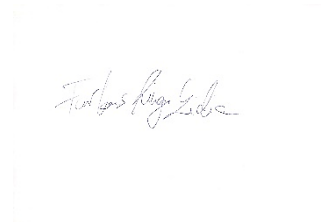


University of Debrecen

Creating a Safe Space on Paper:
How Rupi Kaur Empowers Victims of Sexual Violence Through Her Poetry

Hereby I certify that the essay conforms to the international copyright and plagiarism rules and regulations.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Farkas Kinga Lidia'.

Farkas Kinga Lidia

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Introduction

Many authors and books, fiction and nonfiction all the same, explore themes of trauma of every kind and every form, whether it be an account of a personal experience or a comprehensive study about a tragedy affecting hundreds of people or more. One of the most influential people in the field of trauma research is Sigmund Freud who was the person that laid down the foundations for modern trauma treatment, on which lies the methodology of today's known therapy, where the one undergoing therapy talks about their own experiences to better help the coping. However, parts of Freud's research were problematic, such as his infamous psychosexual theories, which became a catalyst for other research and theories to be born. In my essay, however, I reflect on Freud's work but the main supports of my arguments are provided by the works of other authors, such as Ruth Leys, Cathy Caruth, and Robert Carroll, etc., all of whom were concerned with the theories of trauma and/or its treatments.

My paper focuses on sexual violence and the trauma caused by it and how it is represented in a few of Rupi Kaur's poems. The poems were selected after careful consideration regarding their usefulness. Some of the features that contributed to this choice include the depiction of rape, the portrayal of the perpetrator and the survivor, the effects that trauma has on the survivor, the inclusivity of the issue of assault, and the way that the survivor's community or outsiders relate to rape. Out of the six poems that are to be read with careful observation, only two have official titles, and due to this, I will refer to these by titles that I gave them for the sake of this paper. Thus, the only poem from Kaur's poetry collection called *milk and honey*, from now on shall be addressed as "it's people we are close to" which is on page 68. From her second collection *the sun and her flowers*, the poem "home" was chosen, which starts on page 68 and ends on page 73, and also the one on page 76 was selected that shall be called "hours," from here on. Three other poems were picked from Kaur's third collection *home body*: the poem on page 12, which shall be addressed as "liar," the poem on page 24 which is

to be called “cruelty” and last but not least, “free” on page 146. My paper takes into account already existing research about trauma and coping mechanisms and applies these theories to the poems. It shall likewise examine trauma resulting from sexual assault, who are the affected and how are they affected. Additionally, it shall be studied how Rupi Kaur approaches the issue of rape and how are the parties affected by this phenomenon portrayed in her art. The language used shall be analyzed as well with interpretations of the visual artworks that accompany some of the poems.

Although there exist some studies regarding Rupi Kaur and her poetry, her poetry has not been brought under inspection from a psychological standpoint focusing on her approach to sexual violence, which is exactly the gap that my research attempts to fill and to start discussions about the subject. Hence, this paper examines the representation of sexual violence and trauma in a selection of Rupi Kaur’s poems from a psychological aspect that focuses on trauma’s effects on the survivor and the reader or coping with said trauma. I shall argue that her poems may help with dealing with trauma by openly discussing the topic.

Theories of sexual assault and trauma

Trauma is a concept that has interested humans since early times, trying to find out where trauma comes from, how it works and operates in the human brain, and how it can be dealt with. Despite all the research, there does not exist a conclusive definition or a precise concept of it; as Ruth Leys states in her book *Trauma: a genealogy* “it is as though psychic trauma represents an obstacle to psychoanalysis, one that constantly threatens to overturn its most basic assumptions” (25). This has happened because the today-known concept of trauma has separated from its roots, hence becoming immensely “complex and slippery” (Schönfelder 28). Originating from the Greek language, the word “trauma” meant a physical injury, but over the centuries it became used for mental wounds as well (Merriam-Webster dictionary n.p.). It was Freud, who laid down the basics for trauma research, and as Leys summarizes his theory, “hysteria,” as the trauma was called at the time, originates from traumatic experiences in childhood, however, he concentrated on experiences connected to sexuality. In other words, those people are “hysteric” who have been harassed sexually as a child. Later, however, it was defined as a “rupture in the ego’s protecting shell” (Leys 23), not limited to childhood traumas related to sexual experiences. This means that trauma was now looked at as damage to the human psyche, more specifically to its defense system which can lead to an enhanced state of vulnerability (Kaminer and Eagle 60). Leys also shines a light on the fact that Freud connected the notion of trauma to that of memory, essentially stating that the cause of the trauma is not necessarily the event, but the brain’s delayed reaction to it (20). Later, more experts arrived at similar conclusions, attaching the two concepts, such as Roger Luckhurst and Anne Whitehead, who both identified trauma as a problem emerging in the traumatized individual’s memory (Schönfelder 28).

In sum, then, an event can act traumatically, but the source of the problem in the psyche is the brain’s inability to comprehend the said event. At least this is the closest definition

modern science has regarding trauma¹ and as unstable as the idea is, it is the most widely accepted one.

There are myriad incidents and situations that can cause someone to become traumatized. This paper will focus on the trauma resulting from sexual violence, but before delving into it deeper, the dimensions of the problem must be understood.

