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Unraveling *Milk and Honey*: Women's Voice, Patriarchy, and Sexuality

By Renidia Audinia Siva,¹ Ida Rosida,² and Muhammad Azwar³

Abstract

This article discusses patriarchy and sexuality portrayed in *Milk and Honey*; a poetry collection written by Canadian author Rupi Kaur. Kaur is an amazing poet, artist, and performer who touches on trauma, feminism, migration, love, and loss in her works. *Milk and Honey* is a unique book of poetry as it combines written poetry with line art images. The collection is split into four chapters: "the hurting," "the loving," "the breaking," and "the healing." This research aims to show how the illustrations that appear alongside the poems have amplified the speaker's voice in response to patriarchy and sexuality. This study deployed a descriptive, qualitative approach with close textual analysis. The illustrations are highly meaningful in how they intimately depict women's bodies. Thus, these poems were analyzed within the framework of feminist literary criticism. Existing research will be considered to define the terms of the study and enrich discussion of patriarchy and women's issues. The results show that patriarchal traditions portrayed in the poems deem women as inferior, marginalizing them in a family setting (as a mother and daughter), in the setting of romantic or intimate relationships, and even in the social and economic environment due to cultural norms. It is also revealed that women and their sexuality functioned as recreational objects for males' pleasure. Within the text, women are expected to be sexually submissive, thus prone to sexual abuse in a patriarchal society. However, the speaker consistently expresses her stance against these patriarchal values throughout all chapters of this poetry collection. In conclusion, this work criticizes patriarchy and its treatment of sexuality by presenting the speaker's experiences of patriarchy while also taking a stand against it through poems and illustrations.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women's Sexuality, Feminist literary criticism, Poetry, Art, Rupi Kaur, Canadian literature

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Introduction

Patriarchy, in principle, is a system of social structures where men govern, control, and manipulate women (Pilcher and Whelehan 2016:124; Walby et al. 2017). Women are often restricted to home spaces or have limited public-sphere participation where they face inequality and discrimination within it. It is challenging to remove patriarchal culture from society. Millet stated that the stigma attached to women as domestic workers makes them vulnerable, as women do not earn money from their household care jobs (as cited in Rokhmansyah 2016:34).

Women and children are subordinated to men or the patriarch's interests in a patriarchal society. Women are supposed to be the wife, who serves virtually all of her husband's needs, and the mother responsible for educating their children. Furthermore, male-dominated cultural views about what is acceptable, desirable, or culturally typical regarding men and masculinity define a patriarchal culture (Barli et al., 2017:236; Nurmila 2018:90). Feminist literary criticism reveals how patriarchal tendencies can be exposed in literary frameworks through conventional narrative schemes, and it highlights the knowledge of women.

Feminist literary criticism with feminism as its core value, according to Tuttle (1986:184) as cited in Guo (2019:453), has the ultimate aim of evolving and exposing the practices of women writing, examining women writers and their writings from a feminist viewpoint, denouncing patriarchy in literature, and increasing consciousness of the sexual politics of language and style sexual. Feminism in present-day literature plays a role in political, social, economic, and cultural movements. This movement's purpose is to challenge women's status as inferior compared to men. Gender inequality goes beyond socio-cultural parameters allowing for feminists to petition for women's rights and guarantee that women have an equal standing with men (Guo 2019:453; (Mahajan 2016:738; Suaka 2018:66).

Feminist literary criticism is a form of feminism used to analyze and assess literary works in the theoretical context of feminism. Applying the theoretical context of feminism to fictional texts can help to reveal the realities of women living within a patriarchal culture (Eagleton 2013; Wiyatmi et al., 2020:19). Feminist literary critique aims at providing critical analysis of a culture's literary works, bringing into question the relation between language, power, gender, and sexuality (Karimah 2017:16–17).

Within literary works, a poet, for instance, tries to voice women's issues in society. Rupi Kaur, a Canadian poet, artist, and performer, has created a poetry collection entitled *Milk and Honey* in 2015. Her work sold more than eight million copies, was translated into over 42 languages, and was included in the New York Times' Bestseller List. Kaur's poetry is categorized as contemporary and uses colloquial language which makes *Milk and Honey* accessible for a wide range of audiences (Kao and Jurafsky 2012:14–15). Using illustrations in conjunction with poetry highlights connections to patriarchy and sexuality. Other than being a form of poetic expression, illustration emphasizes the visual qualities of poetry and its connections to everyday life (Kooistra 2014:135).

