
The Subaltern's Voices in the *Rupi Kaur's* Selected Poems: A Reflection of Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Poetry becomes Rupi Kaur's way of expressing her feelings based on her self-experiences. The young Indian 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 of multicultural education. The research was a qualitative utilizing Spivak's Subaltern theory. It was found that Kaur was the victim of hatred by the Sikh tribe who then immigrated to Canada. By living in a new environment, Kaur who previously dominated in her origin country tries to speak up about her bitter experiences and trauma, being raped by her uncle and determined by all men to keep silent in the poem. The poem then becomes media for educating and encouraging people, especially women, to have bravery in facing their trauma and speak to the public to heal the wound. Unfortunately, Kaur's way of speaking up leads to Western cultural representation. The hegemonic practice of Western culture unconsciously penetrates Kaur's way of thinking. All in all, the subaltern woman cannot be apart from the determination.

Keywords

Hegemonic practice, migration, representation, *Rupi Kaur*, western culture

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Introduction

Poetry is an act of meditation, improvisation, and exploration, and urgency is what guides the writer into the poetic journey (van Rooyen & 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 on 4 October 1992, emigrated to Canada at a young age with her family. 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 on her website, rupikaur.com, that Punjabi is written in either *Shabmukhi* 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. Kaur puts on her life story in her poetry books *Milk and Honey*, *be Sun and Her Flowers*, *Home Body*. All the poems are related to one another. It has the primary storytelling of a woman's journey in life (Tarigan et al., 2020). Her work touches on love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration. Moreover, Kaur, in *Home Body*, digs deeper life of racism, classification/capitalism, and oppression.

Born in a Sikh family, she had been separated from her father before she was born, due to hate crimes against Sikh men, following the 1984 Sikh genocide tragedy in India. Then she followed later at four years old with her mother to Canada. Kaur recalls her father leaving hastily 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 and it had long-lasting effects. Kaur and her mother were told to be silent. When Kaur tried to speak up, her father and other men in her life would shut her down. Because of her poems about women at most, Kaur becomes famous as a feminist. Several research and journals discussed Rupi Kaur's poems using a feminist approach. Hagman (2020) 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.

In addition, Kaur's word selection of her poetry has been analyzed by Saddiah and Tarihoran (2021). It discusses the intrinsic and extrinsic elements found in the poems. Furthermore, Hussain and Ali (2021) carried out research on Kaur's *Home Body* as a reaction to the patriarchal mechanism of society, where women have always been subjugated, suppressed, and surpassed by men. Adapting feminism by Beauvoir, the research reveals women in postmodern/postcolonial India are marginalized based on their gender. This research tries to reveal different perspectives of Rupi Kaur's selected poems by analyzing the Subaltern's voice portrayed in them. Subaltern is a term conceived by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who 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). As an immigrant, Kaur adopts the western point of view. She applies hegemonic practice that delivers the question 'does Kaur 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. A view of multicultural education as something that exclusively addresses 'minorities', either as groups inequitably excluded from social access or as a positive presence, however, has its limitations and difficulties (Kalantzis & Cope, 1998).

Literature Review

Analyzing Kaur's voices shout in the poetry books, the condition refers to subaltern theory. This theory is popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written in 1988. Subaltern means the people of inferior rank or status. It refers to the populations that are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and colonial homeland. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. They are marginalized and oppressed people, made in different ways and different from general people (Saadila et al., 2021).

Spivak laid stress on the gendered subaltern – woman, who undergoes oppression doubly inflicted by both colonial legacy and patriarchy in the third world countries (Rahman, 2015). Spivak, in this essay, wants to end the oppression and exploitation of subaltern women (Muama & Mustofa, 2022). If Spivak's chief concern can be summarized as a wariness of the limitations of cultural studies, what is particularly interesting about her engagement with the postcolonial predicament is the uneasy marriage of marxism, feminism, and deconstruction that underlies her critical work.

Subalterns become a continuous issue around the world. Migration to another region or country creates a new minority in the host place, especially when the host country has very different ethnic and cultures. Multicultural education is proposed to overcome the cross-cultural effect appears. A vital goal of multicultural education is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality (Banks, 1993). Further, its paramount goal is to give both male and female students an equal chance to experience educational success and mobility. Delivering 'equal intellectuals', Spivak briefly invokes Gramsci's Subaltern theory concern 'with the intellectual's role in the subaltern's cultural and political movement into hegemony.

The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, how can the people's consciousness be touched, even as their politics are investigated? With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak? (Williams & Chrisman, 1994). The domination of western culture exists, as can be seen in one of the subaltern theory issues, feminism, which is a theoretical ideology that emerged from the western world (Hussain & Ali, 2021). The term 'feminism' begins in US and Europe in the

late century of 19th as a political party that fights for women's suffrage and defend other rights in society (Siregar et al., 2020).

