

FLORA, THE FEMALE BODY AND THE (ECO)-FEMINIST FAÇADE IN RUPI KAUR'S INSTAPOETRY

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Abstract

Instapoetry is an emerging form of poetry on Instagram as a social media platform. Since its first appearance in 2012 many Instapoets have published their works primarily on Instagram with different, sometimes also innovative, forms and styles in poetry. Rupī Kaur, the most popular of these Instapoets, posts her poems along with a picture illustration. Some of her recent posts include her Instapoems that she also published as a part of her books *Milk and Honey* (2014) and *Sun and Her Flowers* (2017). Here, it can be noticed how she repetitively employs the imagery of flowers in correlation with the female body. One of her untitled poems, explicitly portrays a female body as a tree, while others show flowers and foliage growing on and around the female body. While Kaur calls herself a feminist poet, a close look at her works makes it possible to inquire the essentialist nature of her feminist stance. It is obvious that the use of floral patterns in the illustrations interwoven with her poetry indicate an application of the eco-feminist approach. However, the present research departs from this basic understanding to question both, the essentialist nature of some Eco-Feminist theories as well as Kaur's so called "feminism" (since Feminism today refrains from being solely gyno-centric). The selected poems will be analysed through the Social Ecofeminist theoretical framework in *Feminism and Mastery of Nature* (1993) by Val Plumwood.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Essentialism, Body, Nature, Rupī Kaur, Instapoetry

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Introduction

Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectified," generalized: she draws her story into history. (Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*)

Today, it is unfortunate how one of the most innovatively rhetorical feminist essay by Cixous is terribly misread to deliver distorted meanings of feminism. Today, when newer feminisms take birth by the minute and it hardly seems possible to contend with a universal theory on feminism, it is through utmost responsibility that one must approach this discourse. Going through as many as five waves, Feminism today aims for equality of the sexes in social, political and economic realms. Likewise, Ecofeminism that made its first appearance around 1970s, is a branch of Feminism that explores the relationship between nature and women. Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist coined the term in 1974.

Anne Archambault in her critique of Ecofeminism notes Karen Warren's suggestions. Warren holds that Ecofeminism assumes its field around the following premises:

- (i) There are important connections between the oppression of woman and the oppression of nature. (ii) Understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to overcome all forms of domination. (iii) Feminist theory and Relying on women's bodily experiences practice must include an ecological perspective; and (iv) Solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective. (Archambault, 1)

Huey Li summarizes Warren's point as she asserts, "sex and gender based systems of oppression have served as the anchor for ecofeminists' analyses of the conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual, religious, epistemological, political, and ethical interconnections between the domination of women and nature." (Li, 352). Kate Sandilands talks about Ecofeminism as a bridge between the disciplines of ecology and feminism that constructs a praxis able to transcend these disciplines to end all forms of dominations (Sandilands, 90).

Within ecofeminism, Carlassare marks, "socialist ecofeminists employ materialist methods to analyse class and capitalist economic systems, whereas cultural ecofeminists often employ spiritual or associative, poetic modes to explore oppression on a personal as well as on a larger social level." (Carlassare, 221). Many eco-critics dismiss Cultural feminists for being essentialist. For an instance Cultural ecofeminist texts like Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978) have time and again been called essentialist. Essentialism refers to a way of understanding a subject or an object in its essence, whereby it is perceived only through a set of fixed idea of its "form." The subject is assumed to have some sort of innate and unchanging attributes.

Huey Li notes Kathy Ferguson's elaboration upon three types of feminist essentialism. First is "essentialism per se" exemplified in Elizabeth Gray's position in *Green Paradise Lost*—it associates psychological and social experiences of women to some fixed traits in women's physiology. Second is "universalism" that assumes patterns observed in one time and place to be universal and applicable for all. This can be seen in Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*. Third is "constitution of unified categories" that Rosemary Ruether talks about in *Mother Earth and Mega-machine* where she substantiates upon dualistic vision that essentially separates men from women. This position is questionable more so because it is difficult to put ones finger on specifically and particularly female/male traits to be then compared with nature, by which it limits both. Ruether's later claims are marked by Plumwood in *Women, Humanity and Nature*. She writes, "Both men and women must be re-socialised from their traditional distorted cultures of masculinity and femininity in order to find that humanized culture that is both self-affirming and other-affirming." (Plumwood, 22)

