



## Abstract

Rupi Kaur, a young instapoet, performer and author of *Milk and Honey* (2015), *The Sun and her Flowers* (2017) and *Home Body*(2020), catapulted to undreamt-off fame on social and live platform with her poems. Her interviews on popular shows are a proof of her wide readership. Short, simple, screenshotable, her poems connect to a huge audience. The reception of her writing swings to both extremes of acceptance and also criticism for minimalism, lack of conventional poetic process and style. However the poems are a reflection of the changing trends in poetry-reading and the upswing in sales is something that cannot be ignored. The fact that it has brought poetry to mainstream is significant to make it worth studying. This article looks at her first collection of poems *Milk and Honey* from the point of view of Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory. According to the principal of the iceberg, seven-eighths of an iceberg is submerged in water. In a similar way, only one-eighth of poetry is described by the poet while layers of experience remain hidden in the archives of the mind. Hemingway feels that a good writer, consciously omits details. Beyond the words are multiple structures of beliefs, values, biases, fears and so on. This article looks into the depths beyond the simplicity in the poems of Rupi Kaur.

**KEY WORDS:** Instapoetry, Iceberg Theory

## Understanding Rupī Kaur's Milk and Honey through Hemingway's Iceberg Theory

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Rupī Kaur, the Instagram sensation who broke records with her 'screenshotable' and unpretentious but bold, honest and intense poems, written in lower case without punctuations and illustrated with doodles and drawings has escalated poetry to new heights in sales and brought it back to mainstream reading. Her first book *milk and honey* was self-published in 2015 followed by *the sun and her flowers* (2017) and *home body* (2020). She is a new voice in the kind of 'scrolling literature' found nowadays on social media that appeals to the younger generation, for being easy to read and yet retaining the depth of meaning. Huffington Post states, "reading the (Kaur's) book, is like getting the hug you need on a rainy day, the catharsis you crave after a tragedy." Her originality and strength is not just in the content but also the medium. She has redefined poetry as a transformative subgenre where there is a creative blend of art and literature, a harmony of visual, auditory, verbal and non-verbal communication which is complimented by her public performances, interviews and book reading sessions which is the cause of high energy transfer between the artist and the audience. The themes of love, loss, trauma, womanhood, self-discovery, acceptance of life and pain, resonate with the readers on a global level. However she has also drawn criticism from the traditionalists for poetry that defies rules of poetic process and for being too short, simple and consumable.

Instapoetry written by Rupī Kaur, Atticus, Lang Leav, RM Drake and rH Sin that fall under the category of popular poetry has been dismissed as 'filtered reflection of an anxious generation scrambling for distraction' (Roberts 2018) or poetry that lacks a 'kind of canonical weighting demanded by figures such as Harold Bloom, or appeals to the literary tastes of the critics and academics who act as cultural gatekeepers' (Miller 2019). It is 'dubbed as simplistic, or trying too hard to attain modernist obscurity' (Jindal 2017) and according to scholar McQuillan David, it violates certain aesthetic expectations about what poetry ought to be in order to deserve the title of a work of art.

This article attempts to examine Rupī Kaur's direct and accessible writing strategy as a disruption of aesthetic legacy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the main reason for dismissal of her work.

In his scholarly research, David refers to Leonard Diepeveen's *The Difficulties of Modernism* which argues that 'difficulty' in modernist literature plays an essential role in the formation of the modern canon by acting as the ticket to high culture. He quotes Iris Yaron, conducting a cognitive study in relation to difficulty in poetry, who claimed that since the last 150 years, difficulty and poetry have become intertwined. Literary criticism tends to celebrate texts that possess qualities that generate a degree of interpretative difficulty. Kaur's works have a lack of difficulty; it has a simplicity which is central to it and an accessibility to a wider global audience than most poetry. So does this popularity have anything to do with changing trends in the reading public? Should the custodians of literary culture reject a text on grounds of simplicity? Does her sensational success depend only on consumerism and have nothing to do with the poetic value of her work? Does the apparent simplicity also lack depth? Are her works 'superficial' and 'ephemeral' due to its minimalism?

