

## A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FIGURES OF SPEECH IN THE CONTEMPORARY ANTHOLOGY “*MILK AND HONEY*” (2015) BY RUPI KAUR

*UMA ANÁLISE DESCRITIVA DAS FIGURAS DA LINGUAGEM NA ANTOLOGIA CONTEMPORÂNEA “OUTROS JEITOS DE USAR A BOCA” (2017) DE RUPI KAUR*

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**Abstract:** Rupri Kaur’s masterpiece *‘Milk and Honey’* is filled with figures of speech such as irony, hyperbole, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and simile that resemble aspects of the author’s minimalistic and aesthetic writing style. Additionally, it explores relevant themes like the commodification of women’s bodies, oppressive beauty norms, and rape culture that are attached to The Feminist Movement foundations. In this sense, this paper aims to analyze six poems from the anthology in order to illustrate the usage of figures of speech in a literary context. Bearing in mind that comprehending figurative language is not an easy process, this study suggests some tools like the notions of presuppositions, vehicle, and intertextuality that can assist readers in better understand the language implemented by the author. Furthermore, this work considers some authors’ contributions, such as Axelle Mariavale and David MacQuillan to investigate the techniques Kaur uses to create a self-related atmosphere in her book. Thereby, the study of the poems points out that approaching figurative language in literature produces considerable outcomes as it evokes vivid as well as diverse interpretations, encourages critical thinking, and enhances the reader’s emotive responses.

**Keywords:** Rupri Kaur; Feminism; Figures of speech; Figurative language.

**Resumo:** A antologia *“Outros jeitos de usar a boca”*, de Rupri Kaur, contém uma série de figuras da linguagem, como ironia, hipérbole, personificação, metonímia, metáfora e comparação, que retratam os aspectos do estilo de escrita minimalista e estético da autora. Além disso, Kaur explora temas relevantes, como a comercialização dos corpos das mulheres, normas opressivas de beleza e cultura do estupro, todos ligados aos fundamentos do Movimento Feminista. Nesse sentido, este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar seis poemas da antologia, a fim de ilustrar o uso de figuras da linguagem em um contexto literário. Tendo em mente que compreender a linguagem figurada não é um processo fácil, este estudo sugere algumas ferramentas, como as noções de pressupostos, veículo e intertextualidade, que podem auxiliar os leitores a compreender melhor a linguagem implementada pela autora. Além disso, esta pesquisa considera algumas contribuições de Axelle Mariavale e David McQuillan, para investigar as técnicas que Kaur usa para promover o aspecto da personalidade em seu livro. Assim, o estudo dos poemas destaca que abordar a linguagem figurada na literatura produz resultados consideráveis, pois evoca interpretações vívidas e ao mesmo tempo diversas, estimula o pensamento crítico e aprimora as respostas emotivas do leitor.

**Palavras-chave:** Rupri Kaur; Feminismo; Figuras da linguagem; Linguagem figurada.

## Introduction

Language is an intricate organism through which humans communicate. Academics have been studying the way people exchange information for quite some time, and it has not been an easy process. It is particularly more challenging due to figurative language, a phenomenon that adds an extra dimension to the words by expanding on their literal meaning. For instance, literary productions rely a great deal on this device to stimulate the reader's imagination and evoke captivating interpretations. Notably, poems are a major example of figurative language, illustrating many figures of speech.

Figures of speech are an intentional reinterpretation of the text which diverges from the usual word-by-word meaning (GRANT AND BAUER, 2004). These linguistic devices introduce a creative dimension to communication, enriching the message with layers of meaning that extend beyond the literal content. Figures of speech evoke vivid imagery, emotion, and nuance. This intentional deviation from the usual word-by-word meaning not only captures the reader's attention but also invites them to explore the text on a more profound level, prompting reflection and engagement. Hence, this article aims to investigate the figures of speech employed by the poet Rupi Kaur in her compositions.

Rupi Kaur, a contemporary Indian poet, gained significant renown by showcasing her creative works on *Instagram*. This unconventional approach to sharing poetry not only projected her into the spotlight but also reshaped the way poetry is disseminated and consumed in the digital age. What further sets her apart is the attention she draws due to her distinctive writing style. This style, characterized by its accessibility, directness, and strong infusion of activism, echoes powerfully with modern readers seeking both relatability and thought-provoking content. Her words serve as a rallying call for change, addressing topics ranging from feminism to self-empowerment and social issues.

