

## Investigating Iraqi EFL Undergraduates' Pragmatic Failure in Polite Request



استقصاء الاخفاق البراغماتي في اسلوب الطلب المؤدب

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#### الخلاصة

تلعب اللغة الإنجليزية ، كأداة اتصال ، دوراً مهماً للغاية في التواصل بين الثقافات. الوظيفة الرئيسية للغة هي الاتصال ، والكفاءة البراغماتية هي عنصر مهم في الكفاءة التواصلية. ومع ذلك ، بسبب الافتقار إلى المعرفة العملية ، لا يمكن لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية تجنب الاخفاق البراغماتي في التواصل بين الثقافات.و من أجل تحسين كفاءتهم العملية والتواصلية ، يجب دمج المزيد من المقدمات للمعرفة العملية والمعلومات الثقافية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى التحقيق الاخفاق البراغماتي في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلبة الجامعة في العراق متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية وتقديم اقتراحات بناءة حول كيفية تحسين كفاءتهم العملية. تبحث هذه الورقة أولاً في الإخفاقات العملية التي يميل متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في الكلية إلى ارتكابها اسلوب الطلب المؤدب في التواصل بين الثقافات من خلال اختبار يتضمن عشرة مواقف مفتوحة تم إنشاؤها في اسلوب الطلب المؤدب وتم اختيار العينة العشوائية من 60 طالباً وطالبة السنة

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الرابعة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية / جامعة بابل خلال العام الدراسي (2020-2021)

توصل البحث الى ان طلبة الجامعة في العراق متعلمي للغة الانكليزية يفتقرون إلى فرصة الاختلاط مباشرة بالثقافة الأجنبية كما ان الثقافة تلعب دوراً حيوياً في استخدام اللغة ويجب إبراز ذلك في سياقات التدريس والتعلم كونه سيؤثر على أداء متعلمي اللغة المستهدفة لاستخدامها بشكل مناسب كما توصلت الدراسة ان متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لديهم تداخل سلبي في اللغة بين لغتهم الأم واللغة المستهدفة ، ويتجلى ذلك بوضوح عندما يتفاعلون في مواقف معينة في اسلوب الطلب المؤدب اعتماداً على ثقافتهم الأصلية لأنهم يفتقرون إلى الكفاءة البراغماتية التي تجعلهم قادرين على استخدام اللغة بشكل مناسب وبينت الدراسة انه لم يتم التأكيد على الكفاءة العملية لا في سياقات التدريس ولا في مناهج المستوى الجامعي للغة الإنجليزية العراقية. بدلاً من ذلك ، يتم التأكيد على الكفاءة اللغوية فقط وهذا لا يكفي لاستخدام اللغة.

### Abstract

English, as a communication tool, is playing an extremely significant role in cross-cultural communication. The main function of language is communication, and pragmatic competence is an important component of communicative competence. However, owing to a lack of pragmatic knowledge, English learners can hardly avoid committing pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Pragmatic failure sets up barriers to the success of cross-cultural communication since pragmatic failure closely relates to English learners' lack of pragmatic knowledge and understanding of the culture of the target country. In order to improve their pragmatic and communicative competence, more introductions to pragmatic knowledge and cultural information should be incorporated into English teaching.

This research aims to investigate the pragmatic failure of Iraqi EFL undergraduate students and to provide constructive suggestions as to how to improve their pragmatic competence. This paper first investigates pragmatic failures that college English learners tend to commit in polite request in cross-cultural communication through a test, building on the analysis of the collected data, it further discusses the main sources of the pragmatic failures and provides suggestions for it. It is hoped that these suggestions can help to develop students' pragmatic and communicative competence.



**I: Contemporary Poetry**

Poetry frequently matures at the same rapid pace as that of society, which is currently accelerating horrendously. The scene of how books should be presented has greatly improved because of the technological advancements. The objectives and subject matters have changed along with the means. In many cases, it also serves as a means of establishing one's identity in opposition to the broader culture that has ostracized the speaker.<sup>1</sup>

For an audience, contemporary literature primarily relies on the internet. Consequently, poetry has developed new tendencies that entirely depend on how the audience responds. Due to the loss of the air of mystery that the sophisticated ancient poetry supplied, technology has "limited an audience's capacity for effort and complexity".<sup>2</sup> Poetry is typically an elevated type of writing with many allusions and symbols that are not intended for the general public; instead, poetry is for the educated (writers and audience). Modernity, on the other hand, has assumed that poetry should reflect those who are unable to speak for themselves. [

Like the moderns and some of the post-moderns, we need to sing, to paint pictures; but neither for its own sake. Our readers, once awakened, must be inspired, inflamed, saddened, truly sexually aroused, goaded to action ... something.<sup>3</sup>

