



Original article

Towards the Aesthetics of Instagram Poetry: Portraying Woman's Healing Process in Rupī Kaur's Selected Poems

Milad Ghazi Saeed

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, Iraq

ABSTRACT

Instagram poetry generates a legitimate marriage between plastic arts and poetic words, removing the burden of relying solely on the ear when appreciating poems. The current study bridges the gap between written poetic verses and their visual formation. It avoids separating form from content. This appears in Rupī Kaur's attempt of translating women's suffering into drawings, placed next to minimal texts. The current study aims to investigate the way the corporality of the Instapoem mirrors the intended message, where the abstract idea becomes tangible. It also explores the way Kaur depicts healing, not as a static process, but as a gradual and transformative one. Methodologically, this study adopts the qualitative method, integrating a close reading with textual and visual analysis. The study concludes that Kaur gives voice to shushed women through the rearticulation of trauma, where the Instapoem becomes not only a site of exhibiting women's wretchedness but also a choric space for their healing process.

*Correspondence author:

mielad.ghazi1103a@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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Keywords: Instagram poetry, Subaltern Women, Oppression, Spivak, Abjection

نحو جماليات شعر إنستغرام: تصوير عملية تعافي المرأة في قصائد مختارة لروبي كور

م.د. ميلاد غازي سعيد
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية – كلية الآداب – جامعة بغداد – العراق

المُستخلص

يسعى شعر إنستغرام إلى خلق ترابط حقيقي بين الفنون التشكيلية والكلمات الشعرية مُزياً بذلك العبيء المتمثل في الاعتماد كلياً على الأذن في تذوق القصائد الشعرية. تسد الدراسة الحالية الفجوة بين الأبيات الشعرية المكتوبة وتكوينها البصري، وتتجنب فصل الشكل عن المضمون. ويتجلى هذا بوضوح في محاولة الشاعرة روبي كور في تحويل معانات النساء إلى رسومات تُوضع بجوار نصوص قصيرة. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف كيفية نقل فكرة قصيدة الإنستا إلى الفضاء المادي للنص، حيث تصبح الفكرة المجردة ملموسة من خلال تشكيلها البصري. كما وتهدف الدراسة أيضاً إلى استكشاف الطريقة التي تصور بها كور الشفاء، ليس كعملية ثابتة، ولكن كعملية تدريجية وتحويلية. منهجياً، تتبنى هذه الدراسة نهجاً نوعياً يدمج القراءة المتأنيئة مع التحليل النصي والبصري للنصوص المختارة. توصلت الدراسة إلى نتائج مفادها أن الشاعرة نجحت في اخراج المرأة من خضوعها وصمتها وذلك من خلال إعادة تشكيل الصدمة، حيث يصبح النص الشعري ليس فقط مكاناً لعرض بؤس المرأة وإنما أيضاً مساحة كورالية لعملية شفائها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شعر إنستغرام، النساء المهمشات، الاضطهاد، سبيفاك، الازدراء.

Introduction

Proceeding from the fact that technology plays a significant role in all aspects of life, literature is not away from this digital influence. It transforms the literary text, particularly poetry, and reshapes its creation through the interplay between multimedia and poetic expression. It even affects the poetic taste of modern recipients in which the latter begin searching for a new type of poetry that challenges traditional literary boundaries, and is built on direct and tangible representation. This, eventually, has led to the birth of a new genre of poetry, namely Instagram poetry, that holds iconic, aesthetic, and cinematic proportions, offering an energy that emanates from the visual formation on the page. It flourishes in an age when writing has become dematerialized and shuttered into cyberspace. Tanja Grubnic (2020), in her *Nosthetics: Instagram Poetry and the Convergence of Digital Media and Literature*, affirms that Instagram poetry is “a neologism denoting a particular genre of poetry characterized by the instantaneity afforded by social media platforms like the photo and video-based app Instagram; the genre’s primary mode of dissemination” (p.146). She adds that Instagram poetry

implies a plethora of aesthetic modalities that yearn for the materiality of the poem itself to create a special artistic effect on the recipient.

In *Audioliterary Poetry Between Performance and Mediatization*, Instagram poetry is described as “a poetic and digital phenomenon which is a typical for our contemporary period” (Matter et al., 2024, p. 258), as it is the child of the digital communications revolution that people are currently living through. Rebecca Charry Roje (2023), in her *Instapoetry: Characteristics, Themes and Criticisms: A Review of Recent Scholarship*, states that Instapoetry is:

a genre of short, visually impactful poems created specifically for consumption on social media platforms. Its origins can be traced back to the early 2010s when Instagram, with its emphasis on visual content and succinct captions, became fertile ground for creative expression (p.63).

