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Leila Varzi April 3, 2017

Bending Boundaries Through Hybrid Media
in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and rupi kaur's *milk and honey*[1]

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Abstract

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This honors thesis examines *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi and *milk and honey* (2015) by rupi kaur as examples of mixed media feminist texts. Ultimately, I argue that both kaur and Satrapi use different mixed media as a strategy for resisting censorship and reconstructing socially prescribed notions of the female body and story. I consider questions of form in these works on three levels: first, I consider the advantages of using media that feature "text-image hybridity"; second, I consider the implications of using popular and accessible media; and third, I consider the effectiveness of their use of simplicity and abstraction. I consider questions of content in these works on two levels: first, I consider how art and literature function as forms of feminist activism; second, I consider how both women represent the rendering of their personal identities through their work.

At the most general level, *Persepolis* ideologically reframes Western perceptions of Iran as part of the "axis of evil," striving to add a human dimension to the country (Elahi 312). In addition to heretically drawing and writing about faith in her book, Satrapi also attempts to redefine women's role in both Iran and Islam. kaur is similarly subversive in her poems and drawings, striving to reframe dominant perceptions of womanhood, and eliminate taboos surrounding female biology. Her use of social media platforms makes her work even more groundbreaking. This project relies on graphic theory, feminist theory, and critical theory perspectives on mixed media expression to situate kaur and Satrapi in a long line of female artists and activists. Both authors seek to reframe socially constructed expectations through art despite repression, ultimately redefining hegemonic womanhood for themselves.

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Introduction

Deliberate choices of style and media can render art a paramount platform for political activism. *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi and *milk and honey* (2015) by rupi kaur[2] illustrate how the deconstruction of formal artistic conventions can be used as a vehicle for the artist to resist traditional power structures. Often characterized as a Bildungsroman (a coming of age story), *Persepolis* is a graphic novel originally written in French that chronicles Satrapi's youth in Iran following the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war. Satrapi captures the traumatic events of the Iranian Revolution so simply, and yet so expressively, incorporating playful and delightful humor despite the rather grim setting of her work. She succeeds in combatting Western media-generated stereotypes of Iran by adding dimension and humanity to the Iranian people. At just 24-years-old, kaur wrote her poetry collection, *milk and honey*, which evolved from a series of brief lyrical poems accompanied by simple black and white line drawings that were originally posted independently on Tumblr, and then on Instagram. Importantly, kaur first self-published *milk and honey*, but was later signed by Andrews McMeel Publishing (Staff). Through her poems and drawings, kaur seeks to dismantle taboos surrounding female biology and sexuality, tackling the themes of love, loss, and abuse.

There is extensive scholarship on Satrapi's work within the paradigms of graphic theory, feminist theory, trauma theory, and theory on the Bildungsroman. However, beyond informal conversations about kaur's work on the internet, there is virtually no scholarship that engages in a formal literary analysis of it. While informal conversation can certainly be as legitimate as scholarship, it is not enough to establish an author in the academy. Therefore, this project strives to fill that gap by comparing *milk and honey* with *Persepolis,* considering both texts within the framework of mixed media female life-writing.

At just 24-years-old, kaur wrote her poetry collection, *milk and honey*, which evolved from a series of brief lyrical poems accompanied by simple black and white line drawings that were originally posted independently on Tumblr, and then on Instagram. Importantly, kaur first self-published *milk and honey*, but was later signed by Andrews McMeel Publishing (Staff). Through her poems and drawings, kaur seeks to dismantle taboos surrounding female biology and sexuality, tackling the themes of love, loss, and abuse.

On questions of style, comics critic Scott McCloud asserts that "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning' [allows] an artist [to] amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (McCloud 30). I argue that both women turn to a simple and expressive style—as opposed to a strictly realistic one—as a way of manipulating rigid social constructs through art. Using stylized hand-drawing and—in Satrapi's case—handwriting, both women prioritize a uniquely female subjectivity that connects their bodies directly to their craft and to a long line of female artists. Graphic theorist Hillary Chute asserts that the "copresence" of text and image facilitates "dialogues among different versions of the self," which renders comics useful "for articulating a feminist aesthetics" (Chute 5). With Chute's claim in mind, I argue that kaur and Satrapi use text/image hybridity as an avenue for resisting censorship and redefining prescribed notions of the female body and identity. Finally, both the graphic novel and Instagram are committed to "accessibility, popular availability, and mass appeal," which makes them the especially suitable for rejecting censorship (Chute 11).