In the Age of the Internet, the new forms of poetry that appeared have different titles. Cory Stephens, for instance, coins the term AltLit in 2011 (short for alternative literature) which is basically the literature that is published solely online on virtual platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.<sup>4</sup> This new genre is characterized by "direct speech, expressions of aching desire, and wide eyed-sincerity"<sup>5</sup> due to the requirements of the internet generation (Thomas clarifies that this generation has grown up with the internet, and thus, they are used to finding everything online). The internet generation varies in culture, age, gender, etc. It is neither a specific city as audience nor a group of poets that has a profound interest. The poems are addressed to the entire world, as the world has shrunk to the size of a small city, and the responses of which can affect any poet anywhere in the world.

Another contemporary genre is "InstaPoetry", as in Instagram Poetry. Soraya Roberts believes it is "selling sanitized unreality" imposed by the social media in general.<sup>6</sup> InstaPoetry is characterized by "its simplicity, stylised affectations, and appeal to mass readerships, a minimalist 'byte-sized'".<sup>7</sup> It is also characterized by "apparent superficiality and ephemerality of social media"; however, "it is important [. . .] to



acknowledge that [social media] fundamentally affects what and how art and culture circulate".<sup>8</sup>

One of the important topics to discuss when it comes in InstaPoetry is the fact that it generates instant feedback to the writes, which creates an effect similar to that between audience and actors on stage. Kaur confesses it has refashioned her later writings, but not her first book: "it does two things the feedbacks always reassuring in that 'oh there's people here that want to read this I'll keep writing' it but I'm also very self aware of the fact that I don't want what other people think to change how I write and what I write about"<sup>9</sup> and she describes the readers' comments later as "it's just pixels on the screen".<sup>10</sup> Moreover, deciding which text can be considered literature has become more complicated, if compared to the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance:

A text [. . .] cannot be literary on its own, but requires an audience that experiences a literary response to it. The work of literature and literariness occurs not within the text and not within the reader, but somewhere in the relationship between the two.<sup>11</sup>

What these 'genres' of literature have in common is a lack of complexities. Because they lack form and style, these poems cannot be taught in the classroom. The common aspects between AltLit and InstaPoetry, for instance, is that the poems are self-centered and are mostly about what is known nowadays as the "body image".<sup>12</sup> Miller considers this a "conspiracy to 'democratize' poetry"<sup>13</sup> as any "immature" inexperienced person may try writing and all they have to do is to influence the public on a social media platform.

[. . .] the 'virtual community, the idea that digital spaces can provide alternatives to, or new kinds of, community particularly for those who may feel marginalized or disempowered has widespread traction and appeal.<sup>14</sup>

This type of poetry, which is dependent on the public, may only require a certain number of subscribers to the poet's cyberspace and enough 'shares' to be considered poetry. Critics may agree or disagree that a particular piece is aesthetically a poem, but the subscriber will determine whether the book is sold or not. The internet poetry provides a false sense to "their followers that they were witnessing the making of literature as something raw in progress, and as something that they can





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contribute to, even if that means buying the merchandise sold in live performance."<sup>15</sup>

It is commonplace that in the world of digital discourse, of the internet [. . .] communication has been radically transformed both temporally and spatially. The speed whereby the sender's message reaches its destination has obviously created a new sense of simultaneity even as space has become increasingly indeterminate.<sup>16</sup>

In his article, "Why Contemporary Poetry is not Taught in the Academy", McIrvin defines the modern American poem as "a supercilious rant by some small, alienated version of an 'I' whose purview is utterly domestic and approaches absolute solipsism, which is to say it is masturbatory in as much as it assumes no *other*."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he calls contemporary poetry "effluvia of the tiny alienated self".<sup>18</sup> Many critics agree with the fact that the contemporary writers are frequently denied the opportunity to speak up and express themselves and, thus, they resort to social media to be heard by complete strangers.<sup>19</sup> To achieve that goal, they need to speak of the insecurities of the self that everyone suffers, and the pieces written need to be short enough for the social media. Themes have become "deeply personal and intimate shared experiences", as Thomas puts it.<sup>20</sup> Poems, thus, have become "visual, contemporary, and aggressively engaging".<sup>21</sup>