“...the most common criticism of ecofeminism is that the claim that women are essentially or biologically closer to nature is regressive, that it reinforces the patriarchal ideology of domination and limits ecofeminism's own effectiveness,” thus Anne Archambault records a similar strand in her *Critique of Ecofeminism* (Archambault, 21). She marks that Ecofeminism forms two proponents majorly, one found in the “body based argument” and the other in the “oppression based argument.” The body based argument follows that the patterns of female bodily experience like ovulation, menstruation, reproduction are closer to nature than male bodily experiences which is why women connect more with nature.

A theory on feminism that does not depend on dualism or reversal of patriarchal model; a theory that does not seek to morph feminine over the previous masculine model of understanding; a theory on feminism that does not exploit female body (the biological female) to exact the discussions that are embedded rather more firmly in socio-historical dimensions is something that one must try to formulate. Cixous talks about the concept of *écriture féminine*, which starts with the acceptance of the female self which in turn begins by acceptance of her body. The model proposes to subvert the patriarchal structure here, through the foregrounding of the body, but many a times this may be misread as reversal of structure. The present research deals with one such instance of hasty misreading of feminism, specifically eco-feminism, that which is found in Rupī Kaur’s Instapoetry.

Instapoetry is an emerging form of poetry on Instagram as a social media platform. Since its first appearance in 2012 many Instapoets have published their works primarily on Instagram with different, sometimes also innovative, forms and styles in poetry. Rupī Kaur, the most popular of these Instapoets, posts her poems along with a picture illustration. Some of her recent posts include her Instapoems that she also published as a part of her book *Sun and Her Flowers* (2017) and *Milk and Honey* (2014). Here, it can be noticed how she repetitively employs the imagery of flowers and natural elements in correlation with the female body. One of her untitled poems, explicitly portrays a female body as a tree, while others show flowers and foliage growing on and around the female body.

Alyson Miller echoes Nilanjana Roy, “marketed as a ‘social media star’ and lauded by dedicated followers, Kaur has been described as a ‘millennial publishing sensation’ and, even

more impressively, ‘poetry’s Beyoncé’” (Miller, 2019). Miller points out the way in which the rhetoric of “difference” is effectively used by Kaur and many other Instapoets to commodify their content. David McQuillan’s thesis *Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility* on the subversive simplicity of Rupi Kaur’s poetry in her book *Milk and Honey*, deals with the issue of Aesthetics of the popular and discusses the grounds on which Kaur’s critics often find themselves crowding over. McQuillan notes that almost all her critics condemn her style of poetry for being over simplistic.

This research acknowledges that Kaur’s poetry indeed has taken over the so called “serious” poetry for many a youth today. While not responding to the kind of aesthetics she employs or their commodifying effects or even the status of her poetry to the highbrow, the present research presumes that the effect her poetry has is moreover widespread owing to the platform of her publication and relatively large number of audience. Her writings could affect the way her audience relates to and perceives the world around them and so it becomes necessary to analyse if her poetry is politically correct, mostly when her readers consider it to be “life-changing.”

To illustrate how Kaur’s poetry resonates, here is an interesting account of Hannah Taylor’s experience as an audience in one of Rupi Kaur’s poetry recitation event.

The young women around me, as the audience is almost entirely comprised of young women, are buzzing with excitement to see their favourite poet. The two women on my right ask me, “how did you start reading her?” ... They look confused. “What about you?” I respond. “Oh! We both started reading her on Pinterest years ago. I just love how she writes about break ups... Sometimes it’s just so cathartic to hear that someone else experiences it.” (Taylor, 23)

While Kaur calls herself a feminist poet, a close look at her works makes it possible to inquire the essentialist nature of her feminist stance. It is obvious that the use of floral patterns in the illustrations interwoven with her poetry indicate an application of the eco-feminist approach. However, the present research departs from this basic understanding to question both, the essentialist nature of some Eco-Feminist theories as well as Kaur’s so called “feminism.” The selected poems will be analysed through socialist Ecofeminism theoretical

framework of Val Plumwood in the introduction of her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, "Feminism and Ecofeminism". Here her constructionist views on the connection between women and nature, avoiding any kind of essentialism are noteworthy.