In *Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility: The Subversive Simplicity of Rupi Kaur's milk and honey*, McQuillan David explains that 'simplicity' describes the text and is the opposite of complexity and accessibility is the reader's ability to engage with the meaning of a text. Simplicity has as its central attributes, the qualities of purity, pleasure, authenticity, sincerity, directness and open rawness. As a poetic strategy it appears to lack skill, eloquence, density and weight. Kaur's poems have simple language, straightforward syntax, intelligible structure and natural images. It does not have difficulty that blocks reading; infact it can be read in a sitting. It does not have what Diepeveen enumerates, as the aspects of difficulty like; lexical obscurity, use of rare words, syntactical complexity, non-conventional vocabulary, neologisms, archaisms, jargons, ambiguous writing, contortions, extreme typographic deviances or private allusions. The Stanford Daily opines that 'poetry should not feel like an easy read but an intellectual and emotional journey, one that has checkpoints, setbacks, riddles. Poetry, through its line breaks and symbols and rhymes, enables us to stretch language to its fullest capacity, to let it enter into realms unfathomable and strange and, ultimately, beautiful.' ( Paik 2017) So considering this as an inherent concept supporting literariness, Kaur would be found lacking and this has led to the wide scandal around her. But I would like to show how her simple style also has depth and intensity just like her photographs that artistically reveal a natural and minimalistic look. This is her style through which she has connected to her audience; by being truthful and fearless.

Here I would like to discuss her work *milk and honey* as a deep and intense expression that has myriad channels to bring out the depth of human emotions, including words, illustrations, posts, recitals, interviews, social media presence and talks. Kaur uses every known form of public space to reach out to her audience. Considered as ‘poetry’s Beyoncé’ (Roy 2018), ‘authentic, intensely personal’ poet speaking truth to power ‘in a literary scene that is overwhelmingly white’ (Giovanni 2017), Kaur is said to be a unique propellant of poetry that is in the midst of a renaissance driven by Instapoets. Kruger asserts that in sharing space ‘Kaur also connects to cyberspatial sisterhoods, demonstrating that healing through narrative is always necessarily collective.’ Her Instagram page is filled with her posts and pictures of herself. She performs her poems to a spellbound audience and has a huge fan following. The convergence of art, literature, performance and digital space enable her to explore emotional depth and connect with the readers and audience and thereby create a wholesome and holistic experience of poetry never reached before.

I would like to discuss here Ernest Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory or the theory of omission suggesting that ‘sometimes in literature, less is more’. In 1923, Hemingway conceived of the idea of a new theory of writing where he compares writing to an iceberg. In *The Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway says, “If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate, it only strengthens the iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show.’ Hemingway’s biographer Carlos Baker believed that as a writer of short stories Hemingway learned “how to get the most from the least, how to prune language and avoid waste motion, how to multiply intensities, and how to tell nothing but the truth in a way that allowed for telling more than the truth.” Baker also notes that the writing style of the “iceberg theory” suggests that a story’s narrative and nuanced complexities, complete with symbolism, operate under the surface of the story itself.

According to this theory, the seemingly simple style focusses on the surface elements without explicitly discussing the underlying things. The submerged elements are the deep value systems, beliefs, fears, prejudices and intense life experiences. It is true that art presents the hidden and unspoken aspects of reality. So the question is whether there is beyond the simplicity of Kaur's poems also emotions as deep as an iceberg. I would like to probe, if underneath the entirely coherent language, there is a dimension that is unseen. It is indeed undebatable that her poems are personal and autobiographical and experiences of the world around her. She tries to articulate feelings of her entire life, as stated by the poem on the back of the cover page, and this journey of life is submerged beneath the words of the poem.