McIrvin believes that poetry has grown to become "irrelevant" as it degraded into nothing but a "tiny wave on noise in the omniverse of information that washes endlessly over us".<sup>22</sup> Such poetry is not fit for the classroom and literary events anymore. Real poetry requires "sound wedded to sense in order to awaken the higher cognitive faculties of readers"<sup>23</sup> while the internet poetry is an "act of violence against the pathetic way-things-are, against exclusion and control, against the average citizen's complacency"<sup>24</sup> which makes the contemporary poems "vignettes of human suffering".<sup>25</sup> At the time figurative language plays a vital role in appreciating poetry, InstaPoetry relies on "digital poetics" such as font type, font size, spacing, and color which "generate complete verbo-visual configurations."<sup>26</sup> Poetry becomes like any other online text, a 'message' to convey a certain idea without using conventional prose. McIrvin describes the twenty first century as "an age in which information is entertainment"<sup>27</sup>

### II: Feminism vs. Gynocentrism

The three waves of feminism have gained quite a harsh reaction by the time they launched. However, nowadays, being a feminist became an insult to women, a burden they had to shed.

Feminism primarily concentrated on equality and made women insecure about their own femininity.<sup>28</sup> Feminism suggested that the world's knowledge of women was created and promoted by men to restrict women to the roles of the sexual partner and the servant.<sup>29</sup> Feminism treated women's interests and achievements as "insignificant" if they were not in the male domain: for example, comparing a recipe with inventing the car. For feminists, the oppression started by distorting "women's human potential by a society that allows the self-development of men".<sup>30</sup> Such distortion or oppression was because of femininity as it "stunts the development of their full human potential", and turns them into "passive, dependent and weak" creatures.<sup>31</sup> Due to their definition as mothers, for instance, they were not allowed to have a job through which they may find stability and creativity probably for fear that that may contradict with the feminine role the society had endowed her with. Women were not allowed to participate in science or politics, as these carriers required devotion and would be incompatible with taking care of a family.

The reason behind rejecting feminism (or what Young calls Humanist Feminism) was that it offered no solution to undo the inequality without destroying the societal and family ties. Feminism made women ashamed of their femininity and it obliged the society to judge women, as it did men, by the standards of courage and quick wittedness, strength, etc.<sup>32</sup> That was unquestionably not suitable for ALL women as it cannot and should not be achieved. The goal behind seeking freedom, after all, was to free the woman from the pre-made molds and give her the opportunity to make her own choices. Here came the need for a new term that would serve the purpose.

The term which surfaced in opposition to feminism is "gynocentrism" which was coined by Elaine Showalter.<sup>33</sup> Cuddon restricts the term to focusing on writings by women. However, the term signifies looking at women differently and valuing their own feminine experience. Femininity is an experience, rather than a weakness, and it needs to be studied and acknowledged.<sup>34</sup>

Two of the most common features of femininity (which are both feared and devaluated) are love and power. Through love, women offer "nurturance, care, need, sensitivity, transformation". Through power, they offer "freedom, expression, creativity, generation, transformation".<sup>35</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, studying women's writings, comes up with the term "feminist Eros" which combines both power and love as the "two manifestations of the 'life force'".<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the terms have not changed, but the way they are described and defined has. Language needs





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to change in order to achieve the desired form of 'equity' rather than equality:

[. . .] gynocentric science often has been called 'art,' as in the *art* of midwifery, or the *art* of cooking, or the *art* of homemaking. Had ***these?*** 'art' been androcentric activities, I have no doubt that they would have been called, respectively obstetrical *science*, food *science*, and family *social science*.<sup>37</sup>

Women's oppression is, thus, not depriving women of chances to develop, but rather the "denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalized and authoritarian masculinist culture".<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, women are deliberately expunged from history. Women's absence from history means they have not been given the chance to write their own history, which means something and speaks for itself, i.e. the absence of history is a statement in defense of women in itself; Glazebrook calls it the "women's (un)history".<sup>39</sup> In studying history, the role of "woman-the-gatherer" is devalued by suggesting that civilization has risen because men developed their mental skills by hunting the animals.<sup>40</sup> This has overlooked women's roles in creating a sense of 'home' in the first place, as well as adorning that home-space with creative arts, whether through fascinating clothing or embroidery and painting. Gynocentrism helps people look at the world from a woman's point of view, by changing the language through which everything is described, rather than changing the way women live and behave.

In gynocentric feminism, "femininity is not the problem" nor is it "the source of women's oppression".<sup>41</sup> However, "within traditional femininity lie the values that we should promote for a better society".<sup>42</sup>

One of the topics sensitive to the classical feminist writers was sexual abuse and sexualizing women. The women were not allowed to discuss such topics as it would not be suitable for their femininity. This explains the embarrassment Kaur went through when she declared once that she was a feminist: "I didn't think it was a bad word because anything with the word feminine and anything about women is still beautiful and I'm like I want to represent that and I want to know what this is about".<sup>43</sup> She continues, she was the only one raising a hand and the other students would look at her weirdly until she had to say she was not a feminist.