Rape, sexual assault, and harassment are problems that may affect any and all groups of people, regardless of ethnicity and habitation. Not only the lives of women are influenced and shaped by it, but also that of men, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and minors. For example, according to official data from the *National Crime Victimization Survey* and relayed by the organization RAINN, in the United States of America, every 68 seconds, an American is assaulted. People that are facing the highest risks are between the ages of 12 and 34 and approximately 90% of the sexual assault survivors are women and 10% are men. In a college environment, 21% of transgender, genderqueer, etc. people were sexually attacked, compared to 18% of cisgender women and 4% of cisgender men (RAINN “Victims of Sexual Violence”). These data are mirroring a seemingly unresolvable issue in society, but thanks to activists and movements, more attention has been provided to women who have ever experienced any kind of harassment, awareness is raised and even legal actions have been taken to prevent these incidents (Turchik et. al. 134). But for a long time, it was only women, who would be considered as the sole victim of sexual assault, because men and queer or gender-queer people still have not been widely acknowledged as affected people by sexual violence due to the societal belief that only women can get assaulted and only by men (Turchik et. al. 134). Despite all this, the issue of rape cases committed against men and genderqueer individuals does seem to gain relevance and some of these people are being heard and helped. This is being shown in

¹ For additional information see Leys, chapter 1; and Schönfelder, pp. 27-28.

cases such as the 1998 ruling of *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services Inc.*, where the Supreme Court prohibited same-sex harassment, which has not been explicitly stated before that (United States Supreme Court Syllabus).

On the other hand, children and minors can get attacked as well, and their treatment is not that much better than the way adults are treated: in the case minors are taken seriously, and adults believe them, oftentimes they get blamed, sometimes even punished for being assaulted. This can happen as a result of toxic cultural norms and inequality in gender roles (Mathews and Coline-Vezine 307). In other words, unhealthy environments create the perfect habitat for cruel events to occur, such as the assault of a minor, and because of that very environment the minor cannot get help, and they get even more hurt, without a possibility of getting out of that situation.

Being assaulted (whether sexually or otherwise) is an inherently traumatic experience, no matter from which perspective one looks at it. The main problem that survivors face, according to Debra Kaminer and Gillian Eagle, is a loss of meaning. They do not understand the reason why it happened or why it happened to them. They become confused and even distrustful towards the world around them and even towards themselves. Since they do not possess an explanation for the events, they go on a 'journey' to find some kind of meaning, which then may lead to favorable or less favorable realizations. Depending on the survivor's reaction to it, they may arise from their crisis more easily, or their condition may worsen (60). In many cases, they do not get help, at all, because of social stigmas which consider being raped a 'shame,' the fear which causes survivors to stay silent and hide their pain. These fears are always valid, but oftentimes they are not without a basis, and this silence can, in better cases, cause a halt in the regeneration of the survivor's mind, or in worse cases, further traumatize the individual (Wasco 316).

In short, it is not enough for the survivors to be traumatized, they have to face, arguably, one of the worst kinds of existential crises and are left to do it all on their own because, in more cases than less, they can not hope for support from their communities. Still, hope is not completely lost, because there are many kinds of (healthy) coping mechanisms available to most.

For example, one of these mechanisms, and the focus of this essay, is poetry. It is available for the majority of people, either on the internet or in printed books and it is powerful due to its ability to verbalize experiences that “defy understanding” and allows them to be “explored from multiple perspectives,” enabling the trauma to be integrated into the individual’s memory and also to induce “emotional identification (...) and critical reflection,” which has the potential to strengthen the individual’s resilience in the face of their trauma (Schönfelder 29).

Many authors experiment with the proper expression of trauma through their works, but few are as successful as poet and artist Rupi Kaur. Understanding contemporary communication methods and young people’s wants and needs, Kaur cleverly utilizes Instagram, both as a reason to reach as many people as possible and to popularize her poems and art (Kruger 10). Being one of the most popular poets of the 21st century, I firmly believe that it is important to talk about her contribution to contemporary literature, but also to observe the impact that she has on her audience. The poems that are subjected to analysis were selected based on many factors. The main aspect is that they had to be about sexual violence, however, the last poem “free” is an exception. It got selected in the end because its message can still be applied to the issue at hand, even if not exclusively to it. Other aspects in the choice of poems include, but are not limited to: the description of the actual rape event, how it can affect one’s psyche short- and long-term, the inclusivity of the problem of assault, and the community’s and outsiders’ relation to the issue.

Rupi Kaur is an Indian-Canadian poet with four bestselling books, out of which three are poetry collections: *milk and honey* (2014), *the sun and her flowers* (2017), and *home body* (2020). In her poetry she discusses a variety of topics, such as “love. loss. trauma. healing. femininity. migration. revolution” (*milk and honey* 207). Before self-publishing her debut collection *milk and honey*, Kaur shared her work online and took part in multiple open mic poetry slams, amassing a huge following around her and making her first collection an instant success.

One reason Kaur and her art became so popular is the fact that she talks about taboo topics openly and honestly, because “poetry is how [she] move[s] through life, [...] the poems are a result of all [her] reflections and lessons learned” (Bozinoski n.p.), having the personal belief that if what she says can reach and help people, it is all worth it (*Q with Tom Power*). Her transparency and courage to speak up about topics that are avoided in regular conversations are, arguably, what attracted many people, for example, immigrants and children of immigrants with poems like “broken english” in *the sun and her flowers*, or many female individuals with her poem about periods in *milk and honey*, on page 177, and the controversial approach of society towards menstrual cycles. In Kaur’s own words: “my drawings [are] simple enough that they didn’t distract from the words, but they [are] symbolic enough that they helped push the vision of the words forward” (Bozinoski). To put it differently, her illustrations make her poems aesthetically more pleasing and engaging for people on the internet, and they complement the message without the need for more words; they communicate themes in a non-verbal way that one can understand easily and effortlessly. For example, as it will be later detailed, the poem “home” is followed by a drawing that transmits feelings of peace and freshness, which subserves the idea that one can heal from the worst pains that one has ever experienced. Posting this kind of art on the internet in this way, integrated amongst the different

kinds of posts is like holding a mirror up for the reader, showing them for themselves, making one connect with oneself again (*Q with Tom Power*).

