

Wounds, Resilience, and Revolution: Emotional Expression and Social Change in Rupī Kaur's Poetics of Migration

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Abstract

*The article explores the relationship between emotion, identity, and power in selected poetry of Rupī Kaur about displacement and migration, particularly from her collection *home body* (2020). Using Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) as a theoretical framework, the analysis challenges the idea that emotions are not just personal, instead relies on Ahmed's contention that emotions are socially conditioned and politically productive, influencing the boundaries of community, nation, and identity. Through her work with themes of displacement, cultural memory, and healing, this study explores how Kaur's art, which is based on her own experiences, simultaneously reflects and challenges socially enforced emotional norms, especially for women and diasporic people.*

Keywords: *home body*, emotions, displacement, The Cultural Politics of Emotion and migration

Introduction

Poetry has seen a dramatic change in form, medium, and reception in recent years, especially with the emergence of social media. "Social media has influenced the development of Insta poetry into its hybrid format which unites brief texts with basic images for delivering interactive reader experiences" (Sharma and Saraswat 534). Rupī Kaur is only one of the most well-known voices that have come out of this digital literary scene. "Through her written poetry, live performances and media interviews she has gained an international audience" (Singh iv). She is regarded as a leading Instagram poet whose work focuses on relationships, the experiences of immigrants, and their trauma. "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" (Jahan 48). As she skillfully combines the tangible with the abstract to create an eerie and atmospheric world, Kaur's use of words and imagery is a crucial component of her instapoetics. Kaur immerses her readers in a world that is both familiar and alien through the use of straightforward, ordinary language and a unique visual style that frequently includes sketches, enabling them to empathize deeply and emotionally with her experiences. *home body* (2020), her third collection, delves deeper into the emotional ramifications of gendered, racialized, and diasporic life while continuing to explore human experience, trauma, healing,

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and identity. “Kaur described this collection as “a collection of raw, honest conversations with oneself – reminding readers to fill up on love, acceptance, community, family, and embrace change” (Alghamdi 27).

Although Kaur's poetry is frequently praised for its feminist voice and accessibility, it also lends itself to an affective reading that explores the ways in which larger social institutions influence feelings. “This contribution focuses on street poetry and, more specifically, on “bombing” as an intermedial phenomenon capable of expressing socio-political themes such as capitalism, feminism, consumerism, social injustice, as well as more personal themes such as empathy and self-determination”, (Gusella and Peeters 253). This viewpoint encourages a more thorough examination of the ways in which larger cultural and political frameworks influence Kaur's emotional manifestations. According to Ahmed, emotions are socially produced and politically mobilized in addition to being internal, personal experiences. They move between objects and bodies, establishing who is included in and who is not, in collective identities like the community or the country. Fear, pride, and shame are examples of emotions that are used to establish social boundaries and uphold hierarchies of power. Understanding how personal emotions are entwined with larger social narratives, particularly those pertaining to race, gender, migration, and nationalism, is made possible by Ahmed's approach.

home body illustrates how Kaur's emotional environment mirrors the societal and cultural challenges faced by survivors, immigrants, and women of colour through a close reading of a few chosen poems. “Moreover, Kaur, in *home body*, digs deeper into life of racism, classification/capitalism, and oppression” (Neisyra et al. 137). It contends that in addition to expressing emotional suffering, Kaur's poetry questions the conventions around emotional expression, particularly for marginalized groups.

Rupi Kaur is now writing more authoritatively about the South Asian experiences, love, domestic abuses, multiple abuses and heartaches that are intertwined with a specific experience of being woman, being Punjabi and being a child of immigrants in contemporary times. (Neogi, 78)

This paper explores how the *home body* reflects, absorbs, and defies the emotional demands made on minority bodies, drawing on Sara Ahmed's 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

Theoretical Framework

Sara Ahmed, a cultural theorist who investigates the relationship between emotions and politics, society, and identity, is the foundation of this work. Ahmed makes the case in her 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that emotions are influenced by the environment one lives in and are not merely personal experiences like fear, rage, or grief.

Ahmed presents the notion that feelings stick to concepts, people, and things. For instance, in public discourse, some emotions like fear, guilt, or anger are frequently associated with particular groups of individuals, such as women or immigrants. Our treatment of those groups and how society views them are influenced by these emotional connections.

Ahmed argues that emotions are shared, formed, and utilized in communities, civilizations, and politics and are not just something we experience on an individual basis. They aid in drawing distinctions between us and them. For instance, a country can employ fear to make foreigners feel dangerous. Emotions thus contribute to the upholding of sexism, nationalism, and racism as forms of power.

Review of Literature

In her research paper "Rupi Kaur's *home body*: Re-telling the Tales of Contemporary Women," Aanchal Arora explored how Kaur's writing clearly falls into the third stage of female writing, as defined by Showalter, even though it introduces novel topics like the analysis of fatherhood and masculinity in romantic relationships. Her work is rich in imagery that deconstructs assumptions, seeks identity, and the feminine experience against the backdrop of this era. Kaur's work apparently depicts how patriarchal norms have molded women's life in the past and even today.

