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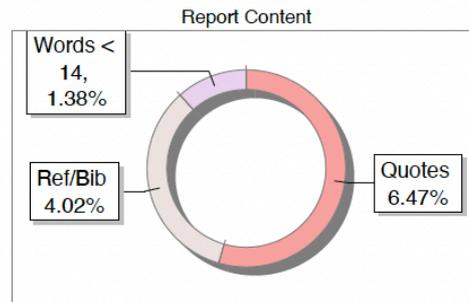
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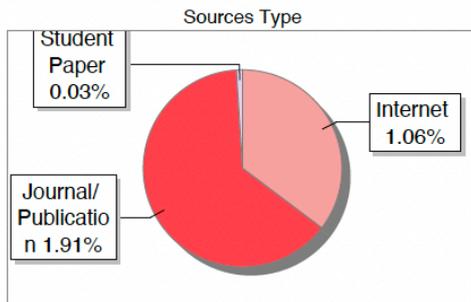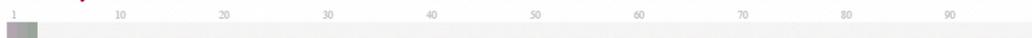**Prof Madhurita Choudhary**

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Deliberate Erasure and Liberating Silence in Blackout Poetry on Instagram

Vaimani Sarjubhai Shah

Abstract

In her essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence" (2013), Susan Sontag explains how postmodern silence comes to be realised aesthetically in literature. While Sontag's focus is on the self-silencing of the writer, the focus of the present paper is the silence found in the deliberate act of erasure in writing. Erasure/blackout poetry is 'created' by a heavy cancellation of words on an occupied printed page and the arrangement of words that remain *un*-erased then form a certain newfound poetry. Erasure forms both the material as well as thematic aspect of Erasure Poetry. Considering the politics of erasure, the paper studies the aesthetics of silence with the help of Sontag's study and reads "silence" as an attempt at liberating art. Through McLuhan's understanding of media, the paper also probes into the implications of this silence in erasure poetry on Instagram where it claims popularity because of its visual appeal. Such a reading endeavours to suggest that literature in the digital space, social media poetry being the case in point, needs to be re-read in the light of changing pedagogical paradigms today.

Keywords: Instapoetry, erasure poetry, aesthetics, silence, social media

Introduction: Silence

Silence, primarily associated with the faculty of hearing, is indicated by the absence of sound. It is understood in a spatial and temporal context in music, language, and literature. It is an absence that acknowledges the presence of an unattainable "something else." As against the conventional idea, silence is not necessarily caused only by nothingness or blank spaces.

Ihab Hassan (1970), in "Frontiers of Criticism: Metaphors of Silence," sees silence as a metaphor that makes its appearance prominent in postmodern literature. This postmodern silence (also found in Absurdist drama) arises from prolonged overdoing or repetition of a sound, word, or even an activity. Rhetorically, it can be expressed as "silence in noise" like "loneliness in crowd."

In her book, *Styles of Radical Will* (1969)[1], Susan Sontag talks about the "aesthetics of silence" in postmodern literature which, according to her, is noisy. Analogous to the structure of the present paper, Sontag conceives of *silence* as a precondition and the end result of a coherently directed speech. To her, the silence rendered by the artist "is part of a program of perceptual and cultural therapy" (Sontag, 2013, xiii). Silence here is interpreted as the artist's renunciation, a self-punishment in the "exemplary madness" where he/she withdraws from speech and words to negate his authority. Thus, the postmodern silence that Sontag engages with instances of the act of self-silencing by the artist as an exercise in a metaphorical suicide. However, the act of deliberate erasure is instead a murder of some other text and points towards a new direction in understanding silence.

Erasure as Silence

Erasure refers to the act of erasing or cancelling out chunks of the original text/artwork, which calls for its rebirth as a new text. Erasure poetics have been around for a century now, and there are different types of erasures enacted by many artists across history. Erasure poetry is a subcategory of Found poetry where the poet crosses out, covers, or paints over the letters, words, and phrases on an occupied printed page. This is done using a redaction tool like a pen, markers, or paint. It is usually executed on materials like newspapers, old books, recipe books, documents, etc. The words that remain on the page are then perceived in a chronological sequence to form new meaning and stand as autonomous poetry. The words left out are read in various sequence combinations that render a different meaning to the words every time the reader reads them. This poetry works in excision rather than addition, so the traditional ways of interpreting this art change and subvert.

Sontag's aesthetics of silence pertain to postmodern silence, while erasure entails another kind of aesthetic. So starting from the aesthetics

of silencing self, erasure moves towards the aesthetics of silencing for subversion. The role of silence in liberating a text from its author and its context, conveying non-conformity to the conventional sensibility, and creating myriad possibilities for interpretation, is common in both.

The two silences discussed so far function in taking away the written word and thus question the meaning of the text. If this meaning, as the only end of art's language, is removed, art will be freer and more liberated. Two thematic patterns of political concerns emerge here, pertaining to each of the silences.

The first condition is where the silencer and the silencee are different. This is also to recognise erasure as a violent political act. Jennifer Cheng (2016), in "Erasure Poetry: A Revealing (I)," argues on similar lines. She sees works of erasure as refractions of the original, as a rupture of language into an assembled one, and as a new work over the monumental ruins of the old original work. She also discusses power relations implicated in the act of erasure in *Zong* (2008) by Nourbese Philip. She mentions how, through this act, the oppressor functions to bend the narrative and how today, by erasing the erased narrative of the oppressed, the poets and artists are reclaiming the language (Cheng, 2016, p. 2).

The second condition is where the silencer and the silencee are the same. This is to recall Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of Jacques Derrida's concept of "sous rature," which she translates as "under erasure" in the "Translator's Preface" from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967*)*. Derrida's "writing under erasure" is materialized in the act of crossing out where what is written is inaccurate yet necessary. Spivak's argument problematises the Heideggerian term "being" as it still lurks for a possible presence, while Derrida's "trace" shows an altogether absence of a presence.

Trace is "the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Spivak, 1967, xvii). Where "meaning" is concerned, it is never fully reached and what is left in the pursuit of finding the meaning is a self-effacing "trace." In this scheme of things, one reaches an acceptance that the "meaning" or the "signified" cannot be reached. At this point, the artist is swamped in frustration, throwing off crumpled pages, reiterating Eliot, "That is not it at all. That is not what I meant at all."[2] At this point the reader is coerced into admitting that reading does not lead to an "understanding" of what is read, but to an ever-inevitable

and recurring "misunderstanding." This abstraction then comes to be represented aesthetically in literature through material erasure as a rewriting of the "misunderstood" meaning.

Poetry Under Erasure

Q. "Why is an aesthetic model necessitated here at all?"

A. "It is inaccurate but necessary."

Hegel's warning against things too familiar can be called upon here. If things are too familiar, they may be passed off as nothing peculiar. Overdoing silence through erasure is, therefore, necessary to defamiliarise to make way for inquiry. John Cage's (1961) "Lecture on Nothing," where he leaves out empty spaces between words to overdo silence in a way that readers consciously notice the space is one such example (109). Erasure is nothing but a context for the readers to acknowledge the silence often missed in writing without material erasure. Erasure voices vacancy. Erasure makes the reader read the opaque emptiness and not think of it as "nothingness." This results in another realization that even the said word is never complete—this takes away the writer's authority. Thus, the deliberate erasure as silence liberates the text.