Plumwood points out to the fallacy that many critics fall prey to when they reaffirm women's difference in regards with men to locate them exceptionally closer to nature. She also marks that this affirmation earlier would be based out of shame but now it accepted as badge of pride. She suggests that it may be drawn from earlier cases that women have lived their lives in less opposition to nature than men, or that some qualities like care and selfhood, some experiences and practices of women may be privileged over those of men by ecological feminists, but by any case all these cannot commit to any kind of naturalism.

But the argument that women have a different relation to nature need not rest on either reversal or 'essentialism', the appeal to a quality of empathy or mysterious power shared by all women and inherent in women's biology. Such differences may instead be seen as due to women's different social and historical position. (Plumwood, 35)

The dualistic view radically discriminates between the categories of man/women, body/mind, self/other, and so on. Addressing this Plumwood contends that "women must be treated as just as fully human and as fully part of human culture as men." (Plumwood, 36) This has to be challenged to give way to the concept of human identity that is continuous with nature and not alien from it.

Following figures are bifurcated into two groups for reader's clarity. The basis upon which the figures are classified is rooted in the thematic focus of the poet in different posts/poems as well as researcher's own reading of the poems. The first group comprises of figure 1.1 to figure 1.6 whereas the second group has 3 figures, from figure 2.1 to 2.3. These posts/poems are selected randomly from Rupi Kaur's Instaram public profile and they belong to both the volumes of her poetry namely, *Milk and Honey* and *Sun and her Flowers*.