kaur's resistance functions both in private and public spheres: she resists her family's patriarchal dynamic that silences women's voices, and more broadly, she resists internet censorship of female biology and sexuality. Satrapi's work is a product of, and a reaction to, the artistic censorship of the fundamentalist Islamic regime. Her drawings challenge the Islamic

belief that "there should be no iconic representations of the faith" (Davis 5). However, Satrapi's childhood persona, Marji[3], considers herself to be "deeply religious" (Satrapi 6). *Persepolis* does not resist religion, but instead resists the government's specific articulation of Islam that polices female behavior and restricts freedom of expression. Similarly, kaur embraces certain aspects of her family's traditions and Sikh religion, but rejects others. Therefore, by personalizing her style of written and visual expression, she personalizes her spirituality on her own terms. Furthermore, both authors engage in a multi-mediated dissemination of their content: Satrapi's work exists as both a book and a film; kaur's work exists both on Instagram and in print.

Satrapi is not the first to use comics to deal with serious content. Serious comics date back to the 1940s, and Will Eisner and Art Spieglemen formalized the genre of the graphic novel in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, Satrapi established herself as an exceptionally successful female comics artist within the French comics (or *Bande Desinée)* scene, which has been notorious for its degrading portrayals of women and hostility towards female artists (Miller 50). Similarly, kaur is not the first to pair poems with drawings. According to W.J.T. Mitchell, seminal Romantic figure William Blake was among the first to create "composite art" that engages in "visual-verbal dialectics" (Mitchell 4). More contemporary examples of artists who juxtapose poems and drawings are John Lennon and Shel Silverstein. However, kaur's work creates a "personalized field of vision" that consistently glorifies the female body and reverses traditional power dynamics (Chute 4).

Ann Miller's article, "Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis: Eluding the Frames" confirmed my interest in exploring the ways in which both kaur and Satrapi participate in a kind of re-representation that helps them to reclaim agency as female writers and artists. Miller shows how Satrapi engages in re-appropriation, reframing, and reinscription, with the end goal of rewriting

socially prescribed narratives and privileging a distinctly feminist perspective. At the most general level, *Persepolis* works to ideologically reframe Western perceptions of Iran as part of the "axis of evil," striving to elicit others' understanding by adding a human dimension to the country (Elahi 312). In addition to un-Islamically drawing and writing about faith in her book, Satrapi also attempts to redefine the role of women in both Iran and Islam. In her first chapter, Satrapi recalls her childhood dream of becoming a prophet, which in itself is non-conformist because she inserts herself into a long line of men. Using the example of Marji "copying a photo-graph of Michelangelo's Pietà…[and] kitting Mary out in a tchador and Christ in a military uniform," Miller shows how Satrapi "manipulate[s] the iconography of the European high art tradition and deftly translat[es] one idealized version of womanhood into another" (Miller 51).

kaur is similarly subversive in her poems and drawings, striving to reframe dominant perceptions of womanhood, and eliminate taboos surrounding female biology. She draws and writes the female body in her book as a way of reclaiming agency and dismantling patriarchal power structures. For instance, many of her poems feature descriptions of the female body that prioritize the power and strength of the female body over its physical appearance. One of the her poems in "the healing" is a prime example:

> i want to apologize to all the women
> i have called pretty.
> before i've called them intelligent or brave.
> i am sorry i made it sound as though
> something as simple as what you're born with
> is the most you have to be proud of
> when your spirit has crushed mountains
> from now on i will say things like, *you are resilient*
> or, *you are extraordinary*.
> not because i don't think you're pretty.
> but because you are so much more than that

In this poem, kaur places intelligence, bravery, and resilience above physical beauty, refuting

society's prioritization of and fixation on a woman's appearance over all her other attributes (kaur 179). In this thesis, I will investigate how both Satrapi and kaur seek to reframe socially constructed expectations through art despite repression, and how they ultimately redefine hegemonic womanhood for themselves.