this is the journey of

surviving through poetry

this is the blood sweat tears

of twenty-one years

this is my heart

in your hands

this is

the hurting

the loving

the breaking

the healing

This is the journey of a 21 year old, who moved from India to Canada with her parents and went through the diasporic experience and coming to terms with it through poetry. Kaur has described how she began to share her writing largely because she was ‘tired of being quiet’ (Spencer 2015). She is a poet of the heart who feels things to the bones, whether they are good or bad experiences. She follows her mother’s dictum given to her at the age of 5, along with a paint brush, ‘draw your heart out’. She states in her introduction paragraph ‘about the author’, ‘rupi kaur views her life as the exploration of that artistic journey’.

She says in one of her interviews, ‘I want to put words to feelings we have trouble putting into words...Like the breath before the kiss, I want to make the mundane beautiful’. Submerged in her simple words is the high regard for writing and artistic expression. She speaks about the poetic process, ‘Freewriting. Rewriting. Enlarging. Copying. Pasting. Until I stop. Until it feels like I’ve gotten out everything that needs to be written and then I will put it away’. Writing for her is like birthing or lovemaking and there is a sensuousness to it.

my heartbeat quickens at

the thought of birthing poems

which is why i will never stop

opening myself up to conceive them

the lovemaking

to the words

is so erotic

i am either in love

or in lust with

the writing

or both (200)

Shobha De, the bold Indian novelist also makes a similar comparison in *Selective Memory*,

‘For a woman, a book in progress is like a secret lover she has to hide from her family. Steal time to go back to.

Dream about. Luxuriate in. Fantasize about.....My existence is consumed by the act itself.’ Kaur describes luxuriant romantic relationships with intensity. There is a raw honesty about the poems. Love is an intense and deep feeling that defies complete articulation. Its depth and range are so indescribable that a poet can never fully articulate its dimensions and often language falls short to express the precise emotion of the moment. Poets therefore use analogies, metaphors, allusions, images and symbols to describe the feeling. For Kaur it is a complete sensual experience as she feels that love is an art on the mind and body. She writes, ‘i’m your favourite book/ don’t you dare leave/ a single word untouched/..... we pull language out of one another’(77), ‘you make music out of me’ (71), ‘my name sounds so good/ french kissing your tongue’ (70), ‘the very thought of you/ has my legs spread apart/ like an easel with a canvass/ begging for art’ (57). Illustrations of the harp, easel, dance, fire, the human body are again used to express love in a way that it is not obscene or vulgar. She chooses the analogy of art for love and where the borders merge is unknown. Some poems are just a line but have an epigrammatic touch to it and for a reader leaves a lot to be imagined.

Similarly, taboo topics like female desire, the liberated female body, honesty of female experience of menstruation, masturbation and intercourse are like an iceberg. Kaur subtly talks about these issues while knowing that deep within it is all about shaking accepted societal norms, fears and prejudices. It is trying to find a voice for things not talked of before. She finds



words to define things that are difficult to define, the minuteness of the hurt experienced in relationships, hollowness of an exploitative relation, male dominance in the family, dysfunctional family, alcoholic father, naivette of young girls who fall prey to abusive men, and the dichotomy of sex and love, marital rape, subordinate status of women in families. She brings up the submerged and repressed feelings of suffocating silence, fear, rage and hurt in the first section ‘hurting’. Many of the poems are ironic in nature,

you were so afraid

of my voice

i decided to be

afraid of it too (17)

if i knew what

safety looked like

i would have spent

less time falling into

arms that were not (21)

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 (35)