Despite the straightforward nature of her writing, Kaur's choice of simplicity accomplishes much more than meets the eye. This modest approach actually intensifies the impact of her poetry. By avoiding hermetic language, Kaur bridges the gap between the poet and the reader, making her verses feel like intimate conversations. This technique draws the reader into a closer relationship with the text, allowing for more profound emotional connections. Furthermore, the absence of excessive embellishments creates a canvas for multifaceted interpretations, fostering a dynamic interaction between the reader's personal experiences and the underlying themes within the poetry.

For one thing, Kaur uses figures of speech to potentialize her message. As mentioned, these language strategies rearrange the literal meaning into a figurative one. Further in this study, Kaur's poems will be explored by their use of figures of speech and the understanding they produce. First and foremost, it is necessary to know more about the author and her writing styles before diving into an analysis of her work. As such, this study is segmented into four sections: initially, a brief contextualization about the author and her writing style will be provided, while the figures of speech and the analysis of the collected data will be explored in the following two sections. Finally, some concluding remarks will be presented in the last section.

## 1. Rupi Kaur: an aesthetic contemporary *instapoet*

Poetry has been taking part of our society since ancient times and, over the years, it has assumed different forms and features. In fact, the language used in some types of poetry resembles aspects of a specific culture and it suggests some characteristics of the author's writing style. With these perceptions in mind, one of the most remarkable contemporary poets is Rupi Kaur. She was born in India but, during her early childhood, her family immigrated to Canada in order to contract better labor opportunities. Rupi Kaur describes herself as a "diasporic Punjabi-Sikh woman" and, as Kassam (2016) acknowledges, her personal experiences as a female immigrant are embedded in her poetry. Currently, she takes part in a trend of *Instapoets* who share their creations on the platform.

In terms of her writing style, Kaur divides her poetry into two types: performance poetry and paper poetry. For the author, performance poetry, as the name suggests, emerges as a result of a performative act that gains its dimension when recited on stage. To underscore the artistic essence of this type of poetry, she likens it to music, possessing its own rhythms and melodies. Thus, performance poetry carries a collective receptiveness, as it is crafted with its oral interpretation in mind.

On the other hand, paper poetry is characterized by a more intimate and individual nature, existing solely in the realm of written expression. In harmony, Kaur (2023, p.28) asserts, "Paper poetry has more impact when you read it to yourself." Similarly, she highlights that the distinct elements of paper poetry, such as page layout and the use of figurative language, draw the reader closer to the text. As a result, readers can engage with the text and formulate multiple interpretations. Moreover, they can connect with the explored themes and associate them with personal experiences.

Her debut collection is entitled *Milk and Honey* – which poems will be analyzed in this article. It was originally self-published on a website page in 2014 and due to its triumph within the cyber setting; a company sponsored its re-release as a printed version in 2015. The book is an anthology of poems and illustrations segmented into four chapters: "*the hurting*", "*the loving*", "*the breaking*", and "*the healing*". This masterpiece has become widespread and it was roughly translated into twenty languages.

In this book, Kaur displays an intersectional and minimalistic writing style. She exclusively uses lowercase and periods in her poems as an attempt to bring her ethnic heritage within her work. Not only that but, through a simplistic and straightforward style, the author advocates for accessibility. In this sense, Kaur reaches marginalized groups such as immigrants and people of color. She includes them as active readers considering that poetry reading was once perceived as an elitist practice (MARI VALE, 2019). Furthermore, her tone is bold and unapologetic; she directly claims for social changes without excusing herself for doing so.

The themes in her writing fluctuate among identity, conflict, heritage, and immigration. Such matters emphasize the difficulties one can face when living in a foreign country. In addition, Rupi Kaur endeavors to deconstruct stereotypes ascribed to immigrants who are often harassed and segregated from the mainstream. Moreover, it is possible to observe several connections with The Feminist Movement foundations. For instance, the poet urges for female union against patriarchal principles and she criticizes the commodification of women's bodies, oppressive beauty norms, and rape culture. Additionally, she explores taboo topics like menstruation and women's sexuality while presenting ordinary subjects such as love, hope, heartbreak, loneliness, and fear.

In recent years, Kaur's literary accomplishments have achieved resounding success, resonating profoundly in both the digital domain and the traditional printed publications. As a result of this remarkable reception, her work has undergone a transformative evolution, manifesting as a distinctive series entitled "Rupi Kaur Live." This exclusive series finds its home on the Amazon Prime Video streaming platform, limited to the audience within North America. The collaborative efforts behind this creative project involve the contributions of Rakhi Mutta, Kimmie Kim, Nelson, and the author herself. Drawing from the wellspring of her poetic creation, this cinematic production interweaves narrative threads that mirror the essence of her literary collection, offering viewers an intimate glimpse into the heart of her written expressions.