Neither author's project of reframing ideal womanhood takes place in a vacuum; they fall into an important female and, more specifically, a maternal line. While Babak Elahi exhibits the salience of family in the creation of identity, Miller expands upon that to underscore the role of female genealogy in the formation of individual female identity. Both kaur and Satrapi emphasize their mothers' and in Satrapi's case, grandmothers' persistent strength and resilience, and how that significantly influenced the formation of their identities. I hope to explore the specific ways in which both authors establish an emotional and intellectual connection with their maternal figures and other female predecessors.

The idea of female genealogy plays into the longstanding feminist notion of women supporting each other—a notion that kaur repeats throughout her work. kaur's work extends the projects of female writers such as Alice Walker and Lucille Clifton, as she encourages the reader to recognize our female predecessors, as well as the "striking women around us" right now (see Figure 1) (kaur 191). Notably, her drawing represents a horizontal line of women as opposed to a vertical one. The smaller drawings of three women in a frame appear to be behind the larger drawings, adding a depth to the image that underscores the idea of female lineage and succession. Importantly, each of the female faces is distinct and unique, emphasizing the vast diversity of women that exist.

Both Satrapi and kaur maximize the potential of their respective media to most effectively put their life stories on the page. Hilary Chute argues that comics are particularly effective as a tool for representing trauma, because "images in comics appear in fragments, just

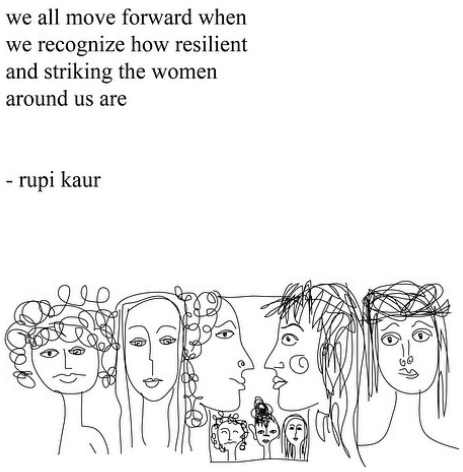

Fig. 1. kaur, rupi. "the healing." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 191. Print.

as they do in actual recollection" (Chute 4). Moreover, she argues that *Persepolis* "model[s] a feminist methodology in its form," because the author "narrat[es] herself on the page as a multiple subject" and "make[s] the hidden visible" (Chute 94). More specifically, Chute argues that the form of the graphic narrative is feminist because it "brings certain key constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography, theorizing trauma in connection to the visual, [and] textuality that takes the body seriously" (Chute 4). By this same logic, then, Chute would also automatically consider kaur's form to be feminist because it combines text and image, and thus, also revolves around those "key constellations" (Chute 4). However, while Chute's claim certainly holds true, Chute's focus on form over content insufficiently captures the full feminist power of these works. Therefore, I hope to extend and modify Chute's claim to demonstrate how Satrapi and kaur's work is feminist thanks to the specific interplay between form and content in which they engage.

Another important consideration in this comparison is the notion of accessibility. In the introduction to her book, *Graphic Women,* Chute refers to a 2004 *New York Times Magazine* cover story on graphic novels, which states that "comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal" (Chute 1). Today, although comics still thrives as a genre of its own, Instagram has now also emerged as an accessible and widely used form that is meant for quick and daily consumption. Of course, the term "accessible" is a complex one, as the accessibility of a work depends entirely on context and audience. Moreover, it would be false to claim that textual expression is inherently more accessible than visual expression or mixed media. In fact, this thesis proves that accessibility and difficulty are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, kaur and Satrapi's work is accessible because it invites a wide readership—not because it is easy to read.

kaur's use of Instagram facilitates an immediate dissemination of her work, creating a unique intimacy between author and audience. Furthermore, with immediate dissemination comes immediate audience reaction in the form of Instagram comments, thereby completely transforming how we think of a work's reception. kaur's use of the digital space raises questions about the literary repercussions of "a move from a print-based to an electronic-based culture" (Culler 131).

