

Rupi Kaur: Women's Writing Tradition in Translation

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present a brief background of the author, Rupi Kaur, and her artistic work, focusing in her poetry. The book approached is *Honey and Milk*, and it will be analysed through the feminist criticism theory of Elaine Showalter in order to discuss the poetry of Kaur in the context of the third phase of women's writing. To achieve that, this paper will discuss some selected poetry and some details about the translation of the book to the Portuguese Brazilian language and the rewriting entailed in the process of translation.

KEYWORDS

Women's writing. Feminist criticism. Translating poetry. Female tradition. Portuguese translation.

Introduction

The work that will be approached in this paper is *Milk and honey* (2014), a collection of poetry, prose texts and illustrations made by Rupi Kaur divided into four sections: the hurting, the loving, the breaking, the healing. These sections not only organize the themes but point to the cycles that women live – such as menstruation. The life of the women Kaur wants to portray has not only a single low point and a happy ending; rather, she portrays it as a life of pain and love, wounds and healings, which are followed by subsequent cycles, never ending.

Literature Review

Rupi Kaur is a writer, illustrator, photographer and performer of her own poetry. She was born in Punjabi, India, in 1992, and her family immigrated to Toronto, Canada, when she was four years old. Kaur studied rhetoric and professional writing at the University of Waterloo, also in Canada. The first time Kaur called attention as an artist was through a photographic series about menstruation and its taboo – which was censored by Instagram twice, and generated a lot of shares of her Facebook post about this event. Her first book, *Milk and honey*, released in 2014, stayed for 25 weeks on the *The New York Times* Best Seller list. Her second book, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, was published in 2017 and reached equal success.

For this paper will be used to analyse the tradition of women writer the theory of Elaine Showalter (1994, 1997), that presents the three phases of feminine writing: first phase (1840 to 1880), described as a feminine phase, imitation of men's writing, adoption of male names to publish and no support between the female authors; second phase (1880 to 1920), called by Showalter as a feminist phase, marked by protest, advocacy for minority and sisterhood; and the third phase – the one this work will relate to the writing of Rupi Kaur – (1920 until the present), marked mainly by self-discovery and women experience. Also, to talk about woman's tradition of writing this work will call the text of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000), that writes about the anxiety of authorship that women has and how different it is for male authorship and how it knits the matrilineage. And

finally, about translation and language, this paper will also bring the discussion of Susan Bassnet (1988) about linguistic and cultural untranslatability in poetry, and the choices of the translator in poetry translation discussed by Andre Lefevere (1975).

Methodology

This paper is a case study of the book *Milk and Honey* (2014) of Rupi Kaur, in which the structure of the book itself and its poems are the material to be analysed. Therefore, we will conduct an exploration of Kaur's work and the translation into the Portuguese language with the objective of present a perspective of the tradition of women's writing and the complexity of translating poetry. We will also focus on a qualitative approach, focusing on the most significant aspects of a few of Kaur's poems.

Results and Discussion

The book *Milk and Honey* (2014) can be understood as belonging to the third phase of women's writing, according to Elaine Showalter (1997), and from now on this essay will point out these relations. One of the subjects dealt with by Showalter is the understanding of women's ownership over writing, and the use of it for self-expression, as in the following examples:

he asks me what i do
i tell him i work for a small company
that makes packaging for—
he stops me midsentence
no not what you do to pay the bills
what drives you crazy
what keeps you up at night

i tell him i write
(KAUR, 2014, p. 57)

my heartbeat quickens at
the thought of birthing poems
which is why i will never stop
opening myself up to conceive them
the lovemaking
to the words is so erotic
i am either in love
or in lust with
the writing
or both
(KAUR, 2014, p. 194)

As Showalter affirms, "Feminist criticism, unlike other movements that seeks to empty the self into scientific production, imposed the authority of experience." (Showalter, 1994. p. 25). That is why it is possible to point out throughout the work, in the poetry of Kaur, the theme of women's experience. And here we do not talk just about menstruation, that's also part of women's lives, but also about abusive relationships and censorship (from others, not self-censorship) women – still – suffer.

The relationship between mother and daughter, according to Showalter (1997), is one common thing to be found in the third phase of women's writing; but what about the relationship between daughter and father? And other male relatives? In the section "the hurting", five poems approach the relationship between the speaker with the mother and the father, three poems about the relationship father and daughter, but just one about the relationship between mother and daughter. That shows how the feminist movement's agenda, which now discusses toxic masculinity and how men can be agents of change in society, comes to the literature written by women anticipating what Showalter's criticism, written around the 1970's, had not yet addressed.