Narrating the traumatic event

The next section of this essay will focus on a few selected poems written by Rupi Kaur and it will analyze them from a psychological angle. Firstly, as it was stated before, literary trauma writing performs a complex balancing act regarding the (un)speakability, (un)narratability, and (in)comprehensibility of trauma,” (Schönfelder 30) meaning that, firstly and foremost, writing down one’s own experiences of trauma helps the poet or the author, but sharing these works is what makes healing a communal occurrence, allowing others to relate their own experiences to someone else’s when there are no other ways for them to cope with them.

The first poem to be inspected is “it’s people we are close to.” It is characterized by short lines and other traits typical to Kaur, such as the lack of punctuation and a brief, strong and straightforward story about domestic sexual harassment. In the second and sixth lines: “our knees/pried open (...) our bodies touched” (Kaur, *milk and honey* 36) a deeply conscientious choice of words can be observed in the poem: “pried open” and “touched.” These words are objectively weaker than “violated” or “raped” and the reason for this artistic decision is to be found in the fact that “touched,” for example, may be less triggering for someone with similar trauma, subserving the transformation of trauma into a narrative memory². It also helps Kaur talk openly about a sensitive topic such as this one on public platforms; and lastly, but not least, these words encase into themselves a wider problem, not only rape but other forms of child molestation and harassment. On the other hand, though, according to Cathy Caruth, “[t]he transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and other’s knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall,” (153) essentially saying

² According to Carlos León, narrative memory is a subgroup of “episodic and semantic memory,” consisting of multiple elements with narrative traits and the connection between those elements (21).

that putting a certain event in a different context does not retell the story in its original strength and may not have the same impact on the reader, losing that edge that makes an event traumatic. However, I would like to argue that this aspect of conversion is what is crucial in trauma writing. The point of trauma writing is not the exact retelling of the events, per se, but to make the writer or the reader experience it again, this time in a safe and controlled environment, where actual harm cannot reach either of them and through which they can put their memories in different perspectives (cf. Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words* and Carroll, 2005). It is also true that while trauma is indeed hard to grasp and dealt with through ordinary methods, writers have found ways to conquer these challenges of the memory and representation in a way that their works are able to aid understanding (Schönfelder 31-32) which is exactly the aim and the purpose of this practice.

The poem closes with the following lines: “that even in a bed full of safety/we are afraid” (Kaur, *milk and honey* 36). Because the bed is considered to be the safest and most comfortable place for a person, feeling unsafe there means that the person cannot feel safe anywhere else either. They are living in constant fear, without the possibility of ever escaping from their trauma, whether spatially or otherwise, more so because 8 out of 10 rape cases are committed by someone whom the survivor was acquainted with (RAINN, “Scope of Problem”). Survivors may develop symptoms of PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Wasco 310), which is essentially a disorder caused by a traumatic event, an extreme version of the brain’s inability to comprehend trauma which may manifest through a variety of symptoms, including but not limited to “threat attention biases”, changes in personality and behavior, or complications in integration into a community (Traynham et al. 86). The last lines of “it’s people we are close to” refers to this occurrence, to survivors developing PTSD, most importantly to how everything may seem a threat to people who experience trauma or struggle

with PTSD. Through this notion, Kaur's poem validates the negative emotions of the survivors, giving them a safe space where they can explore those feelings freely.

Many survivors are also afraid to talk about their experiences because of "secondary victimization" which is what the negative reactions are called from friends, family, and even police officers, doctors, and attorneys, which adds to the fear and uncertainty that a survivor may uphold towards the in their surrounding, making everyone a potential enemy (Wasco 316).

On the other hand, however, the poem uses pronouns in the first person plural, such as "our" and "we," which is an indication of the fact that there are thousands of people struggling with the same problem. This can create a sense of belonging and comfort, which is an essential part of social support, and also which may lead to positive behavior regarding stress regulation (Sippel et. al.). Kaur claimed a portion of the Internet only for herself and her readers, creating a digital territory where open communication and the possibility of giving and receiving support are enabled and encouraged. Via connecting thousands of people on this online platform, Kaur and her community prove that narrative healing is collective (Kruger 2).

Aside from the obvious fact that both poems' central theme is rape, "home" also contains descriptions of the harm done by sexual assault, but in some sense, it goes into more detail about its immediate effects. It tells a simple story about the lyrical self being sexually assaulted by a male acquaintance and whose tale may very well have been inspired by real-life events from Kaur's life, making the poem a perfect example of self-representation in literature. According to Christa Schönfelder, self-narration "in the face of trauma within fictional and literary structures, allow authors to experiment with self-reflexivity in ways that non-fictional trauma writing may not permit, thus enabling writers to explore different perspectives on writing trauma and writing the self" (30). In other words, authors can reflect on their own memories and the things that they have been through, by retelling a similar story, but this time in a fictional context, putting a made-up character between themselves and their own

