

The Healing Power of Poetry: A Study of Rupi Kaur's Instagram Poems

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Abstract

In this age, when the news of mental breakdowns and suicidal tendencies are common issues to find in daily newspapers and not only in newspapers but also in social media, especially in virtual media, people commit suicide by keeping their Facebook, or other media accounts live. It is the act of writing poems that help to roll back from depressing and degenerating mental health. Lyrics have always appeared to us as having therapeutic values. It releases pent-up feelings and makes our battered souls relieved. In my paper, I will endeavor to show the present-day use of "Instagram Poems" by Rupi Kaur has the same healing effect on the youth engaged in the regular use of social media.

Keywords: Instagram Poems. Confessional Poems. Social media Studies. Indian Writing in English

A section of readers is already exposed to the continuously scrolling habit of social sites. Over-exposure to these sites makes their mental state tumbling. A daily habit of surfing the internet forces them to engage themselves for a long time in the snare of the World Wide Web. The Problem lies there. The innocent users of the web in general and social networking sites, in particular, are unaware that they almost sell their souls to the Mephistopheles- like-world- of- data. As if in the process of purchasing goods from the online market, they become the commodity in the hands of the invisible controller of the web world. And this is true that we have already been purchased by them and controlled by A.I. run world of gadgets.

However, each and everything has a brighter side, too. When new age generation users of social sites are becoming frantically addicted to the relentless use of the internet, sparse use of positive sides can also be noticed. And the practice of writing poems and posting them on the pages of Instagram, like photo-sharing social networking sites, appears as a pause. However, writing poetry and using Instagram for sharing are two conflicting ideas.

The composition of poetry in particular and any work of art, in general, requires isolation to ponder upon.

On the contrary, social sites are just about attracting a crowd or achieving colossal viewership. While a piece poem is about nourishing and nurturing individuality, social sites abolish the concept of individuality. They tend to expose every personal self of an individual by posting a single 'selfie' on 'social' platforms. Instagram was primarily created for sharing media content like images and videos. That concept still caters to the same idea of sharing, but nowadays, that simple statement has caught users in the snare. However, while exhibitionist photos and images are being posted on the sites, the same space is also used to promote the other side of the psyche. And poets are very clear about their sole intention in posting poems, particularly on Instagram. Apart from posting photos, this site continues to promote very 'personal' lyrics. And these poets later will be termed Instagram poets, feel very comfortable even among the bunch of over-stylized selfies. There may be a simple purpose behind incorporating poems into the Instagram page. As this kind of page has a massive viewership, these poems can easily be viewed at least for one time. And at the same time, they can be easily liked or commented upon. So, somebody can achieve quick popularity as a poet. Seminal news portal like "The Guardian" promotes the same belief:

Instagram poets" are, of course, simply poets. Still, they're a phenomenon unto themselves because they have cleverly managed to combine the internet's love of inspirational quotes with artful typography and immediate shareability.
(Dean)

Moreover, Instagram being free, these poets can quickly post whatever they write. Emma Winters, a literary critic, in search of good poetry on the internet, writes in her article "Instagram poets make me ask: What is good poetry?", " And by being available for free on Instagram, these poets are democratizing how poetry is shared and who can write it, bypassing literary journals and M.F.A. programs" (Winters). As if a new colony has already been born and this times this colony is unfolded worldwide. This is certain that this set of writers is free of any lucrative awards, which are supposed to be the cornerstone of measuring potential as a poet.

The traits of Instagram-like pages treat the selfie and the poem alike. Both of them are supposed to get accessible attractions. But can the same traits nullify the quality of these poems? Do they cease to possess the recognition of being a 'genuine' poem? To understand their literary values, we can go back to the time of their origin; the necessity behind their composition. Respective poets share their individual experiences regarding the copy of poems, most of them on Instagram. The 25-year-old Jamal Cadoura from Michigan has been writing poetry since 2015. He has been a regular user of Instagram since the exact date and is known online as "@Writing to inspire ." He says about his posts, "You can see the relics of pain that I've overcome, the portraits of beauty that I could be experiencing daily, all of these things are on full display, and I'm proud of them ." He continues, "I want to put them out there because the

point of art is for art to be seen” (www.statepress.com). He wants us to see the 'relics of pain' he had overcome.