The female speaker addresses issues around childhood, such as the first kiss, but not in a happy and nostalgic way, but with pain and the feeling of violation of herself and her body, as in the following paragraph, taken from one of the poems of the first section:

the first boy that kissed me
held my shoulders down
like the handlebars of
the first bicycle
he ever rode
i was five
(Kaur, 2014, p. 8)

The poem goes on to bring out that this violent relationship of boy/man to girl/woman was also seen by the boy in his own house:

he had the smell of
starvation on his lips
which he picked up from
his father feasting on his mother at 4 a.m.
(Kaur, 2014, p. 8)

And so, at the age of five, the female speaker learned things about her body. And understood what society says about what it is to be a woman, and the pain of self-emptying that women share in the face of the violation of their bodies – even at different ages:

he was the first boy
to teach me my body was
for giving to those that wanted
that i should feel anything less than whole
and my god
did i feel as empty
as his mother at 4:25 a.m.
(Kaur, 2014, p. 8)

So, the author talks about “the hurting” in broken family relationships, child abuse, emotional traumas, rape and objectification of the female body. Following the third feminist wave and all the proposals of deconstruction of a toxic masculinity, it is understandable that the writer also portrayed the relationship with paternity with a tone of criticism. This can be seen in the following poem:

every time you
tell your daughter
you yell at her
out of love
you teach her to confuse
anger with kindness
which seems like a good idea
till she grows up to
trust men who hurt her
cause they look so much
like you

- to fathers with daughters
(KAUR, 2014, p. 8)

Already in the second section, "the loving", the author approaches resignifications of sex and the feminine body. Showalter (1994) believes that it is more appropriate to not focus on the word itself but on the ideological and cultural aspects of the adopted lexical field. If in the first section the body was an object of attack and other's use as a pit stop, in the second section she approaches healthier relationships, and shows sex as something also desired by women, and even shows sex as synonymous of

love, of sharing, instead of abuse, invasion and emptying. After all, according to Showalter, every feminist critique somehow seeks a new vision by challenging the current standards of concepts already accepted in society (Showalter, 1994).

the very thought of you
has my legs spread apart
like an easel with a canvas
begging for art
(Kaur, 2014, p. 52)

In the third section, "the breaking", the low point of the wave reappears, with poems and texts in prose pointing to the end of relationship. The reasons are not always clear and do not have an order or division. Sometimes the fault is on the speaker for the breaking, sometimes the fault is on the man. But it is pointed out that for many poems the relationship was not good once the man was not good for her because of his abusive behaviour, did not truly love her or because he was just using her. As in the excerpt from the following poem:

he only whispers i love you
as he slips his hands
down the waistband
of your pants
(Kaur, 2014, p. 80)

But there are also poems in which the female speaker is not good for the partner, the one from whom the other should move away. These are shorter and less detailed, as in the section below:

more than anything
i want to save you
from myself
(Kaur, 2014, p. 84)

As seen here, as well:

the abused
and the
abuser

-i have been both
(Kaur, 2014, p. 105)

It is also important to point out that the person who writes about this abandoned woman is an immigrant woman, one who carries that mark on her body. As black feminism has already affirmed, other feminist movements of immigrants have also brought up racism in relationships, where many women of colour are seen only as someone to have sex with and not as someone to relate to in a serious way. Showalter says that the third phase has a lot more hybrid and multiracial background. And it is no longer restricted to the social and domestic, but has a strong political engagement (Showalter, 1994).

The question of colour and abandonment is not clear in the poems, but it is a relevant issue, since it is understandable that, however much an abandonment may be narrated by all women, it is understood that this subject has a different approach for women of colour (may them be black, or from another ethnicity, and also immigrant women – as punctuated only in a poem, but in the last section, on women of colour.

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

- women of colour
(Kaur, 2014, p. 164)

This "i" in the poems moves between "i am" and "i was", which also refers to the discussion of identity of which Showalter speaks. Many of these elements relate to elements of nature, or elements of the ordinary, transmuted into extraordinary. Water is no longer just the water one has at any moment, but it is something necessary; something that kills thirst, but something that also has the power to destroy. The same goes for the relation with other elements of nature (Kaur, 2014).

All these movements return to the questions that compose a woman as woman, the struggle with these things, and the re-signification of many elements that are part of identity are also part of the third phase of women's writing (Showalter, 1997). And in this, the body is closely linked to identity, and the way one sees their own body and the body of other women. Showalter further argues that when feminist critique is only concerned with confronting theories and interpretations based on male experiences, it becomes subordinate to it, delaying its own theoretical issues centred on women (Showalter, 1994). And that is why it is important to have a critique that walks with the artistic women's production, and also with the feminist agenda, understanding the transversally of it.

Such points are made especially relevant in the context of translation. As Susan Bassnett (1988) points out, there are two types of untranslatability in poetry: linguistic and cultural. The distance between Portuguese and English is felt in the first category, especially regarding the word order in both languages, a matter of even greater significance when it comes to short verses of intense meaning.