experiences, distancing themselves from the trauma, putting it into a different perspective, which allows the critical thinking and evaluation of said trauma. In several places in the poem can one observe that the narrator compares her body to a house, or makes the two to be the same, as it is visible in the following line: “i decorated myself/like the walls of my home were decorated” (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 68), “all the different parts in me/turned the lights off/shut the blinds/locked the doors” (Kaur 69), “this home is what i came into this world with/was the first home/will be the last home” (Kaur 71). The entirety of this piece of art is allegorical, based on this metaphor, drawing a parallel between one’s home and one’s own body, the human person being the tenor, the vehicle is a house or home and the ground is the trait that both a body and a home are essentially containers for a person or a person’s mind. It is true that one’s soul is housed by a mortal coil made of flesh and bones and, albeit it can be modified through surgeries and other treatments, in the end, one is forced to live in their body which cannot be exchanged for another, and one must learn to live in that body that they were born into.

In the poem’s first verse, one can notice the lines “i step into the bathtub/wash yesterday out of my hair” (Kaur 68) and the adjective “spotless,” all of which contribute to the creation of a serene, ordinary, peaceful scene to show the narrator’s pure, untainted state. However, this tranquility does not last long and it is signaled by the lines “but i should have known/when you began to confuse/kind conversation with flirtation” (Kaur 68-69), for soon the narrator gets attacked, but the turn itself, while in scale it is grim and drastic, it is not so sudden, as it is foreshadowed by the aforementioned lines. In this part, she blames herself, instead of her attacker, which is common in survivors of rape (Snow 378). Then, the poem continues with a description of a shift from light to dark, symbolizing how the protagonist is taken away from the safety of a luminous environment, full of people and life to an isolated state of shadow and danger, where she is to be ripped apart, with no hope of help. When she realizes that she cannot

get away, she starts to dissociate from reality to protect her psyche as much as possible from the inevitable damage: “all the different parts in me/turned the lights off/shut the blinds/locked the doors/while i hid at the back of some/upstairs closet of my mind” (Kaur 69). This dissociation³ is crucial in understanding because the poem allows the reader to feel the emotions of the protagonist without showing them the actual events. The sentiments are communicated instead of events that defy ordinary remembering, successfully representing that which cannot be comprehended by ordinary methods (Schönfelder 30). Then, the reader arrives at the most graphic and disturbing part of the poem, where the protagonist is compared to food: “i was (...) fresh meat,” “cantaloupe,” “bruised fruit” (Kaur 69), which is being devoured by a hungry wild animal, or a monster with seemingly unquenchable glutton: “it was you./who dove into me with a fork and knife/eyes glinting with starvation/like you hadn’t eaten in weeks” (Kaur 69). The narrator is being dehumanized by the perpetrator and in turn, the poem dehumanizes him as well, where the latter is the one committing a merciless deed and the former is the subject of that deed. Through this allegory, Kaur is able to talk about one of the most sensitive subjects ever by still not being as triggering as it would be if she described the rape exactly as it was, still conveying the same feelings and messages, for poetry gives her the tools to do so. After this grisly part, Kaur shows what an experience such as this one can do to a person. The symbolism between the body, the individual, and the house is the strongest here, as there is barely any description of a physical person, rather she is the home itself, which has “no gas/no electricity/no running water” (Kaur 70) and which is described as a desolate place, an abandoned, almost haunted house where the ghost is the protagonist herself, who feels dead inside, ripped of all innocence, safety, and joy: “fruit flies. webs. bugs” (Kaur 70). The lines, where she calls out for helpers and fixers illustrate how helpless she feels, they are cries for

³ Dissociation is a defense mechanism of the mind against negative forces coming in from the outside and it manifests in one’s psyche as a disconnection from reality, one’s own identity or thoughts and emotions (ISSTD).

support that seems just out of reach for she feels she is unable to go on alone and to move forward on her own, because none of her ‘systems’ function as they should. As stated by John Suler, a “house can be a powerful symbol of the self,” because it can represent most of what a person consists of (n.p.). As it is written in Suler’s book, the outer walls and paint are what is visible to other people, while the interior is the waking thoughts and the basement is the unconscious parts of one’s mind (n.p.). In the part where the poem talks about the narrator’s unwellness and the home’s dysfunctionality, “this home is empty now/(...)/call the cleaners to wash me up and hang me to dry” (Kaur 70), the interior is being shown as a place in utter disarray which signifies how the narrator’s thoughts are dark and preoccupied with the events so much so that it has effects on her physical well-being as well.

Those descriptions of the depression and helplessness may resonate with people a lot because “[poetry] gets into us and plays through our psycho/neuro/immuno-sensory selves” (Carroll 162), allowing “emotional identification and sympathy” (Schönfelder 29) for the narrator and through her for everyone who has ever gone through a similar experience. The protagonist’s helplessness can be due to depression caused by the traumatic event: “i lose sleep after the first date/lose my appetite/become more bone and less skin/forget to breath” (Kaur 70) and because she is forced by her own mind to constantly relive the trauma: “every lover who touches me – feels like you” (Kaur 70). A disruption of cognitive abilities can be identified, such as memory, which can be a symptom of PTSD (Wilson and Keane 15), as the memories of the rape come back constantly. Her room, which turns into a psych ward by night is also a manifestation of her ongoing mental struggle with her memories; she is a patient at an asylum, her behavior is “crazy” and not understandable by those that have not gone through similar events, with no hope of getting out. These descriptions present the narrator in a most vulnerable position and in the case that this event was indeed inspired by Kaur’s own experience, then that means that she makes public some of her darkest hours. In an interview

with Emma Watson she said that even though she feels naked, “if anything you say can just connect and help one person, that’s enough.” The key word here being “connect” because this is Rupi Kaur’s aim here: to induce sympathy and to make her art relatable, because she realized the strength that poetic expression holds because it is literary verbalization that makes “the wound perceivable and the silence audible” (Hartman 259).