This project will examine the ways in which kaur and Satrapi use text/image hybridity to reframe socially prescribed narratives and resist both individualized and systemic censorship. The hand-drawing in both works is a particularly powerful form of resistance, since it links both works "directly to the hand of [their] creators," and the "physical tracing bears the imprint of survival...through the material line of the text"(Nabizadeh 154). However, both authors still encountered numerous limitations throughout their lives and when publishing their art and

writing. When kaur posted a photo-essay featuring graphic images of menstruation, Instagram deleted her posts, claiming they did not follow "community guidelines" (Sanghani). In addition to the censorship she experienced at the legal and public level, kaur was consistently silenced and censored by her father and other male figures in her family, and much of her poetry contemplates that silencing. *Persepolis* similarly addresses censorship, since the Iranian government deemed the book too treasonous to be published in Iran. The graphic novel itself functions as a reaction to the fundamentalist Islamic regime's harsh censorship of artistic expression.

While both authors use their texts as forms of resistance and feminist self-representation, they go about the task in very different ways. Firstly, the two texts have different functions in the eyes of their respective creators: to kaur, *milk and honey* serves the purpose of healing; to Satrapi, *Persepolis* serves the purpose of "bearing witness" (Satrapi 1). Moreover, kaur and Satrapi follow very different methods of storytelling. Satrapi engages in a [mostly] chronological retelling of her childhood and adolescence, including multiple details about her family and specific lived experiences. In *Persepolis*, the reader has a strong sense of time, place, characters, and names. Contrastingly, kaur's work is vaguely separated into four sections, which are more emotional stages than they are chronological markers: "the hurting," "the loving," "the breaking," and "the healing." Furthermore, kaur includes virtually no names or specific details about her experiences. Instead, she presents a disjointed collection of poetic glimpses into her life story. Considering these differences, I am interested in exploring the ramifications of choices regarding specificity, generality, veracity, and chronology in these examples of life-writing. Humor will also emerge as an important point of analysis, given Satrapi's heavy use of "parody, slapstick, and wry commentary"(Nabizadeh 164).

Using Chute's *Graphic Women*, I will examine the ways in which mixed media offers opportunities for expressive and stylized representations of trauma, and not necessarily ones that attempt verisimilitude. Contemplations of mixed media will remain central in this analysis, given the multiple media involved: *Persepolis,* the graphic novel; "Persepolis," the animated film; kaur's poems as presented in *milk and honey;* and kaur's poems as separate entities on Instagram. However, considerations of "Persepolis" the film are outside of the scope of this thesis. In regards to kaur, I will consider *milk and honey* and kaur's Instagram posts as a single entity.

My methodology is largely centered on close readings of kaur's poems and drawings, and close readings of scenes and frames in *Persepolis*. Another defining attribute of my methodology is my integration of a wide variety of sources from different arenas. Among these sources is Lucille Clifton's poetry collection, *Quilting*. Scholar Johnetta Mukes argues that this collection owes its name to the fact that Clifton's poem are examples of the historical quilting process, where "material is re-worked to reveal a perspective that is female" (Mukes 5). By this definition, both kaur and Satrapi's works are also examples of quilting, as they both work to re-write and re-draw the female body and story. kaur even extends the tradition of quilting in a literal sense, as she hosts women's retreats and workshops where women write poetry and physically bind books together by hand.

In a way, my methodology reflects the very process of quilting, as I interweave a diverse range of female artists, writers, poets and activists throughout my thesis. Doing so proves the importance of transnational and transhistorical collaboration among women in the collective feminist struggle. Bringing such different female figures as Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Christa Wolf, Virginia Woolf, and even contemporary Iranian fashion designers into

conversation with one another showcases the power of a global feminist network—even if its members are not directly connected. References to these influential women disrupt the fabric of my thesis just as their work has disrupted the fabric of society. I deliberately interlace references to other influential works throughout conversations about my primary texts to prove their omnipresence and continued relevance in literary conversations. Beyond my effort to amalgamate a diverse array of sources, I engage in a form of quilting by integrating visuals into my writing instead of including them in an appendix, reinforcing the case I make for the value of hybrid media. Ultimately, it is through embracing the very spirit of quilting that this project truly succeeds in "bending boundaries."

Chapter One: Form

Introduction

At the core of this project is an exploration of the relationship between form and content. Aristotle defined these two fundamental components of rhetoric as *logos* (the logical content of a speech) and *lexis* (the style and delivery of a speech). Scholar Gideon O. Burton elaborates upon Aristotle's division:

> Rhetoricians divided form and content not to place content above form, but to highlight the interdependence of language and meaning, argument and ornament, thought and its expression. It means that linguistic forms are not merely instrumental, but fundamental—not only to persuasion, but to thought itself (Silva Rhetoricae).