However, with gynocentric feminism, such topics can be freely discussed and analyzed because it ensures the continuity of women's freedom. Women cannot be entirely free unless they are at liberty to express what holds them back and troubles their adaptation. "The imposition of female



silence is exposed as a violence of patriarchy, through which male domination might be secured, and women disappeared into nothingness”<sup>44</sup>.

### III: InstaPoetry as Confessional Poetry

Since the contemporary internet poetry relies heavily on the personal experiences of the poet, this brings to mind the experience of confessional poetry. Writers of confessional poetry are mostly women because they are the most oppressed and, thus, muzzled. However, it is generally about personal experiences and the ability to ‘let it out’ as a form of therapy (like the case with Sylvia Plath).

... female poets are characterised as anchored to the private sphere of the domestic, marginalised from public life and denied the articulation of an identity that might be also understood as part and product of the world: ‘[S]he perceives that she is supposed to be living quietly in her kitchen, adhering, as Plath wrathfully wrote, “to rules, to rules, to rules”’.<sup>45</sup>

However, some critics believe that speaking of oneself makes the ego the center of attention, marginalizing other people and negating the fact that poetry can represent people in general. Molesworth uses the description "desperate attempt at self-definition"<sup>46</sup> to define confessional poetry, while emphasizing that it is a "degraded branch of Romanticism"<sup>47</sup> as Romanticism has obviously concentrated on the relationship between the self and Nature.

Rupi Kaur (b. 1992) often refers to the violation of the feminine body. That would not be surprising if we know that Kaur is a victim of sexual abuse. She spent years hating her body and how it attracted the wrong people. Kaur says, in an interview:

Poetry allows you to process emotion and it allows you to express it and it's crazy that such a low percentage of people actually use it as a tool to heal and as a tool to share . . .<sup>48</sup>

Until she reaches a form of peace with herself eventually and this peace is revealed in her poems as well, “Kaur can be understood as drawing from a continuing tradition in which women seek to complicate the sociocultural construction of selfhood via confessional poetry”<sup>49</sup>. Confessional poetry is more like a monologue exposing how the character feels. Such confessions usher the reader to understand how victims feel: victims of bullying, of social/gender discrimination, of violence, of abuse, etc.

our wounds are the reason  
i started writing poetry  
every word





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i've ever written was to

lead us back into our arms (Kaur, *home body*, p. 140)<sup>50</sup>

Modern poetry, Rita Horváth believes, used to separate the narrative “I” from the poet’s personality (like the difference between T. S. Eliot and the “I” of his character, Profrock).<sup>51</sup> In addition, the taboos and shameful subjects have become standard themes of such writings. Horváth writes that “the Confessionals invented a new mode of writing in the hope of self-cure.”<sup>52</sup> This applies to Kaur as she reveals accurate incidents from her life and, in an interview, she justifies that by saying that her poetry is addressed to both genders in hope of changing how women are treated: “if we're not changing minds and [. . .] as to men then what's the point?”<sup>53</sup>

Kaur is “an activist who resists and rejects authority, turning from the status quo to highlight the structural inequalities that have traditionally sought to keep the ‘other’ on the outside.”<sup>54</sup> Her success stems up from “operating outside of the aesthetic norms of the genre”.<sup>55</sup> McQuillan also believes that she may pose “a threat to the systems of value by which poetry is usually produced and distributed, and by which a poet’s status is assessed”<sup>56</sup> because of her novelty as an Indian woman challenging all the rules.

#### IV: Kaur's Poetry

As an abuse victim, Rupi Kaur concentrates on feminine vocabulary and themes. She sees in her survival a representation of all other women who are victims of abuse but have no voice to express their feelings. She develops gradually from the physical abuse to the psychological one. She includes all kinds of women in her poetry, especially the Indian women, who have been denied the opportunity to break free from their men despite the fact that they are being insulted, hit, and raped. She declares herself the spokeswoman of the abused, be they women, men, or trans. By demanding justice for everyone, she would be ‘serving’ all the women around the world as the way people perceive them will be different.

the name kaur

[. . .]

calls out and says i have a  
universal duty to share with  
humanity to nurture  
and serve the sisterhood  
to raise those that need raising (MH, p. 184)

Kaur has published *milk and honey*<sup>57</sup> (2014), *the sun and her flowers* (2017), and *home body* (2020). The poems tackle sensitive topics ranging from enjoying the physical experience with a beloved to the abuse and its



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psychological consequences. The chosen poems are the ones focusing on the gynocentric traits of modern women philosophy.

