

Themes of Gender-Dynamics, Identity-Crisis, Love, Sex, Abuse, Trauma and Survival in Rupri Kaur's Milk and Honey

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Abstract – Rupri Kaur is an Indian-born Canadian poet, writer, illustrator and performer. She was inspired by her mother to draw and paint. Throughout high school, Kaur shared her writing anonymously. She became popular by her instagram posts and her first publication, “Milk and Honey “ in 2014. She describes the change in the women as “smooth as milk’ and ‘as thick as honey’. She has boldly poured her heart out in her poems and illustrations. The poems flow like a smooth mellow river melting and exposing her heart out. The collection Milk and Honey, is especially for women and teenage girls. Women reader of this collection of vignettes of short poems will feel like looking into a looking glass. The poems sadden the readers because of the profound misogyny which is reflected in the writing. The present paper endeavours to elaborate on the themes of Gender Dynamics, identity crisis, discrimination, sex, love, trauma and survival ion this debut collection of Rupri Kaur.

Key Words: Discrimination, Incest, Trauma, Healing, Survival, Commodity, Identity

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Rupri kaur is a Canadian writer who became popular by her instagram posts and first publication Milk and Honey. When she was 5 years old, her mother handed her the paint brush and asked “to draw her heart out”. She literally drew her heart out in her poems. The poems will shatter the reader, tear open the heart and move the readers to tears. Women where they expect love are returned with hate. And more than that, the love they get from the male gender is akin to incest and rape. The poems are replete with hate for men and male relatives who exploited her and handled her like a commodity .Her poems are full of raping by men and incest love. She is a liberal feminist writer who boldly exposes the exploits of men. Her lines -“Your body is a museum of natural disasters” and, “our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry,” strike with powerful and deft stroke presenting the history and suffering of women.

Rupri Kaur describes in poetic words, what it is to be a woman. She links femininity to strength, power and wisdom. Through her poems, she wants all women to know that their oppression does not define them. She celebrates the natural beauty of a woman and shuns any social construct about how women ought to behave, dress and groom themselves. Through her poetry, she motivates women to stand up strong and independent, to love and support one another. Her poems, instil in the readers, a feeling of confidence, that even after difficulties of the past, they can work towards a better future. Kaur's poetry

comforts the readers, as throughout many of her poems, she reiterates that every being is born unique and important in this world. Throughout the book , she also discusses ‘the double oppression’ that she faced, that of being a female in a male dominated society and that of being a coloured woman in a world where the white race is still perceived as superior and more desirable. Rupri Kaur mentions a pathetic state to which a woman has been reduced to that of a receptacle by men: “You// have been taught// your legs are a pit spot 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...”Her longing for love is evident from the cry as appears in the following lines: “She was a rose// In the hands of those //Who had no intention of keeping her ..”

In her debut poetry collection Milk and Honey, Rupri Kaur explores themes of love, sex, heartbreak, healing, survival etc. The book is divided in four sections, each of which focuses on mainly one or two themes in particular. The first section, ‘The Hurting’ focuses on the female speaker's history as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. In the second section, ‘The Loving’, Kaur weaves in themes of love and sex as the speaker recounts her first major romantic relationship as an adult. The third and the longest section ‘The Breaking’, involves the theme of heartbreak, as the speaker describes how her relationship with the man introduced in the ‘Loving’ comes to an end. The theme of healing forms the

focus of the last section appropriately called "The Healing." Poems in this last section reflect the speaker's healing process, new found empowerment and ability to unlearn the harmful lessons she learned about love sex and femininity in the past. Moreover, the very title of the book 'Milk and Honey' reflects the theme of healing. Milk and honey, when used together, have miraculous healing powers. She describes threadbare how she was raped, harassed, abused and how these impacted her life.

Rupi Kaur's poems are full of ravaging by man and incest love. She is a Liberal feminist writer who boldly exposes the exploits of man. Rupi Kaur, through her illustrations and poems, has opened her heart out and set on an artistic journey. The poems are replete with a search for Milk and Honey in a land called Canada which has always been termed as the 'land of milk and honey' by men who find it a land of opportunity and growth. For a dark woman this land still remains to be a land of pain as mentioned by writers like Rohinton Mistry in his story 'Swimming Lessons' published in "Tales from Firozshah Baag (Mistry, " but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior (TFB 168)". It is interesting to note that Quite unlike, Rohinton Mistry, Rupi Kaur does not come to a negative conclusion. She is full of positive force and is ready to 'set the world on fire' with her identity, self complacency and her potentials. She thinks about life to be a journey The most striking lines written by her about woman that she is being used for the purpose of creation and recreation but her inner self is as ugly as her natural biology as described in the following lines—"Apparently it is ungraceful of me //To mention my period in public //Cause the actual biology// Of my body is too real //It is okay to sell what's //Between a woman's legs //More than it is// Okay to mention its inner workings The recreational use of this body is seen as beautiful while the nature is seen as ugly(177)."

