

RUPI KAUR'S POETRY: DECOLONIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM IN NORTH AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Axelle Mariavale¹

Université Le Havre Normandie

Introduction

Published in 2015, *Milk and Honey* was a ground-breaking work in the North American poetry publishing industry. It presented to the general public what can almost be defined as a new popular form of spreading feminist messages. In order to understand the meaning attached to Rupi Kaur's poetry, it is necessary to keep in mind that she was born in 1992 into a Sikh family in India and moved to Canada in her early childhood. Her first collection of poems, *Milk and Honey* was firstly self-published online before being picked up by an editor and eventually made its place on the New York Times Best Seller List for over 77 weeks. Her poetry tackles feminist themes such as the commodification of women's bodies, female sexuality, her experience as a female immigrant as well as more general subjects such as love, heartbreak and mental health. The layout of the poems always follows a similar format: her short and minimalistic poems are accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations. This article will rely on poems that are part of her second collection of poems *The Sun and Her Flowers* published in 2017 to study the feminist implications of her poetry and discuss to what extent she utilises poetry—which is a marginal form of literature in popular culture nowadays—to speak out for women who are placed at the margins of society, both in their ethnic sphere because of their gender and in Western societies because of their race, ethnicity and/or religion. Firstly, this article will endeavour to study how and why her poetry can be considered feminist. Then, it will focus on the particularities of her experience as an Indian-

¹ Étudiante en Master Langues et Sociétés à l'Université Le Havre Normandie et rattachée au Groupe de Recherche Identités et Cultures (GRIC), son mémoire de recherche porte sur la déconstruction des stéréotypes des *Asian Americans* à la télévision américaine actuelle. Intéressée par les questions d'identité et de représentation des diasporas asiatiques en Occident, et plus généralement par les études culturelles et de genre, c'est dans cette direction qu'elle envisage de poursuivre ses études en doctorat.

born poet and the way she connects feminism and her ethnic culture, before finally dealing with the importance of social media in promoting a decolonial and transnational feminism.

“If you have never stood with the oppressed there is still time/ - lift them” (Kaur, 236)

At large, feminism can be defined as the fight for “full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women” (United Nations, 2015). Due to the fact that this movement was firstly initiated and led for long by white women in Western countries, many women of colour have been excluded from it or willingly chose not to join in because they did not feel like feminism was representing their experiences. Although she is a woman of colour, Rupi Kaur’s poetry is not only addressed to women from racial minorities. We argue here that if her poetry has become so successful it is because it impacts a large number of women, either from a racial minority or part of the white dominant culture. Indeed, in the themes she tackles, Rupi Kaur targets patriarchal norms that oppress women in North America. For instance, she denounces the commodification of women’s bodies, oppressive beauty norms and rape culture. With poems such as “their concept of beauty/is manufactured/ I am not/ -human” next to a drawing of women’s bodies on an assembly line, she underlines the connection between the global capitalist and productivist system and the oppression of women’s bodies (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 214). In addition to exposing norms enforced onto women’s bodies, Rupi Kaur also writes about taboo topics such as women’s genitalia and sexuality. In *The Sun and Her Flowers*, she dedicates a whole poem to pubic hair removal, stressing the pain it causes and the shame put on women’s bodies if they do not comply with those norms.²

As well as receiving harsh criticisms for her minimalistic style, she was also accused of trying to appeal to as many people as possible for marketing purposes. In this regard, it could be said that she adheres to a ‘mainstream’ type of feminism, which is often associated with whiteness in Western societies and fails to recognize women of colour’s particular experiences from an intersectional standpoint. Moreover, the fact that Rupi Kaur identifies as a feminist is worth noting because many women of colour who campaign for women’s rights refuse to adhere to the term as a linguistic and political demarcation and accuse it of being associated with white women’s fight. Yet, at the same time, Rupi Kaur defines herself as a “Punjabi-Sikh immigrant woman” and, as we will see, this experience as a female immigrant is a significant part of her poetry (Kassam, 2016). Rather than considering that her approach defends a universalist stance of feminism, it can rather be argued that she operates on a process of identification to welcome as many readers as possible into the conversation. As well as tackling feminist themes mentioned above, she also deals with subjects that appeal to anyone such as love, heartbreak or hope. Thereby, readers identify with what she writes and are led to feel concerned by the feminist issues with which she deals. Besides, a strong part of her poetry is also a call to action to all women, she writes: “they threw us in a pit to end each other/ so they wouldn’t have to/ starved us of space so long/ we had to eat each other to stay alive/ look up look up look up/ to catch them looking down at us/ how can we compete with each other/ when the real monster is too big/ to take down alone” (Kaur, *The Sun and Her*

² See Appendix A

Flowers, 225). She calls for women to unite against the vertical oppression of patriarchy rather than to wallow in horizontal violence between women, which is encouraged by patriarchal norms. Therefore, one can see in Rupi Kaur's approach, an advocacy for a strong solidarity between women. Yet, she does not defend a colourblind sisterhood that would rely on a "common victimization" (bell hooks, 2000). Instead, just like bell hooks, Rupi Kaur defends a solidarity between women that takes into account intersectional prejudices to translate the particularities of women's experiences and therefore include them into the conversation.