As for the style, Kaur chooses to write using small letters (including titles and her name) adopting e. e. cummings' style; however, she does not explain that as a deliberate message with a specific meaning. The poems have no titles, thus, they will be referred to using the page numbers. Kaur believes each of her books is one long poem.

. . . for me *milk and honey* is one large poem it's one continuous poem from the front to the back and I was cheating you know like it's like a body of work but I know what I was doing, was like taking eyelashes and fingertips and limbs and just throwing them and trying to make it work . . .  
58

Kaur also illustrates her poems for publication; most of the drawings are daring and/or showing oppression.

In *milk and honey*, Kaur illustrates how women are muzzled and censored:

you were so afraid  
of my voice  
i decided to be

afraid of it too (Kaur, *milk and honey*, p. 17)<sup>59</sup>

and "this is how the women in my family/ learned to live with their mouths closed". (MH, p. 35)

The psychological dilemma and confusion she goes through is due to her raising, as she has been told that her parents were harsh because they loved her. They show their love through their violence. The result is "till she grows up to/ trust men who hurt her/ cause they look so much/ like you" (MH, p. 19) (referring to her rapist/relative). The reluctance to refuse harsh love is caused by her bringing up. She is unable to form an image of love away from the cruelty she faced as a child. As a victim of abuse, her preference becomes mutilated. In the poem of page 32, she blames both her parents for being apart. She is a victim of a disturbed marriage "your father is absent"<sup>60</sup> and she is "the border between two countries/ the collateral damage". The brainwash continues as she remembers what they used to tell her:

[. . .] a family  
who likes their daughters invisible  
[. . .] when they say  
you are nothing  
repeat it to yourself  
like a wish  
*i am nothing*





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*i am nothing*

*i am nothing* (MH, p. 33)

The agony ceases through her book, though. Kaur manages to save herself to transform from the self-ashamed little girl (who showers “with the lights off” for fear of facing herself in the mirror), into the beautiful young lady who loves herself immensely and respects her gender. She comments, “I realized that self-love is like a consistent thing that you have to work towards and it's always gonna [sic.] happen in cycles”.<sup>61</sup> Later in the book, she says, “you must enter a relationship/ with yourself/ before anyone else” (MH, p. 150).

Her self-admiration evolves until she describes herself as “a museum full of art” (MH, p. 100) and “i was music/ but you had your ears cut off” (MH, p. 115). She is aware of her self-worth. Consequently, whoever is not noticing her worth lacks something, for instance, when she says “had your ears cut off”. Therefore, the time spent with the ‘crippled’ person is a waste of time as s/he will never notice her true worth. The imagery used to refer to herself (representing all women) is one related to fertility and life. She adds the ability to destroy as she becomes stronger: she has the power to grant life and take it away:

i am water

-

soft enough

to offer life

tough enough

to drown it away (MH, p. 137)

Kaur never admits to vulnerability as a woman. She devises a recipe for women to overcome abuse; she uses a recipe as cooking is most commonly assigned to women.

1. take refuge in your bed.
2. cry. till the tears stop (this will take a few days).

[. . .]

6. find the closest ice cream shop and treat yourself to two scoops of mint chocolate chip. the mint will calm your heart. you deserve the chocolate.

[. . .]

13. do not beg for what does not want to stay.

[. . .]

16. breathe. (MH, p. 142)

This to-do-list is to overcome breaking up with abusive partners; it is designed for women who must recognize their self-worth. She is strictly gynocentric in that she knows that addressing women offering a ‘recipe’ is not an insult to women’s femininity, but a support of it.



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Kaur doubts people's ability to help: the refuge is her bed and then the change of habit in order to submerge oneself in daily activities till one forgets the suffering. Kaur allows the woman to feel stupid and sad, to cry and isolate herself for some time in order to become truly independent:

i like the way the stretch marks  
on my thighs look human and  
that we're so soft yet  
rough and jungle wild  
when we need to be  
i love that about us  
how capable we are of feeling  
how unafraid we are of breaking  
and tend to our wounds like grace  
just being a woman  
calling myself  
a woman  
makes me utterly whole  
and complete (MH, p. 169)

The above quotation shows ultimate gynocentrism: women need to look at things differently than the way they were raised to do. Schools, society and parents teach the girl that she is the fragile partner, but Kaur emphasizes that she is powerful enough to save herself without external help. She must see herself with pride, regardless of the beauty standards society has set. Her campaign of attacks continues to include those beauty standards promoted by media:

my issue is with what they consider beautiful  
is their concept of beauty  
centers around excluding people  
i find hair beautiful  
when a woman wears it  
like a garden on her skin  
that is the definition of beauty  
[. . .]  
don't tell me my women  
aren't as beautiful  
as the ones in  
your country (MH, p. 170)