Erasure Poetry and Instagram

A proper beginning of erasure poetics can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century. An online article, "Blacking Out the History of Blackout Erasure" (www.thehistoryofblackoutpoetry.org, n.d.), suggests Man Ray's untitled poem 'Paris, mai 1924' as a predecessor of erasure poetry. Brian McHale recalls Robert Rauschenberg's (an American painter) artwork of 1953, where he "erases a drawing by his older contemporary, the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning, and exhibits it as a work of his own" (McHale, 2005, p. 277). The last four decades of the twentieth century saw some sporadic works based on erasure and blackout poetry, which emerged as self-aware postmodernist art.

With an upsurge of digital media, the form invites newer tools and techniques to enact erasure instead of becoming obsolete. For instance, The Deletionist is a web system, a digital tool developed to enable hypertextual erasure today. Trish Hopkinson shares a guest blog post by Erin Dorney, an American poet, which lists six styles of Erasure poetry–

Cross-out, Computer, Cut-out, Covered-up, Re-typed, and Visual. These works combine visual and verbal poetry in their unique play with the spatial context on the page, opacity (created by a monochromic scheme of blackout), and the said/unsaid words. It is no surprise that the resurgence of such poetics coincides with the rise of social media—platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, and especially Instagram that provide space to post pictures and videos—which principally works on minimal content and attractive visuals. Carol Rumens uses the term "Instagrammable" to describe erasure poetry. The question is: what are these elements that remain specific to social media and more so to Instagram? How has Instagram affected or added to the form? To address these questions of form adapting to social media, some ideas from Marshal McLuhan's theory on new media in *Understanding Media* (1964) can be evoked.

Instagram is a social media platform where users can share pictures and videos publicly. Stories, posts, and reels from different profiles appear on the user's homepage, which the user scrolls through for information and entertainment. The Instagram algorithm works to showcase mostly those posts that the user may be interested in. As a result of its broad reach, many artists are drawn to post their works so they can curate and publish their art online and create a digital profile. It is different from mass media because users become participants in the production in many ways. Therefore, it is an "'all for all' arrangement" (Barichello & Carvalho, 2013, p. 239). Directly, they can produce content, while indirectly, users can influence the algorithm and determine the nature of production in the future by liking, sharing, and saving certain kinds of posts.

Barichello and Carvalho (2013) affirm that digital social media, like any new medium, brings forth the possibility of creating new languages and modes of communication. Again, a change of medium implicates a change in environment, context, and culture. What one sees and consumes on social media is short-lived and ephemeral. Within a few minutes of scrolling, one rarely remembers the content. This is not tagging social media content as frivolous or trivial, but it is how users demand it to be for a quick scan. McLuhan sees the medium as affecting the overall experience, which is why the medium becomes the message as an extension of ourselves. Experiencing media is a continuous process. Processing this experience into a comprehensible study to understand

it is like grabbing sand in a fist. The experience slips but its effects seep through and influence behaviour unbeknownst to the user. So, rather than the content, the effect of media in determining the meaning is focused on.

Social media has immensely changed how one experiences reality today, let alone the experience of digital content. The average attention span has dropped. From books to movies to YouTube videos and now to Instagram Reels, users do not prefer to read plenty of words on a page, or watch a monotonous video for a longer time. Instapoetry adapts to the requirement of the medium in being precise and powerful with eye-catching graphics. The form changes with media, and, in turn, changes readers. It is a cyclical process that reminds one of Lewis H. Lapham's (1994) introduction to the MIT Press Edition, where he summarizes the essence of McLuhan's message, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us" (xi). However, the length of poetry cannot decide the depth or the quality of the aesthetic experience one goes through when reading poetry on Instagram. What follows is the researcher's reading of a selected few Erasure/blackout poetry.[3]

The selection of blackout poetry samples on Instagram is random, where most are recently posted and belong to public profiles, not breaching privacy policy. #erasurepoetry and #blackoutpoetry are the metadata hashtags used for curating the posts.

Reading Sense in Nonsense

Austin Kleon's experiment with blackout poetry in *Newspaper Blackout* 2010 is momentous in the history of Erasure poetry. Kleon blacks out newspaper articles to create his poems. The experience one goes through reading these poems is different because the words do not flow in constant rhythmic gaps. Unforeseen spaces govern the reading, which reflects the horrors of unnerving pauses that are avoided in day-to-day conversations. These poems also make a political statement about silence that speaks loudly through logo-centric newspaper articles, as the language of reports is drained of emotions and truth is organized into facts. By silencing the unemotional, blackout gives birth to the emotions that newspaper reports try to veil. This is the silence that speaks to the reading subject.

Figure 1 *Tylor Knott Gregson's "In My Solitude" Figure 2 Cut-Up Quote by Rilke*
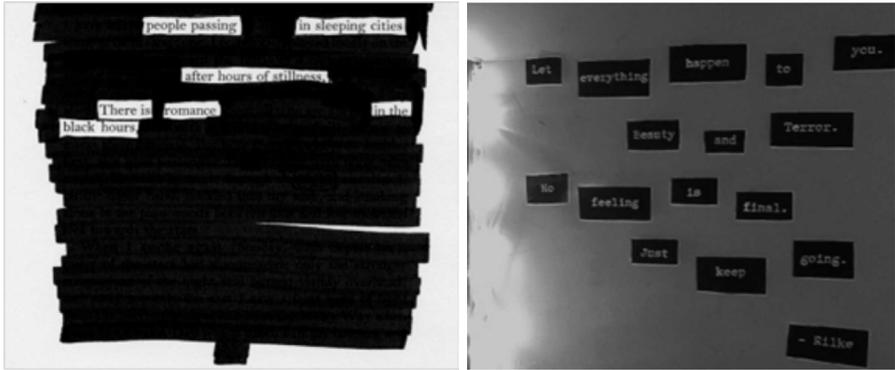
Tyler Knot Gregson's "In My Solitude" is another similar attempt at blackout poetry, posted in 2018 on Tumblr (Figure 1). The poem engages the theme of loneliness experienced in peaceful solitude in the dark hours of the night. The voice of an individual plays with the romance of the black hours. The voice fades and rises again to grasp some words to express itself, which can be seen in the spaces that are blacked out, hushed up. The page is full of words, which would have been visible during the day, but at night, the poet's voice finds a way because of his deliberate crossing out of the other voices. However, the picture is so visually occupied that the silence is instead found in words spoken, in the succinctness, conveying that the words are never enough, but silence sometimes is. Silence is the unreachable "trace" Spivak refers to.[4] Silence at the spatial level also indicates the mood of each pause, while the white space in the margins speaks its own story.[5] That the space indicates nothingness is a fallacy. One has to agree with Sontag in saying that as long as one sees, one is looking at something, and there is always something to see. If nothing, one sees one's predicted meanings fall.