Jenna Lehtinen in her thesis titled "Metaphors of Depression in Rupi Kaur's Poetry Collection, *Home body*" highlighted that Rupi Kaur's *home body* employs depression-related motifs. The collection emphasizes themes of gloom, emptiness, and worthlessness, with a shift towards hopefulness near the end.

Mohammed Ridha examined how Rupi Kaur intentionally or unintentionally employs gynocentric themes in the work "Deconstructing the Gynocentric Narrative in Rupi Kaur's Poetry: An Exploration of Female Empowerment and Representation." She supports justice because the equality that feminism has provided is overvalued. Beginning with the shattered self with innate messages and persevering to be the ultimate feminine superwoman, Kaur skilfully creates her poetry as a healing message.

Analysis

Rupi Kaur's *home body* is the emotional terrain of a woman navigating suffering, healing, identity, and belonging and categorised as a collection that is both intensely personal and politically relevant. "Kaur described a variety of events that women go through in her poems" (Arora and Manju 247). Kaur's poetry frequently seems to be a personal self-reflection:

Kaur, born in 1992 in Punjab, India, had to move to Canada at the age of three due to the persecution that was taking place against the Sikh community, community to which she belongs; therefore, being forced to become an immigrant at an early age, what would later have a great impact on her literary career. (Misa 39),

but in terms of Sara Ahmed's affect theory, then it is obvious that they are not discrete emotions themselves, but are affected by and react to wider cultural and political factors. Kaur's portrayals of pain, love, and healing are also political acts that challenge and rewrite prevailing emotional conventions, as Ahmed's theory illustrates how emotions are transmitted, linked to particular bodies, and influenced by cultural contexts. "Emotions do things: they align individuals with communities — or bodily space with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 119). Sara Ahmed's thesis that emotions are socially generated and historically sticky is in accordance with Kaur's portrayal of melancholy in the poem "where the depression comes for". Kaur's grief is not merely internal; it builds up over experiences of racial rejection, gendered assault, family relocation, and migration.

maybe it met me at the airport slid
into my passport
and remained with me
long after we landed in
a country that did not want us (Kaur 7)

"a lifetime on the road" is a strong poem that eloquently recounts the convergence of emotion, labor, and exclusion. The poet recalls her immigrant father's physical and emotional fatigue, his continuous work, and his subordination under racially exclusionary systems. His experience illustrates how immigrant bodies are subjected to social pressures, where survival frequently comes at the expense of dignity and value is correlated with productivity. The father's "illegal" status and racial stereotyping socially assign and reinforce his emotions of obligation, anxiety, and perseverance.

when you're an immigrant
you keep your head down and stay working
when you're a refugee
and you don't have papers when
they call you illegal outsider
terrorist
towelhead

you work until your bones become dust (Kaur 110)

Ahmed claims that these feelings stick on racialized bodies, making people feel like outsiders all the time. "Emotions work to align some bodies with others, as well as to generate readings of the bodies of others" (Ahmed 4). Inherited emotional labour is shown in the daughter's sorrow and desire for her father's relaxation. This is an emotional testament to structural injustice, not merely a family tale. By transforming personal narrative into collective critique, Kaur demonstrates how political forces such as love, tiredness, and loss may disclose the disproportionate responsibilities that some groups must bear simply to be permitted to exist.

Kaur's poem "habit" has an illustration of a Sikh immigrant family and she wrote "we were always in survival mode / long after we didn't need to be" (Kaur 96). This demonstrates how trauma, displacement, and perseverance become ingrained in people's emotional life and transmitted through the generations, highlighting the emotional legacy of migration. The child's proximity, the mother's head covering, and the father's turban all allude to emotional legacy as well as cultural continuity — the kid is seated between two parents and two emotional worlds, one of adversity and the other of optimism. Despite the image's seeming tranquillity, the poses and facial expressions convey weariness, fortitude, and silent resistance — characteristics of a life influenced by migration. Survival mode becomes a habitual emotional state not because danger exists, but because it used to exist and its consequences persist. These clinging emotions - fear, anxiety, and self-defence - determine how the family loves, works, and navigates the world. A child is taught to carry feelings that are not her own, but rather are passed down through silent histories of racialization and sacrifice. "Emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, they involve forms of intensity, bodily orientation, and direction, and are shaped by contact with others" (Ahmed 10).

"i believed that my value came from my brown immigrant body, which should always work harder than everyone else in the room" (Kaur 98) speaks directly to the weight that immigrant and racial identities have been internalized. The psychological implications of being racialized in largely white or Western environments, where productivity is frequently equated with value, are captured by Rupri Kaur. "To feel alienated is also to feel the presence of others as dominating or controlling, as the loss of one's ground" (Ahmed 53). The way emotions stick to certain bodies — in this example, the way feelings of pressure, inadequacy, and self-

surveillance become embedded in the lives of immigrants — is reflected in this poem, which Sara Ahmed discusses in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* immigrants survive, demonstrating how daily behaviours and beliefs are used to internalize and maintain systemic constraints. In addition to being a racially stereotyped figure, the “brown immigrant body” also serves as an emotional conduit for stories of exploitation, displacement, and aspiration. Working “harder than everyone else” is presented as a need for survival and belonging rather than as aspiration. The poem also criticizes the structures that, when viewed through the prisms of race and migration, correlate human value with labour. It highlights how institutional pressures are absorbed and maintained via daily behaviours and attitudes, giving voice to the unseen emotional work that many immigrants experience.

