



LONELY VOICE OF A GODDESS- A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RUPI KAUR'S COLLECTION OF POEMS "MILK AND HONEY"

Dr. NEELAM TIKKHA

Professor, RTMNU

*Email:Neelam.tikkha@gmail.com

Abstract

Women have been deified in Indian religion for her beauty, her power to create, recreate and her power to retaliate against the oppression. The deification was a way a male dominated society curbed her from voicing her oppression and ravaging by men. The paper endeavours to figure out the lonely voices in the poems of Rupri Kaur against the backdrop of women's representation in Indian culture. The research is also based on the study of various deities in the temple in India and revisiting the mythical stories. Every temple speaks of a story a story of oppression and glorification of woman to suppress the lonely voice. . Rupri Kaur's lines also translates the same story—"Your body is a museum of natural disasters" and "our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry," strike with powerful and deft stroke presenting the history and suffering of women.

Key Words : Divine woman, myth, lonely voice

"Folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also vigorous voice of the present."(Lopez)
Y.M Sokolov

1. Introduction

Women have been deified in Indian religion for her beauty, her power to create, recreate and her power to retaliate against the oppression. The deification was a way a male dominated society curbed her from voicing her oppression and ravaging by men. The paper endeavors to trace the women voices in the poems of Rupri Kaur against the backdrop of women's representation in Indian culture. The research is also based on the study of select temple deities of India and revisiting the mythical stories. Every temple speaks of a story of oppression and glorification of woman to suppress the lonely voice. Women have been considered divine for being procreator and the evidences of women being considered divine can be traced in the oldest religious temple unearthed by the Archaeologist in South East of Turkey which happens to be the oldest religious building of the world, as old as 7000 BC. It is called the Lion Temple by the Archeologist and the most surprising thing is that a woman occupied the central space and was commemorated in the sacred temple. She was depicted with accentuated sexuality and fertility. Then, there are images of fearsome goddesses, who controlled life and death.

The goddesses helped in continuation of human race hence believed to rule the heavens and the earth. Hence, since ancient times have been thought of as divine. Goddess Kali and goddess Durga, of modern-day India, are examples of fierce power which rules heaven and earth and the goddess is still a powerful force for thousands of Hindus. God Shanker tells his wife Parvati about the immense power of Goddess Durga. He says, 'she is pleased by chanting eight hundred times her name 'ashtotarshat namka paath' (Shastri). The devotee can get anything from wealth, health prosperity, and children and can even get freedom from the life and death cycle. Similarly, Christianity was created by a woman and it is possible to tell the history of Christianity without even mentioning a man. Women identity as explicit in the literature and divinity reflects the completeness of women. Virgin Mary symbolizes that a woman can procreate even without the intervention of a man.

Feminist women realized that men are propagating human happiness to be synonymous for material good production. The ecofeminist came to understand the significance of the witch hunt after the murder of witches. There is not even a single example of a male witch in the history. The witches were exclusively females. The women were termed witches and killed because they were associated with protection of women and nature. The murder of witches destroyed even nature (Merchant). The charges were only against women. "From the 1960s, when quality scholarship about witch trials first started, down through the 1980s, it was generally said that virtually all accused witches were women. Authors in that period, often feminists who were not actually scholars, asserted that witch trials were explicitly about misogyny, and that the witch trials were a women's Holocaust." (Aelarsen 2017)

2. Review of Related Literature :

Ali lauds her as a "pop poet" (Ali) Ms. Kaur's success is singular, but it is also a reflection of the times. Poetry is in the midst of a renaissance, and is being driven by a clutch of young, digitally-savvy "Instapoets", so-called for their ability to package their work into concise, shareable posts. Taylor Knott Gregson, a best-selling poet, boasts nearly 600,000 followers on Instagram, where he posts verse scrawled on scraps of paper or printed using a typewriter. R.M. Drake—who counts Ludacris, Nicki Minaj and the Kardashian clan as fans—has a following equal to that of Ms Kaur. Chiara Giovanni feels that Kaur's presentation of "unspecified collective trauma in her quest to depict the quintessential South Asian female experience feels disingenuous. **Rupi Kaur's rise** to fame is a story befitting of our digital age; it's a tale of sudden virality and savvy capitalization. In March 2015, Kaur was still a student of rhetoric and professional writing at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. She had a modest internet following when she uploaded a photo to Instagram of herself lying in bed, menstruation bloodstains on her clothes and sheets. The photo was removed twice, ostensibly for violating the site's Community Guidelines. She hit back on Tumblr and Facebook, saying:

