

## ***Milk and Honey: Kaur's Poetic Cure***

### **Abstract**

*Psychological trauma and more importantly trauma after sexual abuse disempowers the victim and shatters their sense of safety and self-confidence. Retelling the tale of trauma has been done in various genres of literature. Of these, Rupi Kaur's poetry is confessional and presents aspirational philosophy. Titled milk and honey, her first collection has four sections referring to the stages the survivor of trauma undergoes, namely: the hurting, the loving, the breaking and the healing. This article examines the cardinal aspects of psychological trauma to see how Kaur's poetry mirrors the stages of recovery described by Judith Herman in Trauma and Recovery. The paper first identifies the three key aspects of trauma, hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction, defined by Herman, in Kaur's 'milk and honey' and then examines how the process of recovery unfolds in three stages—through establishing safety, reconstructing narrative of trauma and restoring connection with community to reclaim and empower the self.*

**Keywords:** *Psychological trauma, confessional, narrative of trauma.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Traumatic events in our lives cause damage to our being in such a way that it becomes difficult to restore the self to the state it was in before trauma. Psychological trauma manifests itself in various ways such as fear, anxiety and feeling of worthlessness. The damage that is caused by trauma is difficult to overcome without therapy and medication. This article explores how Rupi Kaur uses the expression of poetry as a therapeutic medium to overcome the feelings associated with trauma. Kaur faced sexual abuse, both as a child and as an adult. The psychological trauma caused by this abuse is reflected in her collection of poetry. Kaur's own website states that each section in *milk and honey* serves a different purpose, “deals with a different pain.

Heals a different heartache' (Kaur, 2018).

As an Indian-Canadian writer, she has become the voice of the voiceless. Her success is attributed to the themes that she tackles in her work, some of which are considered taboo, such as rape and sexual abuse (Kudhail, 2018, p. 3). Roy (2018), notes that Kaur's audience,

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a huge chunk of which is younger women, look up to her for voicing their trauma. The concept of trauma has undergone considerable evolution since Freud. In general, it is understood as a disturbing event that negatively affects human emotion and their views about the world (Mambrol, 2018, p.19-20). According to Freud, trauma's impact has the capability to break through the defense mechanism and get lodged in the human subconscious: "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive, and will come forth later in uglier ways" (Freud, 1955). When this happens, the immediate reaction which would have sprung up in the presence of a normal defense mechanism is stalled. The pain of the incident shows in the form of neurotic behavior since the survivors of trauma find it difficult to proceed with their lives, being victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary scholars have examined Kaur's poetry as cyber-poetry, insta-poetry and digital poetry as her poems first appeared on Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter. One of the questions that researchers consider when discussing electronically published poetry whether by Kaur or others is how modern technology has changed the way young poets in the present era express their feelings through this medium. The focus of this research is on language and style of digital or cyber poetry. Discussing Rupri Kaur as an insta-poet, Amritha states that "the simplicity and frankness of her poems made them easily relatable to her audience" (2019, p.3105). Her short and terse poems are in prose and lyric form. The critic attributes it to the demand of the medium, i.e. electronic or cyber poetry that demands fluidity and pithiness (2019, p. 3015).

Other critics have examined Kaur's poetry through various critical lenses including psychoanalytic, postcolonial and feminist criticism. In a thesis, *Rupri Kaur's Poetry: Trauma and Healing*, Masini (2019), examines the issues of post-memory with reference to trauma with special focus on "female oriented post-memory." She also explores the theme of gendered violence and relates it to the Indian patriarchal culture by comparing Kaur's poems to the works of two other female Indian writers Krishna Mehta and Shauna Singh Baldwin. She also discusses the postcolonial diaspora discourse, exploring the issue of ethnic and cultural identity in Kaur's poems as she is an Indian Sikh diaspora in Canada. The last chapter of her thesis touches upon the idea of healing from trauma and the role of poetry in this process. However, she does so by focusing only on the section "Healing" in Kaur's *milk and honey*. She finds that Kaur's poetry on trauma is deeply connected to the themes of post-colonialism, diaspora, feminism and postmodernism, and relates her work to the theories of Appadurai, bell hooks, Bhabha, Braziel, Caruth, Hirsch, Luckhurst and Rothberg. Masini's research is useful in the context of the present research paper as she has discovered connections of the depiction of trauma in Kaur's poetry with abuse, gendered violence, othering, alienation and hybridity. This paper examines Kaur's poetry through the lens of Herman's theory of trauma in order to show that Kaur's confessional poetry demonstrates that recovery or healing is possible through narration of poetry.