Alyson Miller states that ‘Kaur’s emphasis on voicelessness highlights a persistent muting of women, while the portrayal of a denial of speech-acts suggests an insistence on female absence, particularly from public or social spaces’ Further she contends that the imposition of female silence is exposed as a violence of patriarchy, through which male domination might be secured, and women disappeared into nothingness.(4) Kaur frequently addresses the beauty myths which seek to control and contain women, especially in relation to body hair and body shaming, ‘the next time he/ points out the/ hair on your legs is/ growing back remind/ that boy your body/ is not his home’(165) and the taboo around a woman’s periods,

it is okay to sell what’s

between a woman’s legs

more than it is okay to

mention its inner working

the recreational use of

this body is seen as

beautiful while

its nature is

seen as ugly (177)

She uses Irony as a means of speaking about injustice that is not governed by laws or rules. The violence which is within the closed walls, is at times so intense that ‘even in a bed full of safety we are afraid’(36). The fear is so deep rooted, she says, ‘i flinch when you touch me/ i fear it is him’ (41). She further talks about women of colour, ‘our backs /tell stories /no books have the spine to carry’ (171)

How does she express depth with simplicity? There appears a Wordsworthian adherence to natural expression where habitual reflection and imagination deepen the quality of emotion. The material received through the senses is not just a sensation, dead memory or associated idea but assumes a form and quality that satisfies the reason and brings about a union between perception and understanding. She brings an intensity to the confessional mode of poetry.

i don't know what living a balanced life feels like

when i am sad

i don't cry i pour

when i am happy

i don't smile i glow

when i am angry

i don't yell i burn

the good thing about feeling in extremes is

when i love i give them wings

but perhaps that isn't such a good thing cause

they always tend to leave

and you should see me

when my heart is broken

i don't grieve

i shatter (109)

In the section titled 'breaking', she describes weakness, 'i always jump thinking/ he will catch me' (81) and the realization of her weakness, 'i am hopelessly/ a lover and/ a dreamer and/ that will be the/ death of me' (81) and the fact that leaving is a choice she makes when she realizes that he had never understood her, 'i am a museum full of art/ but you had your eyes shut' (100). She boldly states,

i didn't leave because

i stopped loving you

i left because the longer

i stayed the less

i loved myself (95)

Kaur also describes how love had been deceptive and how one wallowed in the yoyo experience between needing and leaving the person. It is an inexplicable state of mess which she tries to express, 'love made danger in you/ look like safety (104), 'i am undoing you/ from my skin (112) and eventually there is a poem that lists things to do

after a breakup and the last point she states is ‘breathe’. She illustrates pain through shattering glass image, withered and dry leaves, shedding eyelashes, packed cartons near a door etc. Pain is another emotion whose depth cannot be fathomed and expressed. Like an iceberg, it remains submerged, surfacing in bits and pieces and over a period of time. So does the emotion of ‘fear’ lack a complete vocabulary. Kaur refers to the daily fears a woman is subjected to in the house, as the daughters look on and acquire it as a legacy. The dominant patriarchal rod confuses love and rage in the daughter’s mind.

i can’t tell if my mother is

terrified or in love with

my father it all

looks the same (40)

Freud used the analogy of the iceberg to explain the three levels of awareness: the conscious, preconscious and the unconscious. The conscious is that part of experience, we can talk about. The pre-conscious consists of anything that can be brought to the conscious mind. The unconscious is a reservoir of pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, feelings, memories and urges. Poetry is an interaction of all these levels of awareness to the extent that the writer accepts reality as per conditioning, hereditary, environment and life circumstances. Kaur was born into a Punjabi family in India but at a very young age her family had migrated to Canada. Hence the duality of strong Sikh roots and the liberal views of the foreign land is exhibited. She is proud of her roots and this is the reason she decides to eschew punctuation and capitalization, as she explains in an interview that the ‘Gurmukhi script’ used in her mother tongue had no upper and lower case.

the name kaur

makes me a free woman

it removes the shackles that

try to bind me

uplifts me

to remind me I am an equal to

any man .....

the name kaur runs in my blood

it was in me before the word itself existed

it is my identity and my liberation (184)