The second level of untranslatability is relevant not only in terms of cultural differences between Canada and Brazil, but also in each country's perception of the feminine and of feminism.

In this context, it is worth to highlight some issues related to the translation in the Brazilian edition, made by Ana Guadalupe, through the publishing company Planeta do Brasil, that can even override elements that Showalter points out as characteristics necessary for a work or an author to fit in the third phase of women's writing. As it is possible to see in the following poem and translation to Brazilian Portuguese version below:

did you think i was a city	será que você pensou que eu fosse uma cidade
big enough for a weekend getaway	grande o suficiente pra passar o feriado
i am the town surrounding it	eu sou a cidadezinha ao redor dela
the one you've never heard of	aquela que você talvez não conheça
but always pass through	mas sempre atravessa
there are no neon lights here	aqui não tem luz de neon
no skyscrapers or statues	nem arranha-céu ou estátua
but there is thunder	mas não vai faltar trovoadas mas não vai faltar trovoadas
for i make bridges tremble	porque eu deixo as pontes trêmulas
i am not street meat i am homemade jam	eu não sou carne de vaca sou geleia feita em casa
thick enough to cut the sweetest	firme o bastante pra cortar a coisa mais
thing your lips will touch	doce que sua boca vai tocar que você ia corar

i am not police sirens	eu não sou a sirene da polícia porque eu ia ficar tão gata
i am the crackle of a fireplace	eu sou o estalo da lareira
i'd burn you and you still	eu te queimaria e mesmo assim
couldn't take your eyes off me	you não tiraria os olhos de mim
cause i'd look so beautiful doing it	porque eu ia ficar tão gata
you'd blush	que você ia corar
i am not a hotel room i am home	eu não sou um quarto de hotel eu sou a sala de casa
i am not the whiskey you want	eu não sou o whisky que você quer
i am the water you need	eu sou a água que é necessária
don't come here with expectations	então não venha com expectativas
and try to make a vacation out of me	e tente me transformar numa viagem de férias
(Kaur, 2014, p. 91)	(Kaur, 2017, p. 115)

In this poem it is possible to note the "i" in the lower case, discussed earlier, as well as the movement of affirmation and reflection of identity from ordinary elements potentiated as something extraordinary, such as homemade jam, the crackle of the fireplace and water. While there is also the denial of other elements such as street meat, police sirens, hotel room, and whiskey as a form to point out what she is not.

The first thing related to the translation is to highlight the fact that the translator did not maintain the plural in "skyscrapers or statues" in the Portuguese version. In the original English version we find "but there is thunder / for I make bridges tremble", whereas in Brazilian Portuguese the translator opted for "mas não vai faltar trovoadas / porque eu deixo as pontes trêmulas", where "trêmulas" says more about weakness, so it seems lacking a relation with the strength of thunder, while it would be more appropriate "eu faço as pontes tremer."

but there is thunder	mas não vai faltar trovoadas mas não vai faltar trovoadas
for i make bridges tremble	porque eu deixo as pontes trêmulas

In "street meat", "carne de vaca" is not a counterpoint to homemade jam, since "street meat" is an expression used to refer to street food, such as hot dogs. "Street meat" can also be a deprecating expression in English, meaning a meat with low quality, or in Portuguese "carne de segunda", that can be transposed as a superficial relationship – in opposition to something (a sweet of good quality) that one can just have at a home. In this way, the opposition between street and house in the poem is annulled in this verse. Moreover, in Portuguese there is a lack of comma between the first sentence and the second sentence, which is an opposing coordinate sentence, since there is a coordinating conjunction "mas" (but).

i am not street meat i am homemade jam	eu não sou carne de vaca sou geleia feita em casa
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In “i'd burn you”, the translation “te queimaria”, is inappropriate, since to agree with the Portuguese pronoun “você”, it should be “lhe” – probably, in this case, the translator was willing to let the translation less formal, but since there is no marks of informality in that way, it can also be discussed.

i'd burn you and you still	eu te queimaria e mesmo assim
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In “i'd look so beautiful doing it”, the translator writes as “eu ficaria tão gata”, besides of “gata” being incoherent, there is the annulment of the object of the phrase, “doing it”, which says it's the speaker who makes the fire crack in the fireplace, part of the construction of the conposition of coziness and home security versus the discomfort and fear of the police siren.

couldn't take your eyes off me	você não tiraria os olhos de mim
cause i'd look so beautiful doing it	porque eu ia ficar tão gata

In “the water you need” the translation is “a água que é necessária” nullifying the interlocutor and the force of the statement that it is necessary for him, not for anyone else.

i am not the whiskey you want	eu não sou o whisky que você quer
i am the water you need	eu sou a água que é necessária