Elements of traditional poetry such as imagery are still used in contemporary poems. Imagery helps to convey deeper meanings within a poem using descriptive language that appeals to the senses. Furthermore, through a flexible performative exercise of the tension between fixing and letting go, contemporary poetry opens up new opportunities in language. These performances are frequently centered on understanding and improving language's influence in word variations (Schwartz 2017:6–7).

There is little academic research on Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. Poetry scholars have a significant role in bringing contemporary poets to audiences and describing how they make sense

of their experience by including personal observations and employing literary styles, subgenres, and rhetoric (Hunter 2019:862). Therefore, previous studies are needed as examples to denote the relevance of the issue central to this study.

In Eleanor Ty's article "Teaching Literatures in the Age of Digital Media" (2018), Ty uses several poetic examples of digital literature in her study, including Kaur's poetry collection *Milk and Honey* as an example of work that combines visual and textual elements. In his master's thesis, entitled "Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility: The Subversive Simplicity of Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*," McQuillan (2018) uses Kaur's work as an example of accessible poetry which challenges the belief that literary works—especially poetry—require advanced reading comprehension skills and reading practice. Lastly, the article entitled "Gender Relation in *Willow Trees Don't Weep* Novel (2014) by Fadia Faqir: A Feminist Literary Criticism" by Ida Rosida and Aini Soraya (2017), focuses on identifying and exposing gender relations found in the novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep*.

Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poetry collection tells the tale of an unnamed speaker, where she states that it is a collection of poetry about love, loss, trauma, abuse, healing, and femininity. The poems in *Milk and Honey* share the story of the speaker's life where she criticizes patriarchal practices in her everyday life and reflects her ideas about women's sexuality. This work is divided into four chapters, each with poems of a distinctive theme in chronological order: "the hurting," "the loving," "the breaking," and "the healing."

The first chapter, "the hurting," portrays the background story of the speaker, about her livelihood in the household and the values that her family holds, including patriarchy. The second chapter, "the loving," describes the speaker and her story with newfound love. The third chapter, "the breaking," continues to depict the relationship between her and the lover, how the relationship ends, and how the speaker is dealing with the heartbreak. The final chapter, "the healing," focuses on how the speaker heals from heartbreak and the prejudice against women that the male figures in her life establish, and how she realizes her own resistance against patriarchal culture.

There are critical issues to be addressed in *Milk and Honey*, including the patriarchal practices surrounding the speaker's life and sexuality. These practices create critical resistance in the speaker through the stories of her and other women's struggles in the poems. Although it is debatable whether this literary work conceives of stereotypical roles for men and women or an empowering stance, we argue the latter.

With the appeal of this poetry collection, this study intends to analyze the practices of patriarchy, sexuality, and its construction in society based on the speaker's experiences. It is also necessary to investigate these patriarchal values in the poem through a feminist lens and how the speaker conforms to these patriarchal values as a social construction.

Methods

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative which analyzes the text by giving a critical description (Berg and Lune 2018; Creswell 2017). This study deployed close textual analysis to analyze a selection of poems from *Milk and Honey*. The data were obtained by selecting poems along with their illustrations intimately depicting women's bodies because of their further engagement with themes of patriarchy and sexuality. The poems were analyzed with cross-reference to previous studies concerning either the same literary work or similar issues and theories, namely patriarchy or feminist literary criticism (Constantakis 2015; Rippl 2015).

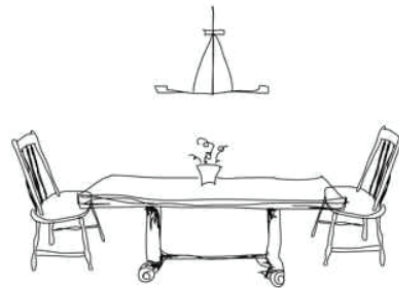
Analysis

Patriarchal practice is deeply rooted in societies and cultures across the globe. It is also conceived as a hierarchy where men can retain influence, prestige, and leadership in society (Asri and Hayati 2019:44; DeKeseredy 2021:3). Feminist literary criticism seeks to confront patriarchal practices in literature and Kaur's *Milk and Honey* reveals existing patriarchal structures, particularly how patriarchy sees women and their sexuality.