We can thus understand the importance of Satrapi and kaur's respective choices of style and media when considering the effectiveness of their work. While Chapter Two discusses *what* these women seek to communicate through their text and drawings, this chapter aims to analyze exactly *how* they do so by way of deliberate formal choices. Since both kaur and Satrapi combine text and image in their work, the first section of this chapter will provide a theoretical background of the relationship between text and image, as well as both historical and contemporary examples of pairing text and image in poetry and literature. The second section will look at how both comics and Instagram are unconventional, popular, and accessible media, and how these characteristics facilitate kaur and Satrapi's projects of bending boundaries of social constructions through their work. The third section will look at the ways in which both kaur and Satrapi use a minimalist and pithy style of expression that ultimately strengthens their arguments.

Section 1: A Case for Popular and Accessible Media

Satrapi: The Power of Comics and Humor

The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck (1837), by Swiss writer Rudophe Topffer is widely

considered the first comic book. However, it was not until the mid to late twentieth century,

Fig. 2. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Veil." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 3. Print.

when less expensive printing methods surfaced, that comics blossomed (Babic 2). In 1938, *Superman* ignited the Golden Age of comics, placing it at the center of American youth culture. However, when renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham published a study called *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, he sparked hearings on "the purported deviance and violence in comic books and their harmful effects on children." This hearing resulted in the Comics Code, which mandated harsh censorship on content in comics. This censorship, coupled with the activist spirit of the 1960s galvanized the underground comics revolution, which comprised of comics that featured iconoclastic and taboo content that was not appropriate for aboveground outlets at the time (Chute 13). Chute asserts that these underground comics "created the space for today's contemporary cannon," and that *Persepolis* is an extension of the underground spirit. Other authors also helped propel the use of comics for subversive messages, including Alison Bechdel with her renowned graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). Comics serves as the perfect avenue for Bechdel to expose difficult topics such as death and sexuality to her readers, just as comics serves as the perfect avenue for Satrapi's radical project of exposing an

honest account of her experience during the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.

In their article, “Estranging the Familiar: ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s Persepolis,” Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley argue for “the subversive potential of comics or cartoons—including as a feminist strategy—because of the way in which messages can be infused, or camouflaged, into these forms that are generally considered nonthreatening” (Naghibi and O’Malley 31). When Marji’s uncle is surprised to find out that Marji knows about dialectic materialism as a young child, Marji explains by saying she “read the comic book version” (Satrapi 59). In this instance, Satrapi demonstrates the great value of the very medium she is using, especially when attempting to tackle difficult and complex subjects.

Satrapi’s use of humor in Persepolis serves a similar purpose as her use of comics as a medium: to quell the intensity of traumatic and controversial subject matter and render it more accessible to a wider audience. Moreover, her somewhat dissident use of dark humor to represent trauma does not minimize the brutality of it, but rather exhibits Marji’s futile attempt to come to terms with it. Satrapi herself states that "we can only feel sorry for ourselves when our misfortunes are still supportable...once this limit [has been] crossed, the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it" (Satrapi 266). Humor acts as a coping mechanism as well as a way of regaining agency for Marji. Satrapi’s use of ironic and comedic text and image shows her childhood self’s desire to gain power over trauma, pain, and a repressive regime. This technique does not undermine the significance of the trauma but rather increases the story’s impact on the reader. On the first page of the book, Satrapi depicts her reaction and that of her classmates when they are forced to start wearing the veil in school (see Figure 2). The overarching text states, “[they] didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially because [they] didn’t understand why [they] had to.” The children in the image yell playful phrases such as “ohh! I’m the monster of

darkness," "it's too hot out," "execution in the name of freedom" and "giddyap" (Satrapi 3). The juxtaposition of text that expresses the children's confusion with an image that shows them playing creates a link between incomprehension and humor in the novel. This frame seems humorous and heartbreaking at the same time, as what seems like innocent and benign child play is technically treasonous behavior in the context of this story and therefore Marji's life.