And finally, across the poem it is possible to see the opposition between home and town – something to go and stay, snuggle and compromise, remembering that it is inside the section “breaking”, that deals with abandonment – with vacation – weekend – something impersonal, like street food, something to temporarily enjoy and leave. In this verse, “do not come here with expectations / and try to make a vacation out of me”, the translation is “então não venha com expectativas / e tente me transformar em uma viagem de férias”, denying, in Portuguese, everything which was built earlier. Although “out of me” can be understood as an expression, in Portuguese “de mim”. It is necessary not to analyse in a static way and to consider that to continue in the idea of the poem, it can be understood that the “don't”, from the previous verse, is hidden in the following verse, as “and [don't] try to make a vacation out of me”; or it is also possible to understand “out of me” with the “out” in the literal sense of “out”, since all the time i/me was treated as a place.

don't come here with expectations	então não venha com expectativas
and try to make a vacation out of me	e tente me transformar numa viagem de férias

Therefore, the translation cancels out the idea of re-signifying an element, something so present in the third phase of women's writing, according to Showalter, since the translation offers to the interlocutor the possibility of understanding that the final proposition is that the speaker wants to be made as a vacation, a place of visitation and abandonment afterwards. Whereas that is not the intent, as signalized in the second verse.

Such inconsistencies may be verified based on the seven strategies of translating poetry proposed by Andre Lefevere (1975). According to the author, one may translate a poem phonemically, literally, metrically, as verse to prose, as rhymed or blank verse and well as by interpretation.

Such strategies may coexist, but there is always the need to apply a coherent plan to the endeavour. In the case of the Portuguese translation, there is no attachment to sound or metric, and the target text is maintained in blank verses, but there is

no systematic use of either literal translation or interpretation. Such result affects the overall interpretation of the target text, as well as the access to the original context of the poem.

The same problem can be pointed to the title of the book, *Milk and honey* (Kaur, 2014), which in Brazil was translated as "Other ways to use the mouth" (Kaur, 2017). In Portuguese the title is directly sexualized, being referred to the following poem:

*you talk too much
he whispers into my ear
i can think of better ways to use that mouth*

(Kaur, 2014, p. 63)

While in English, the elements milk and honey are related to warmth and refuge, natural medicines, something used to show affection and that are offered to heal someone – even for heartbreak. The Portuguese translation can say a lot about the kind of feminism that is trying to be sold in Brazil: a feminism focused more on sex than on the resignification of women's body as not something to be objectified. In a so rich book, filled with women self-discovery in so many ways, why to focus in a sexualized verse? And also a verse that is a male line?

Much of this work, especially the numerous poems dealing with abandonment, are very much related to what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim about the loneliness of the female artist and writer (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Within this and the other issues cited above, Gilbert and Gubar will talk about unconventional places in literature written by women: "a new place to women in literature. To heal herself, the woman writer has to exorcise in the sentences the stereotypes that men have about women" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 76). And that resonates as Rupi Kaur ends her work with the section "the healing".

In this section, Kaur explores women's relationship with their own bodies and the breakdown of patterns of beauty, both in body shapes and in relation to natural things such as menstruation and body hair:

*the next time he
points out the
hair on your legs is
growing back remind
that boy your body
is not his home
he is a guest
warn him to
never outstep
his welcome
again*

(Kaur, 2014, p. 158)

Moreover, another point that Showalter (1997) states as characteristic of the third phase of female writing is the sorority/sisterhood. Very present in this section, in poems that exalt the partnership between women and the mutual support, calling for the end of fights between women. Knowing her own value, and the others' value. After all, "the cure is both: social and aesthetic" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, pp. 45, 48). And by aesthetic we can extend the idea of the necessity of aesthetic transformation of writing to the beauty of the own female bodies.

It is worth mentioning that the artistic life and work of Rupi Kaur began with Instagram, with a younger audience and a specific format: shorter poems, easy to be shared in the network, as well as the relation with the images, that attract the public attention in the sea of information that is the internet. Showalter (1994, pp. 47-51) asserts that the medium and the public can affect the art, and it makes sense to think of this in Kaur's work, since it is so engaged with the empowerment of women. After all, it is important to reflect on the socio-cultural position of women, because that is what defines how women see themselves and how they are seen. In this way, it is important for the gynocentric critique to define this cultural place from where the woman writes, from where she publishes and to whom she publishes, because all this affects the literary identity of the writer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is indisputable that this work of Rupi Kaur is in the third stage of female writing, according to Showalter (1997), even though the author presents some new inputs, such as the discussion about fatherhood and masculinity in a relationship. About the third phase, it is possible to note that Kaur's work is rich in imagery around identity, around how is to be a woman, discussing the social place, body and sexuality, sisterhood, self-discovery, relationships between mother and daughter, loneliness, women's experience, and stereotypes. On the other hand, as this paper showed, it is important that the translation follows the author's ideas of the representation of all these concepts, or the poetry will present a different meaning that will also be contradictory to the rest of the author's work.

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