Similarly, contemporary poetry is frequently associated with the notion of aesthetic difficulty. As McQuillan (2018, p.8) asserts, this concept refers to the "relationship between reader and text [and it] is articulated as the intelligibility of the text, by the reader's ability to understand, to interpret, to create meaning from, or to be affected by a text." In this sense, readers can fully comprehend the poems due to their simple language, identify with the themes highlighted in the work, and be concerned with the issues the author raises awareness about. Likewise, in order to provoke a self-related state in readers, Kaur implements several literary devices in her writing. Following this impression, the next section of this study will define some figures of speech and it will provide some tools one can use when interpreting figurative language.

## 2. Understanding figures of speech

Rupi Kaur relies on numerous literary techniques and conventions as a way to produce different interpretations of words and to evoke emotive, thought-provoking responses in the reader's mind. The most prominent resources used by her are figures of speech. According to Grant and Bauer (2004, p. 51), they are sentences or words "involving an untruth which can be reinterpreted pragmatically to understand the intended truth." Hence, bearing in mind that they share a separate meaning from their literal definition, it is vital to process the information presented semantically to comprehend the real intention of the word or sentence. Therefore, this section proposes to outline six figures of speech - irony, hyperbole, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and simile which will be illustrated in the next segment of this work.

Before diving deeper into the concept of figures of speech, it is important to notice the difference between literal and figurative interpretation. On one hand, literal interpretations are encoded in the language system. They encompass the semantical meaning embedded in the words. On the other hand, figurative interpretations are explicatures in which one or more literal meanings are replaced by a vehicle. The vehicle carries the figurative interpretation and it is an idea that enables the addressee to produce a suitable interpretation of a given text. Presuppositions are other tools that can assist readers to interpret figurative meaning. As Griffiths (2006, p.51) states, "they are implications which are often presumed-to-be-shared beliefs that are taken for granted by the addressee and are expected to be used for interpreting the message." Accordingly, presuppositions comprise the previous thoughts the audience needs in order to understand an idea integrally.

That being said, the first figure of speech conceptualized in this work is *irony*. Irony is a broad term full of meaning and interpretations; consequently, defining it is not easy. As Wilson and Sperber (2004, p. 3) proclaim, "irony consists in echoing a tacitly

attributed thought or utterance with a tacitly dissociative attitude.” Thereby, irony is a pragmatic phenomenon which occurs when the speaker says something that is the opposite of what is expected.

Subsequently, *hyperbole* is defined by Burgers *et al.* (2016, p. 166) as “an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent.” In this manner, hyperbole is essentially marked by exaggeration and the presence of a referent. When it comes to *personification*, an inanimate object is treated or represented in human form. In other words, something lifeless receives anthropological attributes. *Metonymy* is a common form of figurative language that is perceived in everyday spoken language and in literary works. The central idea behind this phenomenon is the association between a word that functions as a vehicle for something that is closely associated with it (GRIFFITHS, 2006). Thus, one can describe a person, an object, or an event using a term which conveys a figurative interpretation that is referred to as the same thing.

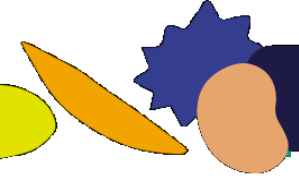
Finally, Griffiths (2006, p. 86) suggests that *Metaphors* are “used to condense multiple or extensive meanings into a few words.” In this case, just like metonymy, there is a comparison which transfers the meaning of a certain thing in a metaphorical or figurative way. The notion of intertextuality, that is, the connection between some texts is extremely valuable when understanding metaphors because a reader needs to rely on certain information which is inferred exclusively from the context. Alike metaphors, *similes* are used to compare things figuratively. In fact, Stern (2000) affirms that similes are a ‘model’ of metaphors because the only difference between them is the usage of the terms ‘like’ or ‘as’ when creating similes.

Overall, interpreting figurative language requires presumed presuppositions that are retrieved from a given context. Each figure of speech features its own characteristics; hence, conceptualizing them is a highly complex process.