For example, Disha Joshi's (2022) Instagram post (Figure 2), a cut-up quote by Rilke, is an aestheticized version of Rilke's words. The cut-up words arranged on a wall can be seen as different posts stuck on a "digital wall" of a social media platform. The words do not appear in a straight line, creating room for interpreting them in different sequences. The order of words is deliberately changed, the original being–"Let everything happen to you/Beauty, and terror/Just keep going/No feeling is final" (Rilke, 2005, pp. 59, 43). Again, cutting up and naming

the author does not go without political implications. The dismantling of a statement by the original author seems to demystify it. The gaps are silent words that can be filled up by a possible new narrative of one's own. These silent spaces, recalling Sontag, liberate the author and the artist who reworks the quote. Comparing the two figures, one finds in Figure 2 a different story in the treatment as the gaps are not blacked out. Here the white text is highlighted black. It is not only a visual juxtaposition of Figure 1, but also carries a contextual connotation to its publication on social media. This makes Instagram (with its "edit" feature) a public sphere where art is democratized and becomes free of context and meaning, which used to be the determining factor of most printed works.

Figure 3 *Natalie Napoleon's Blackout Poem*

Another blackout poetry by Natalie Napoleon (2021) assumes a "meta" theme on two levels (Figure 3). One, the image shows graphic mutilation of a text (black and red marks indicating bruises and blood) that talks primarily about violence. Second, the frame of the image poem consciously includes the markers with which the text is crossed out, and the title reads, "Markable Scenes in Streets." This exposes the process of composition. There is an eraser in the negative space by the corner that says, "Manual Backspace Button," positioned to follow a particular 'Instagram aesthetic.' On a thematic level, the eraser can be perceived

as a failure in erasure itself because erasers cannot erase ink. The act of crossing out aesthetically portrays the inaccuracy and the necessity of the text, mainly representing the world of logos. Lastly, while the words of the text are silenced, the silent space in the corner is used to create another narrative.

Kate Baer's Instagram account is yet another exciting site exploring the politics involved in erasure poetry. As Rumens (2021) observes, her poetry posts like many other Instapoems "offer such cryptic snatches of wisdom, wry quips given significance by their spotlighting" (p. 2). Baer blanks out mean messages from followers and trolls on Instagram and bends the words in such a way that suffice as witty replies turning tables. Baer remains silent by reserving words for a comeback, rather speaks by silencing. Silencing here works like pasting one narrative onto another. It becomes all the more effective in an Instagram culture where reposting the original posts regularly bends narratives to their means and branding purpose, like meme templates.

Andrew David King (2012) suggests that, in some ways, material erasure imitates the selective perceptivity of the reader (p. 1). The more readers are offered in reading, the less their sensibilities move. Erasure in this way catches the attention of the reader and provides room for a better aesthetic experience with lesser content.

Being a social media platform, Instagram demands feeds to be attractive with appealing aesthetics. A feed has to catch the users' attention while they scroll through a flood of noisy information. The need to be louder than the loudest becomes necessary to be heard. This is aptly illustrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, where glaring colours thrown across a busy page make something of a statement. For example, Richards's (2019) blackout reads, "so much richer than the typical/Hourly, daily and weekly rhythms." The rest of the text (deemed inadequate but necessary) is painted with flashy pink flowers, which seem refreshing to the eyes in a crowd of verbose feeds. The image remains within the limits of a fixed Instagram frame, not going beyond, while the entire content is not painted over, suggesting that loudness cannot eliminate other sounds once and for all. This temporary patchwork of silence works to break the monotony and, in its place, seeks to find sense in nonsense.

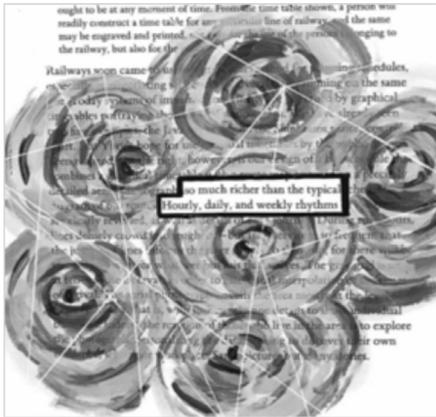**Figure 4.1** *Bekah Richards's*
Blackout Poetry

Figure 4.2 *Maria Mori's Find*
Sense in Nonsense

Conclusion: Silence

Apprehending a digital future, Ihab Hassan (1970) points out, "At a certain limit of contemporary vision, language moves toward silence" (p. 82). With its "all for all" arrangement, Instagram provides a space to break authority, which erasure means to do. The reader/user becomes an artist in their own right by negating the artist's authority, setting art free, and creating opportunities for new narratives to seep in, reverberating Sontag's (2013) vision, "What's envisaged is nothing less than the liberation of the artist from himself, of art from the particular artwork, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations" (xi).

Silence in blackout poetry on Instagram is experienced on two levels: one in the deliberate and material erasure of the blackout technique, and the second, a somewhat metaphoric and liberating silence, realised by the nature of the medium itself as the meaning-making happens in the way the reader chooses to develop in a crowded space. Therefore, the thematic chase for meaning that Spivak speaks of is accentuated with a medial intervention. The silence that Sontag contextualises in the postmodern world is here contextualized in erasure practised on a twenty-first century social media platform–Instagram.

The paper engages the blackout poetry on Instagram with the 'aesthetics' realized through sensation, perception, and experience. 'Aesthetics' is

nothing but a representation of the abstraction offered by these contexts. Such a reading opens up vistas of experiences, trying to understand that there is never an absolute experience, and so, never a truer or more sincere experience than any other. Specifically, reading Instapoetry in this manner leads one on to the path of re-reading social media poetry in the light of changing pedagogical paradigms today.

Notes

1. The paper has taken reference from the 2013 Edition published by Penguin, UK.
2. From "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot. The lines suggest the impossibility of conveying what one means. The words always strike different for different people and so misunderstanding prevails.
3. Blackout poetry is a subcategory of erasure poetry. It is often interchangeably used for Erasure poetry on Instagram. E.g., #blackoutpoetry would show results of posts with erasure poems.
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Translator's Preface" in the English translation of *Of Grammatology* notes that Heidegger's "Being" searches for a presence to replace Being, which is inaccurate yet necessary. While Derrida's "trace" hints at an absence of the presence itself.
5. Gregson's post may not be a product of an exclusive collaboration with digital tools. However, by being a picture post on Tumblr and Instagram, the white space in the Picture & #39's margins can also represent thematic space. A necessary space in the margin enhances the effect of emptiness.