Women have a subordinate role in a patriarchal society. The patriarchal culture based on male rules affects the relationship between women and men (Rosida and Soraya 2017:14–21). Patriarchy creates inequality in gender relations, eventually normalizing the subordination of women. The issue of women's subordination in a family setting is apparent in the following poem:

Figure 1: Poem with Dining Table Illustration

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



Source: (Kaur 2015:35)

Eating together at the dining table is a common scene in a household and also an intimate way for families to gather, supposedly. The poem, however, portrays empty seats with no food on the table, implying how dining with her family feels empty for the speaker. This implication is further described in the poem itself.

The father in the poem appears to be righteous since eating with a full mouth is generally deemed impolite. However, the speaker describes it as women learning to keep their mouths closed in a family. Such an event alludes to how women are taught to be silent and adhere to the commands of men. Moreover, this also serves as a portrayal of the gender relations in the patriarchal culture, specifically how men dominate women by telling them what to do and what not to do. Both the illustration and the poem describe how the speaker can find men's domination even in the smallest or seemingly trivial forms, such as in a dining situation—where one would not expect to see unequal displays of power over another.

Similar scenes in a patriarchal household embed the disparity of men's and women's roles in daily lives, which produces consistent opportunities for injustice that many women face since men are elevated over women in attitudes and desires, as feminist literary criticism describes.

Patriarchal principles becoming normalized within families results in a societal system that gives men undeniable power (Mudau and Obadire 2017:68). Men hold their privilege, even in a family setting, by controlling women and anyone else who could endanger their position. Similar issues of men's dominance and women's subordination, showing how the speaker was taught not to speak up or be vocal since she was little, are addressed in several poems of the collection.

Figure 2: Poem with Illustration of a Male Hand Covering a Girl's Mouth

you were so afraid
of my voice
i decided to be
afraid of it too



Source: (Kaur 2015:17)

Past expressions are used in the poem above to describe how the “you” was afraid of her voice, meaning that this event occurred in the past. Furthermore, she is no longer afraid of her voice when she states that she “decided” to be scared instead of still being scared. The “voice” here has a symbolic meaning, with an illustration depicting a little girl whose mouth is shut by another person's hand. It clarifies how the “me” in the poem was not allowed to talk back or have an opinion of her own since she felt that the “you” was afraid of it.

In this poem, the “me” also represents women, indicating how the man--represented by the hand--taught them to keep their voices to themselves. The speaker portrays herself as a daughter in a family, which indicates how women have learned about this notion ever since they were little. Furthermore, the “you” refers to the men in a patriarchal society, signifying how they do not allow women to express their opinions verbally. The speaker defines this treatment as men being afraid of women's voices or opinions.

However, although the word “you” in the poem may serve as a general allusion to the men in patriarchy, the previous poem, which is entitled “father,” pertains to fatherhood and how the speaker is still searching for her father figure (Kaur 2015:16). The poem hints that the prior poem in Figure 2 is also directed towards the speaker's father.

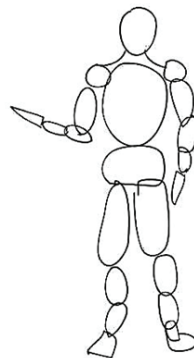
In a patriarchal society, it is normalized for men to abuse their power over women with violence. Furthermore, the speaker mentioned that she does not know whether her mother is in love or is terrified of her father (Kaur 2015:40). This touches on a similar theme where the man (the father) asserts his dominance towards the women (the mother and daughters) in the household through violence. It defines how male dominance affects women's lives in the household setting, which aligns with the purpose of feminist literary criticism.