### 3. Analyzing the poems

Poems generate vivid images in the reader’s mind. This happens especially because of the use of figurative language and figures of speech. Thus, analyzing the figures of speech and their meaning in a poem can be a fruitful process. Rupi Kaur’s compositions provide many examples of this language use; hence, this section’s goal is to investigate some figures of speech employed by the author, such as irony, hyperbole, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and simile, as well as discuss their possible interpretation.





The first poem, entitled 'To fathers with daughters' reads:

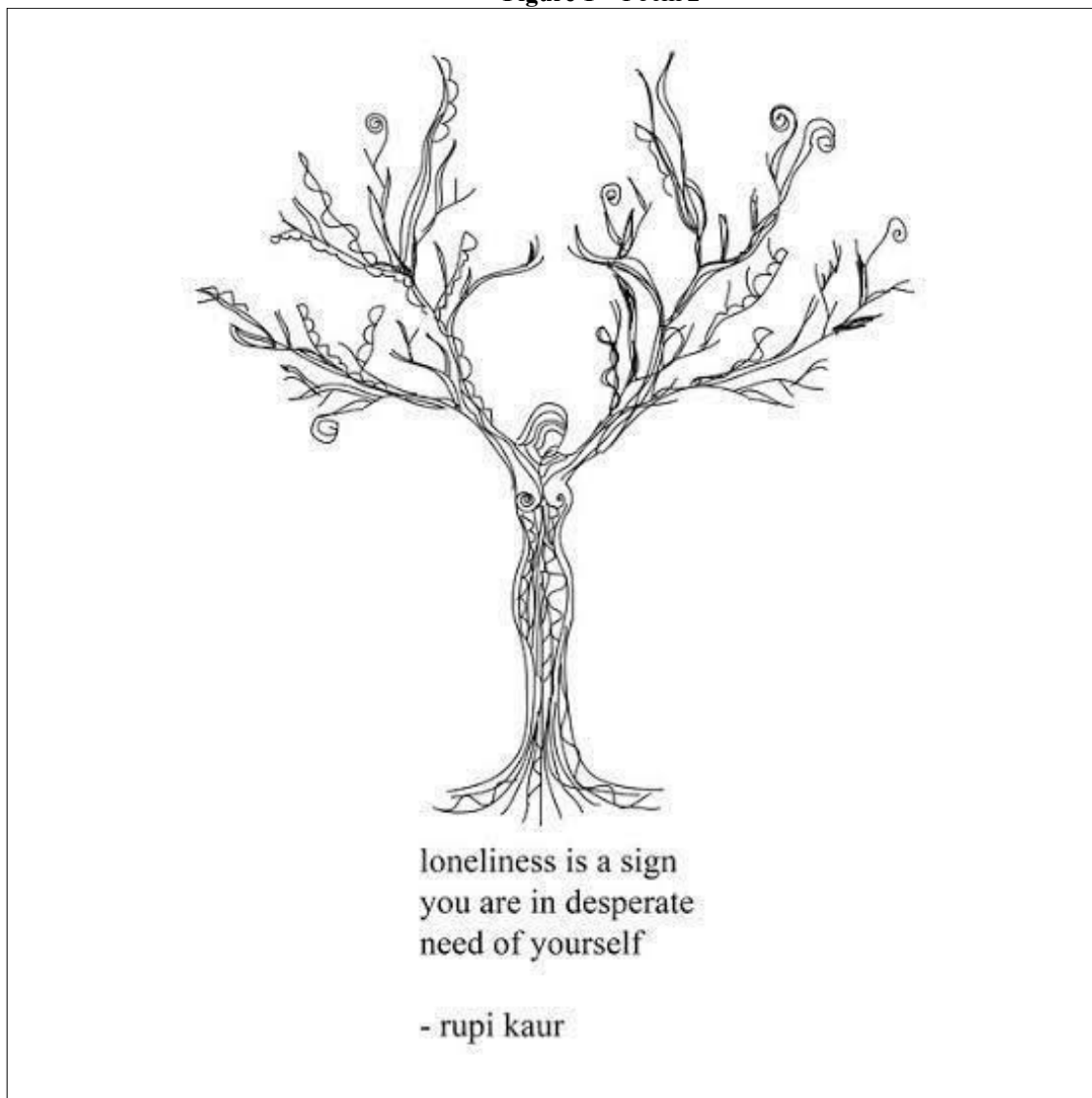
**Figure 1 - Poem 1**  
Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 19.