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Kaur goes through a metamorphosis from the abused woman who could not look herself in the mirror into the self-assured young goddess who stands for all women in the world.

my heart aches for sisters more than anything  
it aches for women helping women  
like flowers ache for spring (MH, p. 187)

She divides her other collection, *home body*, into four parts: “mind”, “heart”, “rest” and “awake”. She swings, one more time, from the hardwired thoughts to the awakening of the gynocentric material. She starts wondering whether her father is like any other man, “the rapist” or “the criminal i called a boyfriend” (HB, p. 8). She displays the men in her life, including the story of how her abusive boyfriend hunts girls, “the invisible ones/ who believe they must be ugly/ because their fathers didn’t love them” (HB, p. 54). Ironically, those men whom she calls “predator” (HB, p. 54) disintegrate her confidence and cause her to gradually hate herself. As a victim of abuse, she blames herself for having a body all bad men want. People are judgmental even after she publishes her first book, exposing the reality of her feelings: the fact that she became more vigorous. People, symbolic for the society, neglect her real sentiments, and ask her to accomplish something worth recognition:

i was sick  
and pretending not to be sick  
at least performing kept me moving  
coming home to an  
empty apartment was worse  
without work i had nothing to look forward to  
i’d sink into the depression for months  
half passed out from the grief  
eyes open  
mind lost in another dimension  
*write the book they said*  
*get back on the road again*  
*what’s taking you so long*  
-empty (HB, p. 22)

Kaur “seeks to trouble and subvert the limitations placed upon the identities of women, often by reveling in subject matter regarded as taboo, including a focus on menstruation, female desire, sexual violence, and abuse”.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, she refuses all those terms assigned to women by society, saying that femininity is supposed to be something beautiful rather than mortifying. It has become remorseful to be a feminist because of the inaccurate opinion people have of that term when associated with

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feminism. Thus, changing those views means being a woman and having feminine features must be a source of pride (like a man's masculinity is). However, being a woman is not enough, one has to keep being impressive to capture the society's approval (asking her to keep writing, for instance). She fears whatever the society had programmed her to fear. She can never be as free as a man:

i want to live  
i'm just afraid  
i won't measure up to the  
idea people have of me in their heads  
i'm afraid of getting older  
scared i'll never write anything  
worth reading again  
that i'll disappoint the people  
who are counting on me  
that i'll never learn how to be happy  
that i'll be broke again one day  
that my parents will die  
and i'll be alone in the end (HB, p. 23)

Such fears are programmed into girls more than boys, for a boy would never worry about being worthy; he is taught that being a 'male' is the source of his pride, whether he accomplishes something different or not. He is capable of making his own family, so it is natural to lose the people he loves; he can always start over. Kaur displays another suffering: she feels less than a human being as, in addition to being a woman, she is an immigrant:

i thought my brown immigrant body  
should always work harder  
than everyone else in the room  
because that's what made me valuable (HB, p. 99)  
before she finally decides: "i am loving myself out of the dark" (HB, p. 37). Kaur recognizes the restraints of society and tries to break free. The terms bestowed upon her must dissolve one by one until she is capable of being free:

imagine what we could accomplish if  
we didn't have to spend our energy  
protecting ourselves from  
society's rapist problem (HB, p. 39)  
The title "victim" is one that she needs to abolish, as a fighter. She survives being victimized and, thus, she deserves to be viewed differently, with admiration, rather than pity: "i'm not a victim of my life/





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what i went through/ pulled a warrior out of me” (HB, p. 43). Again, the gynocentric traits lead her speech advising women to take control and be the doer rather than the recipient of action:

i'm too in love with my life  
to be spilling all over the floor  
for the next man  
who gives me butterflies  
when i could look in the mirror  
and take my own breath away (HB, p. 67)

Men are not her enemies, but a comparison must be made because society has forced their own wrong comparison for centuries:

a man can't give me anything  
i can't give myself  
- *things i wish i could tell the younger me* (HB, p. 72)

She admits that being a woman means having to sound less smart than her spouse (and, metaphorically, physically shorter). However, if the woman is smart there is no reason to hide that. Even if being able to think and make up her own mind is a threat to men, she needs to find a different man and keep spreading awareness that women are not dumb.

i'm not going to pretend  
to be less intelligent than i am  
so a man can feel  
more comfortable around me  
the one i deserve  
will see my greatness and  
want to lift it higher (HB, p. 75)

A man must live up to her expectations, not vice versa; her man must support her and be proud of the smart lady he is mating.

i want someone who is  
inspired by my brilliance  
not threatened by it (HB, p. 78)