The speaker also alludes to the tale of patriarchal families in a poem entitled “to fathers with daughters” (Kaur 2015:19). In the title itself, she refers to the father and daughter in plural forms, implying that it is a general and common practice where men’s domination is evident in the early lives of women as daughters in a family setting. The poem describes how fathers attain control of their daughters by yelling in anger at them, which is considered acceptable in a patriarchal culture to put women in a place of subjugation (Abbas et al., 2018:112).

Since the patriarchal society justifies such behavior, this abuse can quickly turn into violence to enforce the dominance of men which legitimizes, normalizes, and excuses abuse or violence as well. Pertinent to feminist literary criticism, the gender relations in patriarchal practice significantly influence the role of women's subordination in society, where these socially defined standards allow men to abuse power and force their order upon women (Dutt 2018:214), including in the household. However, the abuse does not come from a family setting since the speaker portrays how patriarchy sees women in intimate relationships. These ideas are represented in the poem below:

Figure 3: Poem with Illustration of Stickman with Knife-shaped Hands

*what am i to you he asks
i put my hands in his lap
and whisper you
are every hope
i've ever had
in human form*



Source: (Kaur 2015:49)

The poem above depicts the speaker’s romantic experience, with her intimately telling the man how he is the one thing she wants and needs. However, the poem portrays a figure with a knife-shaped hand, implying a darker stance. Even if he is what the speaker wants and needs in life (“you are every hope I’ve ever had in human form”), he still can cut and hurt the way a knife does. There is a later poem containing a similar theme where the speaker feels that her love interest touches her mind before touching her body (Kaur 2015:54), or in other words, she feels understood. The man sees the speaker as a human being with a mind instead of a mere body.

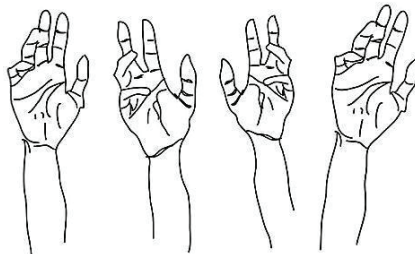
Upon first reading, the poem in Figure 3 may serve as a sweet and romantic love poem. However, there are indications of how the speaker has blind faith in the man, although she understands that he might hurt her. Another poem similarly represents the stereotypical cultural norm for women based on patriarchal values:

i need someone
who knows struggle
as well as i do
someone
willing to hold my feet in their lap
on days it is too difficult to stand
the type of person who gives
exactly what i need
before i even know i need it
the type of lover who hears me
even when i do not speak
is the type of understanding
i demand
- the type of lover i need
(Kaur 2015:74)

The topic of seeking validation from men is evident in the poem above, conveying how the speaker is conforming to a subjugated role as enforced by a patriarchal society. The beginning of the poem portrays how the speaker shows her empowering stance in an intimate relationship where she believes that both parties shall support each other, up until the part where she states how she demands a man who understands and will give what she needs even before she knows that she needs it. This comprehension of the relationship creates a sense that she needs a man to complete her, and she does not feel sufficient on her own. This suggests her approval of the patriarchal stance of women's subordination. Moreover, the poem denotes the speaker's role as a woman in patriarchy, implying a need to be dependent on a man while in a relationship. This issue of the speaker's perspective on partnership can be seen in the following poem:

Figure 4: Poem with the Depiction of "Unsafe" Hands

if i knew what
safety looked like
i would have spent
less time falling into
arms that were not



Source: (Kaur 2015:21)

This particular poem indicates how the speaker has mistaken abuse as love, particularly from the domestic or family sphere in accordance with the poem “fathers with daughters.” It leads her to look for validation in the love of other men, where she also gets to explore her femininity, mentally and sexually. The different shape of arms illustrated in this poem underlines how the speaker falls into arms that are not safe and who abuse her time after time, possibly in four incidents based on the number of hands in the illustration.

Another poem indicates an ending of the relationship between the speaker and her love interest in “the breaking” (Kaur 2015:82). The mother says that the speaker’s lover is not proving his love for the speaker. However, the speaker says that the man still loves her out of habit, indicating an on and off relationship. She is also projecting her attachment and hope in the relationship, although the speaker mentions the pain this heartbreak has caused her. A similar theme can be found in the first chapter “the hurting,” where the speaker believes that her mother both loves and fears her father at the same time (Kaur 2015:40), clarified earlier by the speaker’s story about how her father silenced her mother when she tried to talk in a dinner setting (Kaur 2015:35).