In this poem, the author points out how damaging it can be when fathers have aggressive relationships with their daughters. Irony can be perceived through the vehicle “*a good idea*” because it is actually the opposite. As seen before, ironies differ from what is expected because they draw on the contrary notion of what the words are saying. Therefore, daughters internalizing this hostile treatment and replicating it in their future relations is not recommended or satisfactory.

On the other hand, in poem 02, the author uses hyperbole to build an expressive meaning. She writes:

Figure 1 – Poem 2

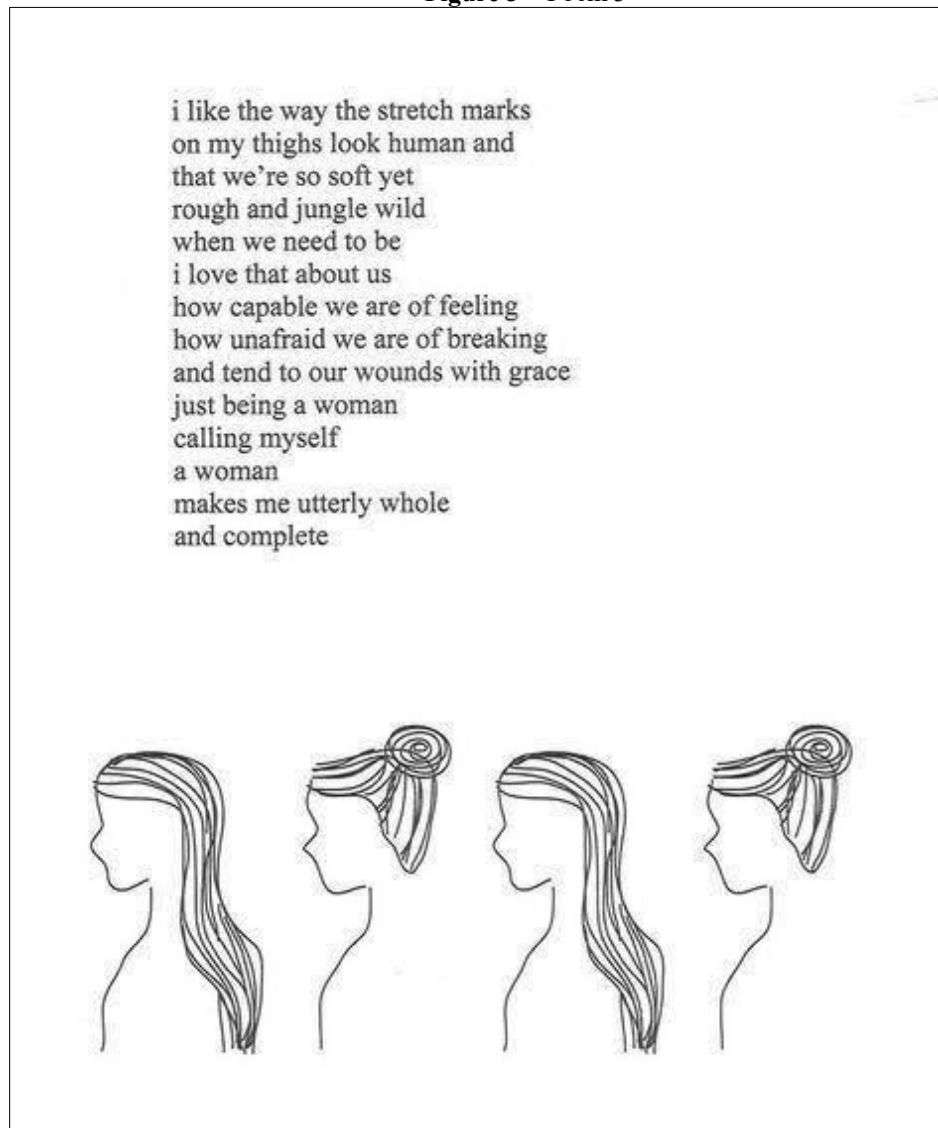


Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 153.

In this case, ‘desperate’ is an extreme adjective that intensifies the message created by the author. Consequently, this exaggeration shows the reader that loneliness is a strong, powerful feeling. Also, one possible interpretation of the poem, along with this figure of speech, is that individuals need to be conscious about their bodies' needs and take time to recharge their energies alone before being social again.

