

Reconstructing the Self in on/Offline: Decolonial aestheSis in the design poems of Rupī Kaur

Nusrat Jahan

Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali, Bangladesh.

email: nusrat.eng@nstu.edu.bd

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ABSTRACT

Rupī Kaur's avant-garde design poems narrate diverse tales, and the poems have stunned the world by reconstructing the wounded selves. Kaur at first published her poems on the virtual site named Instagram, and later on, her collections of poems came out gradually. Decolonial aestheSis is the discourse that aims to delink the human senses from the societal hierarchies and colonial ideologies. Colonial ideologies dominate the minority and destroy the indigenous culture, diverse races or different schools of thought in the process. Decolonial aestheSis delinks the ideologies from the colonial matrix of power and progresses towards healing after recognizing the colonial wound. Portraying decolonial aestheSis in her design poems, Kaur represents her mental trauma, heartbreak, affection towards inner psyche and heritage, immigrants and borders, and these diverse themes are an attempt to disrupt and disturb the social linearity. This study aims to depict the integral delinking of coloniality and how the delinking helps to reconstruct the wounded and traumatized self. In addition, this study represents Kaur's intimate journey through her on/offline poems to search for her soul while pouring the decolonial love emphasizing communal strength. Non-structural qualitative method is applied in this study which focuses on Kaur's illustrations and contents. The drawings, poem's diction, and symbols are inspected, and the researcher considers that all the elements work as a whole to reconstruct the self. Hence, through the poems, readers will be able to subvert colonial authority and reconstruct themselves.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"There was no market for poetry about trauma, abuse, loss, love and healing through the lens of a Punjabi-Sikh immigrant woman" (Assam, 2016).

An Indian-born Canadian poet and illustrator, Rupī Kaur, received worldwide recognition after the publication of her magnum opus *milk and honey* (2014). At first posting the poems on the social media site Instagram, Kaur changed the game with her poetry which is written in "a minimalistic style" (Szkutak, 2017) with accentuating illustrations which she calls "design poetry" (Kabango, 2016). While the instapoetry is anything but conventional poetry, it "reflects the times, perhaps even part of the zeitgeist of the age" (Flores, 2020). Kaur, being the queen of the instapoetry, gradually published her second and

third books *the sun and her flowers* (2017) and *home body* (2020), to wide acclaim.

Nonetheless, decolonial aestheSis can be called as a response and theoretical oeuvre which intends to liberate the sense and delink "from the darker side of imperial globalization" (Balanquet & Rojas-Sotelo, 2013). *AestheSis* is a Greek word which means sense and sensibility and its root comes from the word "aesthetic," and the dichotomy of the "aestheTic/aestheSis" originates from the famous Barthesian S/Z (Mignolo, 2013). The decolonial aestheSis wants to expose the prejudice and flaws of coloniality and can be stated as "a re-valuation of what has been made invisible or devalued by the modern-colonial order" (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013). It wants to oppose a world full of capitalism, commodities and confinements that the western world is imposing in the name of an aesthetic way

of being. Decolonial artists deconstruct the euro-centred concepts of ideal beauty, art, sense, and language and accept a fresh and liberating way to re-emerge, re-accept and re-exist. Hence, decolonial aestheSis also refers to healing the colonial wound as it no longer confines itself to the boundary of colonial norms rather it heals, reconstructs the self, celebrates life and empowers a community (Mignolo, 2013).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the non-structural qualitative method which thoroughly explores the innate themes, symbols, dictions and illustrations to find the message the poet wishes to convey. Kaur's three publications, *milk and honey*, *the sun and her flowers* and *home body* are used as primary texts while existing sources of literature such as journal papers, periodical articles, interviews and others have been used as secondary sources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Adopting an experimental style, Kaur has broken the shackles of the typical structure of the poem with her bite-sized visual poems and uncomplicated themes. In the light of decolonial aestheSis and focusing on heartbreak, trauma, depression, family, healing and love, diaspora, Kaur not only reconstructs her "self" but also the selves of billions of women. Though Instagram is a tool which merely establishes a looking glass that produces a "digital self" (Zhao, 2005, p. 387), Kaur's poems assembled sisterhood in the cyberspace as they are simple to comprehend and speak of collective and mutual pains.