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

-   **Vaimani S. Shah**

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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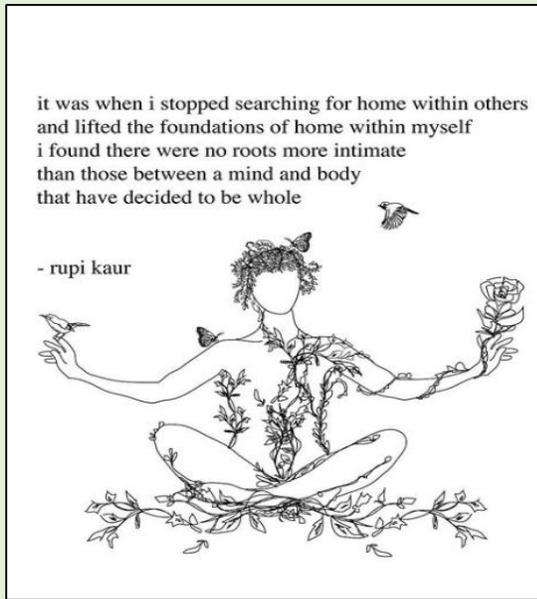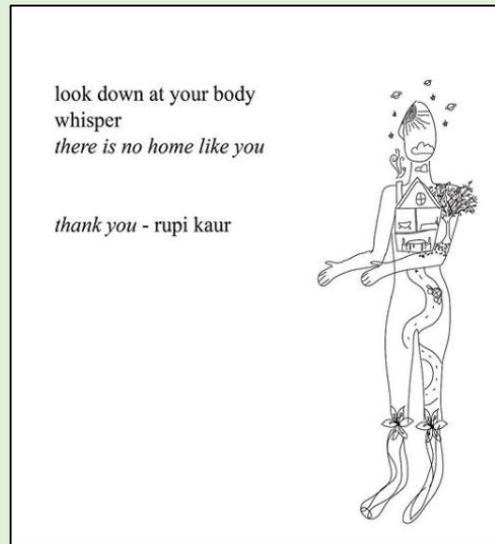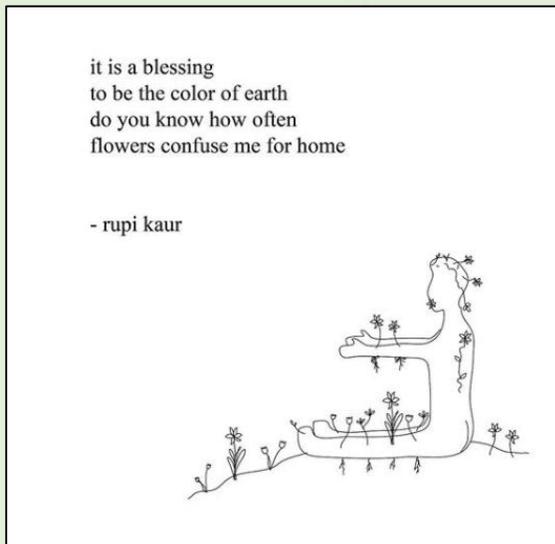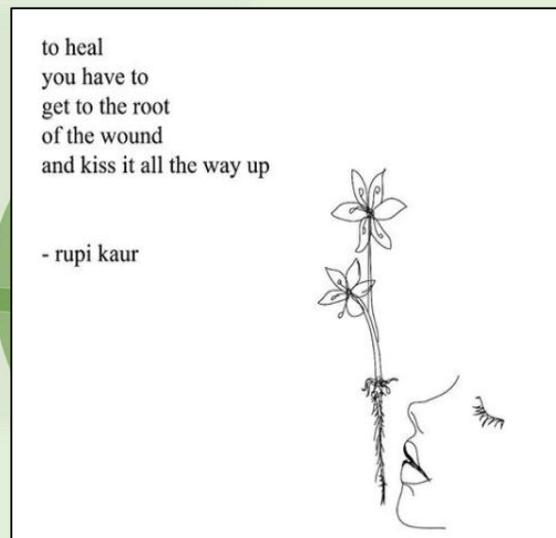
Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

Figure 1.4

i am
made of water
of course i am emotional

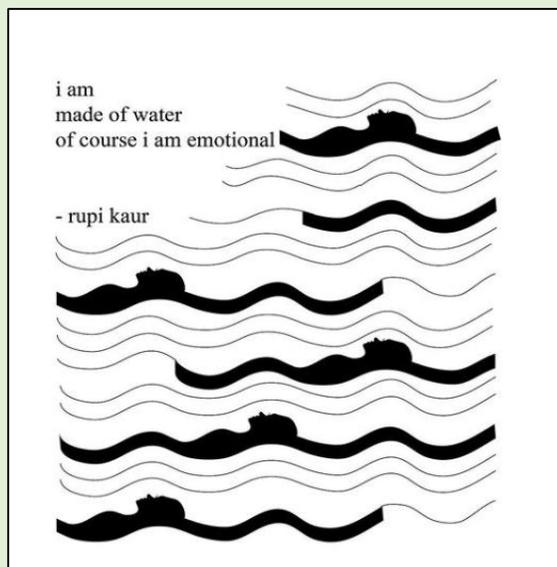- rupi kaur

Figure 1.5

fall
in love
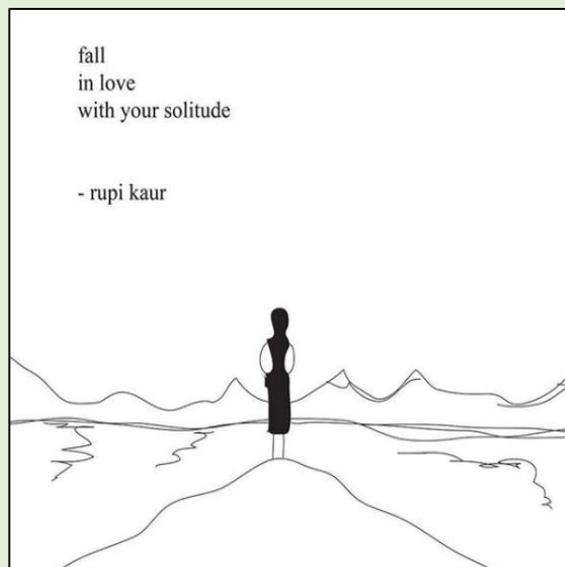with your solitude

- rupi kaur

Figure 1.6

All of the above figures belong to the first group of picture poetry by Kaur. The first group is distinct in a way that the patterns in these poems suggest an essentialist dualism. Starting with Figure 1.1 where the dichotomy between home (within) and the world (outside) is made in such a way that each excludes the other, "home within others…home within myself." Then again there is mind and body as separate categories that are to be unified, "…roots more intimate than those between mind and body…" In Figure 1.2, body is "home" itself, a comfortable space to grow whoch is pitched against the outside world. Finally the dichotomy culminates into another, that of "self" (solitude of nature) vs. "other" (outside world of manmade culture) in figure 1.6. that simply states, "fall in love with your solitutde."