i will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in an underwear but not be okay with a small leak. when your pages are filled with countless photos/accounts where women (so many who are underage) are objectified. pornified. and treated less than human (Giovanni)." Prospero believes that "Ms Kaur's success is singular, but it is also a reflection of the times. Poetry is in the midst of a renaissance, and is being driven by a clutch of young, digitally-savvy "Instapoets", so-called for their ability to package their work into concise, shareable posts. Taylor Knott Gregson, a best-selling poet, boasts nearly 600,000 followers on Instagram, where he posts verse scrawled on scraps of paper or printed using a typewriter. R.M. Drake—who counts Ludacris, Nicki Minaj and the Kardashian clan as fans—has a following equal to that of Ms Kaur (Prospero)."

Tara Henley emphasizes like Giovanni that mainly the success of Global superstar Rupi Kaur is because of the medium and she has become a source of inspiration to millions for writing poetry posts on Instagram. She became so popular that a trendy Nepalese-American designer wore a black suit emblazoned with one of Kaur's lines — "our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry. (Henley)"

3. Significance of the Study

Rupi Kaur a Candian writer, who became popular by her Instagram posts and first publication **Milk and Honey** (Kaur 2015), which was hailed as a number one best seller by New York Times . She has boldly poured her heart out in her poems and illustrations. There is a wave in India about making children understand 'good touch and bad touch' and landmark legislations like "Nirbhaya" for protection of women. Rupi Kaur's poems are full of ravaging by man and incest love. She is a Liberal feminist writer who boldly exposes the exploits of man. She is a powerful writer but as yet not been noticed in the literary academia and no article has been written so far on Rupi Kaur's work.

Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur is a collection of poem specially for women and teenage girls. When Ms. Kaur was a 5 year old child her mother handed her paint brush and asked "to draw her heart out" (Kaur, Milk and Honey 2015). Rupi Kaur through her illustrations and poem has opened her heart out and set on an artistic journey. The poems are replete with a search for Milk and Honey in a land Canada which has always been termed as the 'land of milk and honey' by men who find it a land of opportunity and growth . For a dark woman this land still remains to be a land of pain as mentioned by writers like Rohinton Mistry in his story

'Swimming Lessons' published in "Tales from Firozshah Baag (Mistry, Tales from Firozshah Baag)"—" but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior (TFB 168)". It is interesting to note that Quite unlike Rohinton Mistry, Rupri Kaur does not come to a negative conclusion. She is full of positive force and is ready to 'set the world on fire' with her identity, self complacency and her potentials. She thinks about life to be a journey like demonstrated by Dostoyevsky in his book *The Idiot*. "It is life, life that matters, life alone – the continuous and everlasting process of discovering it – and not the discovery itself." (Malcolm)

The poems flow like a smooth mellow river melting and exposing her heart out. 'The struggle of a woman against man to establish an identity and do not remain in an invisible state to him. Illustrations along with the poems help anchor ideas in proper perspective. The poems will shatter the reader, tear open the heart and move the reader to tears. Women reader of this collection of vignettes of short poems will feel like looking into a looking glass. The poems saddens the reader because of the profound misogyny which is reflected in the writing and additionally, women where they expect love are returned with hate. The love they get from the male gender is akin to incest and rape. The poems are replete with hate for men and male relatives who exploited her and handled her like a commodity.

Rupri Kaur mentions a pathetic state to which a woman has been reduced to that of a receptacle by men –

" You
have been
taught your legs
are a pit stop for men
that need a place to rest
a vacant body empty enough
for guests but no one
ever comes and is
willing to
stay." (Kaur, The Hurting 2015,13)"

Her longing for love is evident from her cry as appears in the following lines—

" she was a rose
in the hands of those
who had no intention
of keeping her"(18).

The most striking lines written by her about woman is being used for the purpose of creation and recreation but her inner self is as ugly as her natural biology as described in the following lines—

"Apparently it is ungraceful of me
To mention my period in public
Cause the actual biology
Of my body is too real
It is okay to sell what's
Between a woman's legs
More than it is
Okay to mention its inner workings
The recreational use of
this body is seen as
beautiful while the nature
is seen as ugly(177)."