The current research paper builds on the existing body of research that highlights the first-hand account of a person undergoing trauma due to abuse in childhood as well as in adulthood, and endeavors to examine what processes are involved in the recovery and how does she come to terms with the harsh realities after the traumatic experience of abuse, using

poetic expression as a therapeutic process for her recovery. This study will analyze, in the light of Herman's theory, the phases that a victim of abuse undergoes and how the poetic expression helps in therapeutic healing and restoring of the self from trauma.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Textual analysis is adopted as the method of analysis. Alan McKee states that “[textual analysis] is a methodology—a data gathering process—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world they live in” (2003, p. 1). The text makes certain demands on the interpreters or the analysts. They cannot randomly assign to it whatever meaning they like, in fact they must let the text participate in the process of meaning making and signification as “every utterance is an iteration” (Belsey, 2005, p. 168). Using textual analysis for interpreting the messages and meaning embedded in Kaur's poems, the authors intend to get an insight into the effects of trauma on the victim's self and the therapeutic effect that narration—telling of the tale of trauma through poetry—had on the victim.

### Remembering the Unforgettable, Speaking the Unspeakable

Trauma is the result of an incident or incidents that cause emotional disturbance in individuals. This emotional disturbance affects the way they see themselves and the world around them. They usually have trouble trusting other people and often have a very low opinion of themselves. For the purpose of analyzing Kaur's *milk and honey*, the researchers in the current study have taken the concept of trauma detailed by Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). Herman asserts “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman, 1992, p. 1). In the light of Herman's theory of trauma, it can be observed that Kaur's poetry is a way to lead her out of the abyss of pain and humiliation that the abusive treatment caused to her. Her narrative is the tale of suffering and abuse, often as striking one-liners that convey the pain associated with the experience. Herman goes on to state that the people who undergo “... atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner...” (1992, p. 1).

Breaking the silence over one's suffering and voicing the horrors caused by the abusers is a first step towards recovery. Herman calls it “the power of speaking the unspeakable,” which results in the release of “creative energy” that works as a healing force “when the barriers of denial and repression are lifted” (1992, p. 2). Such denial and repression, of course, are the result of the silencing that is an aspect of most forms of child and familial abuse because the perpetrators threaten to retaliate if they are reported or because the victim feels great shame because of the abuse and conceals it. Silences surrounding abuse have been ingrained since childhood, and reclaiming the voice comes with great effort. Kaur's poetry addresses the silencing of abuse victims. She states, “you were so afraid / of my voice / i decided to be / afraid of it too” (Kaur, 2018, p. 14). Through the denial of voice, the abusers made her powerless and she developed fear of her own voice.

Kaur identifies the first step out of trauma is to recognize and value one's thoughts and voice. Herman states that the recovery process in the victims of abuse and trauma follows a common pathway such as, “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring

the connection between survivors and their community” (1992, p. 3). Analysis of *milk and honey* establishes that Kaur also undergoes these three stages identified by Herman, which are detailed in Kaur’s collection namely, hurting, loving, breaking and healing. The reconstruction of her traumatic experiences of childhood and adulthood leads her to the path of recovery through poetry, which establishes a connection between herself and people.

It shows the importance of confronting the fears and the demons that haunt the survivor of trauma by voicing the tragedy. As Kaur writes in the epilogue of *milk and honey* “my heart woke me crying last night/*how can i help* i begged/ my heart said /write a book” (2018, p. 4). Kaur states that the way out of the pain was through expressing it. Significantly, Kaur adds that the psychological therapy sessions she may have after the trauma did not help restore her the way she wanted. In “midweek sessions,” she describes the session with the therapist, “*how are you feeling/* you pull the lump in your throat out/*with your teeth/* and say *fine/ numb really*” (2018, p. 11).

One reason that the therapy was not restorative is that it was too clinical. Herman (1992) has found, for example, that US veterans who suffered from PTSD of the 1970s Vietnam War experienced greater healing through informal art therapy groups. For instance, some veterans who were against the glorification of war formed a “rap group.” They would narrate and vocalize their traumatic experiences of the battlefield in small group meetings as they felt uncomfortable in going to conventional medical institutes to seek help. They invited sympathetic psychiatrists to provide assistance to them. Herman states that one of the psychiatrists, Chaim Shatan, explained why these soldiers sought help outside the traditional medical facility: “. . . a lot of them were ‘hurting,’ as they put it . . . . They needed something that would take place on their turf, where they were in charge” (1992, p. 18). This shows that the victims of trauma need “safety,” leading Herman to claim that “need for safety” is the first step on the pathway to recovery from trauma. The informal setting or forum of intimate group meetings was a less intimidating platform for the war veterans. Similarly, we can see that the medium of poetic expression provides Kaur a more authentic platform where she can express her dark experiences and vocalize the unspeakable.