"My feminism transcends borders because my identity does" (Valoy, 2015)

Although Rupi Kaur deals with feminist issues that impact women from all races and classes, such as oppressive beauty norms and the commodification of their bodies, some poems are revealing of her experience as a female immigrant and as a female in her ethnic culture. Thus, she addresses women's oppression in Western societies as well as within her community and culture. This is important to note since it is sometimes difficult for women of colour to criticize their own community because there is racial solidarity between men and women against systemic racism. It is worth noting that the poems about her ethnic heritage are seamlessly incorporated in her collection of poems. Since there is not one part dedicated to this topic, the fact that poems about her ethnicity are scattered among poems about other topics can be read as a refusal to mark a separation between her 'ethnic self' and Canadian 'immigrant self'. This is an idea that she exemplifies in *The Sun and Her Flowers* when she describes herself writing that she has "become a bridge between two countries" (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 112). As a result, she brings cultural awareness into the debate. This cultural awareness is vital to the notion of sisterhood developed in the previous part of this article in order to acknowledge women of colour's specific needs and demands so that mainstream feminism does not impose onto them universalist ideas without taking into account their own culture and history. By refusing to separate her two identities, she makes a statement that both of these cultures are part of her and of her experience, which unsettles the construction of Asian immigrants as perpetual foreigners in North America. In that sense, one identity does not invalidate the other but they appear as complimentary—hence the relevance of defining this form of feminism as 'transnational'. Transnational feminism endeavours to defend both immigrant women in their host society and women's rights in their heritage country and to expose how cultural, racial and sexual differences articulate with colonial history to sustain oppression (Beverley, 2010).

Rupi Kaur's conception of identity can be noticed in her poetry because it is pervaded by her Punjabi heritage. As stated before, she has been criticized for the simplicity of her poetry. Yet, there is a political statement made in this process. Indeed, the fact that she does not use capital letters and rarely uses punctuation signs is an ode to Punjabi, her native language (Vansyngel, 2018). Her minimalist style is also a political statement in terms of accessibility for non-educated people. There is a commonly-held stereotype about immigrants, and more particularly Asian immigrants, that characterizes them as poor English speakers. Although this obviously cannot be generalized to all immigrants, Rupi Kaur explicitly wants to make her poems accessible to anyone, especially women like her mother

who arrived in North America speaking broken English. Therefore, her poetic style that is sometimes qualified as an unrefined stream of consciousness can in fact be read as a strong political statement because it is a tribute to her Punjabi culture and a way of conveying feminist messages to many immigrant women who, for socio-economic reasons, may not be able to have access to academic papers on feminism.

Beside her style, the themes tackled in her collections of poems also directly deal with feminist issues within the South Asian community, either in South Asia or in its diaspora. For instance, she refers to her ancestors with a short poem: “I am the product of all the ancestors getting together/ and deciding these stories need to be told” with a drawing of women whispering to one another dressed in traditional Indian clothing, underlining the necessity for her to pass down that heritage (Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 190). There is one particularly meaningful poem that is an ode to “beautiful brown girl” in which she once again denounces oppressive beauty norms but this time ascribed to women of colour’s bodies.³ She underlines that those women are said to be ugly because they are classified as different from white beauty norms because of their “hyperpigmentation”, “unibrow”, “vagina”, and “dark circles”. In her poem, she takes those traits and redefines them as beautiful. This redefinition is all the more significant as it is not a discourse that is often heard in mainstream discourse.

In that way, not only does her poetry entitle women of colour to be beautiful, but it also calls into question the system’s definition of beauty and its connection to white physical traits deeply embedded in public discourse. Another poem directly focuses on the South Asian community in Canada, called ‘2012’, it goes: “twelve hospitals in the toronto area/refuse to reveal a baby’s gender to expecting families/until the thirtieth week of pregnancy/all twelve hospitals are located in areas with high south asian immigrant populations/ *-female infanticide| female feticide*”.⁴ This poem almost sounds like a news report and gives the impression that Rupri Kaur is only reporting facts. Once again, one can read in that a desire to bring cultural awareness on the issues that impact the South Asian community in Canada, to encourage readers to question themselves and get knowledgeable on this particular matter (Yeung, 2015). This societal issue is especially topical in Canada where several medical studies have recommended the implementation of a “disclose sex only after 30 weeks” policy to prevent sex-selective abortions, targeting principally women from Indian and Chinese communities (Kale, 2012; Thiele & Leier, 2010). This process of tackling specific issues is also what characterizes transnational feminism that is defined by some “as a series of feminisms addressing particular issues and not one uniform movement” (Valoy, 2015). Therefore, by seamlessly incorporating her experience as an Indian immigrant woman among poems about non-specific feminist issues, about love and other topics, her particularities as a woman of colour enters the public arena and does not appear as a fight outside of it. This is also a strong statement in terms of identity stating that her identity as Canadian immigrant and her ethnic identity are not separable, which debunks the stereotype that Asian immigrants are either completely assimilated in the Model Minority myth or not assimilable at all.

