

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Poems should be written in emotional freedom. Moreover, poems are not language but the content of the language (Oliver, 1994, p.3). This statement shows that language in a poetry is not only a language, it always has meaning contained in it. Poetry is the art of giving expression to the beautiful through the medium of language (Connel, 1913, p.2). Connel by his poetry definition adds that poetry is a beautiful art, language is only the form to deliver that art.

For an Indian-Canadian young poet, Rupi Kaur, poetry is her way to express her feelings based on her self-experiences. Rupi Kaur, born in Punjab, 4 October 1992, emigrated to Canada at a young age with her family. In a way, she popularized Instapoetry, a term that can be used to describe poems written specifically for being shared online, most commonly on Instagram but also other platforms including Twitter, Tumblr, and TikTok. Her successful instapoems was followed by her self-published printed poetry book, *milk and honey* on 2014, which became number 3 on the New York Times list in one week after published and number 1 New York Times best seller for several years after.

Kaur continued to publish her poetry book *the sun and her flowers* in 2017 and *home body* in 2020. These collections have sold more than 11 million copies and have been translated into over 43 languages. 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 is written in either *Shahmukhi* or *Gurmukhi* script. Within the *Gurmukhi* script, there are no uppercase or lowercase letters, a visual representation of what she wants to see more of within the world: equalness.

Her work touches on love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration. Kaur's achievement cannot be separated from the history or experience of her life as her main idea of her writings. Born in Sikh family, she had been separated from her father before she was born, due to hate crimes against Sikh men. Then she followed later at her age 4 with her mother to Canada. Rupi Kaur and her family are one of the victims impacted from the 1984 Sikh genocide tragedy in India. Stated in [obamawhitehouse.archives.gov](http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov), it was killed 30,000 Sikh people, most burnt alive, and more than 300,000 Sikhs displaced and rendered homeless. The impact of the tragedy still continues today.

Kaur recalls her own father leaving hastily in order to avoid any harm as thousands of Sikhs were targeted arrested and even murdered at hands of the Indian government (Singh, 2019). She experienced oppression and abuse throughout her life. As a child, Kaur was raped by her uncle. For her, abuse from her uncle had long-lasting effects. Kaur and her mother were told to be silent. Any time Kaur would try to speak up, her father and other men in her life would shut her down.

As an immigrant, she felt embarrassed in many ways; the dark colour of her skin, black thick hairs all-over her body, and her family's speaking accent (mother tongue). However, as she grew up, her experiences with love and

heartbreak taught her how to find the beauty in herself and how to heal in the face of painful experiences.

At home, as a woman, Rupi Kaur was not supposed to talk or discuss anything. She thought that this was fine at first, then she could not hold it. She started to express her feelings and figure out her emotions she had experienced through her art; writing poems and painting illustrations. This is accordant to expression theory from M.H. Abram's Orientation of Critical Theories which the primary duty of the artist was no longer to serve as a mirror reflecting outer things, but instead to externalize the internal, and make one's "inner life" the primary subject of art (Purohit, 2015).

The phenomenon of Rupi Kaur's *instapoetry* interests the community to be discussed and analyzed. A journal entitled 'Finding A Voice in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Popular Culture: Rupi Kaur and Her Insta-Poetry' by Turan (2022) analyzed from the perspective of feminist theory by evaluating the Instagram poetry as a popular cultural product in the 21st century literature.

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 the framework of critical discourse analysis and feminist research.

However, not only love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration as stated in rupikaur.com the voices contain in Rupi Kaur's poems, but also racism, classification/capitalism and oppression. This is compatible to Subaltern theory.

Subaltern itself is a term conceived by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, used it as a codeword for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class (Buchanan, 2018). The concept of the Subaltern gained increased prominence and currency with Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written in 1985. Spivak combines ideas from Marxism, feminism and deconstruction (Riach, 2017).

Poetry is a media to voice Kaur's struggle towards oppression, male determination, sexual abuse, etc. As an immigrant, she 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 the most suitable object to analyze her voice as the actual Western representation: as a product of Western hegemonic practice. Belief of West is better than East portrayed behind the poems.

There has no study on Rupi Kaur's poetry book using subaltern theory approach found yet. The researcher is interested in analyzing this perspective to reveal comprehensively about Kaur's experience, perspective as well as its impact in her poems. Hence, this research is entitled "Representation of Subaltern's Voice Portrayed in Rupi Kaur's Selected Poems"

## **1.2 Problem of The Study**

The problems of the study are formulated in the following questions:

1. What are the subaltern voices found in Rupi Kaur's selected poems?
2. How is the hegemonic practice reflected in Rupi Kaur's selected poems?

## **1.3 Objectives of The Study**

Based on the problems above, the objectives of this study are:

1. To find out the subaltern voices contained in Rupi Kaur's selected poems.
2. To identify the hegemonic practice of Rupi Kaur in her selected poems.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

As an English literature, this research is related to Literary Criticism Study and English Poetry Study. This study can help English literature teachers especially for those two subjects in giving real and newest example of both Subaltern theory and new trend of poetry. This is provable that Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern theory from 1985 is still applicable and relatable to this millennial era.

In the community, this study may increase the readers' comprehension of the poems, help them to analyze the emotions felt and educate the literary theory hence the message can be delivered optimally.

Since this research focuses on literary criticism study approach, the result of the study could be a reference or starting point for further study in another related subject such as English Poetry.

### 1.5 Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to analyze Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory consisting in selected poems of three Rupi Kaur's poetry books: *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body*.