Roje (2023) adds that this platform of Instagram has the potentiality of reaching diverse audiences instantaneously with no-cost self-publishing, which typically bypasses traditional editors and publishing houses. This digital self-publishing method has become the primary means of publishing for the Instapoets. Thus, Instagram poetry allows its poets to engage in real-time conversations, expressing themselves in special ways that line up with the interconnectedness and speed of the digital world.

In order to cope with the rapid development of the digital world that firmly affects the process of conveying meaning in the text, Instagram poetry becomes a contemporary form of minimalist poetry where words and sentences are condensed, and are characterized by their conciseness, preciseness, accessibility, and rapid spread. Commenting on this, Laetitia Rimpau (2028) asserts that if speech is fast today, “words are reduced, and as a result the poems are expressed in a minimal form to the extent that the words themselves become just a sign in a new constellation of meaning” (p. 3) over the surface of the page.

However, the hallmark and the most noticeable characteristic of Instagram poetry is the employment of visual elements such as objects, drawings, symbols, colors, and paintings, taking the advantage of blackness and blankness of the page. It concentrates on the visual construction of the text, manipulating the readers' expectations and inviting readers to dwell on the canvas of the text to negotiate its meaning. In this case, Instagram poetry addresses the brain directly, appealing to its two hemispheres: the left and the right. Rudolf Arnheim (1969), in his *Visual Thinking*, asserts that there are two types of perception in art: intellectual and intuitive. While intellectual perception limits itself to language, intuitive perception concentrates on visual designs. Arnheim (1969) establishes a linkage between these two perceptions and the brain's hemispheres. That is the left hemisphere, which is responsible for processing the language itself, is linked to the intellectual perception, while the right hemisphere, which is responsible for processing the visual patterns, is linked to the intuitive perception. Several scientists have postulated that the nature of "the mental operation determines which of the brain's hemispheres will take charge. Normally, one hemisphere overrides the other, preventing or inhibiting it from functioning" (Bohn, 2011, p. 160). Yet, the virtuosity of Instagram poetry is embodied in the fact that it appeals to the two hemispheres at the same moment, perfectly integrating the intellectual experience and the intuitive one altogether, producing a complex whole, and establishing aesthetic experiences and insights that few other genres can equal.

Accordingly, the visual composition of an Instapoem is usually built on the basis of many things such as the movement of poetic lines that the poet draws on the blankness of the page, the empty spaces that are left intentionally on the page, the symbols, the dots, the graphics, the pictures, and all other things that constitute a shape which has the ability to evoke the reader's mechanism of thinking. The interrelationship between these elements achieves the organic unity responsible for the construction of the poetic text (Roje, 2023). Therefore, the visual construction signifies a technical manufacturing process framed by an artistic arrangement that engineers the word system and the consistency of the

semantic system in the text. It is also an aesthetic dress that is used to draw ideas in a creative and spontaneous manner. In accordance with, Instagram poetry achieves an equilibrium between clarity and difficulty, simplicity and complexity, idea and image, and finally directedness and suggestiveness.

1. The Representative of Instagram Poetry: Rupi Kaur

One of the leading voices in Instagram poetry is the Indian-Canadian Rupi Kaur, who was born in 1992, and is considered “Queen of the Instapoets” in 2017 and “The Writer of the Decade” in 2019 (Roje, 2023). Despite of her young age, Kaur, in her poetry, addresses many prominent social issues that are largely thought to be of no concern to younger generations such as gender disparity that still lingers in modern Western societies, social inferiority as well as discrimination that immigrants in the Western World are stereotypically associated with, and the celebration of one’s origins (Masini, 2019). Mostly, Kaur calls for the rights of women of color who have been dehumanized in the name of discrimination. She resists the male eye that objectifies the women, believing that objectification itself is “a means of ideological control” (Mahmoud & Rasheed, 2025, p. 1324). Therefore, she attempts at curing women of color psychologically and illuminating the way to achieve a full recovery.