While this dualism can be observed one thing that remains undeniably constant is the essential connection between woman and nature. The pictures can be seen reflecting what Jessica Daily recollects of Carolyn Merchant where she portrays the image of the goddess Natura as,

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

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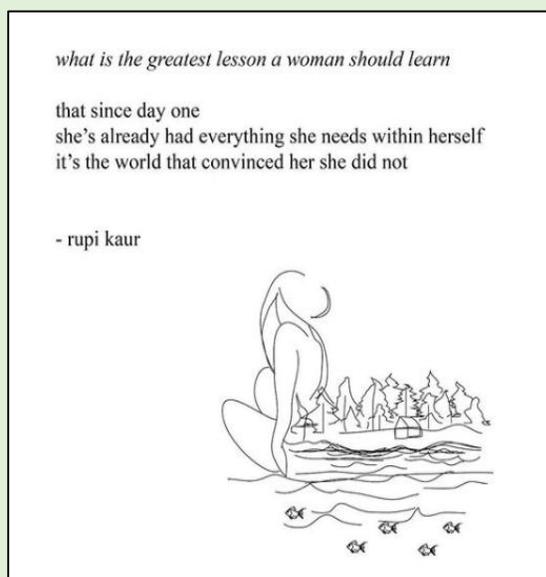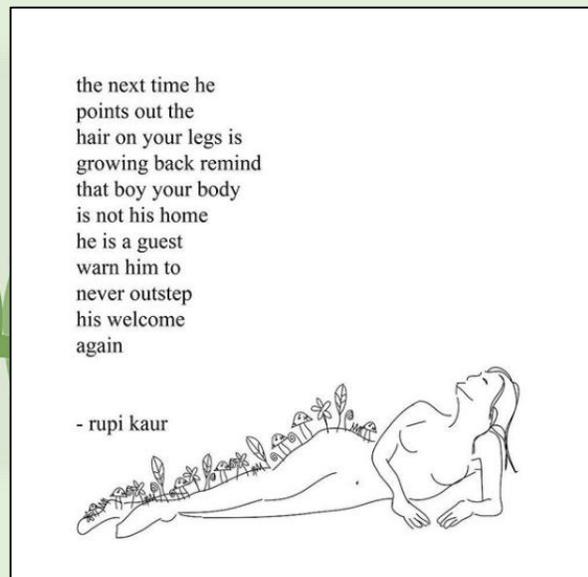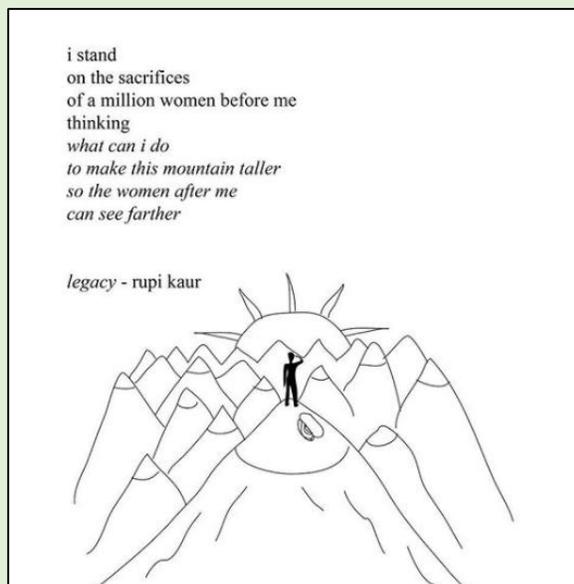

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

सत्यं शिवं सुन्दरम्

Established in 1949

Accredited 'A+' by NAAC

A Synopsis Submitted to The Departmental Research Committee
(DRC) Department of English, Faculty of Arts
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda
(In Accordance with O.Ph.D. 7.1 and 7.3)

For the Fulfilment of
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

"(Re)-Reading Poetry: The Question of Art and Aesthetic Experience in Instapoetry"

Submitted by:
Shah Vaimani Sarjubhai
PhD Research Scholar
(Registration Number: FOA/1519 dated 31-07-2020)

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07 February 2024

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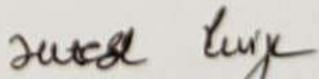The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda
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I. INTRODUCTION

Alexander Baumgarten, in *Reflections on Poetry* [1954 (1735)], used poetry as his specific instance to propose a distinction between the faculties of reason and sense perception, i.e., *aesthetics* (Baumgarten 1954, 78). He posits that sense perceptions experienced through poetry are an integral component of the cognitive process. In other words, experience of poetry serves as a means of acquiring knowledge. However, even though poetry (as art) is a cognitive piece, the insights it offers are unique since they affect the senses. So, the ideas expressed through poetry are characterised by a combination of clarity and confusion, instead of clarity and precision which is found in reason (Munro and Scruton). From this, one may conclude that poetry must be quintessentially *aesthetic*; and its experience, necessarily, an *aesthetic experience*.

If poetry is defined by its *aesthetic experience*, then what transpires when – and Terry Eagleton expresses angst in this regard – *experience* itself fades away? Does the world of "fleeting perceptions and instantly consumable events, [where] nothing stays still long enough to lay down those deep memory traces on which genuine *experience* [my italics] depends" (Eagleton 17), kill poetry by bringing an end to the *aesthetic experience*? The answer is both, yes and no; and in either case, death of poetry is certain. In the first case, one kills poetry by not experiencing the way it must be experienced, where poetry dies because its "essence" is not realised. In the second case, poetry does not die because of the absence of *experience*, rather it runs out of existence because it is abandoned altogether following the institutionalisation of its aesthetic value or its apotheosis (Brooks 686; Epstein 13). In the first case, the *art* of poetry, and in the second, the *artform* of poetry founders into a state of obsolescence.

Seemingly separate, the decline of poetry's *art* and *artform* are correlated. Since poetry places a high value on *art*, the former is seen incomplete without the latter. And because *art* is believed to be inaccessible to the masses – however, that may not be true – more and more individuals prefer other genres over poetry. Consequently, it is discernible that easily accessible popular poetry is not furnished with the sincerity of *art*; and so, it does not afford an *aesthetic experience* either. John Dewey's exposition on the practice of 'popular art' better explains the situation:

> So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set art on upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his casual recreations, at least in part, because of their aesthetic quality. The arts which today have most vitality for the

average person are the things he does not take to be arts; for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip trip and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits (Dewey 6).

Hence, if it is possible to attain *experience* in the absence of the so-called "high art," then it calls for a re-examination of the definition of *aesthetic experience*. By conceiving of art as "consummatory experience" in *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey is able to bridge the gap between *popular* and *art*. According to him, consummation of experience is the raison d'être of any art, therefore, the environment in which art is experienced must be equally considered along with its content. This facilitates a meticulous sketch of contextualised aesthetic experience.

Subsequently, the art of poetry too must be re-read by reconstituting the idea of aesthetic experience in order to mitigate the distance with which it is perceived. The present research aims to study Instapoetry in this light, since Instapoetry suggests the need to contemporise the conception of aesthetic experience. In turn, the theory of aesthetic experience as propounded by John Dewey and Arnold Berleant will help understand art and aesthetic experience in Instapoetry.

- **Instapoetry**

Instapoetry, a portmanteau created from the words "Instagram" and "poetry", is poetry in verse form encountered on Instagram. Instagram is an online photo/video-sharing social networking application that can be accessed for free using digital devices such as PCs, mobile phones, and tablets. The Instagram website itself defines the workings of the app, as it states, "People can upload *photos or videos* to our service and share them with their followers or with a *select group of friends*. They can also *view, comment and like* [my italics] posts shared by their friends on Instagram" ("Help Center"). From this, it is apparent how Instagram turns the textual art of poetry into a visual art (even though it retains text in an image form), as it is posted in the form of either a picture, a video, or a picture caption. Again, the way poetry is read and received on Instagram (through *view, comment and like*), indicates a shift in the manner of reading on digital platforms. Lastly, since poetry is instantly shareable (with friends and followers), the context of community also informs its circulation. Thus, the simple definition of Instapoetry as "poetry shared on Instagram" needs to be questioned and relocated in the context of contemporary art cultures in new media platforms.

