

My initial reaction to almost every poem in *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur was an intense response of excitement. My breath would hold for a few minutes growing the pressure of a high pitched squeal which would then pour out onto a friend close by. I'd point to a page or put the book literally in their face and be like, "Look! Look! That's me!" and "It's so true! She gets it!" I'd proceed to sit there, marinate in the poem, grow quiet, grow overwhelmed, and have to close it, pace myself. I saw myself in almost every poem. Here are only a few examples, "i flinch when you touch me/ i fear it is him," "Our knees/ pried open/ by cousins/ and uncles/ and men/ our bodies touched/ by all the wrong people/ that even in a bed full of safety we are afraid," "perhaps/ i don't deserve/ nice things/ cause i am paying/ for sins i don't/ remember". The "him" I feared would be my grandfather, the aversion to touch, common to most my life, and though my knees may not have been pried open, I was touched by "all the wrong people", and would be fearful sleeping, fearful in safe places. Actually this poem brought to remembrance two instances with two different uncles that I have added to my research list. As for the last poem, it might as well have been my mantra growing up. But these poems are not mine.

CG: Could you perhaps use some of the information from Culler in your explanation of your piecing together these instances after reading this poem?

JD: Culler explains that the meaning we apply to past events in the present alters the original meaning, and that it is effect-cause not cause-effect.

DK: technically, it's not one or the other, but both, each depending on the point of view.

JD: (continued) A lot of Kaur's poems are new applications of meaning that I can view my stories through. Yeah I have felt that flinch, but she gave meaning to it that I had not, I had not applied "i fear it is him" to the situation. She has given words to things I have not given words to. To parallel, it's like placing the meaning of the words child molestor or pedophile over my grandfather. I had never applied that discourse to my grandfather/his narrative in the past and therefore didn't equate him with that, even though he was. With people placing that meaning over my grandfather his past becomes the present meaning and he can now step into that meaning fulfilling his past. Placing new meanings on past events is extremely powerful.

Milk and Honey reflects Kaur's very personal experiences and reflections of abuse, trauma, love, and healing. Experiences that are different from my own. Kaur is Indian, and I am white, she was raped, I was not, and her romantic relationships, and world views or religion are different from my own. These are a few factors that influenced her own interpretation of the situations she experienced, and I interpreted her situations with the context in which I live, and yet there was a connection. If Kaur heard my story she would most likely make sense of it by interpreting it with her knowledge and experience and come up with something I had not seen myself. Even though our stories are different, I think the most connecting factor is the emotional, mental, spiritual underpinnings of the topics she highlights that can transfer to any situation or story. If your friend is complaining of a headache, you understand, you know what that feels like, even though your headache might have originated differently than theirs. It's a pain you both recognize.

Is this okay? Am I not reading closely enough? Am I not taking away what Kaur intended?

DK: One important item to note is that you are sharing from a reading limited to the mimetic, reading for the aesthetic emotion that emerges through identifying with the speaker/narrator, which is certainly part of the design of the text. It might be valuable to also examine it more closely, to read for thematic and synthetic concerns. How might a resistant reader approach the book more critically? If you identify too closely with the narrative audience to the book, would that even be likely? Why not?

JD: I think a resistant reader would have to become the “interested reader” that is open to taking on different readerly roles and would have to read the text for what it is on the page. I find this extremely difficult. I am stuck in one role, in one dominant reading of the text, reading for emotions, reading for my experiences, and the beliefs surrounding them. The narrative audience is an audience that is fully convinced the text is realistic, and I am convinced. Rabinowitz states, “Sometimes, however, we must go further, and pretend to abandon our real beliefs and accept in their stead “facts” and beliefs which even more fundamentally contradict our perceptions of reality” (128). I think in order to read Kaur’s poems with a critical stance, I have to temporarily abandon or put off to the side what I already know and hold true about the reality of sexual abuse, and take on another perspective. Identifying so closely with the book, I’m not sure this is possible. My reality is so real and so is Kaur’s, it’s hard to ignore.