The link between incomprehension and humor is perfectly exhibited when Marji is puzzled by why her family laughs at tragic happenings (see Figure 3 below).

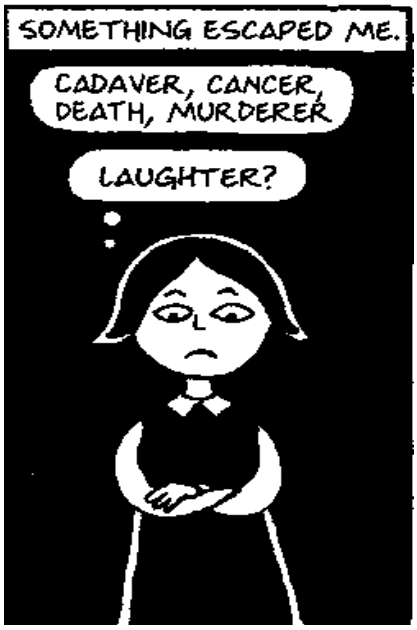

Fig. 3. Satrapi, Marjane. "Persepolis." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 32. Print.

Although this frame does not make use of humor, per say, it reinforces the tension between tragedy and comedy and how it can both *indicate* confusion and *arouse* it. Marji "realized then that she didn't understand anything [and that she] read all the books [she] could." Her epiphany highlights her curious character and instigates the gradual tainting of her innocence as she becomes increasingly informed of current events and subsequently more aware of true devastation.

kaur: The Power of Social Media and Channeling Mainstream Trends

Studying kaur's development as an online poet sparks interesting conversations about how literature will be affected by our move from a print-based to an electronic-based culture (Culler 131). A recent article in The Guardian discusses the recent rise of "Instapoets:"

> 'Instagram poets' are, of course, simply poets, but they're a phenomenon unto themselves because they have cleverly managed to combine the internet's love of an inspirational quote with artful typography and immediate shareability. Poems are ideally suited, in some ways, to social media, because they pack so much meaning into so little language.—The Guardian

Of course, kaur is not the only poet to capitalize on Instagram as a site for art and poetry. Other emerging Instapoets include Cleo Wade, Atticus Poetry, Tyler Knot, and Blackoutpoetry (Qureshi). Each of these poets maximizes the potential of Instagram as a platform for multi-mediated and interactive art. These artists present an amalgamation of photographs, typed poetry, handwritten poetry, web screenshots, and other artistic forms all on the same platform. These poets also have the extra space of their captions to supplement their poems or replace titles if they so choose. One of the greatest powers of digital platforms is that they allow artists to embrace a constantly evolving identity and portfolio. Whereas museum exhibits take years to curate, and books take years to publish, content can be posted on Instagram as frequently as desired with the simple click of a mouse. Jonathan Culler speaks to this point, foreseeing a shift where "literature comes to be seen less as a fixed text and more as an event, a specific instance of singular interaction with a reader or audience" (Culler 132). The interactivity and immediacy that digital platforms offer is also revolutionary. Culler points out that, "in new electronic systems, feedback loops enable different levels of interaction between text and reader to continuously inform and mutually determine one another, transforming texts as readers perform them." (Culler

131).

Notably, the first two links that come up after a Google search for "Instagram Poets" are ones from teenvogue.com and buzzfeed.com—two popular sites targeted towards millennials and centennials. These search results are a testament to the audience to which Instagram poetry typically appeals. However, just as Chute and Marianna DeKoven make a case for "the viability of graphic narrative for serious academic inquiry," so too am I demonstrating the viability of Instagram poetry for serious academic inquiry. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that kaur is only 24-years-old, and therefore still a young and growing poet. The quality of poems across her collection and Instagram page varies significantly. This is partially due to her high production volume and lack of editing, and although her admirers far outweigh her critics, critiques of the literary quality of kaur's work have emerged on the internet:

> Some poems are just basic sentences with random skips that have no real point, they aren't too lyrical, and it's literally just like reading a normal sentence… while the messages themselves might be important, they aren't new and we aren't hearing about them in any new way… (two anonymous bloggers).

