity. Kaur's inconsistency can be identified in her poet's story flows, which change readers target form of women from 'her origin minority' to 'universal', means from the colored-skin women to all skin color women, including white, West.

Belief of West is better than East, also portrayed behind her poems. Some poems tell beauty standard is white-centered and she, represents the minority colored-skin and hairy girls, try many attempts to look-similar to the majority as the standard, the white one.

Meanwhile, her family's deep dark life has expressed in *home body*, Kaur's third poetry book. Throughout the collection, Kaur's poetry reflects on the negative traits of Western society, such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy (Tanzmeister, 2021).

*"...when you're an immigrant
you keep your head down and stay working
when you're a refugee and
you don't have papers
when they call you illegal
outsider
terrorist
towelhead
you work until your bones become dust
you are the only one you can count on..."*
a lifetime on the road, *home body* – p.93

Its hierarchy cannot be refused. As migrants, they have to follow the host country's system where in this case, they are the peasants, the low workers, the subaltern.

3.2. Discussion

Sikh, was banned in India. 1984 remains one of the darkest years in modern Indian history. The conflict first began when the prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. Her assassination served as the catalyst for genocidal attacks around India especially in its capital, New Delhi. Sikh victims were dragged out of their cars and homes and beaten to death, fires were set to their house of worship known as *Gurdwaras*, women were raped and homes and stores were burned down to ash (Asif, 2021).

In the 1960s, the Canadian government, like the American, liberalized its immigration laws. A chain migration process has been built as a result of this policy. The painful desire or "separation" of people from their nation of origin is the foundation of the Sikh Diaspora. Almost 200,000 Sikhs have been killed by the Indian state in the past 20 years, with no sign of foreseeable justice (Jathol, 2019). In order to survive, Rupri Kaur's father as a Sikh man moved to Canada as a refugee. She followed at her four years old with other family members.

In her age of five, Kaur was raped by her own uncle. The trauma of sexual abuse experienced brought long lasting effect to her. Kaur and her mother, as women, had no right to speak out, protest, argue even in her own family members. They were forced to be silent by the men. Keeping the

trauma, Kaur faced more trouble in the new country. Different language had worsened her childhood life, no one could be her sharing partner. In a talk show, she said:

“I’ve been drawing since I was five years old, I moved to Canada with my family when I was four years old. We moved from Punjab, and I couldn’t talk to anyone when I arrived, ‘cause I didn’t know any English. And so, I couldn’t really make any friends. And so, books became my friends” (The Tonight Show, 2018)

Writing and illustrating are her partner of sharing, the poems are the result. The poems written in her poetry books then becomes her life story. Those poems are really based on her life experiences, as stated in her interview with Emma Watson:

“...and I hardly read comments and that’s usually how I do it. I think it’s about honesty and just sharing that. It’s so personal so everybody around me is like it’s okay, like you know, this person isn’t criticizing you they’re just criticizing the work and I’m like but the poetry was literally me. Yeah, you know this poem is about my life, poems about my experiences, and the people that I love, so it’s very difficult and even though I am self-aware and I do try to like, you know, not let it affect me, I’m sure at a level it has affected, you know, the way that I write.” (Our Shared Shelf, 2018)

Trauma that has been kept for so long is finally published through her poems. Most poems discuss about women, many illustrations of naked woman body support it. Here, the female body—a crucial component of feminist discourse—is portrayed as a patriarchal male possession whose fulfillment is predetermined. In terms of rape, sex, and love, the female subjectivity in sexuality is also explored. In another poem, ‘the art of being empty’ in *milk and honey* page 33, humiliating woman self, a woman’s physical presence is considered to be something very shameful (Islam, 2020).

Rape is not only one causing her trauma. Shah (2021) reported her father’s sexual demands towards her mother taught him that sex was a man’s right and a woman’s obligation. Abuse like this was what shaped her perception of a woman’s role in society. It depicts the predicament in which women are oppressed by patriarchal society norms, sexual abuse in the home environment that results in mental trauma at such a young age, and social pressure and expectations towards women (Adzkie, Trisnawati & Agustina, 2022). Male-dominant view as most common traditional mind, puts women’s position only as a giving birth machine. They are used as a tool to fulfill their sexual fantasies (Hussain & Ali, 2021).

Kaur’s poems, such as *welcome* and many others, was considered provocative by many readers and critics, but Kaur is using the sketch of the female body as a symbol for women’s empowerment and to question social constructs and the way society perceives the female body (Gawrieh, 2019). Forming a protest of women oppressions, Rupi Kaur stands as a passionate advocate for women's rights in a patriarchal culture. She accuses the society around her of being stiff and biased on gender issues. The patriarchal system even restricts the freedom of thought for women. She stands against women discrimination and mis-behavior done to them. The poetry books represent Rupi Kaur as a women’s proponent. As a woman, she takes a strong, equal stand against men and challenges them in her art, literature, and literary style. (Hussain & Ali, 2021).

Capitalism as another subaltern issues written in Kaur’s selected poems, experienced most by her parents in working field. Poem a *life time on the road* clearly tells discrimination and race classification. The word *terrorist* in the poem is a punch for western people who generalize eastern men as perpetrators of 9/11 tragedy, the World Trade Center Building crashed on 11 September 2001. Permitted to live in host country, immigrants have to follow any rules of white as the origin people of the host country, Canada.