Kaur shatters the age-old sets of conformity and refuses to bend from her words and actions. She writes about many restrains a brown woman faces, being a Punjabi-Sikh woman, and also celebrates her heritage, stating lovingly, "Heritage is where I root myself. It's where I find my truth. Where I find my people. Where I find my spirituality. And where I connect" (Bozinowski, 2019).

As an "open sesame" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 9), virtual sites provide an easier option to meet with a community in a short time-frame. These virtual sites allow to share information such as texts, images, or videos, and often in this incorporeal world, identity becomes obscure and vague. This cyberspace seems real as users "orient around it and are able to manipulate it" (Cupchik, 2011, p. 325). Kaur also used Instagram merely to express herself at first. The avant-garde style of her instantly grabbed the attention of her followers, and she gained worldwide followers which inspired her to self-publish *milk and honey*. "Raw, evocative and utterly striking" (Henley, 2017) design poems of Kaur have given the supports to the countless women who perhaps also considered themselves as colonial subjects. Just as decolonial aestheSis challenges a world full of commodities which invade and restrict the "creative and imaginative potential" (Lockward, et al., 2011), Kaur's poems reject the gendered and racialized grids of societies. She

introduces her reader with the newest forms of symbols and drawings to articulate her pains, sufferings and affections more prominently. Her poems shook people to the core because "sadness looks the same across all cultures, races, and communities. So does happiness and joy" (Carlin, 2017) and therefore, selves of Kaur's readers have been constructed and reconstructed through her undaunting tone in cyberspace.

On the *milk and honey's* back cover, Kaur describes, "this is the journey of surviving through poetry". She at first expressed her thoughts on anguish through words and drawings in the "hurting" section. She pens her being "invisible" as a daughter in the family to articulate her nothingness, stating, "*i am nothing/ i am nothing/ i am nothing*" (Kaur, 2015, p. 33). Kaur labels how a South Asian woman is supposed to be "quiet and not have those opinions" (Assam, 2016) and the dominating nature of patriarchal society has been portrayed by her illustrating two empty chairs and verses "how the women in my family/ learned to live with their mouths closed" (Kaur, 2015, p. 35). Sharing about her sufferings and internal pains, Kaur gives others the space to also communicate and articulate their feelings. The unapologetic tone of her poem, "i don't know why/i split myself open/for others knowing/sewing myself up/hurts this much/afterward" (Kaur, 2015, p. 125) inspires others to flourish decolonial love and discard bitterness and colonial aftermath.

Kaur (2015) delinks the western standard of beauty with these verses, "my issue with what they consider beautiful/ is their concept of beauty/ centers around excluding people" (p. 170). This unequal binary opposition-they/people- indicates at favouring the westernized set of rules by the societal hierarchy. Kaur (2015) boldly delinks the logocentric culture and narrates, "don't tell me my women/ aren't as beautiful/ as the ones in your country" (p. 170). She also uplifts her surname "Kaur," which bears her Sikh identity, and restates, "the name Kaur runs in my blood/ it was in me before the word itself existed/ it is my identity and my liberation" (Kaur, 2015, p. 184). As decolonial aestheSis aims to cure the colonial wound by delinking the coloniality, Kaur not only highlights her ethnic identity but also raises voice against the societal grid, empowering thousands of women along the way in cyberspace. Nonetheless, proudly bearing the "skin the color of earth" (Kaur, 2015, p. 170), Kaur (2015) also deconstructs the concept of "other"- "other women's bodies/are not our battleground" (p. 175). This "other" is always marginalized and is considered inferior to the mainstream race, gender or culture. Kaur (2015) destabilizes this colonial notion by stating, "we are all born so beautiful/ the greatest tragedy is being convince we are not" (p. 183). The concepts of superiority and inferiority are not embedded in her thoughts and writings, and she discovers the colonial wound and goes all the way- from online to offline- to heal the wound afterward. Just like colonial wounds can be cured through "communal and shared work and engagement" (Mignolo, 2013), Kaur (2015) also declares sisterhood by affirming,