The two intimate partnerships exhibit similar behavior, where the speaker and her mother choose to stay in abusive relationships. The speaker unconsciously adopts her mother's habit of “giving more love than she can carry” (Kaur 2015:32). This notion is rooted in the patriarchal stance that women are dependent on men since domestic violence and economic dependency prevent women from leaving their partners (Fuchs 2018:14). However, the speaker is becoming more aware of this issue over time, apparent in the following poem:

what i miss most is how you loved me. but what i didn't know was how you
loved me had so much to do with the person i was. it was a reflection of
everything i gave to you. coming back to me. how did i not see that. how.
did i sit here soaking in the idea that no one else would love me that way.
when it was i that taught you. when it was i that showed you how to fill. the
way i needed to be filled. how cruel i was to myself. giving you the credit for
my warmth simply because you had felt it. thinking it was you who gave
me strength. wit. beauty. simply because you recognized it. as if i was
already not these things before i met you. as if i did not remain all these
once you left (Kaur 2015:138).

In the poem above, the speaker acknowledges her value as a woman and as an individual. She realizes the love and validation the man gave her came from herself and that she is valid and sufficient on her own. He simply recognizes her for being her. She begins to comprehend that what the patriarchy regards as a weakness in women is a strength in itself, such as her warmth as a woman. Furthermore, the speaker also states in another poem how a man is merely a complement for a woman (Kaur 2015:154), as opposed to the stance that a man completes a woman since a patriarchal society leads women to think that men make up for what women lack and therefore, they should depend on men.

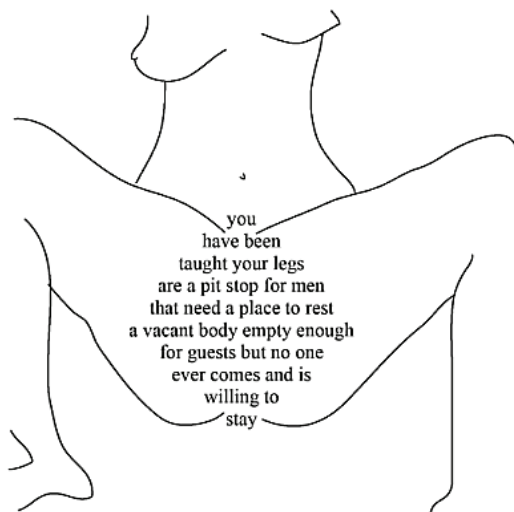
The speaker perceives the separation as enlightenment; the loss of her lover is an invitation to become herself (Kaur 2015:174). She realizes that she is enough as a whole human being without the presence of a man. The speaker believes that a woman has to love herself first before loving another person in a romantic relationship (Kaur 2015:150).

The speaker further states how women are powerful in “kaur, a woman of sikhi” (Kaur 2015:184). The surname Kaur means “woman” in sikhi, and “strong” in Balwant. Therefore, the name Kaur means strong woman. The poem explains that the speaker feels obliged to dedicate herself to the field of women’s matters. A similar idea is also stated in another poem, where the speaker expresses that her heart aches for women helping women the way a flower aches for spring (Kaur 2015:187). It represents the speaker’s feeling of happiness and her desire for women's empowerment against the cultural norm of women’s roles in patriarchy.

Women’s Bodies and their Sexuality

In the poem below, the speaker explicitly illustrates a naked female body, presenting a woman in her vulnerable state with her legs open. It alludes to how women are merely seen as sexual objects or naked bodies in a patriarchal society, rather than a fully clothed woman or a whole human being.

Figure 5: Illustration of a Naked Female Body and a Vulva-shaped Poem



Source: (Kaur 2015:13)

This illustration indicates that women are expected to be ready for a sexual encounter, regardless of their condition. This idea of available sexuality is further reinforced by the poem’s position covering the woman’s intimate areas. Since the poem is positioned in place of a vulva, the speaker implies the importance of acknowledging a woman’s body and her sexuality.