The next, and arguably even more meaningful section of the poem is the one where the protagonist manages to heal from her trauma and uses it to become stronger. It shows, that there is hope for survivors of rape and that one can overcome these hardships and that the pain is transitory if one chooses it to be. The narrator begins this process of healing in the following segment: “the sun can’t stop the storm from coming/the tree can’t stop the axe/(...)/it’s too heavy to carry your guilt – i’m setting it down” (Kaur 71), by forgiving herself and even her attacker because her hatred would only bring her down; she realizes that she was never responsible for being assaulted. To completely accept the events and to be able to move on, one also must personalize said events and integrate them into their own memory and think of them as part of their personal history, only this way can the painful aspects of the trauma be properly left behind (Kolk Section 6). The protagonist then performs a symbolic “kicking out” of the unwelcome guest for only after cleansing and forgiving herself is there a possibility of moving forward: “there is no space for you/no welcome mat/no extra bedrooms/i’m opening all the window/airing it out” (Kaur 71-72). In the end, it is up to the survivors to find meaning and successfully cope with the trauma, by integrating the hurtful event into their past (Wilson and Keane 632). The allegory of the home being the same as its inhabitant is also prominent here, as the narrator accepts the fact that she has to live in the body in which she was born and it is up to her to love and caress it and that she has the ultimate say in what she allows to stay and what she wants to and needs to get rid of. The narrator starts to see her attacker in a different light as well: “it takes a broken person to come searching/for meaning between my legs” (Kaur

71) seeing him as another human who also has his own struggles, but in the line “it takes monsters to steal souls” (Kaur 71) she revokes her merciful judgment because even if her attacker is ‘broken’ he is still the sole individual responsible for his actions, and that is what makes him a “monster” instead of someone who needs help; that conscious choice where he decides to hurt a person even though his ‘victim’ did not commit any transgression towards him.

At the very end, the poem comes full circle, as this part takes place at the end of the healing process. Things return to normal, and it is signified by the frame-like structure and the motifs of purity return as well, alongside the notion of cleaning, but this time, these symbolize the narrator getting free from the misery of her past. She becomes happy and content again and everything returns to an original, before-rape state: “putting flowers in a vase/(...)/loading the dishwasher with all of my thoughts/(...)/wash yesterday out of my hair/(...)/sit back/put my feet up/and enjoy/this typical thursday afternoon” (Kaur 72). The line “decorate my body in gold” did not appear at the beginning of the poem and here, at the end, it refers to the fact that while the protagonist did indeed heal from the events, she has not forgotten it; rather, she took it and shaped it into power and she wears that strength proudly; the memories are not a stain on the soul anymore, but proof of what she has survived.

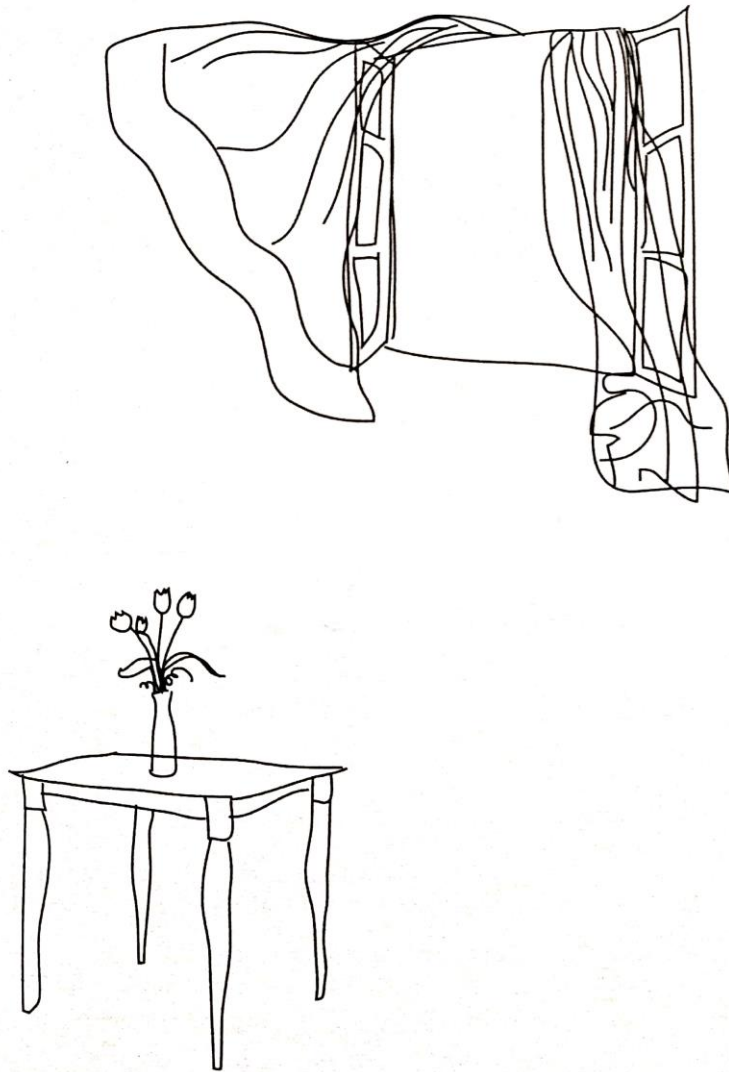


Figure 1

The artwork (figure 1) that accompanies this poem is also one that conveys emotions of calm and serenity, aside from providing a visual experience for the picture created in the poem by words. The image of the open window and the curtains flying as the wind gushes around them creates an atmosphere of freshness and freedom, which signals a new start for the protagonist, and the flowers on the table signify life returning and thriving.