“we all move forward when/ we recognize how resilient/ and striking the women/ around us are” (p. 191). Kaur (2015) considers nothing important as “love and human condition” (p. 194) and she spreads her love to build “sisterhood” in digital space. As William Mitchell (1995) muses, “the keyboard is my café” (p. 7), Kaur has also turned Instagram into her home, an Edenic utopia where women can find solace and reconstruct their selves. Her (2015) another poem, “my heart aches for sisters more than anything/ it aches for women helping women/ like flowers ache for spring” (p. 187) illustrates her willingness to ease the path of reconstructing “selves” which can be called as “individuation” in Jung’s language. According to this term, unconscious instincts turn into conscious life with the purpose that “the self ultimately grows into full organic awareness” (Elarem, 2015, p. 163). Kaur (2015) also tries to reconstruct the traumatized souls resisting and denying the colonial matrix by uttering “the world/ gives you/ so much pain/ and here you are/ making gold out of it” (p. 185). As the process of individuation can cause “psychic wholeness” (Elarem, 2015, p. 164), Kaur’s poems also trigger the positive impact on readers, decolonizing the constructed senses, and as a result, self-transformation occurs through communal virtual meetings. On the other hand, Cupchik (2011) notes that virtual sites are more of a place which changes the classic Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” statement into “I am responded to, therefore I am” (p. 324). Kaur has created such a strong connection via social sites at first and responding to her poems has eased the paths of many women to live, to breathe. In this space, Kaur reminds everyone, “if the hurt comes/ so will the happiness” (Kaur, 2015, p. 182), and this reassurance provides earnestness to countless women irrespective of caste, creed and culture. She chants how she thinks every woman is extraordinary “*you are resilient or you are extraordinary/ not because I don’t think you’re pretty/ but because you are so much more than that*” (Kaur, 2015, p. 179). Kaur consciously deconstructs and decolonizes the social and cultural correctness by choosing intelligence over beauty. She reintroduces brown skin and body hair as an accepted natural part to debunk the cultural idealization of beauty.

She illustrates the blooming leaves and flowers in a woman’s body to indicate that body hair is as natural as growing natural plants (Kaur, 2015, p. 165). The non-linearity, denying the conventional grammatical punctuation and rules indicate at Kaur’s resisting the social conducts and norms. She embraces the minority, “people of colour... people who speak different languages, are refugees, or immigrants” (Bozinoski, 2019) or marginalized people, in a word, by stating herself as “i” and not “I”. Kaur follows the Gurmukhi script (Kumar, 2017), where there are no uppercase or lowercase letters and all letters are treated as the same. This points to Kaur’s interest in South Asian diaspora and uniting all people irrespective of class, creed and race in this world. She talks about the universal themes- heartbreak, loss,

love, trauma, healing, empowerment- and the minority can find solace in her writings. According to Kirsty Melville, the president and publisher of Andrews McMeel Publishing, Kaur has given “voice to things that people may not have been able to articulate for themselves” (Carlin, 2017). Thus, Kaur delinks herself and the thousand people from the colonial matrix to reconstruct which is lost.