Furthermore, personification can be found in poem 03 as one reads:

Figure 3 – Poem 3



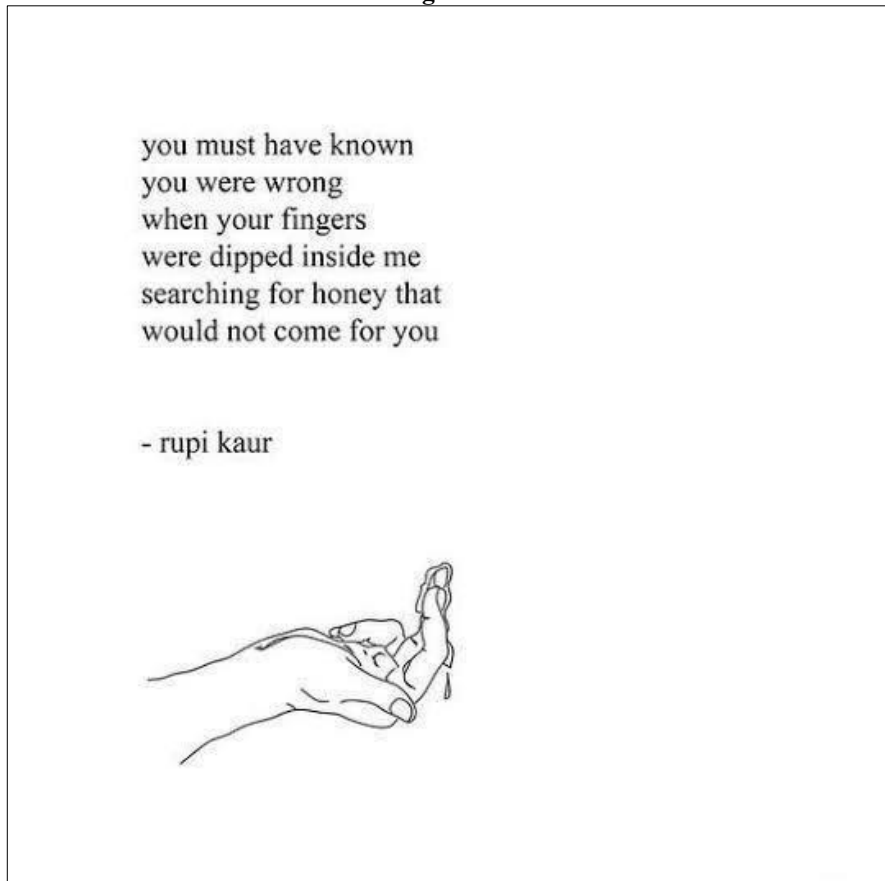
Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 101.

As previously stated, this figure of speech involves representing things (objects, ideas, animals, nature, and more) as having human characteristics and feelings, as exemplified by the use of 'stretch marks' in the poem. The author attributes people's features to the vehicle, admitting they 'look human' and using the plural 'we' to refer to them. Additionally, the use of contrasting adjectives (soft, rough, and jungle wild) strengthens this idea of 'stretch marks' sharing the personality traits of a human being. On the whole, this connection can change the readers' perspective on something mundane.



In poem 04, one of Kaur's common themes arouses. She describes a relationship in decay by addressing their sexual connection. The said relation is no longer working and, when the couple is intimate, the author points out that one of them is fighting a lost cause by saying:

Figure 4 – Poem 4

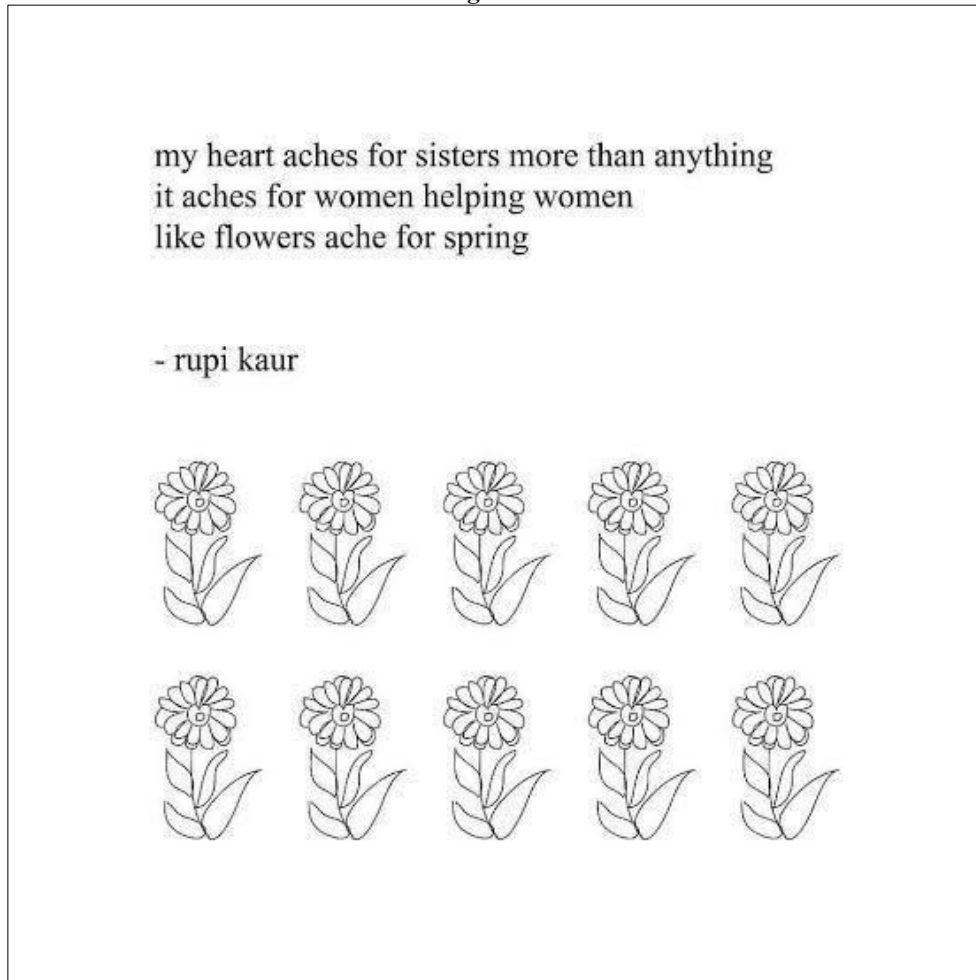


Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 187.

In other words, when the couple is having physical relations, one of them is not capable of pleasing the other. It is possible to understand this from the usage of “honey” as a metonymy for the female ejaculatory fluid. As formerly discussed, metonymy substitutes other names in order to enhance the images created by the text. Thus, Kaur's choice can associate a human biological phenomenon to a food, a color, or a natural element – being that honey has more than one meaning.

Last but not least, poems 05 and 06 provide examples of metaphors and similes. These figures of speech use comparisons to clarify abstract ideas and connect the meaning with something familiar to the reader. In poem 05, Kaur writes:

Figure 5 – Poem 5

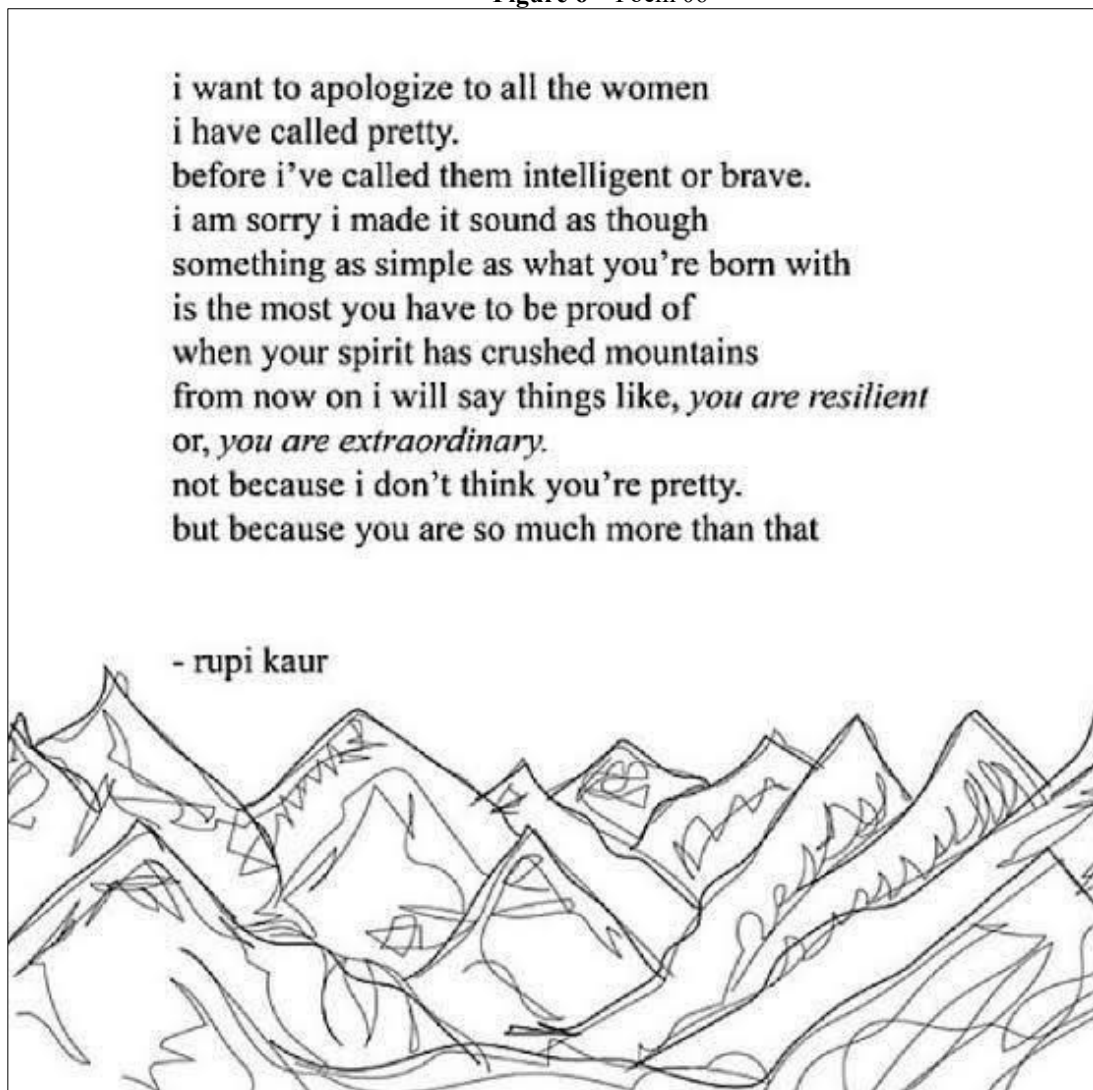


Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 187.

For one thing, ‘heart aches’ is a metaphor for feeling worried and concerned. In this instance, taking care of other women is so important that it affects a human organ that does not feel emotional pain but is frequently attached to this interpretation. Also, ‘like flowers ache for spring’ is an example of simile — which only differ from metaphors because of the explicit use of makers of similarity (*like* and *as*). Therefore, both the person and the flowers feel apprehensive and, since flowers are usually seen as beautiful, it is possible to interpret this feeling as praiseworthy.

Likewise, in poem 06, one reads:

Figure 6 – Poem 06



Source: Kaur, 2015, p. 179.

This poem considers the usual compliments given to women, normally associated with physical appearance and beauty standards. Then, the author proposes a shift, focusing on complementing resilience and willpower. The metaphor present in the passage relates to a person's spirit which carries an immeasurable strength comparable to destroying mountains. Such powerful images demonstrate the empowerment of women over simply their looks. Overall, Kaur's use of figures of speech contributes immensely to the meaning-making process.

### Final remarks

In brief, Rupi Kaur's poetry is remarkable. As revealed by this study, she associates her personal struggles with her feminist worldview and creates a cathartic body of work due to her discussions about taboo topics. She blends heavy themes with ordinary issues, thus raising awareness about such matters. Furthermore, accessibility is essential to the author, notably seen by her preference for social media to share her poems. Her writing style also contributes to a large circulation of her work, in

particular, because of the uncomplicated and accessible language structures used. Yet, her tone is audacious and unashamed, which is crucial when appealing to younger audiences. Overall, Kaur's compositions are authentic and in agreement with current debates.

Kaur's work also provides an extensive range of interpretation due to her use of figures of speech. As previously stated, figurative language is a complex language use, and figures of speech are useful mechanisms that improve the effectiveness and scope of the text. Thereby, analyzing Kaur's composition was an interesting process. It was possible to uncover how one can perceive the meaning behind the words, and which vehicles were chosen by the author to provoke the readers. Irony, hyperbole, personification, metonymy, metaphors, and similes are enriching tools authors can use to paint a sensorial, relatable message. All in all, this study was beneficial to understand figures of speech when applied in a literary context by a contemporary author.

Overall, this study has contributed to the understanding of elements of figurative language in the poetic works of Rupi Kaur. However, it is important to emphasize that additional works and further research into figures of speech and poetry are necessary to conduct additional studies to address these topics in different settings. By undertaking further works in this area, we can expand our comprehension, not only of Rupi Kaur's poetry but also of the broader implications and applications of figures of speech across a wide spectrum of artistic and communicative contexts.

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