



© Trust "Tru" Katsande on Unsplash

## **B**YPASSING GATEKEEPERS, BREAKING TABOOS AND TRANSFORMING THE LITERARY FIELD? AN EXPLORATION INTO THE DEBATE AROUND INSTAPOETRY

Theresa Spreckelsen

Instapoets do not only write poetry, they also illustrate their work, post it online and market themselves. They come with a built-in readership, which poses less of a financial risk for publishers. Rupi Kaur's work, for example, is accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations. She has not only marketed her work but also managed to build an entire brand around herself. Poets like her are not only artists but also entrepreneurs. It is a great achievement to make a name for oneself in the creative industries and to use one's platform to raise awareness of social inequalities - all the while making the practice a highly lucrative one. This article aims to show ways of engaging with the genre that transcend assessments about quality, which is a common discourse surrounding Instapoetry.

Since the release of Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* (2014) and its subsequent time of 77 weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List, its translation into roughly 25 languages and sale of 2.5 million copies worldwide, discussions of the "new genre" of Instapoetry have been surging in the media, on social media and in academic as well as professional circles. While Kaur is not the first nor the only successful Instapoet, she has received much attention globally and represents an excellent example of the issues most often raised in debates about contemporary poetry. In fact, her work has received so much attention, that the Instagram profile not rupikaur (@rupikaur\_not), satirizing her work and the entire genre, comes as no surprise. Other examples of Instapoets are Atticus (@atticuspoe), Nikita Gill (@nikita\_gill), Brian Bilston (@brian\_bilston) and Wilson Oryema (@wilson\_oryema).

Many of the poets who had their breakthrough online (via Instagram, Twitter or tumblr) are women or writers, who might not have found an entry into the literary field through traditional channels. Their work is often openly feminist and overall activist, addressing issues that have long been deemed taboo by the literary establishment. This development coincides with the general cultural and political discourse influenced, among others, by the #metoo movement which also impacted the literary market. While the poems generally carry as much meaning as traditional forms of poetry, their language is more direct, making it easier for broad audiences to resonate with them. This format is categorized under the umbrella of free verse poetry.

The writers of Instapoetry circumvent the traditional gatekeepers of the literary market, i.e. editors, literary agents and publishers, who historically have been overwhelmingly white men. A tenacious pattern, for a 2016 study revealed that 78% of people working in the publishing industry were Caucasian. Because of the medium of publication - initially Instagram - as well as the focus on themes like femininity, healing and self-discovery, the genre is regarded as overwhelmingly female. This already is a classification from the outside, representing gender stereotypes prevailing (not only) in popular culture. Because of the direct, arguably rather simple language, critics have raised the question of authenticity and cultural legitimacy when discussing Instapoetry.

MY ISSUE 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  
BIG HOOKED NOSES  
POINTING UPWARD TO THE SKY  
LIKE THEY'RE RISING  
TO THE OCCASION  
SKIN THE COLOR OF EARTH  
MY ANCESTORS PLANTED CROPS ON  
TO FEED A LINAGE OF WOMEN WITH  
THIGHS THICK AS TREE TRUNKS  
EYES LIKE ALMONDS  
DEEPLY HOODED WITH CONVICTION  
THE RIVERS OF PUNJAB  
FLOW THROUGH MY BLOODSTREAM SO  
DON'T TELL MY WOMEN  
AREN'T AS BEAUTIFUL  
AS THE ONES IN  
YOUR COUNTRY

© Rupi Kaur & Andrews McMeel Publishing, *Milk and Honey* (2015)

Interestingly, this criticism is not new in regards to art forms that are considered particularly appealing to young women – for example the negatively connoted category of "Chick lit" which is used to refer to certain kinds of woman-centred novels - and are to a significant degree also produced by young women.

Why are these cultural products overwhelmingly and homogeneously negatively connoted? This question is especially interesting with respect to the fact that Instapoetry has boosted the sales of poetry in general and women's poetry in particular. Accordingly, the genre has become less elitist and more popular with the broad public and can be seen as a gateway for an audience that might not be attracted to traditional formats of poetry. Taking into account Pierre Bourdieu's theory on "*The Field of Cultural Production*" (1993) it can be argued that these developments have changed the principle of legitimacy for poetry to a certain degree.



© Trust "Tru" Katsande on Unsplash

According to Bourdieu, there are three such principles: legitimacy awarded by fellow artists, meaning that the poetry is considered of high quality by other poets (arguably the highest principle of cultural legitimacy in artistic circles); legitimacy granted by the economic, social and political "system"; and finally, legitimacy given by the audiences, i.e. sales decide what is good. The last principle of legitimacy is often considered the lowest, regarded as culturally, and artistically less valuable. While these principles are not mutually exclusive, in practice, cultural products appealing to a broad audience are often not seen as legitimately artistic.

Thus, Instapoetry which is consumed by a broad number of people, initially through different channels, is not considered particularly artistic or creative. Even the name of the genre implies something negative, the "insta" distinguishing is from "normal" poetry. However, many publishers are oriented more along where culture, or more fittingly, the market takes them. As for the quality of this format of poetry, it is important to consider that there are different degrees of quality, like there are in all other forms of artistic production.

It implies that if one works hard one can achieve anything, regardless of outside factors. This is a common notion in contemporary global cultures and it poses many problems. In a world where pressures about being professionally successful affect people from a very young age and sayings like "no pain no gain" circulate through youth culture, this can be an additional stress factor.

Thus, I argue that the issue with Instapoetry is not its artistic or literary quality but the entire narrative constructed around it. Criticism about literary merit is problematic. Especially in the context of works by non-traditional artists, it should be challenged regarding questions of elitism, sexism and racism. Instead of paying attention to "quality", it would be much more fruitful to look into the ways in which the genre can influence young readers by making them engage further with poetry. After all, it is natural for the literary field to shift when young or new artists introduce new or alternative art forms. Additionally, the entanglement of neoliberal narratives, media practices in general and the "new genre" of Instapoetry present a compelling as well as topical research area.

© Rupi Kaur



Aside from questions around literary merit - a predominantly subjective category - another, perhaps more interesting and important line of criticism arises. The motivational content of much of Instapoetry mirrors aspects of the self-help genre, which is often criticised for its reinforcement of a neoliberal narrative. Furthermore, Kaur's path to success (and that of other Instapoets) supports a neoliberal discourse. In a neoliberal framework, especially the entry into the creative industries is left to the individual's devices and everyone is responsible for their own success. While most criticism is based on the work itself, I want to also highlight the inspirational character of these "self-made" successful poets, which is one of the strategies used to market themselves and their work.

*RUPI KAUR IS AN INDIAN-BORN CANADIAN WRITER, PERFORMER, AND KEY FIGURE IN THE WORLD OF INSTAPOETRY. SHE STUDIED RHETORIC AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO, IN ONTARIO. MUCH OF KAUR'S WORK ADDRESSES SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGE TABOOS: IN 2015 SHE POSTED IMAGES OF HERSELF, HER CLOTHING AND BEDSHEETS WITH STAINS OF MENSTRUAL BLOOD. THIS PIECE OF "VISUAL POETRY" AIMED AT DRAWING ATTENTION TO THE STIGMA SURROUNDING MENSTRUATION AND RECEIVED A LOT OF MEDIA COVERAGE.*

### About the Author:

Theresa Spreckelsen studiert an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin Großbritannienstudien im Master. Ihre Schwerpunkte umfassen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften, Popkultur, Adaptation Studies, Gender Studies, Politikwissenschaften und Mental Health Diskurse.



© Theresa Spreckelsen