Her poems are replete with examples which talk about a woman being treated as a machine –

" the first boy that kissed me
held my shoulders down
like the handlebars of the first bicycle
he ever rode
i was five" (Kaur, The hurting 2015,12)

She describes the exploitation of a five year old girl by her own uncle, cousins and all wrong men. Yet, she is taught by her alcoholic father to be quiet. She poignantly mentions—

“When my mother opens her mouth
To have a conversation at dinner
My father shoves the word hush
Between her lips and tells her to
Never speak with her mouth full
This is how the women in my family
learned to live with their mouths closed
our knees
pried open
by cousins
and uncles
and men
our bodies touched
by all the wrong people
that even in the bed full of safety
we are afraid. (Kaur, Milk and Honey,p36)”

The voice of the girl is stifled because if the truth would be bitter and challenge a man’s world and his indignant attitude towards women. The girl learns the lesson since childhood to stifle the voice.

You were so afraid
of my voice
I decided to be
afraid of it too...(17)
Her lines written to fathers with daughters
Every time you tell your daughter
You yell at her
Out of love
You teach her to confuse
Anger with kindness
Which seems like a good idea
Till she grows up to
Trust men who hurt her
Cause they look so much
Like you (19)

Fatherly attitude is missing and performs an apathetic role which is demonstrated in beautiful lines—

“He was supposed to be
the first male love of your life
You still search for him everywhere...
It is your blood
in my veins tell me how I’m
supposed to forget” (16)
“the thing about having
an alcoholic parent
is an alcoholic parent
does not exist simply
an alcoholic
who could not stay sober
long enough to raise their kids”
“The idea that we were still capable of love

But still chose to be toxic" (23)

The idea that woman brings dishonor to the family is very strange and weird if she remains safe and chaste –

"There is no bigger illusion in the world

Than the idea that a woman will

Bring dishonor into a home

If she tries to keep her heart and body safe"(24).

She talks of the cultural chain that pins a woman.

"You pinned my legs to the ground

With your feet and demanded

I stand up" (25)

The girl child is chained mentally and culturally like the mother earth . Love has changed to lust which leads to rape and crushing of female soul.

Sapho an archaic Greek Poetess, wrote in 630 – c. 570 BC women who are getting married smitten by the Aphrodite that marriage is going to crush them like the shepherd who crushes wild flowers in the meadows.

"Sweet mother, I can't do my weaving—

Aphrodite has crushed me with desire

for a tender youth.

23

Like a sweet-apple

turning red

high

on the tip

of the topmost branch.

Forgotten by pickers.

Not forgotten—

they couldn't reach it.

24

Like a hyacinth

in the mountains

that shepherds crush underfoot. (Sapho)"

Sapho was an archaic poetess writing in 4th century and Rupi Kaur a modern poet writing in 21st century but there is no change in the oppression of women.

Rupi Kaur goes a step further and demonstrates how love has changed to rape in a world where woman is treated as a commodity.

Sex takes the consent of two

"If one person is lying there not doing anything

Cause they are not ready

Or not in the mood

Or simply don't want to yet the other is having sex

With their body it's not love

It is rape" (22)

She also talks about what rape does to a woman's identity:

"The rape will

tear you

in half

But it

will not
end you" (26).

The awesome is the concept of divide between mother and father which Rupi Kaur mentions is like a rift between two countries:

"Your mother
Is in the habit of
Offering more love
Than you can carry
Your father is absent
You are a war
The border between two countries
The collateral damage
The paradox that joins the two
But also splits them apart."

It is painful to read the lines that the moment daughter is born she becomes invisible to the world and loses her identity—

"Emptying out of my mother's belly
Was my first act of disappearance
Learning to shrink for a family
Who likes their daughters invisible
Was the second
The art of being empty
Is simple
Believe them when they say
You are nothing
Repeat it to yourself
Like a wish
I am nothing
I am nothing
I am nothing
So often the only reason you know
you're still alive is from the heaving of the chest(33)."

She calls it—"the art of being empty" which a woman must learn in a male dominated world. Use of small i also shows how insignificant is the woman and being a woman itself means a sinner.

" perhaps
i don't deserve nice things
Cause i am paying
For sins i don't remember "(Kaur, The Healing 2015,147) The illustration along with this poem allegorizes it to be the planet earth . Both women and the earth suffers for sins of others.
She questions man boldly and out rightly—
How do you turn
a forest fire like me
So soft I turn into
Running water (Kaur, The hurting 2015, 65)

She believes to be complete and thinks that the idea that woman is incomplete without man must be given up. The same desire of a woman to be individually complete is echoed in the poems of Rupi Kaur as by James Tip tree in her short story "Houston, Houston, Do You Read"

Rupi challenges the existing cultural belief of Ardh Narishwar that a woman is not complete without a man. She boldly rejects the concept of her emptiness by the belief that woman is complete in herself and needs a man just to complement her. She can alone illuminate the world with her identity –