Another societal error is the amount of work required in the materialistic world: people are expected to have work done, regardless of how much time they spend doing that. Kaur clarifies that she used to look at herself with this mentality, like her society:

i measure myself-worth  
by how productive i've been  
but no matter  
how hard i work  
i still feel inadequate  
- *productivity guilt* (HB, p. 86)



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However, she is now aware that lots of things that matter are postponed; life itself is postponed waiting for her to finish the endless work of her job.

i'm tired of putting off living until  
i have more information on who i am  
i'm a new person every month

[. . .]

i don't need fixing

[. . .]

everything necessary to live a vivid life  
already exists in me (HB, p. 114)

Therefore, she decides to take control, one more time and abolish one more term which has been abusing woman over and over. As a woman, she must be allowed to spend her time anyway she sees fit:

i became confident  
once i decided that having fun  
was more important than  
my fear of looking silly (HB, p. 126)

Kaur emphasizes the generalizations in this book (*home body*) too. She sees herself as the Emersonian Sayer, representing all the women in the world. She fights a mysterious male enemy or maybe society who tries to control her. The lines seem to be about the women in history, not just Kaur:

]]

i've been hunted. killed. and walked back to earth. i snapped the neck off every beast that thought it could. and you want to take my seat. the one i built with the story of my life. honey. you won't fit. i juggle clowns like you. i pick my teeth with fools like you for fun. i have played and slept and danced with bigger devils. (HB, p. 134)

She exceeds the representation to include the unfortunate people "freedom can't exist/ until the most disadvantaged are free" (HB, p. 142) without defining what freedom is or who decides who the disadvantaged are. Anyone may see herself/himself disadvantaged because of any problem they face. However, the representation includes them all, people must treat one another fairly and empathy must be encouraged.

[

you are one person  
but when you move  
an entire community  
walks through you  
- *you no nowhere alone* (HB, p. 144)





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The metamorphosis into her gynocentric self is almost complete as she asserts herself and other women that they are the powerful ones. However, she tries to generalize her base of defense again to include the blacks, coining the terms “nonblack” and “antiblack”. The terms are highly racial while Kaur tries hard to abolish racism and to defend the weaker party. She suggests that society raises people to be racists; in this case, she defends all who are not Caucasian.

by virtue of living  
in a racist world  
nonblack people are  
raised to be antiblack  
we are all taught that  
lighter is better (HB, p. 145)

Another danger taught by society is to complete all the time, a materialistic cause. However, the competition she abhors most is the one between females; females are supposed to support one another not cancel one another. Women, being the material of societal abuse for centuries, must learn to support one another as the success of one woman means that they all can achieve success at some point. Success of one woman can change how society comprehend women’s role in a family. Women can and will change that if they support one another.

women have been starved of space for so long  
when one of us finally  
makes it to the arena  
we get scared that another woman  
will take our spot  
but space does not work like that  
look at all the men in the arena getting stronger  
as their numbers multiply  
more women in the arena  
more room for all or us to rise (HB, p. 161)

Kaur seems to understand and differentiate between feminism and gynocentrism: feminism supports one abused group. It gives women the wrong kind of support as it seeks equality with men. Equality means women can endure hard working conditions and their unique physical needs would not be met, like having a maternity leave.

Another threat made to women is after they actually succeed and try to cope with a spouse. Men, or the less fortunate individuals, would unjustly criticize the successful woman abusing her verbally. She is called “opinionated”, for instance. Being powerful does not cut it. They want to make it look insignificant that what she achieved was because she was

hard to deal with and that would prevent her from living and accepting another person. Truth is she is not so. They degrade her verbally because they cannot abuse her physically anymore.

he says *you're opinionated*

as if it is an insult

to have ideas so big

he chokes on the size of them

- *never be quiet* (HB, p. 163)

This self-realization helps her deal with such arrogant low lives. She can "see" herself and cannot undo that because she finally knows what she is capable of.

i can't take my eyes off of me

now that i can see myself (HB, p. 170)

Kaur speaks of herself at the time she wrote *milk and honey* being as confident and self-conscious as she could be:

My confidence during that time [while writing *milk and honey*] was amazing... I thought that would just stay around forever and I'd always be confident and just feel beautiful and not be down on myself all the time. And then suddenly, I don't know how or why, but it dropped all over again. And I was like, what? How can I be sharing this message, but yet waking up every day and criticizing myself? And so I realized that self-love is a consistent thing that you have to work towards... It's just like everyday work and you will never have it all figured out. You just have to be kind to yourself.<sup>63</sup>

Kaur transforms the traditional confessional poetry into a pedestal on which she stands to defend the world. Her strength is femininity, the kind of femininity free of feminism. Gynocentrism grants the poet pride in herself and her kind employing her feminine features rather than being ashamed of them.