Her poems are replete with examples which talk about a woman being treated as a machine – "the first boy that kissed me held my shoulders down like the handlebars of the first bicycle he ever rode, i was five" (Kaur, The hurting 2015,12) .She describes the exploitation of a five year old girl by her own uncle, cousins and all wrong men. Yet, she is taught by her alcoholic father to be quiet. She poignantly mentions— "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, our knees pried open by cousins and uncles and men our bodies touched by all the wrong people that even in the bed full of safety we are afraid. (Kaur, Milk and Honey,p36)" The voice of the girl is stifled because the truth would be bitter and challenge a man's world and his indignant attitude towards women. The girl learns the lesson since childhood to stifle the voice." You were so afraid of my voice// I

decided to be afraid of it too..."17) Her lines written to fathers with daughters, "Every time you tell your daughter //You yell at her //Out of love// You teach her to confuse// Anger with kindness //Which seems like a good idea// Till she grows up to Trust men who hurt her //Cause they look so much// Like you" (19) Fatherly attitude is missing and performs an apathetic role which is demonstrated in beautiful lines— "He was supposed to be the first male love of your life You still search for him everywhere... It is your blood in my veins tell me how I'm supposed to forget" (16) "the thing about having an alcoholic parent is an alcoholic parent does not exist simply an alcoholic who could not stay sober long enough to raise their kids" "The idea that we were still capable of love, but still chose to be toxic" (23) The idea that woman brings dishonour to the family is very strange and weird if she remains safe and chaste.

She talks of the cultural chain that pins a woman. "You pinned my legs to the ground// With your feet and demanded// I stand up" (25) The girl child is chained mentally and culturally like the mother earth. Love has changed to lust which leads to rape and crushing of female soul. Rupi Kaur demonstrates how love has changed to rape in a world where woman is treated as a commodity. Sex takes the consent of two "If one person is lying there not doing anything //Cause they are not ready //Or not in the mood //Or simply don't want to yet the other is having sex //With their body it's not love It is rape" (22) She also talks about what rape does to a woman's identity: "The rape will tear you in half, but it will not end you" (26). The awesome is the concept of divide between mother and father which Rupi Kaur mentions is like a rift between two countries: "Your mother Is in the habit of// Offering more love //Than you can carry //Your father is absent //You are a war// The border between two countries //The collateral damage //The paradox that joins the two //But also splits them apart."

It is painful to read the lines that the moment daughter is born she becomes invisible to the world and loses her identity— "Emptying out of my mother's belly //Was my first act of disappearance// Learning to shrink for a family //Who likes their daughters invisible //Was the second //The art of being empty Is simple //Believe them when they say //You are nothing //Repeat it to yourself// Like a wish I am nothing I am nothing I am nothing //So often the only reason you know you're still alive is from the heaving of the chest(33)." She calls it—"the art of being empty" which a woman must learn in a male dominated world. Use of small i also shows how insignificant is the woman and being a woman itself means a sinner. "Perhaps i don't deserve nice things //Cause i am paying//For sins i don't remember " (Kaur, The Healing 2015,147) The illustration along with this poem allegorizes it to be the planet earth. Both women and the earth suffer for sins of others. She questions man boldly and out rightly " How do

you turn a forest fire like me //So soft I turn into
Running water (Kaur, *The hurting* 2015, 65).

She believes to be complete and thinks that the idea that woman is incomplete without man must be given up. The same desire of a woman to be individually complete is echoed in the poems of Rupi Kaur as by James Tip tree in her short story "Houston, Houston, Do You Read" She boldly rejects the concept of her emptiness by the belief that woman is complete in herself and needs a man just to complement her. She can alone illuminate the world with her identity "I do not want to have you //To fill the empty parts of me //I want to be full on my own// I want to be so complete// I could light a whole city// And then I want to have you// Cause the two of us combined could set it on fire" (Kaur, *The Loving* 2015, 59). She is a positive iconoclast who tries to break the myth existing for ages that a woman is incomplete without a man— "You are in the habit of co-depending on people to make up for what you think you lack// Who tricked you into believing another person was meant to complete you when the most they can do is complement (154)." She feels proud to be a woman – " I love that about us// How capable we are of feeling// How unafraid we are of breaking// And tend to our wounds with grace just being a woman calling myself a woman// Makes me utterly whole// And complete(169)." She compares the woman with gold who is as pure as the metal since she has great resilience to oppression and torture yet returns it with happiness and love to the world. She most poignantly mentions the plight of women of colour, wherein the body a woman carries reminds her every day of the disasters and abuses she has suffered. The analogy of female body with that of a museum is very striking –"Your body is a museum of natural disasters //Can you grasp how Stunning that is (173).

"Rupi Kaur has successfully managed to deliver difficult perspective and emotions in very short collection of poems. There is a variety both in length and style with the poems. Rupi Kaur's clean and simple illustrations on almost every poem give an edge to the imagination of the reader. "Kaur's medium and her treatment of her subjects are tied to one another. Hers is a voice of the future, which is the instantaneous now. There will be others. But we cannot anticipate them nor mimic them nor know where they lead. (Ali 2017)"A strong theme of self-confidence and finding strength in one's self ran throughout this entire collection—each section builds upon it until it cultivates in the last fourth. Overall, it's a very important satirical message to the society." (Bergthaller 2017)

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