Instapoetry can also be simplified in another way – perhaps with a wider acceptance than the first – as "Instant Poetry." In that, it becomes poetry shared on various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, presuming that the nature of reading experience on these social media is inherently "instant." In fact, the initial instances of Instapoetry can be traced back to Tumblr posts by Rupi Kaur and Lang Leav, and poetry collection (in print) called *salt* (2013) by Nayyirah Waheed. Apart from these, short poems are also quoted by users on platforms other than this, such as Pinterest and Reddit. However, the production, reception, and distribution of poetry are more so in character with the platform aesthetics of Instagram, which is why Instapoetry has become more popularly associated with Instagram.

Instapoetry first made its appearance on the platform approximately in 2012, when Robert Macias (aka r.m. drake) started sharing his work on Instagram (Hannah and Cailin Loesch 2017), finding no other suitable platform to express his artistic voice. This was followed by Rupi Kaur (in 2012) and Atticus (one of the most popular Instagram poets today), who have been sharing their work online since 2014. Soon, such poetry began to trend with an increasing readership. More and more poets, such as R. H. Sin, Lang Leav, Arch Hades, Nikita Gill, Hollie McNish, and others, came up staging their poetry on the social media platform. With each artist, using poetry as a medium of expression on the platform, the features of Instapoetry have widened in range and evolved with time.

Instapoetry, with its unique form, has now been considered one of the styles of contemporary poetry. It is brief, concrete, and visually engaging. Poetry is usually found in the form of an image with: 1. Text Image (typewritten); 2. Text with Aesthetic Setting, 3. Text with Artwork/Photograph, 4. Text with Graphics and Doodles, and 5. Simple Text with Concrete Poetry, 6. Artwork/Photograph Image with Poetry Caption, and 7. Video Poetry with Text, Music and Narration (developed after the introduction of Instagram Reels in 2020). These are mostly created keeping in mind the visual aesthetics and engagement dynamics of Instagram. And so, it can be agreed that the features mentioned above are the result of its location on Instagram as it is a social media platform whose tools carry a particular meaning and purpose for its audience different from other platforms in online and offline environments. For instance, @stvksn plays with the loop feature on the reels and creates short film poetry that plays in a continuous cycle. Moreover, the common themes of love, self-love, heartbreak, motivation, everyday life activities dominate Instapoetry, and serve as an indirect testimony of how poetry shapes itself around the medium of Instagram (as a social platform). Apart from the fact that the corpus of Instapoetry has been on a constant rise, these factors also contribute towards the

assumption that Instapoetry is a new subgenre of poetry that has a unique style in continuity with the platform.

Kathi Berens's observation about Instapoetry that it is the only E-literature that could fill a stadium in her article "E-Lit's #1 Hit" marks Instapoetry's popularity as being "well-liked by many people" (Williams 1983, 236). It is crucial to note this success for another reason, however. Not only did Instapoetry top the charts of U.S. poetry sales, it also opened up the masses to the activity of poetry reading in general, where an annual growth of 21 percent in sales of poetry books was witnessed (Rogers 2019). Of course, this included the sales of Instapoetry books, but poetry books other than that also underwent a hike in sales. This has brought about a common opinion among bloggers and netizens that Instapoetry has resulted in the rebirth of poetry as an art form.

Nevertheless, a feeling of ambivalence surrounds the status of Instapoetry as "poetry". On the one hand, Instapoetry's vogue is lauded for bringing poetry back to popularity. On the other hand, it is accused of being banal and shallow, corrupting forms of contemporary poetry (Hodgkinson 2019). In attracting more readers, it invites its harshest critics, who target it on the grounds that it lacks the revered *art* essential to poetry. Instapoetry's world is debated as being alienated from the world of traditional poetry, which discerns the former as quasi-poetic because it does not offer *aesthetic experience*.

Traditionalist criticism and aesthetic categories create two worlds in opposition to one another: one with a limited group of niche readers and artists, and the other with a popular following of untutored readers and unqualified poets. The first exists in a minority yet is superior, while the majority of the latter is considered inferior. Critiquing the "taste theories" of modern aesthetics, Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a French sociologist, argues that "taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of 'class' (using the term in a double sense to mean both a social economic category and the suggestion of a particular level of quality). For Bourdieu, the consumption of culture is 'predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social difference" (Storey 6). Thus, the existing outlook towards popular Instapoetry must be reworked by contextualising it in the art tradition and its cultural context.

In this regard, Mike Chasar's timely research on popular poetry, which explains why Instapoetry must not be discerned based on its popularity, deserves a mention. Chasar points

out that poetry, as a literary form, was never out of the compass of popular culture. He notes how various media used to popularise some works of poetry for functions other than aesthetic and literary, such as, product marketing and political propaganda (Chasar 2020, 4). Because the aesthetics of poetry change with its specific location in media and function, contextualising poetry in the medium of its dissemination aids in reading poetry as marked not only by its aesthetics but also by its economic and institutional context (Yu 2019). For instance, by bringing up the accessibility and resources provided by the platform, it becomes easier to understand the various types and themes of poetry posts on Instagram discussed above. Witnessing the number of followers of this subgenre of poetry, Instapoetry's aesthetic experience cannot be denied. This calls for a redefinition of aesthetic experience as embedded in its environment.

Therefore, to approach Instapoetry, one must account for both the paradigms converging in its definition, i.e., Instagram and poetry. The present research insists that poetry as an artform can best be assessed by a theory that derives from surveying contemporary art. Accordingly, the researcher finds Arnold Berleant's theory of Aesthetics of Engagement, influenced by John Dewey's theory of Aesthetic Experience to be apt for studying the aesthetic experience of Instapoetry. Further, suggested within these theories, the environment (or the aesthetic field) of Instapoetry – Instagram – will be analysed for a fuller picture through the lens of new media theories.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature comprises works on Instapoetry and digital poetry. Academic research as well as non-academic work found in books, theses, research papers, articles, and blogs that fall under the broad but limited literature available on the subject have been referred to. Thus far, commentaries, criticism, and research have focused on the popular as well as digital aspects of Instapoetry, of which the most significant work can be found in the following books: *Instapoetry: Digital Image Texts* (2023) by Niels Penke, *Digital Poetry* (2021) by Jeneen Naji, *Poetry Unbound* (2020) by Mike Chasar, and *Poetry's Afterlife* (2010) by Kevin Stein.

Theses such as *Instapoetry: The Influence of Instagram and the Online Community on the Shaping of a New Literary Subgenre* (2020) by Frederique Smit, *The Future of Poetry in the Digital Era: Instapoetry and Remediation* (2019) by James Morgan Rue, *The Queen and the Laureate: Social Media Poets and the Creation of Minor Literatures* (2018) by Hannah Taylor, and *The Importance of The Poetry Book in The Digital Age: How Far Digital Technology Has*

Influenced Contemporary Poetry And The Status Of The Poetry Book (2017) by Philip Monks majorly draw on the effects of social media on the poetry reading cultures.