### V: Conclusion

Rupi Kaur writes with gynocentric traits, consciously or subconsciously. She believes in justice because the equality feminism has offered is overrated. Kaur develops her poems elegantly as a healing message, starting with the broken self with inherent messages and surviving to be the ultimate feminine super woman.

Kaur travels in each of her books between two extremes: stating the inherent messages of the society and her parents then moving in a quick shocking transformation to how a woman should think in order to fee free.

Emancipation for Kaur means unshackling all the unprivileged. In a world where there is no fragility, a woman would be truly free. Women,





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she believes, should help one another and help the world because they are the power that grants life, in the first place.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> McIrvin, M. (2000). Why Contemporary Poetry is not Taught in the Academy. *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 54(1), 89-99, p. 93

<sup>2</sup> Miller, A. (2019, May). *Poetry's Beyonce*. Retrieved August 2022, from Axon: Creative Explorations: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issues/9-1/poetrys-beyonc%C3%A9>

<sup>3</sup> McIrvin, 2000, p. 96

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, B. (2020). *Literature and Social Media*. London: Routledge, p. 93

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, S. (2018, August 24). *No Filter: How the nicest place online created the worst, most popular poetry*. (The Baffler) Retrieved 10 21, 2022, from The Baffler: <https://thebaffler.com/latest/instapoetry-roberts>

<sup>7</sup> Miller, 2019

<sup>8</sup> McQuillan, thesis, p.18 McQuillan, D. (2018, August). Aesthetic Scandal and Accessibility: The Subversive Simplicity of Rupi Kaur's milk and honey. Nova Scotia.

<sup>9</sup> Kaur, R. (2018, September 5). Emma Watson interviews writer/poet Rupi Kaur for her book club Our Shared Shelf. (E. Watson, Interviewer) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL2u93brqiA>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> McQuillan, 2018, p. 26

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, 2020, p. 94

<sup>13</sup> Miller, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, 2020, p. 94

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 96

<sup>16</sup> Perloff, M. (2010). *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> McIrvin, 2000, p. 89

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 96

<sup>19</sup> Miller, 2019

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, 2020, p. 93

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> McIrvin, 2000, p. 89

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 96

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 92

<sup>26</sup> Perloff, 2010, p. 13

<sup>27</sup> McIrvin, 2000, p. 95

<sup>28</sup> Young, I. M. (1985). Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics. *Women Studies*, 8(3), 173-183, p. 173

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



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- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 174
- <sup>33</sup> Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (5th ed.). West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publications, p. 275
- <sup>34</sup> Young, 1985, p. 176
- <sup>35</sup> Ginzberg, R. (1987, Autumn). Uncovering Gynocentric Science. *Hypatia*, 2(3), 89-105, p. 91
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Young, 1985, p. 176
- <sup>39</sup> Glazebrook, T. (2005, Autumn). Gynocentric Eco-Logics. *Ethics and Environment*, 10(2), 75-99, p. 87
- <sup>40</sup> McHugh, N. A. (2007). *Feminist Philosophies A-Z*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 55
- <sup>41</sup> Young, 1985, p. 176
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 177
- <sup>43</sup> interview with Emma Watson
- <sup>44</sup> Miller, 2019
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Kaur's interview with Emma Watson
- <sup>49</sup> Miller, 2019
- <sup>50</sup> Kaur, R. (2020). *home body*. Andrews McMeel Publishing. Henceforth, the book will be referred to parenthetically using the abbreviation HB with the page number of the poem.
- <sup>51</sup> Horváth, R. (2005). *"Never Asking why Build - Only Asking which Tools": Confessional Poetry and the Construction of the Self*. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, p. 61
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 10
- <sup>53</sup> Kaur's interview with Emma Watson
- <sup>54</sup> Miller, 2019
- <sup>55</sup> McQuillan, thesis, p.17-18
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.18
- <sup>57</sup> Kaur uses small letters for the titles of her books.
- <sup>58</sup> Kaur's interview with Emma Watson
- <sup>59</sup> Kaur, R. (2015). *milk and honey*. Andrews McMeel Publishing. Henceforth, the book will be referred to parenthetically using the abbreviation MH with the page number of the poem.
- <sup>60</sup> It is possible that her father travelled to work. She never states that she hated her father, nor that he was in any way her abuser.
- <sup>61</sup> Kaur's interview with Emma Watson



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<sup>62</sup> Miller, 2019

<sup>63</sup> Kaur's interview with Emma Watson

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