When AshishBegrecha, a tech -entrepreneur from the city of Surat, struggled with mental health issues like panic attacks, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts due to personal and professional problems, he started writing poems to relive his pent-up feelings (Mitra). He posted those pieces of poems on Instagram. It was 2017 and a year after he noticed that he got a huge fan base. The same person who once was thinking about committing suicide, getting rid of troublesome life, after one or two years, started to enjoy his creative faculty and became one of India's most followed Instagram poets. However, he was saved or it'd be better to conclude that the poetry writing process kept him.

In 2019 Blake Auden decided to set up an Instagram page to share his poetry with the digital world. That was when he had emotional disorders like anxiety and heartbreak. Being advised by his friend, he continued posting poems on his page, and two years later, he found to his utter surprise, that he got almost one lakh followers to his name. He wrote, "... focusses on heartbreak and loss, mental health and genuine vulnerability, drawn from real life experiences" (Auden). Instead of using cliches or motivational lines, he draws heavily on subjects that profoundly impact the readers.

So, it can be noted that people writing poems and posting on Instagram have an average problem with psychological disorders, including anxiety and personal distress. This has something to do with this present age which is highly burdened with the side effects of technological advancements.

However, from the discussions of the poets mentioned above, we can at least reach a general proposition that the genre of Instagram Poetry has a therapeutic aspect. These poems can equally heal those suffering souls who might have gone through psychological upheavals in their lives for some reason. In general, the therapeutic element of poetry has been proven for ages. There is so much research on this topic. But this new genre can equally provide the same refuge to the troubled psyche.

Rupi Kaur's poems bear traces of these therapeutic aspects. She is an Indian-Canadian "install-poet" with almost 4.3 million followers. Her first collection of 'Insta-poems,' *Milk and Honey* (2015), was spotted on the *New York Times* best-seller list in 2016. Her collections have been translated into almost 40 languages. Her other significant collections of poems are *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017) and *Home Body* (2020). However, these meager collections are insufficient to showcase her tremendous popularity on social media. She has already made a niche in the heart of social media users, who are primarily young. And this popularity is not just due to her poetic prowess, which has become a matter of debate between the traditional practitioners of poetry and the social media surfers, but also due to the mental refuge she provides to her reader. And she, in her poems, is candid about that,

you look at me and cry
everything hurts

...

I hold you and whisper
but everything can heal (181)

Her intention about turning her insta-posts in general and poems in particular into a source of healing has also become a matter of dispute among the conventional users of lyrics. They think this inclination to message-oriented content might not be treated as natural or traditional poems. However, if we keep the discussion regarding her being the potent poet aside for the time being and try to find out what she has to say about this argument, we'll notice that she is assertive about her focus in her poems. She, in an interview with Jeffrey Brown from *PBS News Hour*, speaks about what she is trying to achieve:

Brown: Does it hurt you when the poetry is critiqued as more therapeutic or emotional than real poetry?

Kaur: Not really, because I never intended to get into the literary world; this is not for you. This is for that 17-year-old brown woman in Brampton who is not even thinking about that space, who is trying to live, survive, and get through her day. (*PBS News Hour*)

As I have already discussed in the first part of my article, several social media users who have been posting on Instagram-like platforms are not necessarily already established 'traditional' poets, but they have issues that have forced them to express themselves on these platforms. And these issues can be exceptionally personal and socially constructed as well. But one thing is sure they have felt the necessity behind articulating such words, phrases, lines, etc. in this newly formed genre of poems. In actuality, they have been writing their respective lives. That's why when Rupi Kaur appears on this platform with a surge of emotion, she exhibits a volcanic eruption of suppressed feelings in her poems. However, her poems have scorned established critics who find her poems 'unedited' and filled with raw emotions. Some critics go even further in criticizing her poems and denigrate them as "artless." Rebecca Watts, in her seminal paper "The Cult of the Noble Amateur," expresses her doubt over Kaur -the like -poet's existence as a true poet:

Why is the poetry world pretending that poetry is not an art form? I refer to the rise of a cohort of young female poets who the poetic establishment is currently lauding for their 'honesty' and 'accessibility' – buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of the craft that characterizes their work.(pnreview.co.uk)

It seems to them that extreme popularity has marred her poetic self. That her poem is not difficult to understand is considered as lacking sophistication and depth. And as she often spells out her themes and contents in her poems, it helps such critics to conclude that Kaur's poems are not "proper" poems and, subsequently, not valued enough to be discussed in the academic world. But there are other opinions, too, which find Kaur's poems significant and sufficient to be read on a serious note and consider that these poems should reach the

maximum number of readers. This set of critics thinks that her poems are entirely contemporary. This is the exact nature of oversimplification, which keeps a section of critics at a distance, and helps general readers, particularly young women, to relate to her poems. Leah Larwood, a practitioner of the therapeutic aspect of poetry, pertinently comments upon this tendency, "Indeed, writing for you is crucial. Being unedited allows you to explore what matters to you. Sculpting your emotions or concerns into poetry can give your conscious mind a holiday. It's a great way to tap into the fountain of activity 'beneath the iceberg' within the subconscious mind. That's where the 'gold' lies" (calmmoment.com).

That's why when her first collection of Insta poems, *Milk and Honey* (2015), came out, it instantly caught readers' attention for this particular reason. This book contains four sections, i.e., 'the hurting,' 'the loving,' 'the breaking,' and 'the healing.' These parts are arranged to place the healing process at the end of all 'hurtings.' She recollects her hidden past during a therapy session, and it forms a poem, "the therapist places/ the doll in front of you/ it is the size of girls/ your uncles like touching" (15). In another poem, she talks about her 'voice', which has been stifled by this male-dominated society, "you were so afraid / of my voice/ I decided to be/ afraid of it too" (17). She presents herself as the representative of the marginalized women in all these poems. She takes the burden of existence on herself. So, when it comes to the depiction of domestic violence, she narrates it from her own experience:

when my mother opens her mouth
to have a conversation at dinner
my father shoves the word hush
between her lips and tells her to
never speak with her mouth full
this is how the women in my family
learned to live with their mouths closed (35)

In this regard, she is the appropriate descendant of Kamala Das (1934-2009), an Indian Writer in English. Das, in her poems, brings out a blatant disclosure of personal life. And Kaur using the same confessional tone blurs the distinguishing line between the individual and the professional lives. Pangs and pathos felt by women have aptly been presented by her. Like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Eunice de Souza's "Autobiography," and Kamala Das's several father-related poems where they depict the traditional role played by their respective fathers, Kaur, too, in a poem deals with her father almost in the same tone, "father.../I don't blame you for not knowing/how to remain soft with me" (37). This may appear at times a little bit monotonous to follow her poems as she expresses the same victimized and submissive life of a woman already discussed numerous times by her predecessor poets. Therefore, when she continues in the same poem, "sometimes I stay up thinking/of all the places you are hurting which you'll never care/ to mention" (37), we find her as someone who has been carrying on the baton of previous poets. But this is noteworthy to mention that the same bracketing with the last poet makes her role praiseworthy. As the issues are still not being repaired and women are

still being silenced in the hands of the patriarchal society, she has to continue this struggle. She is the warrior who goes to the field with her bare body and tortured soul. She is not different in mode but degree; her way of countering the mistreatments matters much. She has chosen the medium of writing as a means of protest and found poems as the healer of the battered soul. That's why her poems, like her predecessor Kamala Das, too, show a therapeutic aspect. And in the age of social media, when nothing is personal anymore, the poems uploaded to Instagram instantly reach millions of followers. And the result is reflected not only in favor of the poet, but the readers also benefitted by the same. In 'the healing' part of the book, she is very much confident about getting back her lost energy:

If you were born with
the weakness to fall,
you were born with
the strength to rise. (156)

She is someone who can understand the trauma and the despair of women in this society and is very much eager to provide mental support to them through her poems,

stay strong through your pain
grow flowers from it
...
bloom beautifully
dangerously
loudly
bloom softly
however, you need
just bloom ("to the reader" 158)

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