“I do not want to have you
 To fill the empty parts of me
 I want to be full on my own
 I want to be so complete
 I could light a whole city
 And then
 I want to have you
 Cause the two of us
 combined could set it on fire”(Kaur, *The Loving* 2015, 59)

She is mirroring the images of fearsome goddesses, who controlled life and death. The goddesses helped in continuation of human race hence believed to rule the heavens and the earth. Hence, since ancient times have been thought of as divine. Goddess Kali and goddess Durga, of modern-day India, are examples of fierce power which rules heaven and earth and the goddess is still a powerful force for thousands of Hindus. God Shanker tells his wife Parvati about the immense power of Goddess Durga. He says, ‘she is pleased by chanting eight hundred times her name ‘ashtotarshat namka paath’ (Shastri). The devotee can get anything from wealth, health prosperity, and children and can even get freedom from the life and death cycle. Similarly, Christianity was created by a woman and it is possible to tell the history of Christianity without even mentioning a man. Women identity as explicit in the literature and divinity reflects the completeness of women. Virgin Mary symbolizes that a woman can procreate even without the intervention of a man.

Ms. Rupi Kaur is like aggressive goddess Kali in her own perspective. She feels the healing begins with the idea that a woman is complete when she looks for support in her own company—

“Loneliness is a sign you are in desperate need of yourself.(Kaur, *The Healing* 2015,153)”
 “Fall in love with your solitude(161)”

She is a positive iconclast who tries to break the myth existing for ages that a woman is incomplete without a man—

“You are in the habit
 of co-depending on people to make up for what you think you lack
 Who tricked you into believing
 another person was meant to complete you
 when the most they can do is complement (154)”

She pities women who look for being complete towards man and looks down upon them and presents cogently—

“ perhaps the saddest of all
 Are those who live waiting
 For someone they’re not sure
 Exists.
 7 billion people (157)
 She feels proud to be a woman –
 “ I love that about us
 How capable we are of feeling
 How unafraid we are of breaking
 And tend to our wounds with grace just being a woman calling myself a woman
 Makes me utterly whole
 And complete(169).”

She compares the woman with gold who is as pure as the metal since she has great resilience to oppression and torture yet returns it with happiness and love to the world.

She most poignantly mentions the plight of women of color, wherein the body a woman carries reminds her everyday of the disasters and abuses she has suffered. The analogy of female body with that of a museum is very striking –

“Our backs tell stories no books have spine to carry (171).”

"Your body is a museum of natural disasters
Can you grasp how
Stunning that is (173).

She has great love and tends towards lesbianism like Sappho a poet from Lesbos island, who wrote poems in 17th century BC and the word lesbianism was coined after her.

Rupi Kaur mentions –

"Other women's bodies
Are not our battlegrounds (176)"
My heart aches for sisters more than anything
It aches for women helping women
Like flowers ache for spring (187)"

Sappho describes the pain of departure of her friends after their marriage—

"Honestly, I wish I were dead.
Weeping many tears, she left me and said,
"Alas, how terribly we suffer, Sappho.
I really leave you against my will."

And I answered: "Farewell, go and remember me.
You know how we cared for you.

If not, I would remind you
...of our wonderful times.

For by my side you put on
many wreaths of roses
and garlands of flowers
around your soft neck." (Sappho)



Sappho with Erinna

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

Examples from Real Life

India we find examples of women exploitation and then deification for example Kali Jai temple and Chinnmasta Mata Mandir . Kali Jai temple was constructed because the lady got drowned when she was about to get married. Similarly, the story behind Chind mata mandir is also quite interesting. There was no water so her family drank her blood and then constructed her temple.



Photo Kali Jai Temple Chilika Lake ©Dr. Neelam Tikkha



Chinnamasta Mandir Bihar (Chinnamasta Temple n.d.)



Chintpurni maa (Matachintpurni Trust Una HP)

Vandana Shiva elaborates on the plight of women. She feels that women's role is just for fertility and the body has been reduced to a container to hold the babies till birth. Her role of a mother who gives birth has been diminished.

"The Womb of women are containers to be captured by the ideologies and practices of those who do not believe that women are able to take care of themselves. The capturing of women's wombs is the domination of the physicalist and masculinist scientific paradigm, the ultimate logic, not merely of the medicalization of life, but of a Cartesian world-view, in which the behavior of bodies can be explained and controlled independently of minds." (Oakley 1989)

Conclusion

Women have been exploited by men for recreation and procreation for ages. For their role as procreator and after being exploited women have been related to the status of a goddess. Once the lust and need of a man is over she is deified and reduced to curb her voice so that she cannot challenge man and his ways. Rupi Kaur is criticized for being disingenuous, her verse style and popularity due to commodifying her attitude on social media yet, the fact remains that some of her short lines tell the epic tale of suffering of women. Her lines--"Your body is a museum of natural disasters" and "our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry," strike with powerful and deft stroke presenting the history and suffering of women.