As a Punjabi diasporic female living in Canada, Kaur describes her struggle in achieving the freedom that is not granted for brown-skinned women in the patriarchal society of Canada (Roje, 2023). She showcases the traumatic events that affect her psychologically as a female. She also dwells on the idea of resilience and how the latter goes hand-in-hand with resistance, leading to the idea of accepting one’s traumatic past and eventually generating healing. She wants to put an end to the tradition of considering the female on the mere basis of her external beauty, aiming at elucidating the fact that women, even biologically, are much more than that. For her, woman’s body is more powerful than arms and weapons. Therefore, “women’s resistance and resilience, which Kaur claims to be an intrinsic

element in the female spirit, intertwine with women's bodies, which may even act as the carriers of women's wounds and scars" (Masini, 2019, p. 53).

Accordingly, Kaur has immense literary fame through her minimalist poems, accompanied by simple drawings, and has amassed over four million followers on Instagram. After publishing several literary works exclusively online for years, Kaur has achieved commercial success with her first printed volume *Milk and Honey* in 2015 and a follow-up volume *The Sun and Her Flowers* in 2018, reaching the top of bestseller (Roje, 2023). What differentiates these two volumes is the gradual process of healing. That is, each volume represents a story with a series of events, beginning with poems depicting how a brown-skinned female is subjected to the injustices of her patriarchal society, and ending with poems depicting how this female overcomes and resists this victimization. This is certainly achieved through the use of visuals and drawings mingled with the written text, contributing to the overall experience of her literary work. It is also worth to mention that most of Kaur's Instapoems have no formal titles, offering a large space to readers to indulge deeply within the layers of the text, along with its visual formation, to figure out the hidden meaning.

2. Theoretical Background

Digging deep into the field of literary criticism, the idea of how women are dehumanized by their society are represented by several philosophers and theorists, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Julia Kristeva. The latter are selected here, as their theorization about women impeccably fit the angles of Kaur's directions in relation to the healing process of marginalized women. They both pay a great attention to the psychic healing of women. Though the ideas of Spivak and Kristeva are mostly related to the representation of women's loss, pain, and emotional estrangement, they both delve deep in the way healing encompasses the reconstruction of the self which is the core of Kaur's poetry.

In her *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak impliedly addresses voice, representation, and agency, particularly through the idea of Subaltern. The term "Subaltern" is borrowed from the politician theorist Antonio Gramsci (2004) in his discussion about the idea of Hegemony; the ruling class imposes its ideas on the lower class. Subaltern refers to a group of people who are ill-represented by society, including women, workers and poor classes. Those people are unrepresented, because they are just like shadows who do not have the power to speak or regain their rights. In her *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak deliberates the idea of how females are relegated by various authorities such as the colonial power as well as the patriarchal domination. That's why Spivak accomplishes that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (1988, p.287).

Julia Kristeva also goes along with the idea of defending women. She declares that female's body is not a thing; it is a situation to which every single entity in this world is related. It is definitely the container and producer of the existence of the entire universe. Kristeva links the maternal body of females to the concept of Chora. The latter is a Greek concept that designates the woman's womb which "appears to create something (body or meaning) from nothing" (Adams, 1992, p. 22). Nonetheless, Kristeva (1982) proclaims that women have gradually been reduced to the role of the silent Other. They are excluded from knowledge and power, and are governed by the patriarchal society that prevents women from expressing themselves or reclaiming their liberty. Moreover, Kristeva links this misery state of marginalization of women to the concept of Abjection, in which Kristeva in her *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* sets its principles.

Essentially, the word 'abject' is a state of misery or degradation that happens to human beings, because of some phenomena that threaten the self, making it unstable. It specifically deals with the borders of the body; the ego and the identity. If these boundaries are disrupted by something, they would create a kind of horror in the self, forcing it to act aggressively as a reaction to the threat whether it is personal or social (Zinato & Pes, 2014). Indeed, Kristeva (1988) considers this state as something

wicked for "it lives in the shadow and feeds on ambiguity and warping" (p. 69). She attempts to interpret this concept of abject as:

Massive, sudden emergence of uncanniness ... [that] harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do recognize as a thing. A weight of meaningless ... which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me (1988, p. 2).

Hence, Kristeva translates the inner collapse of a pathetic, humiliated female, arousing a sense of sympathy towards the suffering of women and support her own case of defending them.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

In Kaur's Instapoems, the healing process of persecuted women passes through many stages. It starts with identifying the root cause of this injustice, and uncovering the pain that leaves its imprints in the self of the oppressed. Kaur, therefore, exhibits the harsh victimization of women caused by the patriarchal society. This can be investigated in "you were so afraid" (Kaur, 2015, p. 24), where the poet literally visualizes the suffering of a female:

you were so afraid
of my voice
i decided to be
afraid of it too



What draws the reader's attention to this Instapoem is the visual formation of the text. The poet paints an image, and places it in the middle of the page. The drawing captures a female whose mouth is entirely closed by a hand. The expressions of her face show a sort of struggle and fear because of this large, dominating hand that covers her mouth and part of her nose.