Although perhaps not the most astute literary critique, there is an element of truth to the fact that kaur's poetry is not quite as rich as that of some of her predecessors. For instance, Lucille Clifton's "poem in praise of menstruation" proves to be denser with powerful literary devices:

if there is a river
more beautiful than this
bright as the blood
red edge of the moon if

there is a river
more faithful than this
returning each month
to the same delta if there

is a river
braver than this

coming and coming in a surge
of passion, of pain if there is

a river
more ancient than this
daughter of eve
mother of cain and of abel if there is in

the universe such a river if
there is some where water
more powerful than this wild
water
pray that it flows also
through animals
beautiful and faithful and ancient
and female and brave

In Clifton's poem above, the use of strategic spacing between the penultimate and last words of each stanza thrusts the reader's gaze through each enjambment, simulating the flowing of a river. Moreover, she often uses both alliteration and repetition for emphasis—poetic devices that kaur hardly employs. However, while some might argue that kaur's less refined poems result from a lack of experience and expertise, I argue that she deliberately preserves the rawness of her young voice. Some of her ideas about love and life might be trite, but she incorporates them in her collection to appeal to a certain audience: non-literary millennial women. By using this tactic to attract her readers, she is then able to relay more powerful and sophisticated feminist messages in other moments. In other words, once she has her reader hooked, she eases them into her more subversive and controversial feminist arguments. Additionally, what the above critics describe as basic and unoriginal sentences are what make kaur's work so pure and powerful. It is precisely the rawness and immediacy of kaur's work that lends gravitas to the conflicted and intense feelings of female adolescents and young women. While some of kaur's poems might be nothing more than widely known aphorisms, they are ones that are often forgotten unless we remind

ourselves of their importance. The poem below is an example:

> how you love yourself
> is how you teach others
> to love you

While this seems obvious, self-care often falls by the wayside unless we consciously prioritize it. One blogger writes: "the journey of empowerment Kaur offers genuinely resonates with young women who hear, perhaps for the first time, their own fears and joys echoed" (Groen). Thus, kaur's work serves a similar function as Betty Friedan identifying "the problem that has no name" in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Through her book, Friedan shed light on the monotony and frustration that white middle-class housewives were feeling about not finding fulfillment from domestic chores (Horowitz 3). In doing so, these women felt affirmed and supported. Along the same vein, kaur's poetry can be used to legitimize and grant importance to seemingly mundane experiences like a frame can be used to turn things into art.

Section 2: Implications of Text/Image Hybridity

The crux of kaur and Satrapi's work is the use of what Miller calls "text/image hybridity" (Miller 40). Chute and DeKoven call this same practice "cross-discursive media," which they define as "composed in words and images"; "written and drawn" (Chute and DeKoven 768). Of course, these women are not the first to consider the relationship between visual and textual expression. In fact, such considerations date back to Horace's Ars Poetica, in which he asserted "ut pictura poesis," or "as is painting so is poetry" (Martinez 621). In saying this, Horace urged for poetry to be given as much deliberate attention as was given to painting at the time. During the Enlightenment era, German writer and art critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing refuted Horace's view in his seminal essay, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Martinez 622). In his essay, Lessing emphasizes the distinct nature of poetry and painting, arguing that the

two cannot and should not be compared or confused. His central argument for thinking this is that painting is a phenomenon extended in *space*, while poetry is a phenomenon extended in *time.* In his book, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W.J.T. Mitchell reveals the social constructs and the root of this insistence on maintaining a division between art forms:

> The decorum of the arts at bottom has to do with proper sex roles…Paintings are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space which they ornament, while poems are free to range over an infinite realm of potential action and expression, the domain of time, discourse and history.

In her essay, "Women Poets and the Sister Arts in Nineteenth Century England," Michelle Martinez extends Mitchell's argument by emphasizing the gendered nature of Lessing's desire for visual and verbal art forms to remain separate:

> The influential aesthetics of Lessing and Burke relied upon distinct borders between the temporal (music, poetry) and spatial (painting, sculpture) arts and the attribution of femininity to space and the concept of the beautiful (Martinez 624).