While critical articles and research papers such as "Courage to be Dislike': Strategies and Approach of Insta-Poetry in Digital Era" (2019) by Muhammad Adek and Dadi Satria and "The Cult of the Noble Amateur" (2018) by Rebecca Watts pitch "for" and "against" Instapoetry respectively, papers like Kathi Berens's "E-Literature's #1 Hit: Is Instagram Poetry E-literature?" (2019) and Jeneen Naji's "The Posthuman Poetics of Instagram Poetry" (2018) celebrate the newness of the subgenre. "Selfie-Help: The Multimodal Appeal of Instagram Poetry" (2019) by Lili Pâquet, "'Poetry's Beyoncé': On Rupi Kaur and the Commodifying Effects of Instapoetics" (2019) by Alyson Miller, and "Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene" (2017) by Aarthi Vadde discuss the impact of distributive channels of Instagram as a medium of poetry.

- **Research Gap**

When the discussions on Instapoetry originate by comparing either its formalistic features or its content, the verdict of its quality pans out by labelling it as either "good" or "bad", "fit" or "unfit" as poetry. Some of these arguments also centre around the popular status of Instapoetry, which leads to assessing its value for the sake of culture. This results in an impasse where one must decide what kind of change such poetry is bringing to the culture, ultimately directing the opinions into binary categories of "high" and "low". Such an approach bypasses the consideration of the audience's agency and role in choosing to read a particular piece of art or literature on an online platform like Instagram. These commentaries also overlook the relationship between audience's aesthetic experience and their agentic participation. Here, since reading is governed by the engagement logic of the platform, the grounds of experience are radically diverse from the traditional mode of experience. This makes a direct comparison between the two inaccurate. So, a broader outlook has to be adopted based on the purpose of poetry on the platform – an outlook that allows for not one but many possibilities to appreciate Instapoetry.

Research on the impact of media platforms on poetry hints at the cultural change brought about by social media. Here, Instapoetry receives attention only because it is considered a significant artefact for registering the evolution of technology and, by extension, culture. Although it appreciates the presence of Instapoetry, such an approach is primarily concerned with exploring culture through poetry. Kathi Berens, for example, views the algorithm affecting Instapoetry's

reach as something that helps one read the reader (2019). James Rue embarks on a journey to read Instapoetry as "a social phenomenon rather than a cultural one" (Rue 1). He correctly argues that analysing Instapoetry requires both media and cultural context. But, in the process, he also attempts to find "worth" in Instapoetry. This results into the creation of hierarchies within Instapoetry. Rue concludes by asserting cultural significance without examining aesthetics, thereby separating aesthetics from cultural discourse.

Hence, to arrive at a balanced position on the aesthetics of Instapoetry (since exact and all-determining position cannot be achieved), the hierarchies built on this binary understanding of aesthetics and culture must be problematised. For this, poetry has to appropriated for the overall (yet not complete) experience it affords, not leaning towards either 'pop culture utopia' or 'overinterpretation'.

III. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The following aims have been set down, keeping in mind the research gap identified in the previous section:

i. To contextualise the practice of reading Instapoetry amidst the debates around value judgments on the art of poetry.

ii. To assess the available aesthetic frameworks for studying contemporary artforms in new media and adopt an appropriate framework to study Instapoetry.

iii. To understand the ways in which social media platforms, especially Instagram, work and to discern the affordances of the platform.

iv. To acknowledge the ingredients introduced by the participatory culture of Instagram and study their effect on the overall experience of poetry on the new media platform.

v. To understand the roles of reader, poet, and poem in an online social media environment.

vi. To derive from aesthetic theories, the various stages of aesthetic experience and demonstrate that Instapoetry may not yield an experience that is descriptively elaborate, but the experience cannot be misconceived as being nonreflective, shallow, and insignificant.

The central objective of the present study is to communicate the significance of Instapoetry, not for the sake of culture but to determine a major shift in the way we experience art (online

as well as offline). Consequently, it is directed towards examining newer ways in which the aesthetic outlook can be attuned to the existing state of art.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions that the study concerns itself with to reach a tenable stance on Instapoetry are:

i. What can "(re)-reading poetry" mean in the particular case of Instapoetry?

ii. Can Instapoetry experience be enhanced by aptly working with its aesthetic parameters, without implicating a stipulated formal structure to it?

iii. What happens to Instapoetry when it is read in print; and all the same, what happens to originally printed poetry when it is shared on Instagram?

iv. What effect does Instapoetry have on conventional poetry that exists in print form?

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To be able to answer these question, the current study employs a mixed methods approach, using multiple methods to produce reliable results. In order to provide a more thorough grasp of the issue, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied. Under the mixed methods approach, a "convergent mixed method" design as suggested by John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018) has been used. Thus, quantitative data and qualitative data have been collected independent of each other. Their analysis is carried out separately, results of which then converge in the overall analysis of the experience. Again, these are embedded within theoretical frameworks that guide the study – Aesthetics and New Media Studies. On the one hand, the discipline of Aesthetics is necessitated as a lens to look at Instapoetry and inquire about its status as an artform. On the other hand, New Media Studies as a framework is also indispensable, as art on social media undergoes some fundamental shifts that can only be recorded accurately if the platform specificities are taken into consideration. Quantitative data analysis is undertaken following Donal J. Treiman (2018), while qualitative data is analysed based on the various approaches to analysis suggested by Alan Bryman and Robert Burgess's (2002).

The thesis proposes to depart from the traditional criticism applied in analysing Instapoetry, and it does so by suggesting that the aesthetic lens on which this criticism relies have been

wanting in contemporising art. The primary aim of this research, therefore, is to identify a theoretical approach that can minutely study the subject matter under discussion. For this, the thesis turns to John Dewey's foundational work in the field of aesthetics that was influenced by his pragmatism. Pragmatism is a school of Philosophy that is "based on the principle that the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas, policies, and proposals are the criteria of their merit. It stresses the priority of action over doctrine, of experience over fixed principles, and it holds that ideas borrow their meanings from their consequences and their truths from their verification" (Rosenthal and Thayer 2017). Thus, Dewey's pragmatist approach towards aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1934) makes discrimination and hierarchy underpinning the consumption of traditional poetry and Instapoetry questionable. He argues that "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience" (Dewey 1), and aesthetic experience must be examined in its contextual environment – the aesthetic field.

The composition of this aesthetic field is discussed in further detail by Arnold Berleant (1994), as he understands aesthetic experience as an "engagement" with art which necessitates the consideration of the components of the aesthetic field – material resources, technology, socio-cultural factors, psychological factors, artist, audience, performer, and art. The digital aspect of the concerned aesthetic field of Instagram, is explored using some new media theories like remediation, convergence culture, participatory culture. These theories suggest that, the shift from print to digital not only changes the work of art but also the entities involved in creating and experiencing the work. However, to closely examine these shifting roles of artist, audience, and art, this research is also supported by the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, before making any final conclusions based on the said theories.

Quantitative data consists of information related to themes and types of poetry posts from 115 poetry profiles (all "Public") on Instagram; engagement received on these posts in terms of *likes* and *comments* are also taken into account, where "type of poetry profile", "post type", and "themes" are independent variables and nature of engagement is the dependent variable. These variables are partly derived from researcher's personal experience of poetry on the platform and partly from the available literature (mentioned in ROL) on the subject. The data is collected on the basis of naturalistic observation method, relying on Instantaneous sampling within a targeted timespan of two years (June 2021 to June 2023). The selection of 115 samples is done on the basis of cluster sampling method, where the samples are randomly selected through probability sampling and are repicked according to the number of followers on the profile (so that only popular profiles do not crowd up the sample, making the analysis

erroneous). This data is analysed using MS Excel tools and SPSS to comprehend the experience of poetry on Instagram. The analysis also provides a larger picture of poetry-reading behaviour. The result of this analysis is supported by the interview data, which also provides a closer view of the experience on an individual reader/poet level.