Rupi Kaur's poem "never forget 1984" discusses the Sikh genocide of 1984 and the emotional wounds it left on diasporic identity. The conflict between national origin and emotional belonging is highlighted by Kaur's statement, “i have a very complicated relationship / with the country i was born in” (Kaur, 93). The tragedy her community endured —“our men were slaughtered... our women were raped” (Kaur, 93) —as well as the Indian state's denial and inaction have a profound impact on the poet. The poem discusses a historical event as well as its enduring emotional influence that transcends boundaries and generations. Ahmed contends that political institutions influence emotions, which play a crucial role in determining whether people in a country are aligned or estranged. “Emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. They involve relationships of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to others” (Ahmed 8). Kaur feels estranged because of the horrific history of her homeland and its inability to accept it. The poem reclaims speech against erasure by transforming personal passion into political testimony.

Rupi Kaur emphasizes the deep emotional and political legacy that comes with collective struggle when she states,

i will never be quiet
about the way
my people resisted
so i could be free (135)

in this succinct yet powerful statement. The poem effectively captures the idea of emotional migration within a diasporic identity, where the poet's current freedom is intimately linked to the historical resistance of their ancestors or group, even though it does not specifically address physical migration. This position reflects a conscious reluctance to forget or withdraw from a history characterized by both oppression and unwavering fortitude. According to Ahmed, pride and duty help to bond Kaur to their people's history, a powerful example of how emotions can unite people with communities. “Emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed 1). Therefore, regardless of the poet's geographic distance from the location of that historical resistance, this emotional inheritance significantly influences their sense of self in the present. As such, the poem serves as an emotional testimony, showing how diasporic or migratory characters represent both the trauma and the resilience that comes from their roots.

The poem

our wounds are the reason i
started writing poetry

every word i've ever written was to lead
us back into our arms (61)

written by Rupi Kaur, effectively places this piece into the category of migration poetry, but from a cultural and emotional perspective. The wounds represent a profound, shared historical trauma — a common legacy for diasporic communities moulded by systematic oppression, displacement, or violence. The poet feels compelled to create poetry as a result of this shared suffering. Writing becomes an essential emotional migration activity, a voyage over the terrain of collective memory and identity rather than across geographical boundaries. Sara Ahmed argues that "emotions are cultural practices, as opposed to psychological states" (1). This perspective shows that Kaur's poetry is not just a way for her to express, but also a shared experience and a collective act of healing. She transforms her own pain into a broader call for compassion and harmony. Her wish to "lead us back into our arms" is indicative of a deep-seated desire to bring people together in a divided society. According to her, cultural customs transcend beyond simple rites and become means of healing the scars of the past and moving forward as a community. The words

they could take away
everything we have and
we'd conjure this
beautiful life up all over again with
the bones in our backs building an
empire from the ground up
is exactly what we're good at (Kaur 133)

perfectly conveys an unwavering resilience that is deeply rooted in diasporic experiences. "Emotions are material rhetoric—they have affective power and can dictate our modes of life" (Ahmed 1). This poem emphasizes how resilient people can be in the face of severe loss. The "bones in our backs" represent a fundamental, innate strength. Kaur's writing, ours must be

a politic of revolution
freedom can't exist
until the most disadvantaged are free (137)

is a powerful plea for radical social change. Since "emotions do things" (Ahmed 1), in this case, a particular form of political participation is dictated by the general sense of freedom.

Conclusion

This article has shown how Rupi Kaur's chosen poems from her 2020 book *home body* provide a deep examination of migration and displacement, with emotions acting as crucial locations for both political action and identity creation. The study is an attempt to show how Kaur's expression of wounds, the weight of inherited labour, the tenacity of survival mode, and the demand for a politic of revolution are far from being merely sentimental statements through the theoretical framework of Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). Politically charged and socially conditioned processes actively shape diasporic experience. It is clear from Ahmed's observations that emotions are cultural practices and do things via circulating and conforming to racialized bodies that Kaur turns personal suffering, fatigue, and fortitude into a collective critique. Her poetry exposes the structural constraints that marginalized people experience and challenges dominant emotional norms, serving as a potent kind of affective testimony.

In addition to reflecting the complicated emotional landscape of migration, Kaur actively contributes to a revolutionary politics where freedom is dependent upon the emancipation of the most disadvantaged by articulating the intergenerational impact of displacement and the inherent strength in rebuilding. In the conclusion, Ahmed's interpretation of Kaur's writings emphasizes the importance of emotional expression in comprehending and changing the long-lasting effects of persecution and migration.

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