³ See Appendix B

⁴ See Appendix C

Consequently, one cannot accuse Rupi Kaur of subscribing to an exclusively-white form of feminism since her poems can be read as a way of spreading educational content about the South Asian community in Canada. She encourages readers to acquire knowledge on racial minorities' specific culture by providing small pieces of information and more or less overt references to their home country and culture.

“Poetry questions who has the authority to put their narrative forward, when it is written by people who don’t otherwise hold this power” (Ferguson, 2019)

When it comes to analysing the success of Rupi Kaur’s feminist poetry, it is necessary to take into account the important role of social media. Indeed, Rupi Kaur firstly started to share her poems on Instagram and she firstly gained media attention thanks to this platform. In 2015, she shared a picture of herself, lying on her bed with her pants and her bedsheets stained with menstrual blood, which was captioned “the patriarchy is leaking”. Although it included nothing sexually explicit, Instagram censored it for pornography, causing a public outcry on social media where many women denounced the taboo around menstruations. Since that day, her community online kept growing and has reached more than 3.5 million followers. Even though she is now a published writer, Rupi Kaur keeps posting her poems directly on her Instagram page. This can be seen as another political statement to make her poems accessible to as many people as possible. Her choice to write simplistic poetry is in keeping with this free sharing of her poems because people from any socio-economic background can have access to her poems online. It is even more important for women of colour since their economic status is often lower, as a result of systemic racism (Fisher, 2015). It is even more relevant to appeal to young people who may not have financial autonomy to buy her book. Rupi Kaur’s poetry participates in conveying feminist ideas that are easy to understand and accessible to all and particularly to those who may not bear interest in poetry. It is thus relevant, both in terms of marketing and in terms of political ideology, because she breaks barriers between readers and feminist ideas and poetry.

Furthermore, Rupi Kaur is part of a trend on social media around reviving poetry—nicknamed the ‘Instapoets’. Poetry is often perceived as an elitist form of literature that is constructed as being apart from popular culture because of its alleged superiority. With her simplistic style that does not follow rhyme schemes or rhythm patterns, she renegotiates this form of writing that has become marginal so that everyone feels entitled to read it—including marginalized groups such as women of colour and immigrants. At the same time, since her poems have become very popular on social media, she paves the way for more stories from and about women of colour in the public arena. Through this process, feminist claims and demands for cultural respect and awareness can be voiced. Since social media are particularly impactful on younger generations, it can lead young feminists and young people in general to question about the place immigrants have in North America at large and about the necessity to take into account cultural differences in order to understand what has come to be defined as the ‘Other’ before imposing what the dominant culture believes is right for women from ethnic minorities. One can thus see that Rupi Kaur’s poetry is not limited to a narrow group of elites and neither is feminism since here it is addressed to all. Her approach is also revealing of the hardships women of colour have to make their voices heard in the traditional publishing

industry of North America. Yet, thanks to the still-growing influence of the Internet, social media can be used as a powerful tool to share their experiences and bring them into the public arena. She demonstrates that neither poetry nor feminism are restricted to limited groups of people, and makes a statement that it is by bringing this issue into the mainstream sphere that there can be a real debate about race and gender taking into account people from ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

Rather than providing strictly literary analyses of her poems, this paper tried to demonstrate that Rupi Kaur's poetry is helpful in understanding new dynamics in our contemporary society. Her feminist poetry is particularly powerful because it is inclusive, yet it does not adopt a colourblind stance. The fact that she brings her ethnic culture into the public arena by refusing to dissociate her identity into two parts is a strong political statement. On numerous occasions in her poetry, the emphasis is put on her biculturality. This notion unsettles the social construction of immigrant as either perpetually foreign or completely assimilated in order to belong. Thereby, she deconstructs stereotypes ascribed to immigrants. Her combination of feminism and her ethnicity brings cultural awareness into the feminist debate and into popular culture. The accessibility of her works is crucial in order to understand the reach of the messages she wants to convey. By defending a strong solidarity between women, but insisting that it should not be a colourblind one, she adopts an intersectional approach and makes it easily understandable to the general public thanks to her minimalistic style.