Kaur has published her second collection of poetry named *the sun and her flowers* in 2017. This book consists of five chapters titled “Wilting”, “Falling”, “Rooting”, “Rising”, “Blooming” and these chapters focus on multi-dimensional aspects a woman goes through in her life, comparing her with a sunflower. Kaur expresses, while *milk and honey* is an “inward journey,” *the sun and her flowers* is “outward” (Ceron, 2017). In a sense, the scars and the process of recovering from the colonial wound are even harsher in this book than its predecessor. Unlike *milk and honey*, the poems of *the sun and her flowers* elaborate on accepting roots, self-acceptation, female infanticide, colonization, immigration and borders and other non-spatial themes. Kaur presented several poems describing the cultural diversity, migration and familial stories and wrapped up nostalgia with them. She muses, “I want to know what she laughed about with/ friends. in the village within houses of mud and brick. surrounded by acres of mustard plant and sugarcane” (Kaur, 2017, p. 143). She pens, “my mother sacrificed her dreams/ so I could dream” (Kaur, 2017, p. 148) and she pictures the thousands of Asian women’s sacrifices, tears and silences in order to providing the facilities to their daughters they were unable to get. Kaur (2017) also describes the pains and sufferings of an immigrant family to spend days after days in another foreign urban city, “*was it worth to pull all of our money/ into the dream of a country/ that is swallowing us whole*” (p. 149). They have landed in this land with broken vowels and this unknown territory “looks at her/with the word *visitor* wrapped around its tongue” (Kaur, 2017, p. 149). Kaur (2017) deconstructs the idea of perfect accentuation in a posh manner which can make one person into perfect westernized and celebrates the accent of her mother, which is “thick like honey” (p. 151). Claiming the human as “cyborgs”, Mitchell (1995) notes that urban designers of the digital era should retheorize “the body in space” (p. 28) and Kaur is vividly doing so. She is re-accepting and reconstructing the body parts as they should be and is combining them in virtual space. She embraces her brown skin by stating, “it is a blessing/ to be the color of earth” (Kaur, 2017, p. 227) and the illustration paints a human body on the soil, which is growing flowers and leaves all over it. Decoloniality as well as decolonial aestheSis make the “wound visible, tangible” (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013) and also portray the possibility of healing. Kaur’s radical criticism of decolonial subjectivity, which causes decolonization of senses, ultimately paves the path to reconstruct and deconstruct the self and unshackles from the parameter of modernism, postmodernism and altermodernism and their aftermaths. Kaur (2017) explains,

“that people too/ must wilt/ fall/ root/ rise/ in order to bloom” (p. 114). The breaking will finally make a person stronger to “bloom” and come out of his/her shell to resurrect.

Mignolo (2013) observes that decolonial cures can emerge after one person gets entangled with the collective consciousness and communal work. People who feel and share the colonial wound, most likely, can provide the decolonial love and affection. Another poem stresses the vitality of the healing power of love, “to heal/ you have to/ get to the root/ of the wound/ and kiss it all the way up” (Kaur, 2017, p. 235). Kaur (2017) recognizes the sacrifices and contributions other women have made to pave the path of development and growth and how she will prepare herself to continue the legacy for others, “i stand/ on the sacrifices/ of a million women before me/ thinking/ what can i do/ to make this mountain taller/ so the women after me/ can see further” (p. 213). Kaur’s (2017) another poem “community” deciphers the importance of decolonial love to cure the colonial wound, “when the world comes crashing at your feet/ it’s okay to let others/ help pick up the pieces” (p. 97).

The minimal line drawing of holding several hands further emphasizes the tone and importance of being in a community.

Nonetheless, the tendency to admit other’s contribution and the preparation to repeat the same are the signs of communal love which is the main ingredient to cure the decolonial wound. Curing the wound, one will be able to reconstruct the damaged and traumatised self and Kaur consciously is doing so by replacing the “individual ‘I’ with the collective ‘we’” (Jahan & Rahman, 2019, p. 181) in this book to reconstruct the “self”.

“Home body is a love letter to the self” and also “the celebration of my community” (Power, 2020), says Kaur, explaining the necessity of self-importance and communal communication. Kaur has published her third collection of poetries in 2020 named *home body*, which is full of raw and vital energy. Kaur engages in an honest conversation with herself and reminds everyone to focus on community, family and love, nature and nurture. This book consists of four chapters named “Mind”, “Heart”, “Rest” and “Awake”, and these sections signify human body’s steady process to search for a safe heaven. Kaur makes herself habituated with her body as her sanctuary and this book is the ultimate journey towards psyche’s growth and becoming. Claiming her body as the home is a tool to resist the coloniality and western mindset which deny anything other than the imposed specific standard or norms. Subverting the colonial ideologies, Kaur brushes over the almost same topic in a different paint-battle with depression, reclaiming her happiness, stigmas of immigrants, prospects and loads of work, and prejudices against minorities and others. Kaur (2020) pens in the poem titled “disconnected”, “my mind/ my body/ and i/ all live in one place/ but it feels like we are/ three completely different people” (p. 14). It can be stated that Kaur suffers from “derealisation disorder” which is