AR: So, I’ll admit that I’m resistant to Kaur. Well, if I’m honest, I’m resistant to most things... :) Last semester in Core1, I wrote one of my assignments as a parody of Kaur’s poems. I mainly know Kaur for her “instagram” poetry, and parodies of her work are very popular. I guess a resistant reader would look at them in comparison to “good” poems...whatever that means. They’re not long enough or complex enough or clever enough...blah blah. I’m wondering if this would be a synthetic view? Or maybe looking FOR a synthetic view, but finding none?

If I were to write a poetry book on similar topics as Kaur, I think I would just want people to get something, anything from it. Plant a seed that they can grow something from, even if it comes up rotten for them. I think it is less important that the reader need to connect with my specific story and more important that in my writing there is an influential, universal space a reader can fill up with meaning. Perhaps I’d like them to take away my intended meaning, but is that more or less authentic to the reader’s experience? It may be unrealistic to wish for the ideal audience.

TB: I wonder if you can apply some of this through specific lenses of the authors we’ve used.

AR: Specifically, I think you should do a network of controlling values. This may help you step outside the mimetic register.

JD: I’m a bit confused how to go about this because there is so much happening in this book, so many topics. Throws me off because it doesn’t read so linear like a narrative, but is split up. I’m definitely off on this one. Anyone have suggestions?

Controlling

Purpose: When you embrace self-acceptance, self-love, your beauty as a woman, and become your own soul mate, you achieve wholeness, groundedness, and healing.

Context: When you look for a man to complete you or make up for what you lack, or find affirmation, you will be disappointed, and end up with less of yourself, realizing your needs are not found in a man.

TB: Does the book and general subject deal more with the pressures and abuse women face as a result of the patriarchy?

JD: The first section definitely deals with the abuse and pressures woman face, but it also covers love in romantic relationships, and breakups, as well as healing.

TB: But are those relationships in the frame of a patriarchal society? Such as, the way the partners interact are shaped by the influences of society

JD: Most of the poems, no, there are a few though where I could see a dynamic that could be seen as patriarchal.

TB: Okay. Then perhaps you could make two separate networks?

JD: Yeah, and honestly there could be so many networks within this book. I'm still caught up on the opposing side of the first though.

TB: I'm still shaky on these, but I guess think about what is stopping the purpose, and what is a positive effect from the context.

JD: I'm struggling to see it, but I guess If I look at from what the world has to say about this generally that Kaur is going against? I think of all the fairytale romantic movies out there where the woman isn't happy until she is married at the end. Like she isn't satisfied alone with herself. Or the saying "you complete me"

TB: So, if your purpose is about a woman's acceptance of herself, would the opposing context be about the struggle a woman faces to do so? What is hindering this self acceptance? Is it the message that a woman should be married and a mother to be truly happy in life? Is it something else? Does that make sense?

JD: I might be getting a little off topic, but the opposing side to Kaur's idea of fulfillment might contrast with Plato. I'm reading a book called *The Sacred Search* and in the chapter titled, Soul Mate or Sole Mate, it talks about Plato's idea that there were humans that were both male and female who tried to overthrow Zeus. He split them in half to make them weaker and then were always in search for their other half, "Eros, the bringer-together of their ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two and to heal their human nature, because we are sliced like fillets of sole, two out of one; and so each is always in search of his own token." Hence, "finding your soulmate", whereas Kaur says to be your own soulmate and you will be complete.

TB: Interesting. I mean, if we look at it from Kaur's perspective, isn't being your own soul mate the same as these original beings, because they were one whole person? Or is it that because they

are separated, you should be able to find solace in being by yourself, because you never know when you'll find the other half, and you should be able to be happy and self sufficient without it.

JD: I don't know if I'd say it's the same thing, just because the human's Plato was talking about were both male and female and whole because of that. I'm not really sure about your latter point haha. I think that is Kaur's realization at least.

Opposing

Purpose: When you look for a man to complete you, you make up for what you lack, becoming your full self, realizing your needs are to be met by the completion of another half.

Context: When you become your own soulmate and look to yourself for fulfillment you remain incomplete and lack healing.

AR: I think that your network of values are good! Having not read the book, I can't comment on them much. But you mentioned earlier that you weren't sure *how* to write a network for this book because there are so many topics going on. I think you succeeded with just one though. I think Kaur's controlling value is female empowerment, and you can trace each poem back to that no matter what.