There are nonetheless some downsides in her works that are linked to her writing style. Indeed, her poems tackle complex notions in feminist thought but tend to stay on the surface of the problem without providing in-depth explanations, which may be necessary to understand such topics. Yet, her poems should rather be seen as a way of starting a conversation about complex feminist and racial issues and should not be debased because, thanks to her success in popular culture and social media, her poetry opens the door on feminism and cultural awareness to younger generations who may feel welcome in joining the debate. Beyond her collections of poems, Rupi Kaur is a strong figure in terms of representation due to her influential presence on social media. For instance, she promotes the works of Indian designers and artists. Thanks to that, she participates in acknowledging Indian culture and bringing cultural awareness to fight against oppressive stereotypes and preconceived ideas. Rupi Kaur thus appears as a powerful writer by bringing decolonial and transnational feminism into popular culture through her use of a marginal form of writing to give a voice to women who have long been kept at the margins in Western societies.

References

- BEVERLEY, Andrea. *Grounds for Telling It: Transnational Feminism and Canadian Women's Writing*. PhD dissertation, Université de Montréal, 2010.
- FERGUSON, Donna. "Poetry Sales Soar as Political Millennials Search for Clarity". *The Guardian*, 21 Jan. 2019.
- FISHER, Milia. "Women of Color and the Gender Wage Gap". *Center for American Progress*, 14 April 2015.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.
- KALE, Rajendra. "'It's a Girl!' — Could Be a Death Sentence". *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Vol. 184, n° 4, Mar. 2012.
- KASSAM, Ashifa. 'Rupi Kaur: 'There Was No Market for Poetry about Trauma, Abuse and Healing''. *The Guardian*, 26 Aug. 2016.
- KAUR, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015.
- . *The Sun and Her Flowers*. Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017.
- MOHANTY, Chandra Talpade. "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America". *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, Asian Women United of California (eds). Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- MORGAN, Robin. *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. New York: Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1996.
- RAVI, Anusha. "Gender and Reproductive Health Justice for South Asian Immigrant Communities". *South Asian Americans Leading Together*, 17 Nov. 2016.
- THIELE, Allison T., and Brendan LEIER. "Towards an Ethical Policy for the Prevention of Fetal Sex Selection in Canada". *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*, Vol. 32, n° 1, Jan. 2010.
- UNITED NATIONS. "Gender Equality". *United Nations*, 16 Dec. 2015.
- OUR SHARED SHELF GROUP. "Emma Watson Interviews Rupi Kaur for Our Shared Shelf". *YouTube* video, 5 September 2018.
- VALOY, Patricia. "Transnational Feminism: Why Feminist Activism Needs to Think Globally". *Everyday Feminism*, 28 Jan. 2015.
- VANSYNGEL, Margo. « La poésie connaît un coup de jeune grâce à Rupi Kaur ». *L'Echo*, 31 Oct. 2018.
- YEUNG, Myriam. "How Asian American women became the target of anti-abortion activism". *The Washington Post*, 4 November 2015.

APPENDIX A

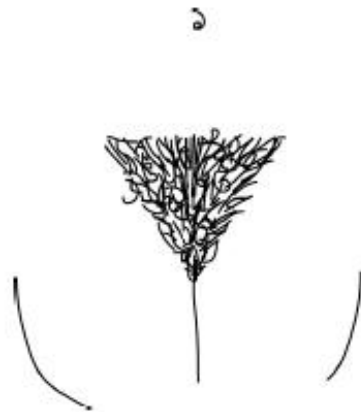
Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 75.

places the head of the machine on my pubic bone
and just like that it begins
the hair follicles around
my clitoris begin burning
with each zap
i wince
shivering with pain

why do i do this
why do i punish my body
for being exactly as it's meant to be
i stop myself halfway through the regret
when i think of him and how
i'm too embarrassed to show him
unless it's clean

i bite down on my lip
and ask if we're almost finished

- *basement aesthetician*



APPENDIX B

Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 197.

beautiful brown girl
your thick hair is a mink coat not all can afford
beautiful brown girl
your skin can't help but carry as much sun as possible
i know you hate the hyperpigmentation
but you are a magnet for the light
carrying as much sun as possible
you are a magnet for the light
unibrow—the bridging of two worlds
vagina—so much darker than the rest of you
it is trying to hide a gold mine
you will have dark circles too early
appreciate the halos
beautiful brown girl
you pull god out of their bellies

- rupi kaur

APPENDIX C

Kaur, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, 138.

2012

twelve hospitals in the toronto area
refuse to reveal a baby's gender to expecting families
until the thirtieth week of pregnancy
all twelve hospitals are located in areas with high south asian immigrant
populations

- *female infanticide* | *female feticide*