The speaker also mentions how women have been taught that their bodies are merely a “pit stop” or a sexual object which can be used and disposed of whenever men want. This patriarchal notion is an objectification of women, where men see women merely as sexual objects and strips women of their humanity, which may even lead to men’s sexual aggression against women (Morris et al., 2018:12; Vandenbosch and Van Oosten 2017:4; Vasquez et al. 2018:7). Furthermore, the speaker’s statement that men are not “willing to stay” or try to understand women, signifies the issue of men not viewing women beyond their physical bodies. Accordingly, the poem critiques patriarchy’s sexual objectification of women. Moreover, the topic of women’s sexuality is further addressed in the following piece of poetry:

The first boy that kissed me
Held my shoulders down
Like the handlebars of
The first bicycle
He ever rode
I was five

He had the smell of
Starvation on his lips
Which he picked up from
His father feasting on his mother at 4 am.

He was the first boy
To teach me my body was
For giving those that wanted
That I should feel anything
less than whole

and my god
did I feel as empty
as his mother at 4:25 am.
(Kaur 2015:12)

The speaker learns from a young age that the purpose of her body is to be used whenever men “want.” There is an indication that the boy in the poem forced a kiss on her, as the speaker was held down and felt “less than whole.” Based on this poem, men are taught from childhood that their position in a patriarchal society allows for domination over women.

The speaker compares her experience—where the boy was abusing his power over her—with an intimate event between the boy’s parents. She described how the boy “picked up” his father’s behavior in forcing himself on the mother. The speaker suggests the mother experienced a forced sexual encounter around four in the morning. The specific time of 4:25 suggests an end of the sexual encounter, where the mother feels “empty” and unfulfilled after the sexual encounter. This dissatisfaction indicates that forced sex does not allow her to feel pleasure.

This sexual encounter implies that men have the power to abuse women sexually even in a private sphere. Another poem in the collection describes two parties within a similarly violent or forced sexual encounter: a character implied to be a woman who is “not doing anything” while another character, assumed to be a man, is “having sex” (Kaur 2015: 22).

The speaker defines how if a person is having sex solely with another person’s body, then it is simply rape (Kaur 2015:22), because the man is treating the woman as an object and denying her ability to give consent. A woman may not mentally be available to have intercourse, whether she is not in the mood, is not ready, or does not want sex. Consequently, the sexual occurrence in the poem above is marital rape. Another topic of sexual abuse is heavily portrayed in a poem entitled “midweek sessions.”

Figure 6: Poem with an Illustration of a Little Girl Being Held

the therapist places
the doll in front of you
it is the size of girls
your uncles like touching

point to where his hands were

you point to the spot
between its legs the one
he fingered out of you
like a confession

how're you feeling

you pull the lump
in your throat out
with your teeth
and say *fine*
numb really

- midweek sessions



Source: (Kaur 2015:15)

The poem implies that sexual abuse such as touching in an intimate place (“fingering”) is a common practice since the abuser is referred to as a plural set of “uncles.” It means that there is not only one man who is abusing the girls, but multiple men. The speaker also mentions “the girls” touched by their uncles, meaning that there are other girls of the same “size” or the same age as the speaker who are also experiencing sexual abuse by their uncles.

Through claiming the control of women’s sexuality by men, patriarchy facilitates sexual abuse against women through social roles, norms, and value that justify men’s violence against women. Furthermore, because women are stereotyped as overly emotional their protests against domestic and sexual violence are discredited. By effect, the victims are portrayed as suspicious, not worthy of being taken seriously, and as misrepresenting the offender’s actions (Fakunmoju et al., 2016:247). This systemic social protection allows men to abuse their dominance in patriarchy and continue to be violent towards women.

The speaker also describes her frustration with sexual abuse in another poem, stating how it is hard for women to sleep out of fear that they might be sexually harassed in their sleep by uncles, cousins, and men in general who would “pry the women’s knees open” (Kaur 2015:36). It is an allusion to how common it is for women to encounter sexual abuse in a place as private as a family setting where women are supposed to feel safe.