Undeniably, the codes of meaning are directly sent from the image to the observers at the moment of examining the text, even before reading the poetic words, permitting them to project their own interpretations and emotions onto the image of the oppressed. Likewise, the same codes that are perceived from the image are sent from the poetic words to the receivers, in which the poet addresses the patriarchal society that prevents women from expressing themselves through the policy of silencing. Actually, letting women speak out and offering them enough space is against the norms of society. What makes the matter worse is that the speaker herself is brainwashed. She starts adopting the same fear that males have of her voice. As long as men are "afraid of [her] voice", she "decided to be/ afraid of it too". She starts believing that this act of silencing is the way towards being accepted, by her society, as a human being. This definitely leads to the idea of how external oppression is internalized, and it erodes the female's individuality and confidence. In this case, the speaker becomes a subaltern who has no power to defend her rights at all, because those who are most structurally excluded from power, as Spivak (1988) postulates, can never be heard as speaking subjects within their dominant institutions.

Thus, the body of this Instagram poem plays a significant role in delivering the intended message, where the act of silencing this marginalized woman is carried through the corporality of the text. Consequently, the abstract idea of pain becomes tangible through the perception of the eye of the visual formation which is aesthetically united with the linguistic items of poem.

In “i hear a thousand kind words about me” (Kaur, 2017, p. 62), Kaur proceeds in portraying the suffering of women through the corporality of the text:

i hear a thousand kind words about me
and it makes no difference
yet i hear one insult
and all confidence shatters
- focusing on the negative



In this Instapoem, the two activities of perception, seeing and reading, are present. Approaching the poem for the first time, the attention is drawn to an abstract portrait placed beneath the poetic text. What builds the canvas of this portrait is a group of scrambled lines that form a chaotic field of no cohesion. It has no signified to which every single line is related. This adds more to the vagueness of meaning which is structurally floating without any anchoring points. As long as the meaning of this abstract image is fluctuating as if it were drawn by someone aphasic, a supplement is required in order for the meaning to be recognized. That is, it is necessary to relate the shape to the poetic text within the poem. Hence, the aesthetic of this Instapoem is exhibited through depending not only on the visual formation but also on the written linguistic items. In this case, a collaboration should be made between the two poles; the visual and written elements in the poem.

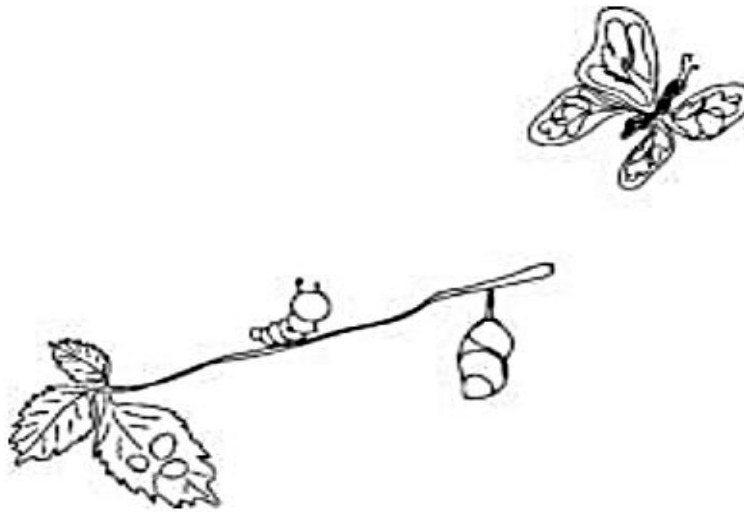
In alliance with the idea that false knowledge and dishonest representation, produced by the colonial, patriarchal society, functions as a mechanism of destruction that downgrades females (Spivak, 1988), the poetic written text reveals that the speaker is suffering from verbal violence that penetrates her self-esteem. She acknowledges that despite the fact of receiving “a thousand kind words about [her]”, it simply “makes no difference”, because “one insult” can psychologically tear her into pieces. This also goes hand-in-hand with what Kristeva (1982) says about the state of abjection which thrives on the turmoil of one’s self. The verbal violence practiced against the speaker creates a sort of horror in the self, leading to a fully breakdown of her confidence. A “one insult” she hears is capably of internally damaging and shattering her into parts, making her literally “*focusing on the negative*” aspects of her life.