Methodology

The method used in this research is qualitative. This method does not involve numbers or numerical data. It involves words or language pictures, photographs, and observations. Qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The research process involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. This design focuses on data collection, analysis, and writing. However, it originates out of disciplines and flows throughout the research process (e.g., types of problems and ethical issues of importance) (Creswell, 2014).

This qualitative method is used by identifying subaltern theory contained in the data, especially the main object of this research which are selected poems from three of Rupi Kaur's poetry books *Milk and Honey*, *the Sun and Her Flowers* *Home Body*. To strengthen the research, some supporting data are needed from sources such as journals, books, articles, video reviews, and interviews. Those all data will be analyzed and elaborated further to draw a conclusion answering the problems of this research.

The research object

The object of the research is 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*, *Home Body*. The first book was a self-published poetry book in 2014. The second and third poetry books follow were in 2017 and 2020 and printed by the publishing company. There are 71 poems from those three poetry books selected to be researched by using Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory approach to reveal the subaltern woman's voices in them.

Techniques for collecting the data

The research data is collected through multi-methods and sources 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*, *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 research and the approach. Firstly, to dig for the meaning of the poems and learn the author's life story, the researchers read all three poetry books and the Subaltern theory to understand and comprehend the ideas. The poems then are determined and classified based on the subaltern issues found. 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.

Techniques for analyzing the data

In analyzing data, the researcher is focused on the oppression, struggle, racism, and gender classification consisting of selected poems of *Milk and Honey*, the Sun and Her Flowers and Home Body poetry books by Rupi Kaur. The researchers use the 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*, *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 to strengthen the research analysis until finally concluding the research.

Findings

The three Rupi Kaur's poetry books were written in a similar style, beginning with a chapter feeling of pain as a general feminine feeling in an amoral relationship. It starts with a self-abusive approach, goes through some remedial measures, and finally reaches a state of acceptance and relief. The book attempts to communicate about most common female experiences by women in different roles as daughter, lover, mother, and most important woman (Islam, 2020).

Misinterpretation of love as a 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 like a pit stop for men. They might come and go as they please as stated in a *welcome* poem,

*“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 a woman's oppression and determination from a man, especially in her eastern original culture, India. By disclosing the story of her life, her parents, and her ancestors, Kaur's poems aim to create a sense of solidarity among her readers, who might be able to grasp the power of being united against inequality and injustice. Freedom of belief as Sikhs deprived and capitalism in the hierarchy of social life experienced by her parents and fired her to voice it out loud. Readers' response even being

the trigger, pulls her to voice it bigger and louder. These comments on writing are suggestive of her writings in verses as well. Kaur's poetry is so popular that a 'brand' like the image of her poetry gets formulated (Deka, 2000).

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

The poem above in *The Sun and Her Flower* page 223 on the other hand, proposes a change of the way of thinking against East culture that considers the 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 to all women.

Therefore, Kaur, in line with feminist thought, is also challenging the idea of dualism which has been typical of Western thought (Masini, 2019). Having been raised in Canada by a Punjabi family, Kaur might have experienced a lack of consistency and coherence between her parents' teachings and beliefs and those of her newly adopted culture, originating uncertainties about the uncovering and understanding of her 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' which means from the colored-skin women to all skin color women, including white, West. The west's belief is better than the east, is also portrayed in her poems. Some poems tell the beauty standard is white-centered, and she represents the minority colored-skin and hairy girls, trying many attempts to look like the majority as the standard, the white one.

Meanwhile, her family's deep dark life has been 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 must follow the host country's system where in this case, they are the peasants, the low workers, and the subaltern.

Discussion

Sikh was banned in India. 1984 remains one of the darkest years in modern Indian history. The conflict began in October 31, 1984, when Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. Her assassination catalyzed 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 houses of worship known as *Gurdwaras*, women were raped, and homes and stores were burned down to ash (Singh, 1999).

Like the United States, the Canadian government also liberalized its migration policy in the 1960s. This change has created a chain migration procedure. The Sikh Diaspora is based on the painful drive or “separation of people from their country of origin. The Indian state has killed more than 200,000 Sikhs in the last 20 years without hope for predictable justice (Jathol, 2019). To survive, Rupi Kaur’s father, a Sikh man, moved to Canada as a refugee. She followed at four years old with other family members.

At the age of five, Kaur was raped by her uncle. The trauma of sexual abuse experienced brought long-lasting effects on her. Kaur and her mother, as women, had no right to speak out, protest, or argue even with her family members. They were forced to be silent by the men. Keeping the trauma, Kaur faced more trouble in the new country. Different languages 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 is her partner in sharing, and the poems are the result. The poems written in her poetry books then become her life story. Those poems are 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 women, and many illustrations of the naked woman’s body support it. Female body- an important topic of feminist subject matter- gets introduced here as a property of the patriarchal male to dictate its fulfillment. Female subjectivity in sexuality is also evaluated in

terms of love, sex, and rape. In another poem, 'the art of being empty' on *Milk and Honey* page 33, the insult to the female self that her physical existence is considered something very shameful (Islam, 2020).