The first section in Kaur’s *milk and honey* (2018) is called “Hurting” and contains poems that deal with themes of child abuse and parental neglect. Perhaps the most powerful lines in terms of the father daughter relationship are “A daughter should/not have to/beg her father/for a relationship” (Kaur, 2018, p. 25). The lines point to a part of the cause of her trauma. The idea of “begging for a relationship” shows that her relationship with her father lacked warmth. It also suggests that many daughters around the world crave a strong emotional bond with their father but don’t have it. In another poem she says, “your father is absent” (2018, p. 29) and “you still search for him everywhere” (2018, p. 12). This absence isn’t physical, it is on an emotional level. In “to fathers with daughters” Kaur points towards the fact that the environment that the parents give to their children during their childhood has a significant impact on them in their adult life. This fact is underscored by Herman when she states that survivors of childhood abuse are more likely to be victimized than others. She also observes that such survivors usually select authoritarian partners because they get a sense of security with them that they didn’t get during childhood. Oftentimes, these partners fail to meet abuse survivors’ expectations. Kaur identifies a father figure who failed to give her a

sense of security: "if I knew/What safety looked like/I would have spent/less time falling into/arms that were not" (2018, p.17).

The poetess echoes Herman's idea that the child who has not been shown what a secure home feels like repeatedly falls victim to relationships that are unsafe. The poem above and "to fathers with daughters" are thematically similar, the key difference being the fact that "to fathers with daughters" describes the abusive environment through the use of words like "yell". The clause "Every time you tell your daughter you yell at her out of love" (2018, p. 15) shows that this action of yelling is a routine. She falls for such partners who treat her in a similar manner, yet she feels they do so out of love. A victim of trauma, specifically triggered by child abuse, finds it difficult to liberate herself from the authority of the abuser as she longs for security. It is through the telling of her tale that Kaur finds an escape from oppressing authority as well as reclaiming her 'self'. This is consistent with Schafer's contention that the idea of one's self or identity is based on one's account or narrative of it (1994, p. 88). He also highlights the 'narrative' nature of psychoanalysis which Herman emphasized, which demonstrates that by telling the story of herself in poetry that Kaur is restoring the "self" from which she was alienated by abuse.

### **Feeling Empty yet Full of Pain, Talking Poetry When Silent**

The study of psychological trauma in domestic and sexual realms is important because the attempts to silence victims and deny their experiences has been used to further disempower the survivors of abuse: "When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable" (Herman, 1992, p. 5). Silencing is an important trope in the section "Hurting". Herman believes that silence is enforced by perpetrators as a tool first to invalidate the pain and agony of the traumatized and secondly to defend themselves (1992, p. 8). In, "you were so afraid /of my voice / i decided to be / afraid of it too" (Kaur, 2018, p. 14) Kaur indicates that her voice threatened the one who was silencing her, or it made him feel less powerful. The girl is made to feel powerless and helpless through the act of silencing. These are the two feelings that victims of abuse feel constantly (Herman, 1992, p. 98.). Through the authoritarian act of silencing, the victims of abuse lose the power to speak up and voice their harsh experiences. Charcot, who is considered the pioneer in modern neurology studied the patients of hysteria and termed the narrative accounts they produced "Vocalization" (Goetz, 1995, p. 67), which Herman considers one of the steps towards healing. Breuer, one of Freud's companions, names this concept the "talking cure" (Lanska, 2014, p. 538), "a cure based on reason, on the unraveling of tangled mental health associations (Herman, 1992, p. 90). Another poem by Kaur describes another strategy that her abuser uses to prevent her from vocalizing her abuse: "You tell me to quiet down cause my opinions make me less beautiful" (Kaur, 2018, p. 26). As in other pieces, the topic is forced silencing. Kaur is being made to believe that her "quieting down" is for her benefit and it is intense psychological manipulation on the part of the one silencing her.

Another idea that Kaur presents in part one of *milk and honey* is "shrinking". In the poems "the idea of shrinking is hereditary" and "emptying out of my mother's belly" she shows how women have been conditioned to take up as little physical and social space possible.