A few pages after “home” is the poem called “hours,” which focuses solely on the aftermath of a rape incident. It is not explicitly told that the protagonist was sexually assaulted, however, there are a few clues that help the deduction process: “the white between my

legs/(...)/the bite marks/(...)/the blood” (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 76), these are all indications for male genital fluids, bruises, and scars that are unavoidably part of a sexual attack. However, this time it is not the attack itself that is the focus of attention but rather what happened after. After the narrator arrived home she went into the bathroom to clean herself of the pain that she was subjected to not long ago. As it was pointed out by Kell Hagerman as well, the narrator calls upon the power of nature and other materials provided by it, to help her heal from the ache and agony (109): “tossed in spearmint from the garden/two tablespoons of almond oil/some milk/and honey” (Kaur 76). The way they are described is similar to a recipe for healing; rape is an unnatural occurrence and it is nature that has the ability to repair a broken soul with its tools. The narrator picks out the pine needles from her hair and lays them in order, counting them in a ritualistic way. Here, the needles may be symbols for the agonizing memories that the protagonist must analyze, sort out, and make sense of in order to deal with them easier later on, for trauma can be understood as a crack in the “ego’s protective shield” (Leys 23). Oftentimes, traumatic memories do not have a narrative, with the help of which they could be integrated into one’s knowledge of the past, however, they can be thought of as “sensations,” as in the five senses of a human being, such as vision or hearing (Sklarew 104). Trauma, being more vivid and disorganized, is being symbolized by a pine needle, but also because of its irregular nature, and this is also the cause for why it takes much more effort and time to organize them, and it can be a much harder process.

The lyrical self then proceeds with the healing practice by disowning the harm and the shame, all that she does not need moving forward: “the sweat was not mine/the white between my legs/not mine/the bite marks/not mine/the smell/not mine” (Kaur 76). With these actions she makes her identity different from the assault and the rape, she distances herself from it, not making herself equal to it. Nevertheless, the poem’s story has a duration of only four hours, but this healing process is usually much longer and much more arduous. Even if the protagonist

manages to get rid of most of the pain, actually healing from the trauma takes a lot more work. This might be the explanation behind the poem's last line "the fourth hour i prayed." She might be praying for these rituals to work and heal her or for others who were also assaulted similarly, and she feels sorry for them, as they are in the same boat. Either way, she wishes for herself and others she is sharing a fate with so that all of them can get help and heal from the trauma. The poem does not blame anyone, not even the attacker and especially not the survivor; rather, it gives a small demonstration of how trauma processing may look like for some people and also how it may affect those who experienced it. In Sharon M. Wasco's essay, she points out that what was essential in understanding the reactions and experiences of trauma survivors is the PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, because it offers a "scientific explanation for distress that does not blame the victim for bringing [the rape] on herself" (310). The poem offers a similar kind of understanding of the survivors but from a much more subjective standpoint, showing them that even though they are the ones who have to bear the grievous consequences of their attacker's actions, it was not them who are at fault, and the emotions they experience caused by the hardships are completely valid and even normal because what they went through is objectively terrible (cf. Ruby 2002).

The poem that I entitled "liar" was published in Kaur's third poetry collection *home body*. It is very short, only four lines but it can still be divided into two parts, the borderline being at the exact half-point of the work, between the first two lines and the last two lines. This opposition is symmetrical, being similar to a margin between two enemy forces who are at war against each other. Kaur uses pronouns in the first person: "i'll be quiet when/we can say *sexual assault*" (Kaur, *home body* 12) which creates a sense of community and belonging between those who have read the poem and including but not limited to those that are survivors of sexual assault or are activists to help those affected and prevent more cases of rape, producing an intricate web of connections among people of different ways of life but having one common

ground, that is the fight against circumstances allowing rape cases to happen. The use of these inclusive pronouns of “i” and “we” is significant from another aspect of community: the poem, due to its short and compact nature, is perfect to be posted on *Instagram*, where it can reach even more people. On the platform, it may come through as a call to action for people to speak up against sexual violence, because the pronoun “we” immediately integrates the new reader into the already existing group of people.

On the other hand, first-person pronouns are genderless, which brings attention to the universality of the issue of sexual harassment. Behind that single word “we” there are people of every kind of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., so every single person that comes across the poem feels represented unless they have different views on the topic. These people are the opposing “they,” the oppressors and the perpetrators. While the problem of false rape accusation is indeed existent and ever-persisting, this is not the problem that the poem brings attention to, but the issue of secondary victimization when certain members of the survivor’s community do not believe the survivor’s claims. This phenomenon occurs as a result of social stigmas according to which, being assaulted is the shame of the survivor and not the cruelty of the perpetrator; these reactions add more to the already tremendous burden of the survivor (Wasco 316). Presenting this issue as an opposition like this puts more emphasis on the severity of the situation and it also serves as a call-out for those categorized as the “they” not necessarily to believe everything but to stop saying that every rape claim is a scheme made up by the survivor. What plays more into this is how the “we” “says” “sexual assault” but the “they” “scream” the opposite, signaling, that these people have oppression as their agenda, by any means, and this ‘war’ and the bigger issues will not be terminated until the participants take a step back and try to understand each other instead of fighting a meaningless battle.