Rape is not the only one causing her trauma. Masini (2019) 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 shows the situation in which women are overwhelmed by the pressure of patriarchal societal norms, sexual abuse in a family environment that causes mental trauma at such young ages, and social pressure and expectations towards women that become oppression against women (Adzkiya et al., 2022). The traditional mind of male-dominant societies considers women a machine for giving birth to their babies. They are handled as a tool for their sexual desires (Hussain & Ali, 2021).

Kaur's poems, such as *welcome* and many others, were considered provocative by many readers and critics. However, 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 women's oppression, Rupi Kaur stands as an outspoken vocal for the rights of women in a patriarchal mood of society. She declares the culture around her as rigid and biased in terms of gender. The patriarchal mechanism even does not leave the mind of women free. She stands against women's discrimination and misbehavior done to them. The poetry books represent Rupi Kaur as a valid advocate for women. She is a woman who stands liberally and equally against males and challenges them through her art, literature, and literary manners (Hussain & Ali, 2021).

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

Capitalism is hierarchical (Pardede, 2020). No matter how hard they work, immigrants and minorities will not be respected or valuable. Though it is hard for them, what they can do is only fall into the system to stay alive. The subalterns could never understand the power game and hegemonic policies of elites and their supporters. They just obeyed and considered them as their well-wishers, and they ruled over these downtrodden people (Saadia et al., 2021).

Publishing poems to represent Subaltern's voices, Rupi Kaur meanwhile reflects western culture. When a 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

considers both perspectives of her country of origin and that of her adoptive one (Masini, 2019).

In Kaur's case, this second view of cultural identity makes clear why she is struggling with finding her identity because identity is not something that you can just read about and understand. It does not come with explanations in books, as it does not only come with precise facts. recognizing oneself and one's native culture becomes much more complicated when you must deal with other cultures and other ways of living, especially when they do not seem to be like your original one.

Since Canada is Kaur's host country, multicultural education supports her western way of thinking. Helping her survive by learning and adapting to the culture, Kaur is indeed breaking tradition which means that she is modifying her cultural identity step by step. Thus, cultural identity might at first seem to be something stable and fixed by strict rules but, on the contrary, cultural identity is in a continuous process of change and redefinition. Yet, the possibility of bringing deeper changes to one's cultural identity comes together with the struggle of identifying one's self since dealing with two or more cultures and their expectations might result in a feeling of non-belonging to either one culture or the other.

Thus, when people migrate, it is natural that identities, perspectives, and viewpoints may change along with the change in one's social and cultural environment. Indeed, with her poetry, Kaur celebrates the freedom of expressing one's culture and especially accepting yourself for who you are, even though this might imply disregarding the cultural practices of your original culture in favor of those of your adoptive one and vice versa. Hegemonic dominance is never fixed, just like cultural identity. Kaur is aiming at binding together all those who are in search of freedom and equality. The poet often addresses women in her poetry, specifically women of color, as they constitute a minority in minority. Not only do they face inequality because of their gender but also because of their skin color.

With the hope of helping others who might find themselves in a similar situation, Kaur creates a sense of communality in her poems when she speaks about diaspora, abuse, and daily issues, such as her break-up. Those who share the same or similar traumatic experiences are likely to feel relieved when they become aware that others have gone through what they have gone through in the first place since this shows that trauma can reach anyone, even though minorities are especially, being fragile parts of society. At the same time, she is helping her readers who might identify themselves with her story, and it creates a communal sense of solidarity between the author and her readers (Masini, 2019).

Calling other women 'sisters' as represented in the *Home Body*, page 166 points out the familial type of support that Kaur is willing to demonstrate to other women, which she shows to the public through the same poetry. 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 concern instead of only her colored-skin women as a minority. It becomes difficult to identify the persona separately from the whole race of women with whom she expressed her sorority. This sorority is central to her identity and liberation. Her voice turns from local to universal (Islam, 2020). Her poetry becomes a representative voice of the readerly thirst for mass (Deka, 2000).

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 usually operated through ideological and ethical inclinations to the dominated group, and in Spivak's perspective, a subaltern group is a group whose voices are always represented, while the representation is only a tool for 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, 2020).

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 and 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, teaches women to be silent and act under men's orders, her new country, Canada, shows her the freedom to speak out and face others, both men and women, a western culture.

Feminism, gendered classification, hegemony, and capitalism from Subaltern theory, are found in many of Kaur's poems in her poetry books. She successfully tells readers about her life experiences before and after her migration. Meanwhile, she succeeds in 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 encounters. Rather than centering one's culture on the world or trying to equalize, another theory, Bhabha, in his perspective, proposes the 'Third Space', a result of *hybridity*, a new space of transcultural forms. Continuing this research, Bhabha's third space theory is recommended as the approach to further interesting research on a cultural mix.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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