Capitalism is hierarchical (Pardede and Neisya, 2020). No matter how hard they work, immigrants, minority, will not be respected nor valuable. Though it is hard for them, in fact, what they can do is only fall into the system in order to stay alive. The hegemonic policies and the power play of the elites and its followers were incomprehensible to the subaltern as the underclass. They simply followed them, regarded them as their well-wishers, and ruled over these oppressed people (Saadia, Dharmyal and Iqbal, 2021).

Publishing poems to represent Subaltern’s voices, Rupi Kaur meanwhile reflects western culture. When woman’s voice is under men in eastern culture, speaking woman is possible and acceptable in western countries. Diaspora and migration have created such diverse scenarios that the

identities of people, their inner selves, their traditions and their viewpoints are all likely to change during and after moving abroad.

Being raised as a diasporic Sikh girl in Canada resulted in Kaur feeling torn between two cultures, one that is still quite conservative when it comes to how women are treated in society, while the other is more liberal but does not prevent women from considering themselves not beautiful enough, not clever enough, not brave enough. In her poetry, Kaur takes into both perspectives: her country of origin and her adoptive one (Laurea, 2019).

This second interpretation of cultural identification in Kaur's situation clarifies why she is having trouble defining her own identity: because identity is not something you can simply read about and comprehend; neither does it come with explanations in books or solely with clear facts. Actually, dealing with different cultures and ways of life, especially when they don't seem to be similar to your own, makes it much harder and more confusing to recognize oneself and one's local culture.

Since Canada is Kaur's host country, having multicultural education supports her western way of thinking. Help her to survive by learning and adapting the culture, Kaur is indeed breaking tradition which means that she is slowly modifying her origin cultural identity. As a result, although cultural identity may initially appear to be something fixed by rigid laws and of a constant state of change, it actually undergoes constant redefinition. Yet, dealing with two or more cultures and their demands may leave one feeling as if they don't belong to either one or the other, which could lead to the prospect of making deeper alterations to one's cultural identity.

Thus, when people migrate, identity, perspective, and viewpoint changes are inevitable when one's social and cultural context shifts. Indeed, Kaur celebrates the liberty of expressing her culture with her poetry, and especially, of accepting who you really are as a person, even though this could imply that you should disregard some cultural norms from your original culture, in favor of those of your adoptive one, and vice versa. Hegemonic dominance, like cultural identity, is never been over. Kaur is aiming at binding together all those who are in search of right and equality. The poet often addresses especially to colored skin women, as they constitute a minority in minority. The inequality they face is not only because of their gender but also their skin color.

In her poems, Kaur gains a sense of community by discussing diaspora, abuse, and everyday problems like her breakup in the hopes of assisting others who may encounter similar circumstances. Those who have had the same or similar traumatic experiences in their lives are likely to feel relieved when they know that others have experienced same things, as this proves that trauma can happen to anyone, although minorities are particularly affected because they are weaker members of society. Kaur also encourages her readers who might be able to relate to her story, which bonds a sense of solidarity between the author and the readers (Laurea, 2019).

Calling other women 'sisters' as represent in *home body* page 166 indicates the familial type of support. Kaur wants to bespeak to other women and show the world publicly through the poem. Eventually, the poet identifies herself with all women by using "we" instead of "I" as stated in 'stronger together' *home body* page 161 and addressing all females rather than talking about herself. Spivak's perspectives of intellectuals are proven. All women are being her concerned instead of only her colored-skin women as minority. It becomes challenging to distinguish the persona from the entire race of females she expressed her sisterhood with. Her identity and emancipation are both rooted in this sorority. Her voice turns from local to universal (Islam, 2020). Her poetry turns on the voice of the general readership thirst. (Deka, 2020)

Subalterns are just a tool of a hegemonic practice that symbolizes political, social and even cultural domination by a group against the other. Since hegemony is indirect, it is typically practiced through ideological and ethical inclinations toward the dominated group, and Spivak's Subaltern theory refers to a group whose voices are always represented, despite the fact that representation is merely a means of facilitating the actual domination (Setiawan, 2018), and domination is always accompanied by oppression which can be physical, psychological and moral or in the realm of ideas. (Pardede and Neisya, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

Migration compels Rupi Kaur to face two different cultures of the countries, east and west. Many challenges are faced by Kaur and her family. It forces her to adapt, adjust to her current life.

The surroundings affect her way of thinking. Getting multicultural education seems to help Kaur's problems. In contrast, when the culture from her origin country, India, teach women to be silent and act under men's orders, her new country, Canada, show her a freedom to speak out and face others, both men and women, a western culture.

Feminism, gendered-classification, hegemony, capitalism, from Subaltern theory, are found in many Kaur's poems in her poetry books. She successfully tells readers of her life experiences before and after her migration. Meanwhile, she is succeed showing the world that her life in western culture is much way better than her previous life. Kaur, by speaking out through her poetry books, is asking for acceptance and admission of her life changing.

Cultural issues seem to be a never-ending discussion. Many new problems appear through cultural encounter. Rather than centering one's culture to the world or trying to equalize, another theory, Bhabha in his perspectives proposes 'Third Space', a result of *hybridity*, a new space of transcultural forms. Continuing this study, Bhabha's third space theory is recommended as the approach of further interesting research on cultural mix.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to have a precious support from the institution, Universitas Bina Darma Palembang, especially from Dr. Sunda Ariana, M.Pd., M.M. as the rector, and precious guidance from the leadership of Nuzsep Almigo, S.Psi., M.Si., Ph.D.

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