Eventually, this construes the chaotic lines that are drawn in the poem. The fragmented nature of the portrait signifies the confusion, subjugation, and emotional distress the speaker experiences while in the state of abjection. Her emotions are translated and expressed in a form of tangled lines that grow in a rhizomatic way. This abstract portrait suggests that the speaker is entrapped in an oppressive system that causes her identity to be fractured. The absence of clear structure within these lines, and the fact that some of the lines are rigid while the others are fluid and erratic, signifies the tension between the imposed social norms and the speaker’s inner resistance. The latter is completely constrained by the fragile self that is shaped by the societal restraints.

Relying heavily on the aesthetic of Instagram poetry, the second stage of approaching the healing process in Kaur’s Instapoems deals with the idea of the realization and awareness of what woman is going through. In “you do not just ...” (Kaur, 2017, p.81), the speaker starts realizing that healing does not come all of a sudden, and psychological growth as well as recovery need a lot of patience. The healing process definitely needs a series of steps to be accomplished:

you do not just wake up and become the butterfly

- *growth is a process*



The poem is built on two minimal lines, followed by a drawing in the middle of the page. Kaur visually translates the meaning of “growth”, along with the process of healing, into a drawing. The latter engraves the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It is known that the act of transforming into a butterfly takes much time and effort. The caterpillar undergoes many stages before being a winged creature. This process is likened to the journey that the oppressed woman needs to go through before being fully recovered. Both cases prove that change is not something instantaneous; it requires a journey of perseverance, determination, and patience to accept the self as it is. Therefore, women “do not just wake up and become the butterfly”. This definitely goes hand-in-hand with what Kristeva (1988) announces that being conscious of what disturbs the identity and destabilize subjectivity would enable women to confront the abject statement and regard it, not as a fixed condition, but as a liminal state that can be subjugated through identifying its causes. And, in this poem, “the abject is edged” (Kristeva, 1982, p.11) the moment the speaker realizes that “*growth is a process*” and it has to do with neglecting the stations of wretchedness established by the patriarchal society.

Within this poem, the aesthetics of Instagram poetry is embodied in the moment when the image of the caterpillar collaborates with the written poetic text. Here, the hidden message is delivered to women that they have to embrace this process of growth which definitely carry them to the last step of healing process. They have to comprehend that each step is crucial and valuable, as it further contributes to the realization of their full potential. Thus, a subaltern woman has to know that she has to pass all the stages of challenges, experiences, and self-discovery, just like a butterfly that doesn't emerge fully molded overnight, in order to approach recovery and celebrate her self-confidence, strength, and self-worth.

The final step in the healing process is incarnated in the idea of accepting oneself. Kaur starts depicting a sort of psychological development, proving that if the victimized females learn how to accept themselves as they are, they will unquestionably overcome the pain that reside deep inside them. This is achieved by concentrating on their beauty, as it is evident in “we are all born ...” (Kaur, 2015, p.181):