compelling Kaur to feel detached from her mental processes. She (2020) talks openly about depression which is sometimes associated with stigma, “depression is silent/ you never hear it coming/ and suddenly it’s/ the loudest voice in your head” (p. 13). Discarding the stigmatised and misunderstood conceptions of depression, which slips through the door silently, Kaur opens up about it so that others can get a clearer picture. This stanza, “i am loving myself out of the dark” (Kaur, 2020, p. 37) with the illustration of a human body growing leaves all over the body points at the intimate and raw journey from the cave towards the light.

As a cure of the traumas and heartbreak, Kaur (2020) herself has the perfect solution, “our souls ache for community/ our deepest being craves one another/ we need to be connected/ to feel alive” (p. 107). Kaur believes that souls can be only soothed by the company of people and the detachment from our selves will be fulfilled through belongingness. This poem bears a soothing illustration of three children holding hands in an urban background and this visual treatment comments upon the obligation of companionship in the present chaotic time. Kaur (2020) reminds herself again and again, “when it feels like i can’t/ i will/ i will/ i will” (p. 44). Another poem of Kaur signifies how the collective energy is doubly privileged than individualism, “imagine what we could accomplish if/ we didn’t have to spend our energy/ protecting ourselves from/ society’s rapist problem” (Kaur, 2020, p. 39). Decoloniality can be considered as “a process of recognizing the colonial wounds” that common people are still facing and decolonial aestheSis “departs from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves toward healing” (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013). In the poem named “you have all of you on your side”, Kaur (2020) composes, “how are you alone if/ an entire community lives in you” (p. 180). The poems portray the decoloniality which recognizes the wounds and later on through decolonial aestheSis, she moves toward healing emphasising on companionship. In the poem “sisters”, Kaur (2020) also pays homage to sisterhood stating, “on days i could not move/ it was women/ who came to water my feet/ until i was strong enough” (p. 166). Through the sisterhood which Kaur has envisaged and painted in her poems, she becomes successful in creating a home in cyberspace which builds and reconstructs thousands of selves. However, this book depicts Kaur’s firm standpoint to resist and deny the colonial ideologies through decolonial aestheSis which ultimately uplifts the progressive healing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Kaur stresses that she is bound to share her traumas and dreams of re-building as “when we share, we connect. And when we connect, we feel less alone, and can help one another recover” (Bozinoski, 2019). Through her sharing and intention to build a community to ease the path of becoming is the way of re-emerging and healing the colonial wound. Hence, with her “delicate line drawings” (Carlin, 2017) and minimalist poems in both on/offline,

Kaur promotes to recreate a world which badly needs its healing. The focus is not on the divine and sublime sensing rather feeling the jugged surface of reality and accept the natural instincts instead of the polished ones. Decolonial aestheSis wants to destabilise the “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013) and in light of this movement, Kaur also subverts the hegemony of colonial norms. Kaur focuses on the unconventional and audacious themes such as mental traumas, heartbreak, immigrants and borders, diaspora, people of diverse races and cultures and her poems contradict with everything that Euro-centred society approves of. Her design poetries perform as an avant-garde movement which shatters the linearity and opens up multi-faceted angles like a kaleidoscope. To reconstruct inner psyche, it is mandatory to recognise the colonial wound and move towards decolonial healing and Kaur fervently does so. By embracing decolonial love, she not only takes breaths of fresh air but also reconstructs the selves of her readers from worldwide. Therefore, it can be stated that Rupī Kaur succeeds to reconstruct selves from the hegemony and traumas through decolonial aestheSis in her design poems, in both on/offline, which confronts colonial ideologies and its consequences.

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