She has taken the values of balance, harmony, universality, liberation and freedom from the Sikh religion. She never refers to the term God, religion or spirituality but it is found submerged in the acceptance of joy and pain and the rebuilding of self from ashes. She says, ‘the world/ gives you/ so much pain/ and here you are/ making gold out of it (185), ‘you must enter a relationship/ with yourself/ before anyone else (150), ‘i thank the universe/ for taking/ everything it has taken/ and giving to me/ everything it is giving (159), you/ are your own/ soulmate (197). The poems started with pain but moves to a universal healing, showing a direction or proposing a path to positive reinforcement of the value of self and projecting the resilience especially in women. Alyson Miller says that Kaur’s poetry is an essential read for women everywhere and by the final chapter, ‘Kaur becomes the sister you never had’ (Spencer 2015). Such positioning of the need for women to unify and the creation of a community of womanhood, uplifts her to the role of an activist.

i want to apologize to all the women

i have called pretty

before I’ve called them intelligent or brave

i am sorry I made it sound as though  
something as simple as what you're born with  
is the most you have to be proud of when your  
spirit has crushed mountains  
from now on I will say things like  
you are resilient or you are extraordinary  
not because i don't think you're pretty  
but because you are so much more than that (179)

Her first book of poetry is divided into 4 sections. And this is followed in her other works as well. What does this division suggest? It reflects a process of choice, selection and organization. The divisions are titled, the hurting, the loving, the breaking and the healing which alternates the pain and the pleasure, the negative and positive experiences. Although the collection starts on a personal note, it moves forward to end with a universal experience of womanhood. It displays a mature perspective of life which accepts the cycle of joy and pain. The tone is intense and passionate. The expression, as elucidated by Scott James regarding Coleridge, is of life situations that awaken vivid emotion and then pass through the 'intellectual lens' of imagination to a fully prepared consciousness. Like Coleridge, these poems involves 'the whole soul of man' and while the Primary Imagination collects impressions and sensations from the external world and imposes some shape so as to construct a clear picture, the Secondary Imagination 'diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate. It synthesizes the

faculties of intellect, perception, will and emotions. Indeed in Kaur's works we do see the raw emotion but not described as a mess or an incoherent rant, but processing in the cauldron of the mind for an aesthetic feel that becomes comprehensible and connectable to the audience. Her public reading sessions show how comfortable she is with her words; it is like her second skin and she brings a union between her inner expression and the outer persona taking the audience with her to the mental places she has been and resonate back through a huge fan base on instagram and facebook. Her pictorial illustrations are tattooed and printed on mugs and t-shirts, developing another field of merchandise altogether.

Although Rupi Kaur's works are criticized by many for its minimalism, consumer-driven mode and lack of literariness and intellectual process, one realizes that simplicity is always in danger of becoming trivial and mean. As Ernest Hemingway states, 'If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A good writer does not need to reveal every detail of a character in action.'

Rupi Kaur tells us in her interviews that poetry is how she processes her experiences, reflects and recovers and hence her poems are a result of all her reflections and lessons learnt. She talks of how she started drawing to deal with things happening to and around her and then when it seemed insufficient to her, she started adding phrases to it and after years started writing long poems that could be performed at open mics. That was for her a never-turn-back moment where she challenged herself to find words for what was bothering her and it empowered her. Another aspect is how activism and art are intertwined in her poems as her father who was highly moral and ethical would take her to human rights protests and make her write speeches on it even though she hardly understood it. 'My art had to be active for it to feel good for me' she replies in an interview. Again heritage meant a great deal to her when she understood how beautiful it was after having gone through the phase of self-hate because she could not make sense of her



Punjabi Sikh identity in Canada. Her poems also stem from her ability to think about the pain others go through, being deeply concerned and contemplating their pain and admiring their resilience.

Thus the collection *milk and honey*, is indeed an expression of deep emotion and contemplation that connects to people because she says, ‘when we connect, we feel less alone’.

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