Looking back on my Vision/Mission statement I wrote, "I am the possibility of a creative union of words, peoples, ideas, experiences that converge on to a same path or goal." I think Kaur's poems communicate this mission, at least in the way I interpret, since I feel she has similar complaints. She unified me, with her, and many other women on sexual abuse, as our experiences converge in her writing, creating tracks in a discourse community in which we are on a similar path and some with the goal to advocate change and embrace healing. I see this in reviews of her book. I looked at goodreads to see what people were saying and the ones who loved it had an emotional response to the poetry and/or connected with its message, or shared similar experiences with the author. Positive reviewers also left self affirmations to live life carrying Rupi's messages or what they discovered for themselves about themselves.

DK: Thomas Mann once wrote that art, and specifically writing, is an act of revenge on life, on its blithe power to bring us to experience what we rather would have not experienced. This is certainly a broad viewpoint on the context and purpose of art/writing, and it is certainly questionable.

JD: I think that is really interesting. I would agree that this is a broad and questionable statement, but writing is definitely an act/response to life, and the unpleasant experiences that come with it. As for revenge, I think the motive can differ.

Although not everyone who read this book was unified. People who did not like the book did not show an emotional connection or acknowledge the message, but rather critiqued the poems themselves in how they were constructed. Most complained said they were just sentences broken up, and compared them to tumblr, and the majority of negative reviewers did not consider her work to be poetry. I think this is really interesting, because just like when I shouted, "That's me!" Kaur was also shouting, "That's me!" The poems are parts that make up her whole person, her heart, her experiences, her thoughts. How do you criticize poems that are so personal? I am

usually critical when I read poetry, but all of that went out the window when I read Kaur's poems. And honestly I don't have problem with her simple style, I think it balances the weight of her heavy emotions.

TB: I think poetry has become so subjective. Modern poetry can really be anything, I feel, and I think the most important takeaway from it is that it elicits some type of emotional response. The connection that you felt is important, and probably a goal of Kaur.

AR: I like your analysis of the resisters here! I think you're right - resisters put an obstacle in front of them, preventing the emotional connection/message acknowledgment. The obstacle being: these aren't poem-y enough! I love the "poems are just parts that make up a whole." I think that's rather poetic in itself.

After reading Tyson's chapter, "Using concepts from Feminist Theory to Understand Literature," I see that Kaur's poems can be interpreted with a Feminist lense. I think a majority of her poems exhibit an oppression of traditional gender roles. For example in her poem on pg 19 it reads, "every time you/ tell your daughter/ you yell at her/ out of love/ you teach her to confuse anger with kindness". Rupi's father is portrayed in the traditional male gender role and as a father who is assertive and domineering. Rupi on the other hand is the helpless and sensitive female. It is clear by her tone that she is in opposition of her father's behavior or traditional gender role of masculinity and the effect it had on her, "she grows up/ to trust men who hurt her". Another example on page 166, Kaur says, "to be/ soft/ is/ to be/ powerful." This idea defies the traditional idea of a female that equates "soft" with weakness which lacks power, and man as "tough" with strength which allows for power.

DK: Okay, but might this also be seen as a rudimentary inversion? I mean, such a statement is already well understood in our culture, so much so, that I bet there were many eyes rolling reading that. But to a narrative audience thinking such a thought for the very first time, it can be revolutionary.

JD: This definitely is not a new idea. My initial reaction to reading the poem was to kind of write it off, cause I've heard ideas like this before, and perhaps there was some disbelief intertwined. But reading it again and dwelling on it, I did feel liberated. I believed what Kaur was saying. Power doesn't have to be defined by a tough exterior or interior, or the masculine connotations that come with that idea. In fact, I think there is more power in being "soft" because there is more vulnerability, honesty, and possibility for change. When I think of tough, I think of stagnation, a hard core that doesn't budge, refuses to be open, a mask for the softness inside.