Bibliography

- Aelarsen. Salem: The Real Problem with the Show. 05 October 2017.
- Ali, Kazim. On Instafame & Reading Rupi Kaur. 23 October 2017. 3 November 2017 <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/10/on-rupi-kaur>>.
- Bergthaller, Hannes. "What is Ecocriticism?" European Association of Literature, Culture and Environment (2017).
- Biography.in, Short. Short Biography. 10 October 2017 <<https://www.facebook.com/shortbiographies/posts/276480952851477>>.
- Branch, Michael P.O'Grady,Sean. "Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice." Western Literature Association Meeting. Salt Lake City UTAH, 1994.
- Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ed. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism ." Iowa Review 9.1 (Winter 1978): 71- 86; rpt. in (1978): 71-86.
- Chinnamasta Temple. 26 October 2017 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinnamasta_Temple>.
- Datar, Chhaya. Ecofeminism Revisited. New Delhi : Rawat , 2011.
- Evans, Rebecca. "James Tiptree Jr.: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s." Women's Studies Quarterly Vol. 43, No. .3/4 (2015): 223-239.
- Giovanni, Chiara. 4 August 2017. Buzzfeed.com. 4 November 2017 <https://www.buzzfeed.com/chiaragiovanni/the-problem-with-rupi-kaurs-poetry?utm_term=.xqGvK33PX#.uty466Vr>.
- Hathway, Jay. What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks. 10 October 2014. 5 October 2017 <<http://gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080>>.
- Henley, Tara. "Rupi Kaur:Style Meets Verse to Inspire A Generation." 7 October 2017. Star.com. 4 November 2017 <<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2017/10/07/rupi-kaur-style-meets-verse-to-inspire-a-generation.html>>.
- Indian Express. Outside Jaipur, farmers neck-deep in protest against land acquisition. Jaipur, 05 October 2017.
- Kaur, Rupi. Milk and Honey. Missouri: Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2015.
- Kaur, Rupi. "The Healing." Kaur, Rupi. Milk and Honey. Kansas City Missouri: Andrews McMeel , 2015. 147-204.
- Kaur, Rupi. "The Healing." Kaur, Rupi. Milk and Honey. Kansas City Missouri: Andrews McMeel, 2015. 147-204.
- Kaur, Rupi. "The hurting." Kaur, Rupi. Milk and Honey. Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing , 2015. 13.
- Kaur, Rupi. "The Loving." Kaur, Rupi. Milk and Honey. Kansas City Missouri: Andrew McMeel, 2015. 45-77.
- Know Your Meme . GamerGate - Image #906,290. 5 October 2017 <<http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/906290-gamergate>>.
- Kristine. Snippets from Sokolov. February 22, 2012. <http://talesoffaerie.blogspot.in/2012/02/snippets-from-sokolov.html> (accessed May 31, 2015).

- Kukuruyo. Gamergate life 37. 21 April 2015. 5 October 2017 <<http://kukuruyo.com/comic/gamergate-life-37-english/>>.
- Lopez, Mellie Leandicho. A Handbook of Philippine Folklore. Quezon city : University of Phillipines, 2006.
- Malcolm, Jones. Dostevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience . London: Anthem , 2005 .
- Matachintpurni Trust Una HP. Matachintpurni Trust Una HP. 26 October 2017
<<http://www.matashrichintpurni.com/>>.
- Merchant, C. The Death of Nature, Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. Ecofeminism. New Delhi India: Rawat Publications, 1993.
— . Ecofeminism. New Delhi: Rawat, 2010.
- Mistry, Rohinton. Tales from Firozsha Baag. Canada: Penguin, 1987.
— . Tales from Firozshah Baag. London : Faber and Faber , 1987.
- Oakley, Ann. The Captured Womb. London: Blackwell, 1989.
- Outside Jaipur, farmers neck-deep in protest against Land Acquisition. Jaipur , 05 October 2017.
- Sapho, Dubnoff, Julia Translation. http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/sappho.html#_ftnref2. 116. 3 Novemeber 2017 <http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/sappho.html#_ftnref2>.
- 10 October 2017. 10 October 2017 <<https://www.facebook.com/shortbiographies/posts/276480952851477>>.
<<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/469781804851579749/>>.
-