The next poem, “cruelty,” is a part of *home body* as well. Structurally, out of all the poems analyzed in this essay, this one is the least lyrical with all lines reaching the margin of

the paper, having a block shape, and looking like a journal entry or a paragraph from a prose. The theme of the poem is sexual violence committed against a child, but the lyrical self talks from a position of retrospection, remembering and making sense of the tragedies that befell her and reflecting on the feelings that emerged in her caused by her experience. Her mentioning of womanhood at the age of four is additionally a commentary on how many people tie the concept of adulthood in the case of female individuals not to physical, emotional, and intellectual maturity, but rather to sexual knowledge and experiences. Towards the end, there is the sentence “to know fear intimately” (Kaur, *home body* 24) where fear is personified as if it was so strong and intense that it became an entity on its own. Another interpretation of this snippet of the poem may be that the attacker is made identical with the fear, for if the survivor encounters their attacker, it throws them back into that state of vulnerability and misery. On the other hand, showing the perpetrator as a concept, a feeling, depersonalizes them, makes them less of a human being, less real but at the same more palpable, hence making the molestation and the evil that the perpetrator represents easier to comprehend and accept, to look at them as unstoppable catastrophes, without a waking mind, rather than regular people. The poem performs a similar dehumanization as in “home,” with a similar role, which is to talk about sensitive topics. Symbolizing the perpetrator as a monster also serves the creation of a “space in which experiences that defy understanding and verbalization, that concern (...) vulnerability” may be analyzed and put into a context of understanding (Schönfelder 29). Enabling this proceeding allows for an opportunity where the reader can take a step back and consider the many facets of an experience such as the molestation of a minor, for example, what are some solutions that could prevent events like this, or what is the right course of action in dealing with an attacker.

Calling attention to the problem of child sexual abuse makes this work one of the most significant ones among all the other ones that are inspected in this essay. According to Mathews and Coline-Vezine:

Child sexual abuse is enabled when children's rights are not recognized, laws and policies do not prohibit and prosecute sexual offending, social norms against sexual violence are weak, gender inequality persists, constructions of masculinity emphasize aggression and sexual dominance, there is ignorance about sex and sexual violence, and opinion leaders in social institutions lack the will to act (306).

In other words, due to ignorance and toxic societal rules, children are forced to deal with issues that not even all adults can get sorted out. They have no protection and little to no hope of escaping, because those that have the power to help them, refuse to recognize the ever-persisting problem. Even worse is the fact that they are told to not talk about their experience or they are ignored when they do muster up the courage to speak up, and in some cases, they are even punished for it (Mathews and Coline-Vezine 307). This may be the reason why the poem itself is written as a reflection of events that have years ago. As a child, in fear of punishment, the narrator could not talk about the assault, could not express herself, and so she had to wait years to be given a chance to communicate her experiences.

The poem is closed with the following sentence: “and own all the world’s shame at once” (Kaur, *home body* 24) This can be understood as one blaming oneself for getting hurt or the community blaming the survivor and performing a shift in focus from the individual’s experiences and memory to the collective memory. The last and third interpretation of the sentence, however, may be the one that is the most beneficial for the readers and traumatized individuals: the lyrical self carries the exact same “shame” every other person who has ever

experienced child sexual abuse or other kinds of sexual violence, which, again, creates an invisible web between all these people, connecting them in one community, making the bearing of pain easier. Being integrated into a community and having a feeling of connectedness does lower the rate of distressed individuals among those that are affected by some kind of trauma, as it is indicated by data that was derived from inspecting the lives and behaviors of war veterans (Sippel et al.). It is also widely believed that healing is a process that is an inherently lone and individualistic course (Wilson and Keane 632), however, Robert Carroll believes that healing is necessary on a communal level as well, such as between an individual and their family, between the individual and the community or at the highest level of the entirety of the community (166-167), as children's or anyone's rape affects not the survivor, but the surrounding people as well, such as the survivor being emotionally detached from people in their vicinity, not being able for intimacy or altered loyalty towards friends and family (Wasco 317).

The last poem to be inspected is called "free" and it is different from all of the previous ones, but it is just as significant as those. It was established previously that Kaur created a community of safety and support for her readers (see pp. 13 and 24). In this community, people are encouraged by each other to speak up, whether by each other or by Kaur herself, and this is where the last poem connects with the previous ones, on the level of communicating and giving courage and voice to those that need it. "Free" is the shortest poem of those that were studied in this essay, consisting of only two lines and five words: "you voice/is your sovereignty" (Kaur, *home body* 146). It is accompanied by an illustration of a woman, whose mouth is a flower and her throat is also some kind of plant. The poem itself is straightforward due to its shortness, as it calls attention to the fact that the only real freedom one possesses is one's freedom of speech, it is the only power that one owns. This freedom of speech is the

strongest way one's agency can manifest and it is also the best chance for survivors to have in getting help, albeit it can be the hardest thing to do.

Agency, in this context, refers to the “capacity, condition, or state of acting or exerting power” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.p.), further arguing in favor of the point that it is through one's capacity and willingness to use one's voice that one is able to have control over one's own self. Sexual assault perpetrators strip their victims from their agency when they commit the rape, forcing themselves onto the victim, disregarding that the latter has the right to say no to those sexual advances. They have that right because of personal agency, according to which they are the sole decision-maker regarding their actions and power over their bodies.