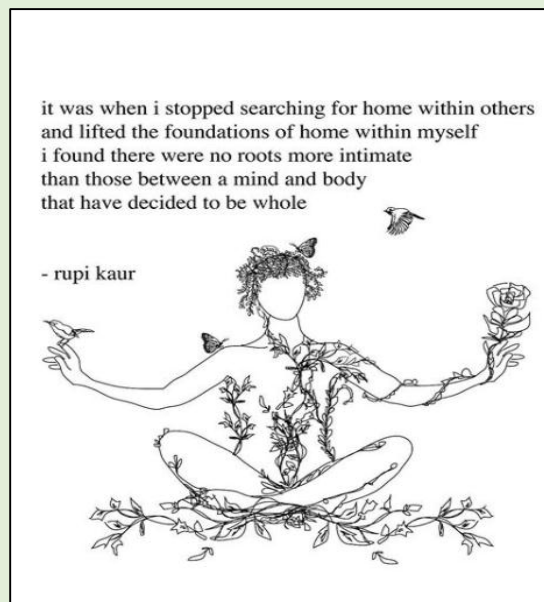


Figure 1.1

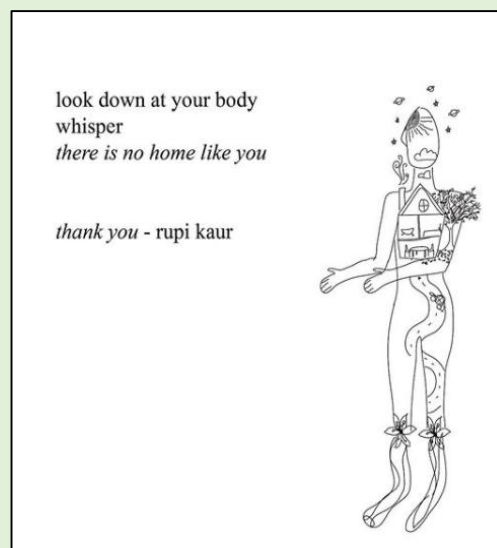


Figure 1.2

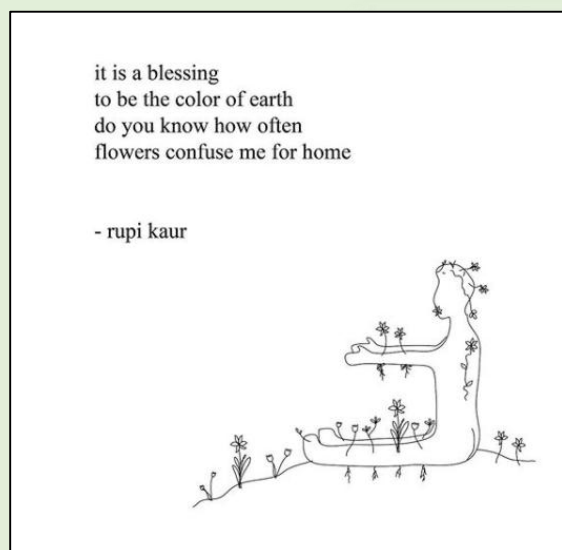


Figure 1.3

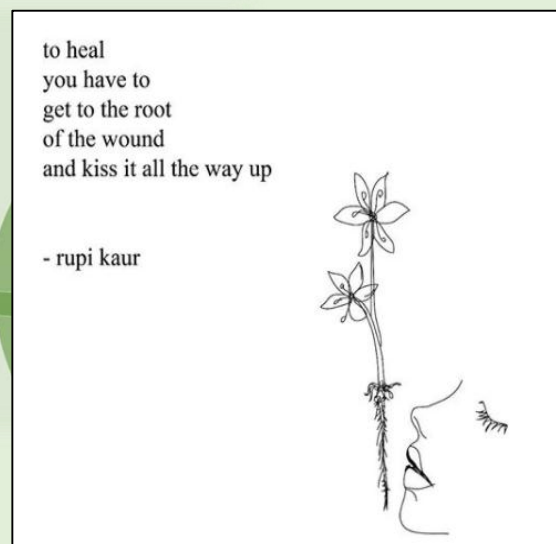


Figure 1.4

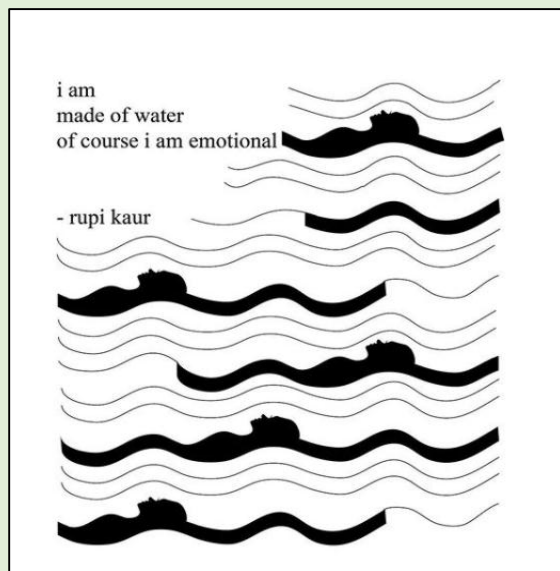


Figure 1.5

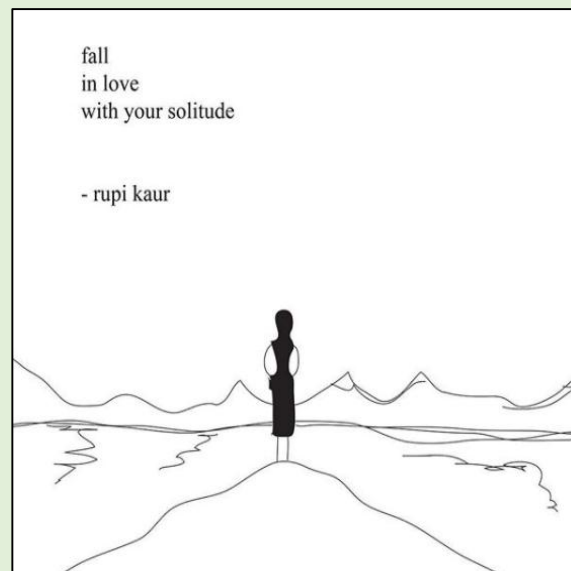


Figure 1.6

All of the above figures belong to the first group of picture poetry by Kaur. The first group is distinct in a way that the patterns in these poems suggest an essentialist dualism. Starting with Figure 1.1 where the dichotomy between home (within) and the world (outside) is made in such a way that each excludes the other, “home within others...home within myself.” Then again there is mind and body as separate categories that are to be unified, “...roots more intimate than those between mind and body...” In Figure 1.2, body is “home” itself, a comfortable space to grow which is pitched against the outside world. Finally the dichotomy culminates into another, that of “self” (solitude of nature) vs. “other” (outside world of manmade culture) in figure 1.6. that simply states, “fall in love with your solitude.” While this dualism can be observed one thing that remains undeniably constant is the essential connection between woman and nature. The pictures can be seen reflecting what Jessica Daily recollects of Carolyn Merchant where she portrays the image of the goddess Natura as,

A replica of the cosmos... set in her crown as jewels were the signs of the zodiac and the planets; decorating her robe, mantle, tunic, and undergarments were birds, water creatures, earth animals, herbs and trees; on her shoes were flowers. This ancient literary figure embodies the classical notions of women's relationship with nature; she is connected to the cosmos, she lives in harmony with animals and plants.” (Dailey, 4)

The female body is portrayed as being closer to various aspects of nature: flora (in 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) fauna (in 1.1), mineral world (in 1.5) and safe solitude of nature itself (in 1.6). Most prominently recurring association is with flora where nature, home and body become organically intimate spaces as against their essential opposite categories. She starts out by accepting the body but it comes at the cost of shedding anything that forms a part of the world which remains “outside” the body, and thus the boundaries. The body further figures in two forms: sexual self and the cultural self. Sexual self and the wounds thereby have been the theme in figure 1.4 where also the roots of the weakling plant share a similar image with female genitalia that have to be kissed “all the way up” alluding to the sexual imagery of cunnilingus. The cultural self comes cross in the images of home. While the third undeveloped category is that of emotional self. Emotional expression as natural and womanly aspect is still essentialist.