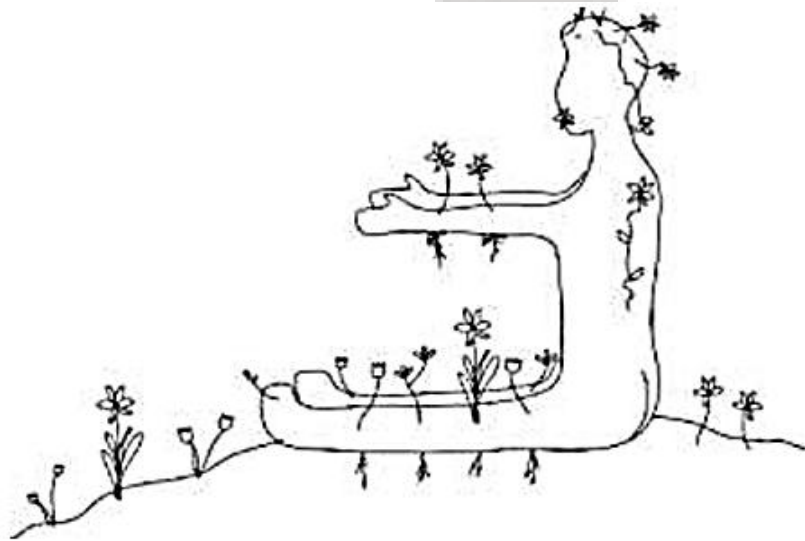


In this Instapoem, the text is literally mingled with the visual when the words are placed in the lap of a specific drawing. The latter depicts a body of a pregnant woman who seems to be touching the part where the fetus lives. This visual formation, that deepens the emotional effect of the text and creates a unique reading experience, can speak by itself. It is the embodiment of the idea of Chora, where the body of woman is the container of the whole world. It is the place where the creation of a new soul is started (Kristeva, 1982). Indeed, the codes that are sent by this drawing to the mind of the receiver is summarized by the idea that woman has to be proud of her body that carry the blossoms of creation. Concentrating on the beauty of the body would help the oppressed female in reconciling with her soul, and consequently conquer her fear and pain.

What is delivered to the receiver by this visual formation is finalized by the written text, as both complete each other. The poet writes that “we are all born/ so beautiful”, suggesting that every female is intrinsically beautiful since the moment of her birth. But, the “great tragedy” happens when the society teaches women how to diminish and change their self-perception about the concept of beauty, making them feel inadequate and unworthy. However, this context proves that there is a moment of self-realization as long as the problem, and the reason behind the suffering of women, is identified to be solved. The oppressed females start to grasp that they are gaslighted by the patriarchal society, and “being convinced” that they are ugly creatures. Consequently, the idea of empowerment stems from overcoming this negative belief. These women are encouraged throughout the text to embrace their beauty and uniqueness, creating a sort of resilience among them. Thus, the text and the visual formation aesthetically cooperate together to deliver the message that the beauty of woman should not be defined by her societal standards, because it is an innate quality.

In “it is a blessing” (Kaur, 2017, p. 87), Kaur proceeds in empowering women, contributing to their full recovery. The speaker in this Instapoem rejoices the exquisiteness of her skin color, embracing her own beauty and distinctiveness. She says:

it is a blessing
to be the color of earth
do you know how often
flowers confuse me for home



The speaker proudly states that “it is a blessing” to have a skin color that is similar to that of the earth. She announces that her brown skin color is very stunning and resplendent to the extent that “flowers confuse” her “for home”. This idea is delivered not only through the poetic written text but also through a drawing placed below the text. In this drawing, a female is sitting in the lap of nature, surrounded by many flowers. She is in a meditative position with her arms wide open. This act of opening the arms indicates the desire of embracing the new beginning of life, especially after reaching the last stage of full recovery. It also advocates nurturing and self-acceptance.

Moreover, the drawing also depicts the process of flowers sprouting from the woman’s body. They grow around every single part of her body. This stresses the idea that inner peace, beauty, and life are

springing from within. The flowers that are found around her head, exactly like a crown, symbolizes dignity, self-worth, and sovereignty over oneself. The female here is rising out of ashes, celebrating and acknowledging something that once was marginalized. Her brown skin color, that once caused her pain due to the patriarchal society that manipulates her to fake the truth of her beauty, turns into something sacred from which something flourishes. This actually embraces the idea of Chora in which the woman is the root to which everything is related (Kristeva, 1982). Thus, the subaltern woman can speak here by, as Spivak (1988) believes, neglecting all the causes of pain, and focusing on what makes her move forward with pride.

Conclusion

Depending profoundly on the potentials offered by the Instagram poetry, where the poetic texts are aesthetically united with graphic elements on the blankness of the page, Kaur accentuates the significance of confronting and accepting one's pain, rather than repressing it, to achieve a sort of reconciliation with the self. She affirms that healing process is something introspective and holistic. It begins with diagnosing the spiritual wounds, allowing oneself to feel the quantity of emotions tied to them, letting these emotions go, practicing self-love, and finally embracing growth to liberate the self from the burden of oppression. By applying Spivak and Kristeva's ideas of the subaltern and abjection, respectively, to Kaur's selected Instapoems, it becomes evident that the poet reclaims silenced women's voices. She transforms their abjection into a source of empowerment through her poignant language and visual drawings. She, in addition to speaking for the subalterns, is the subaltern speaking herself—being a Punjabi diasporic woman who was uprooted from her motherland, and transplanted into a foreign country. She thus speaks from a deliberately visible and accessible position, destabilizing assumptions of authority, authenticity, and legibility in feminist discourse to accomplish her goal of supporting the oppressed females.

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