Qualitative data is collected through semi-structured interviews conducted through email. Since the researcher required a detailed and introspective response from the interviewees, asynchronous mode of interview has been chosen for the task. As mentioned above, the interviews are not influenced or embedded within the results of quantitative data. The questions formed for the interview are independent and are based on the researcher's experience as a reader of Instapoetry. A total of thirty-six participants are selected, among which twenty nine are readers of Instapoetry and digital literature and seven are poets on Instagram. Sample selection of readers is done on the criteria of availability; while the decision on the selection of poets is based on the types of profiles and number of followers, where seven poets represent each type of profile (personal, strictly artistic, curative, and so on) and have a wide range of following (from 500 followers to 50k). The age range of the interviewees is between 18 to 30, as statistical data suggests that persons between this age range form the highest number of Instagram users. Further, the data is processed through different types of coding (open, thematic, and analytic). The results that closely capture (on individual level) the manner in which Instapoetry is engaged with are then merged with quantitative data results and comprehensively presented to attain a coherent picture of aesthetic experience of Instapoetry.

These are the main methods that are employed in the study. However, besides this, close reading is also used for a formalistic analysis of selected Instapoetry and traditional poetry to compare and investigate the similarities and differences between the two.

VI. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The current study solely considers poetry profiles that were browsed and curated throughout a two-year period, from June 2021 to June 2023, using the Instagram hashtags #instagrampoetry, #instapoem, #instapoetry, #poetry, and #poem. Most of these profiles are popular and have over 10,000 followers. This is so because the metadata search results work in accordance with the Instagram algorithm, which favours posts with maximum engagement at the moment of the searching exercise. However, effort has been made to curate those profiles with fewer followers if they add to the variety of types of Instapoetry. Again, different profile types have been chosen

for the study, so the overall analysis is not biased towards a small majority of poetry profile types.

The only limitation of the quantitative data analysis is that the Engagement ratio (which counts the number of "likes" and "comments" to the number of followers) only calculates an average of engagement received on each post on the profile. It is so problematic for two reasons: 1. Not all posts receive equal attention from the audience, and 2. since the number of followers and likes on Instagram is not stable and can be manipulated, the engagement ratio may be highly skewed or different on some profiles. Comments, too, nowadays can be generated by fake profiles using bot software. Furthermore, the reading and engagement behaviour of an online audience cannot always be predicted in one direction. It can be recorded only up to a certain extent, to realise which, interviews have been conducted.

The scope of this research is limited to studying the poets and readers based out of the Indian subcontinent. More or less, it is assumed that since the online audience is already globalised, their online behaviours share a common logic that informs the platform. The interview samples, for this reason, are selected on convenience basis. The selected samples for interviews may be helpful in gauging the situation on a larger scale as they provide a preliminary understanding; however, quantifying aesthetic experience in poetry is a challenging task, especially considering that the researcher has only employed a limited number of aesthetic frameworks to evaluate Instapoetry. Therefore, the exercise may possess inherent constraints.

VII. CHAPTER DIVISION AND SUMMARY

The thesis is divided into four core chapters excluding an introduction and a conclusion. Following is a short summary of each section:

- **Introduction**

The introductory section of the thesis introduces the term Instapoetry. It then traces the origins of Instapoetry and its history on Instagram. It discusses the various standpoints and views on the subject, which also structures the review of literature, wherein Instapoetry is seen as a style, a subgenre, and popular poetry. Identifying the research gap follows the review of the literature, which is then followed by a discussion on the research methodology to be adopted for the research.

- **Chapter 1**

The first chapter focuses on tracing the evolution of Instapoetry as a subgenre, for which it also uses the history of the platform. It also disclaims the opinion that all Instapoetry is the same by demonstrating the different types of Instapoetry that have come up corresponding with the upgrades of the platform. In the second section of the first chapter, a formalistic analysis and comparison is made between the different forms of traditional poetry and various forms of Instapoetry to see if there are any major differences between the two. It attempts to answer the question of sematic complexity and intensity that predominates most criticism of Instapoetry and calls for a reassessment of the aesthetics of Instapoetry.

- **Chapter 2**

The second chapter of the thesis engages with a discussion on Aesthetics to reach the most appropriate aesthetic framework for studying art on Instagram. The discourse meanders across the theories of modern aesthetics and postmodern aesthetic philosophy. The theory of aesthetic experience by John Dewey, principally appearing in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), and the theory of aesthetic engagement by Arnold Berleant in his book *Art and Engagement* (1991) are determined to be the best suitable for the investigation of Instapoetry as an artform.

- **Chapter 3**

The third chapter is divided into three sections, where the first section introduces the reader to the concepts of artistic medium and aesthetic medium and the difference between them. In the same section, the researcher establishes a connection between aesthetic medium and aesthetic field as discussed by John Dewey and Arnold Berleant mentioned in the previous chapter. The second and the third section use the framework of new media studies to establish the prerequisites of platform attributes to understand new media platforms (with a special focus on social media) and eventually the aesthetic field of Instagram. The broad theories that inform the analysis of art in new media are: Marshal McLuhan's "Medium as Message" in *Understanding Media* (1964), Henry Jenkins's "Participatory Cultures" in *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (2015), "Remediation" as explained by Bolter and Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000). Further assistance in understanding Instagram as a medium has been taken from the following works: *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020) by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin; *Digital Life on Instagram* (2018) by Elisa Serafinelli; and *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetic* (2021) by Kylie Budge and Lachlan MacDowall

- **Chapter 4**

This chapter is a culmination of the theories discussed in the third chapter. Combined with an understanding of media specificities on Instagram, this chapter attempts to track the shifts in the roles of three components of poetry: poet, reader, and poetry. By intersecting the results of qualitative data (from 115 Instagram poetry profiles) and quantitative data (comprising interview response of twenty-nine readers and seven poets) with the theoretical frames, the researcher has attempted to present the factors governing poetry reading experience on Instagram and how that changes the definition of poetry itself. Thus, the main objective of this research is achieved through the fourth chapter, which is also the final submission towards the central thesis: any poetry on Instagram, may it be that which is specifically composed and designed for the platform or that which is originally printed but posted on the platform, is Instapoetry.

- **Conclusion**

In the conclusion, it becomes clear how Instapoetry is experienced the way it is because it appears so on the platform and that there are no radical differences between the experience of traditional poetry that appears on the platform and Instapoetry posted by the popular poets. The concluding section suggests the ways in which the experience of art on Instagram, especially poetry, can be improved and how artforms can be worked with the affordances of the platform to evince as much enhanced engagement as possible for refined experiences. Finally, it also takes up some critical questions on the nature of participatory culture and democratic involvement of Instapoetry readers vis-à-vis the accusations on the consequences of declining reading culture.

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