Kaur is saying that there is power in being a women, in being soft, in being vulnerable. I think an interesting one to read with a feminist lense is the poem on page 24, "There is no bigger illusion in the world/ than the idea that a woman will/ bring dishonor into a home/ if she tries to keep her heart/ and her body safe." Where does this illusion come from? Perhaps patriarchal society? I think in the view of patriarchal society, a silent woman is a safe woman, she is not a threat to the patriarchal agenda. And the "honor" of a home is traditionally held in the position of the male, who oversees the family and earns a living for the family. It could be humiliating for the traditional family if people know of sexual scandal, in fact, I know it is, and the family can get a

bad rap. If a woman imposes a sexual scandal on her family it effects the standing of the family in society and the position of the man in society. Keeping silent saves face, and a lot of times the one victimized is criticized and blamed if they say something. I think too of the ideology in Tyson's chapter called, "The Cult of True Womanhood" which originated during Victorian times. The Patriarchal ideal of a women was one who did not work outside the home, was submissive and sexually pure, but in contrast, "A woman whose racial or economic situation forced her to perform physical labor and made her a victim of sexual predators was considered unwomanly and therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploited her." I think this is the "dishonor" Kaur speaks of and one reason women stay silent and continue to be abused. If you're not sexually pure, even because of abuse, you may be seen as the one in the wrong since you are no longer up to the patriarchal ideal of a woman.

TB: You mentioning Victorian times reminded me of the book *On Chesil Beach*. I don't think I recommended it to you, but it is about a young couple who just got married and it is their wedding night. It takes place in the aftermath of WWI, so it's coming off from the Victorian time period. But, the book is beautiful as it deals with this couple fumbling to consummate as everything is suspenseful and drawn out, and the idea of sex and sexuality is struggled with. Spoilers, but it is revealed to the reader that the woman has gone through some sexual trauma, but she keeps quiet about it, and it was something that put a strain on the couple's relationship, because the man has no idea and wants to have sex. I don't know if you would have time to read it, but I think looking at it through the lens you are working out would be very interesting.

DK: Julie, what else have you been researching that you could share with us? Alternatively, how could you also dig into the poetry using vocabulary from the readings at the beginning of the semester, to help complicate things and expand our understanding of the text and its content?

AR: If you've started reading it, I think it would be interesting for you to discuss Kaur alongside the book I lent to you.

JD: In my reading of *Such a Pretty Girl*, by Laura Wiess, I have been a resistant reader. In Kaur's book, she is looking at past events and reflecting on them, and though her words can be explicit, we do not walk with her through the narrative of her life as though it is happening. In this book things are happening in the present and it is disturbing to enter the narrative. I'm constantly projecting onto the text with objections. Who would give a child molestor of 5 kids only 9 years in prison? My grandfather molested 5 and has double that! And who in their right mind would let him out in 3 years for "good behavior"? What does that even mean! Although there are a lot of things that do make sense. But all odds seem to be against Meredith, the main character, at least with how far I have gotten in the book. She doesn't have adequate support from the government, her mother is in denial and supports her enemy, her friends may be unreliable, and she denies help from God. To feel protected and safe and tries to take things into her own hands. I mean, what would a girl do, if her father, a child molester, was on the loose, and no one could really help her? This fiction really puts the reader in a place they have not experienced and unlike Kaur's poetry, you don't have to necessarily relate to become a part of the audience, or to get it. It's easy to believe that the government sucks at justice, cause it does, and that a mother would be in denial, cause traumatic situations make people lose their head. But it's hard for me because I had justice, I did not have to take things into my own hands, my family

was supportive, and I am safe. Kaur's book is a journey and so is this one, but they are such different experiences, mediums, perspectives. Still, I think there is a lot of crossover for meaning to apply to both situations. They both have a idea of injustice and the attaining of justice. They were wronged and they are making up for it, cause no one else will or can for them.

AR: Yessss I think these two sources juxtapose nicely. And I think the trio (Kaur, Wiess, and yours, Julie, Darpino) do, too.

Controlling

Purpose: When you have been abused and you rely on yourself to have protection and justice, you will attain it.

Context: When you have been abused and rely on other people, authoritative figures, the government, adults, relationships, to have protection and justice, you will not attain it, as this web enabled/enables the abuse.

Opposing

Purpose: When you have been abused and rely on other people with more authority and power, you can attain protection and justice.

Context: When you have been abused and rely only on yourself, you enable the abuser to have more power is exercising authority, and injustice continues.

AR: I wonder if taking out the mentions of abuse in the network of values will make it more clear. I think Meredith is self-reliant for more things than just protecting herself from abuse. That may become more clear as you get further into the book, though.