Figure 2

In the illustration (figure 2), there are vines in a circular form connecting the plants of the throat and the mouth which is similar to a crown, which, again, plays nicely into the metaphor of one's voice being their ultimate authority. This connection, on the other hand,

could also symbolize the difference between the ability to speak and the willingness to do so: being able to talk does not mean anything unless one chooses to do so. On the level of the poem, this appears in a way that is concealed, so to say: the poem itself does not explicitly call out the reader to speak, nor does it talk about those people that actively use their voices. Rather, it states the obvious, that one's voice is the most powerful tool one owns, but leaves the rest, that is, the choice to use or how to use that tool to the reader.

Nonetheless, without one's voice, one is unable to be heard or to achieve anything that would serve one in any beneficial way. However, standing up on a podium is not the only method of speaking up, for humans have a myriad of ways to communicate, one of which happens to be poetry. Using the tools granted by artistic expression one can talk about hurtful topics without saying the exact words, which might be triggering for one and many others as well, but the conveying of the same message is enabled through art. According to Robert Carroll's observations, who worked with patients with terminal diseases to help them cope with their condition by encouraging them to write poetry, sharing one's own stories and thoughts has a huge healing power even if the poem is not about that issue – or in his and his patients' case is not about illness or that particular illness –, it just needs to have themes that can resonate with the reader, in order to subserve positive changes (Carroll 164).

Of course, this poem and its message can be applied to many different cases and problems as well, nevertheless, it can be crucial for rape survivors to be encouraged to speak up, even if it is only through an indirect way such as this one for the unreported number of sexual assault cases is immeasurable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main topic of this research was the poetry of Rupi Kaur and whether it has beneficial effects on readers who are also survivors of some kind of sexual violence. The methodology for this was the careful reading and interpretation of six poems from three poetry collections, the poems being “it’s people we are close to,” “home,” “hours,” “liar,” “cruelty,” and “free.” The interpretations were then connected to already existing research about trauma, sexual violence, and, most importantly, coping mechanisms, and the general healing power of poetry. Alongside the texts, the illustrations accompanying them were also observed. Their relevance to the topic of the poems was studied and how they complement them from an artistic and story-telling point of view.

Concerning “it’s people we are close to,” I examined the way poetry helps with the integration of trauma into one’s memory by fictionalizing real-life events, and how through poetry one is able to talk about sensitive topics publicly, and without making the readers relive the trauma as it was. The problem of secondary victimization is also discussed, but while this has a negative impact on the rape survivor, support from people has positive effects on the survivor while they are in the process of dealing with the trauma of rape.

“Home” explores sexual violence differently as it goes into more detail about how it can affect a survivor. In connection to this poem I also further explained how the narrative recollection of an event can have positive effects on both the author and the readers, by enabling the evaluation of the trauma in a fictional context. It is made possible by the use of metaphors, such as the body and the house metaphor, or the monster metaphor, and powerful descriptions of depression that would resonate with people on a deeper, more emotional level. The poem shows the readers the utter desperation that exists in a survivor’s soul at the time of the rape but also how healing is possible on the level of the individual. The concept of dissociation was a crucial psychological aspect here, through which understanding was provided of the

survivors' experiences, and which made recognizable many of the issues that survivors have to face when they are against something like rape. In relation to this poem, I have analyzed one of two drawings, concluding that the illustration enhances the conveying of the atmosphere created by the poem, while also complementing the final message of the text, which is that there is a possibility for sexual assault survivors to heal from their trauma.

If "home" details the psychological impact of rape on a survivor, then "hours" talks more about the process of healing. This happens through the use of motifs of nature and by the narrator realizing that she needs to get her memories of the trauma in order, before attempting to include them in her knowledge of the past. In regards to this poem the concept of PTSD was also brought up in order to understand the actions of survivors when it comes to dealing with trauma and the procedure that these people have to go through to recover mentally.

"Liar" is the poem that talks more about the community, and brings together many different people under the same cause, which is the fight against negative societal feedback against survivors of rape. Through symmetry of the lines, the poem creates an opposition that can be observed in real life as well, between the survivors battling for their rights and help from their surroundings, and between those that wish to suppress them by any means. Here, the main focus of the discussion was the relationship between the community and the individual and how they affect each other.

Sexual violence committed against children was also discussed in relation to "cruelty," where the issue of memory was examined again, but this time in the context of a bigger time period, that is between childhood and adulthood. The motif of dehumanizing the perpetrator of the rape act returned as well, which had a similar function as it had in "home," but this time it enabled a different kind of reflection on the events of the past. I further studied the relationship between the individual and community as well, but this time the focus was the group of people

who are bound together by similar life experiences regarding sexual violence and the benefits of a supporting community.

In relation to “free,” one’s voice’s power was examined as a source of power and agency. It was established, that it is the best tool that the average person possesses and it is through it that one can exert power over oneself. This is also where the second illustration was analyzed and it is where I argued that while one may have the ability to speak up, it takes a great deal of effort to utilize it. It is, however, through the community that Kaur creates a space where speaking up is allowed and encouraged.

In this paper, thus, I argued that Rupi Kaur’s poems have healing power granted to them by their honesty, as well as their ability to transform traumatic events into memories that are much easier to process through carefully built structures. A survivor may, furthermore, receive much-needed and hard-to-acquire support from the community surrounding Kaur as it consists of understanding people who share many similar experiences.

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