Shrinking is so ingrained in women's and girls' psyche that they have been made to believe that doing so comes naturally to women. Not surprisingly, Kaur finds the idea of expanding an uncomfortable challenge (Kaur, 2018, p. 26). In "emptying out of my mother's belly", the idea of shrinking is correlated with disappearance and nothingness. She mentions that shrinking is learned, and asserts that, contrary to what the patriarchal system would have a woman believe, it isn't instinctive. It is not unusual in the Indian household (to which Kaur belongs) to expect obedience from women. This is manifested through their silencing. She repeats, "I am nothing" (2018, p. 29) as an act of disappearance that she has to learn and which makes her feel empty; being a denial of her existence. This relates to the idea of trauma because trauma stems from oppression and curtailing an individual's space is oppressing that individual, much like imprisoning a person and defining their attempts to break free as a crime (Herman, 1992, p. 30).

In "Remembrance and Mourning" Judith Herman discusses the role of narrating trauma and stresses on the importance of remembering the trauma. Like Herman, Naomi Mandel emphasizes the importance of narrating trauma. Mandel goes on to criticize the notion that any kind of abuse is or should be "unspeakable" and argues that attempts to silence victims' narratives are a deliberate strategy or rhetorical tactic to silence and invalidate the experience and reality of the victim of trauma. Thus, the negation that "un" in unspeakable refers to the "taboo" surrounding and "prohibition" against (2006, p. 7) making the abuse public. It is evident through Kaur's poetry that she is revealing her experiences which the victims of abuse keep secret due to fear of being ostracized. Since the experiences of traumatized abuse victims are often invalidated by silencing them or expressly denying the veracity of their accounts, many victims of trauma develop the belief that the abuse or catastrophe was their own fault. Thus, the act of narration of trauma is empowering. It gives survivors back the very power that was usurped by the perpetrator (Herman, 1992, p. 161). It also serves to heal the victim by making her face the very emotions that are troubling, a step in the restorative process for some survivors because it is painful. Feelings of worthlessness and inferiority dominate the victims of trauma and they begin to see themselves through the eyes of others. Opening up about their ordeal is also considered a taboo. Hence the victims cannot muster up courage to talk about the event. Building upon Herman's theory of Trauma with reference to the victims of sexual abuse Binder and Weisberg argue that talking about trauma is not only the first step towards healing but also a political act "...effective treatment of psychological effects of trauma are political acts of resistance... (2000, p. 206) because it empowers the victims by giving them a voice which was denied to them. "...narration triumphs over not only a psychological process of repression but also a social process of 'silencing'" (Binder & Weisberg, 2000, p. 207). They agree with Herman that the primary purpose of the narrative of trauma is to "empower" the victim rather than to record the "history" (2000, p. 207).

It is also important to note that narration is different for survivors of repeated trauma. To them, many similar incidents often take the shape of one narration. Therefore, one or a few episodes stand for many (Herman, 1992, 175-195). This is the case in many poems from *milk*

*and honey* that remember and mourn the poetess' physical and emotional trauma poetess. The poem "midweek sessions" is a testimony to the fact that the narrator has suffered trauma and has also sought professional help as a remedy. This is the aspect of Kaur's poetry which researchers have referred to as confessional (Miller, 2019, p. 4). In mourning and remembering the trauma of sexual abuse at the hands of uncles and cousins, Kaur is resisting the perpetrators rather than admitting defeat. According to Herman, it is an "act of courage rather than humiliation" (1992, p. 188). It is noteworthy that she doesn't detail the trauma verbally here. "you point to the spot/ between its legs/ the one he fingered" (Kaur, 2018, p.5) She merely points at the part of the doll to indicate the place of trauma. This resonates with Herman's reference to the reluctance and disjointedness of survivors' narration of their abuse in the initial phases of therapy. The fact that this poem has a place in the beginning of the book is also significant. Reconstructing the narrative of trauma is the second step in the path of recovery for the survivors of psychological trauma: "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (Herman, 1992, p. 27). Kaur's terse and brief lines of poetry express the traumatic memories. It is important to reassemble the narrative of trauma in order to come to terms with its reality. The narrative of trauma is assimilated in the form of "an ongoing life story". Through the organization and recital of the situation the survivor of trauma seeks to validate it for others and for herself as well. The restatement and narration of trauma is also significant for "putting this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history. . ." (Herman, 1992, p. 27). Kaur through her poetry does the same. The disjointed and episodic memories of intense pain are re-lived and recreated to be confronted and analyzed in the moments of sanity as well as to make it comprehensible for others who look at it from the perspective of the observer.