The explication of her sexuality as a woman in a romantic relationship within a patriarchal society is further evident in a poem entitled “solo performance” (Kaur 2015:75). The title itself implies that the poem addresses masturbation. This poem shows how the love interest demanded that the speaker masturbate for him: “make those pretty little fingers dance for me.” The explicit phrasing suggests that the speaker feels empowered upon exploring her body and sexuality with her love interest. However, this signifies how she is submitting to her role in patriarchal society by essentially performing sexually at the man’s request (Rosida and Soraya 2017:132). The following poem in Figure 7, which contains a more daring choice of words, further describes the issue around the speaker’s sexuality in an intimate partnership.

Figure 7: Poem with Canvas Illustration as a Metaphor for Legs

the very thought of you
has my legs spread apart
like an easel with a canvas
begging for art



Source: (Kaur 2015:57)

This motif of sexual submissiveness is evident in the poem entitled “solo performance.” The canvas illustration in the poem is an allusion to how women are seen as objects for men’s “art” or sexual practices. The canvas is a literal object, a metaphor for women. The poem contains the word “begging,” meaning that she is desperate for her love interest to experience sexual intercourse with her, going as far as to have her “legs spread apart” in anticipation. This explicit narration portrays how the speaker is conditioned to submit to the man’s sexual desire, showing the hierarchy of an intimate partnership where women are the disempowered party because of gender discrimination (Ferguson 2011:45). This notion also implies how the speaker has to invest her energy and be ready for the man to engage in sexual activities, such that the mere thought of him gets her “begging for art.” However, the speaker later states her stand against patriarchy and the notion that women are men’s property in the poem below (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Poem with Illustration of Plants Growing out of a Woman’s Body

the next time he
points out the
hair on your legs is
growing back remind
that boy your body
is not his home
he is a guest
warn him to
never outstep
his welcome
again

- rupi kaur

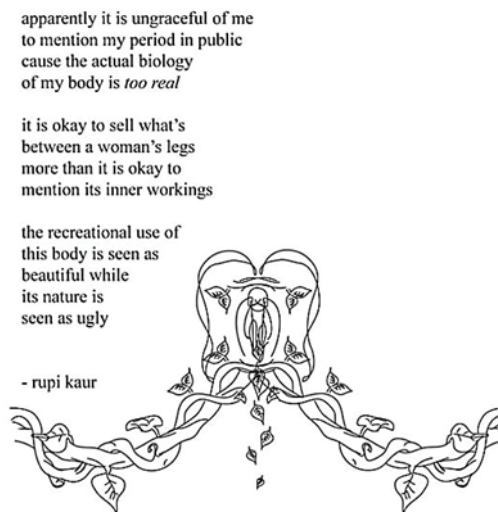


Source: (Kaur 2015:165)

The poem above reflects the speaker's experience with her partner in which he complained about her body hair in an intimate or sexual setting. The illustration in the poem depicts a nude woman with plants growing from her waist down to her feet, which is an allusion to body hair. Women are more likely to struggle with their body image (such as weight, body hair, skin tone, etc.) because the cultural norm idealizes how the female body is supposed to look rather than accepting how they naturally look. Women are held to an impossible standard for the benefit of men, resulting in women feeling insecure and hating their bodies. They are expected to possess a body that fits male's sexual desires, including having large breasts or having no body hair (Habib 2017:70; Pendergrast 2018:66).

This poem serves as the speaker's statement against how women are supposed to look according to the patriarchal norm, having no body hair in particular. Moreover, she reminds women how men are only a "guest" and thus have no claim to dictate how a woman cares for her body. By contrast, the poem urges women to reclaim their bodies as a form of empowerment. Furthermore, the speaker also touches on how patriarchy portrays women's bodies and sexuality in the following poem (figure 9).