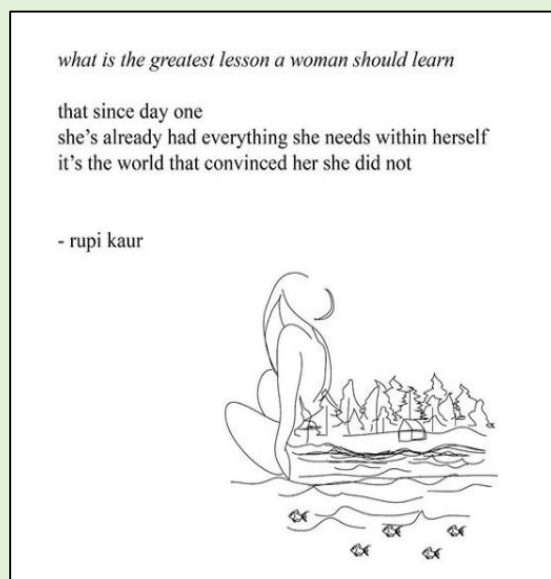


Figure 2.1

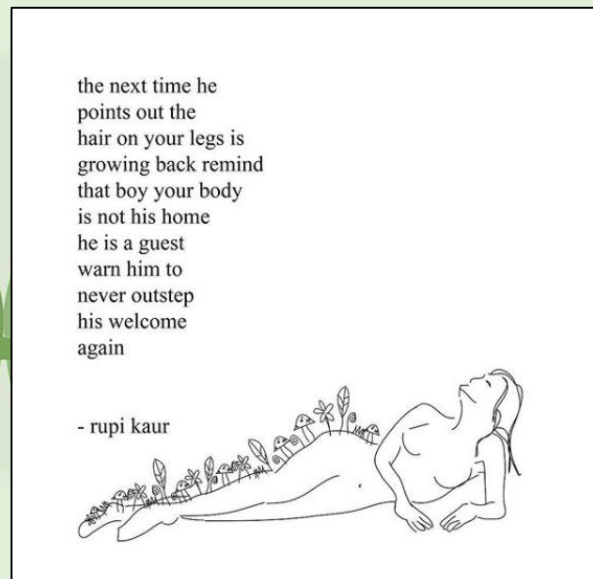


Figure 2.2

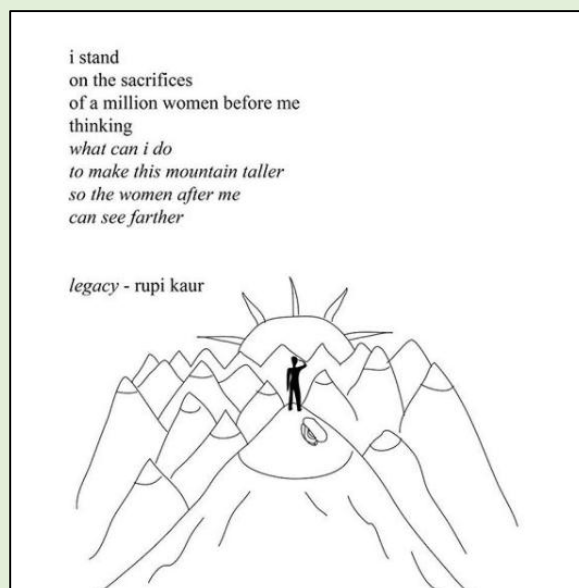


Figure 2.3

The second group of poems from figure 2.1 to 2.3 work on the axis of reverse exclusion. They differ from the first group since there is an explicit mention, calling out to women (in figure 2.1 and 2.3) as well as keeping the “he” out of the space that women share (in figure 2.2). Women form a part of nature in a way that excludes men from it. Thus woman as nature is away from culture that is represented by men. This comes across in the first image poem where the speaker wants women to learn one sole lesson, “that since day one, she’s already had everything she needs within herself.” (Figure 2.1). Whereas nature is all complete by herself, culture is seen to be interfering in nature’s activity to distort its natural form and mould it into something else, “The next time, he points out the hair on your legs...” Lastly the question arises as to why the speaker’s acts are only meant to guide women and not men I figure 2.3. All these point out to the exclusion of men and world considered as radically separate categories against women and nature. Plumwood quotes Ynestra King as she says, “both men and women can stand with nature.” (Plumwood, 36)

Conclusion

Kate Sandilands finds the essentialist and constructionist views equally problematic and provides three major reasons for that: One that the dualism itself is a concept that is questionable, historically speaking. Second that the socio-political factors that come to fixate

image of woman with nature do not have a linear flow, as there are dramatic changes witnessed even within those aspects. Third that both theories assume a pre-decided connection between women and nature and do not question how it actually came to be in existence.

Val Plumwood in her *Mastery in Nature* traces how the image of female body associated with nature recalls the dualistic conception of mind/body and male/female, reducing female back to mere body and so such use of imagery is harmful to emancipation of women by ecofeminism stance. In her essay *Revisiting Ecofeminism* (2011) Greta Gaard historically traces the developments within Ecofeminism, explains what it is today. She notes that essentialism did creep in early but is now avoided and then she goes on to suggest new possibilities of exploration in the field. Recently, the use of female body to understand the relation between women and nature is also studied by Deborah Slicer in *Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds* (1998), a work which avoids essentialist or dualistic claims. Another such work is *Is Body Essential for Ecofeminism?* (2000) by Terri Field.

In conclusion it would be apt to reiterate Tegan Zimmerman's remarks on Non-essentialist ecofeminism,

For Non-essentialists, the non-feminization of the object, and the non-masculine perceiver would both be important because of the imagined relationship between women and nature. Nature as a free space, devoid of any confining concepts, values and roles offers a site for feminist cultural critique, a signifier without the signified or referent. (Zimmerman, 178)

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