The first poem of the last section, "Healing," describes another dilemma that most victims face: "perhaps I don't deserve nice things . . ." (Kaur, 2018, p. 137). Mourning and accepting the pain that survivors of abuse experience has its benefits: "Because reliving a traumatic experience provokes such intense emotional distress, traumatized people go to great lengths to avoid it" (Herman, 1992, p. 30). In the poem "to be soft is to be powerful" (Kaur, 2018, p. 156) Kaur is acknowledging the strength that comes from embracing the pain. She admits that the process of healing is empowering (1992, p. 159). The title of the collection *milk and honey* also resonates with the same feeling of softness that Kaur associates with healing and recovery. Milk and honey are the cure and nourishment to the aching and ailing being. The pouring out of the narrative has therapeutic effects that serves as a soothing balm, a cure to the distress and pain. Herman emphasizes the significance of "truth-telling and full discourse" for therapy and healing (1992, p. 104). She states that some patients of trauma insist that the truth be known and discourage efforts to cover it up despite the secrets of trauma being too painful to recount. Kaur is in this category in that her poetry shows resilience gained through "truth telling" and creating a poetic discourse: "As the patient becomes involved, she inevitably re-experiences the intense longing for rescue that she felt at the time of the trauma" (Herman, 1992, p. 105). The pouring out of the narrative helps in mediating the pain as it leads to catharsis of emotions.

Discussing the process of recovery from psychological trauma, Herman identifies the role of resilience: "The capacity to preserve social connection and active coping strategies, even in

the face of extremity, seems to protect people to some degree ...” (1992, p. 42). This is evident in Kaur’s poetry, particularly in the last section, “the healing,” which shows that through resilience she recovers herself and restores her trust in the community while also restoring other victims’ trust in self and community. In “you look at me and cry” (Kaur, 2018, p. 172), the poetess seems to have surpassed her pain and arrived at a point where she can offer hope and healing to the emotionally distraught: “... everything can heal” (p. 172). Through her poetry she has created a safe space not only for herself but also for the other victims of trauma like her, to whom she gives voice and hope. This has been identified by Herman (1992) as the third stage in the process of healing and recovery from trauma: restoring connection between survivor and her community: “Once a sense of basic safety has been reestablished, the survivor needs the help of others in rebuilding a positive view of the self...The restoration of a positive view of the self includes not only a renewed sense of autonomy within connection but also renewed self-respect” (p. 45-47).

Some of the poems in the last section sound like advice. For instance, “accept yourself as you were designed” (Kaur, 2018, p. 185) indicates that the poetess has also developed the capacity to embrace herself the way she is. Her own healing seems to have brought her to a point where “you have to stop searching for why at some point. You have to leave it alone” (Kaur, 2018, p. 187). She advocates letting go of the painful question of “why me?” and urges other victims of abuse to come to terms with reality. Herman suggests that the survivors of trauma must reconstruct a belief system to understand their own grief. While doing so, the survivors might discover that the people that they hold most dear don’t share their beliefs. This poses a threat to the survivors’ reconstructed and restored sense of self-worth. Herman states that the first principle of recovery of a survivor is “empowerment” and recovery takes place in the context of relationships. The capacities for trust, autonomy, intimacy and identity are shaped in sustained relationships with others and when they are damaged by traumatic experiences they are to be rebuilt as recovery cannot take place in isolation (1992, p. 94). The last section of Kaur’s *milk and honey* also emphasizes rebuilding this connection.

*milk and honey* (2018) is a testimonial of Rupi Kaur’s pain as well as the pain of many other women. Her poems rightly assert that “our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry” (Kaur, 2018, p. 161). She has unloaded the burden of her spine and has helped other women and victims of psychological trauma by voicing their fears and narratives. Though her work has been regarded as a subversion of colonialism and patriarchal values, this study has explored it as a means of countering trauma and stigma associated with trauma of sexual abuse. Breaking silence and speaking the unspeakable requires a lot of courage. She has shown how to restore the torn and damaged self through narrating pain: “Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor” (Herman, 1992, p. 112). The narration of trauma may feel painful but it ends up empowering the victim. Kaur has also shown that it is possible to step out of the cycle of repeated victimization. Freedom is achieved by confronting and voicing your fears.

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