Figure 9: Poem with Vagina-shaped Vines Illustration



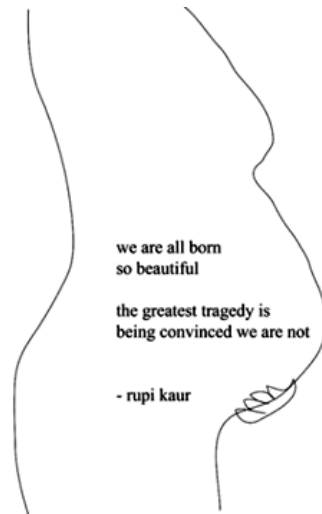
Source: (Kaur 2015:177)

The poem above illustrates a woman's intimate body parts as a vine or plant, with several leaves falling from the center. An association between plants and a woman's body suggests the speaker's presumption that the vagina is natural and nature's gift, including its inner workings, referring to menstruation as indicated by the falling leaves to represent blood. Accordingly, the speaker explains how women's sexuality and bodies are objectified while the mention of its nature is deemed unacceptable. This double standard against women's bodies and sexuality is also an issue that feminist literary criticism aims to elaborate.

Feminist literary criticism discerns the entitlement of men to possess women's bodies. This concept originates from the patriarchal notion that men own their partner and, therefore, women should acquiesce to men's desires (Sikweyiya et al. 2020:7). The beautiful illustration of the vagina as a plant in the poem works against the patriarchal stance that women's nature is "ugly." The speaker criticizes how it is acceptable for patriarchy to "sell" women sexually while

scorning the mention of their bodily processes. This poem demonstrates the speaker's challenge of patriarchy's denial of bodily autonomy for women, going further to appreciate the natural beauty of women's sexual traits.

Figure 10: Poem inside of a Pregnant and Naked Female Body



Source: (Kaur 2015:183)

The illustration in the poem in Figure 10 portrays women in a vulnerable state of nudity and pregnancy. The speaker mentions how it is tragic that women are convinced that they are not beautiful. Women's unique reproductive traits are unfortunately used against them by men who seek to dominate, oppress, and gain authority over women. Women are subjected to injustice, exploitation, brutality, and prejudice as a result of this. This tragedy also alludes to the patriarchal view that a woman's body (with its body hair and inner workings) is ugly at the onset of her birth.

Patriarchal society often disempowers women, let alone pregnant women. Being pregnant is a substantial shift in women's life because it can symbolize a transition from girlhood to womanhood, and the creation of a new life (Mitchell-Hardt 2019). The intimacy of the illustration echoes the beauty of pregnancy as a part of the human experience. Furthermore, this shows that women's reproductive function belongs to them; it does not exist only to serve men.

The illustration in figure 10 also indicates the speaker's suggestion that women carry each other in a way. The pregnant mother holds and supports the daughter from the womb and into life. Moreover, this implies how women are vital for carrying a child and how girls will grow to be women of their own and are all beautiful. The speaker's belief in women's beauty is described in another poem where she admires their qualities, such as stretch marks which are described as human and natural (Kaur 2015: 169). In that poem, the speaker mentions how women are "so soft" (motherly) but can also be "jungle wild" (sexual) and that she loves that duality of women. She states how strong women are, since they are not afraid to feel and be vulnerable. Additionally, they are not hesitant to heal themselves "with grace." Consequently, this view of women's body and sexuality serves as the speaker's stance and critique of the patriarchal view that women should abide by men's desires thereby relinquishing ownership over their own bodies and how they look or behave.

Conclusion

Rupi Kaur in *Milk and Honey* criticizes patriarchal practice and views of women as inferior compared to men. Kaur conveys her stance against patriarchy through the poems based on her experience in a patriarchal family and romantic relationships where she suffered inequity. The patriarchal society also does not regard women's voice or opinion since women are stereotyped as overly emotional or "hysterical." This notion is meant to enforce the role of women as the inferior and submissive party, asserting men's dominance and limiting women's position to the marginalized domestic sphere. Furthermore, patriarchal values dictate how women should and should not be regarding their sexuality. The poems in *Milk and Honey* portray how women are sexualized and seen as objects to be used and disposed of arbitrarily for sex. Women are also considered sexually submissive and therefore must adhere to men's desires, such as not having body hair and presenting their bodies as an object of pleasure for men. However, it is taboo and ungraceful for women's reproductive and sexual traits to be mentioned outside of the control of men. Furthermore, this essay concludes that Kaur's poems are a critique of patriarchal practices, as the speaker narrates her experience while also defining her stance against patriarchy.

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