Martinez goes on to explain how female artists in nineteenth century Britain began to claim their space in the professional sphere. In doing so, communities of mostly middle-class women writers and visual artists formed sisterhoods that "sought to increase women's professional and educational opportunities and to gain legitimacy for their art" (Martinez 624). With this history in mind, we can see that kaur and Satrapi are not only challenging social norms in a contemporary context, but also joining a historical movement to bridge gendered artistic barriers. They enrich this movement by also bridging cultural barriers between the Western and non-Western worlds. Therefore, it is the combination of their feminist content and their unconventional choices in style and media that facilitates these women's role as influential activists (Martinez 624). Whereas Lessing drew attention to the differences between the temporal and spatial registers, Satrapi and kaur capitalize on the fruitful conversations that can be had

between the two. If visual and verbal expression can function powerfully independently, the possibilities that can come from marrying the two are boundless.

Comics is perhaps the most popular form of hybrid media today. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is a seminal work in comics theory, providing a critical analysis of the intricacies and evolution of comics. McCloud's work reveals the effects that come from pairing text and image, emphasizing that it involves not only a juxtaposition of two media, but also a conversation and an intimate interaction between them. McCloud's discussion of comics shares the central focus of this thesis: the relationship between form and content. He first takes time to define comics as a genre in relation to other genres. He points out that the basic distinction between animated film and comics, for example, is that "animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are" (McCloud 7). He then draws the conclusion that "space does for comics what time does for film" (McCloud 7). McCloud's commentary on the use of space in comics leads to an important consideration of the role of the gutters between panels, and thus, the reader's active part of creating "closure" to fill in the gaps between images. McCloud borrows Will Eisner's term, "sequential art" to differentiate comics from other forms of visual expression, ultimately settling on the following all-encompassing definition for comics: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). The notion of sequence raises further inquiries when analyzing kaur's poem/drawing pairings: can McCloud's theories about sequence also be applied to the order of kaur's poems in her collection? Similarly, what effect does it have on the reader when they happen upon kaur's work in their personal Instagram feed, where it is juxtaposed with pedestrian posts of family and friends?

Considering McCloud's analysis, we can conclude that pairing text and image multiplies the possibilities for expression in several respects. In the case of kaur and Satrapi, pairing text and image is particularly effective for their specific feminist projects. To make a deterministic argument about mixed media being inherently feminist would not only ignore the myriad examples of non-feminist mixed media work, but also undermine the relevance of kaur and Satrapi's specific content by unjustly attributing their feminist characteristics entirely to their form. Instead, I support Chute's claim that comics—and therefore, text/image pairing in general—"lends itself to feminist considerations" because the copresence of text and image allows "for dialogues among different versions of the self" (Chute 5). Chute's book, *Graphic Women*, book examines the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, and Marjane Satrapi as examples of pioneering autobiographical comics by women. She provides a brief history of the evolution of comics, from Rodolphe Topffer's work in 1830, to the "Underground Comix Revolution" in the late 1960s, and leading up to the contemporary context in which the four women she examines fall. Chute outlines how these four women take the art of autobiography and storytelling in new directions, specifically in their treatments of sex, gender, and female lived experiences. Chute explores the four women's verbal and visual techniques, as well as the ways in which the form of the graphic narrative lends itself to feminist considerations. She argues that "the form of comics even at its most basic is apposite to feminist cultural production" and that comics are valuable "for articulating a feminist aesthetics" (Chute 8). Part of Chute's justification of this argument is that the "copresence" of text and image in comics—as well as the copresence of dialogue within frames and overarching narrative text—allows for "dialogues among different versions of the self," which results in "layering

temporalities and narrative positions" (Chute 5). Chute argues that "the graphic narrative offers a constant self-reflexive demystification of the project of representation" (Chute 9).

In *Graphic Women*, Chute also emphasizes that, in addition to being a convenient space for the treatment of feminist subject matter, comics is also a useful medium for recounting traumatic stories. She argues that "comics itself is a possible metaphor for memory and recollection," given its fragmented nature (Chute 4). Chute introduces her book by stating that there is a "new aesthetics emerging around self-representation," and the graphic novel is an example of this new aesthetics (Chute 2). Many stories in contemporary graphic novels are often both self-representational and traumatic to some extent, but Chute points out that these women "do not project an identity that is defined by trauma" (Chute 2). She highlights that these authors interestingly "point to the female subject as both an object of looking *and* a creator of looking and sight" (Chute 2). Chute draws on scholar Cathy Caruth's theory that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Chute 3). Caruth's trauma theory leads Chute to address "the risk of representation" when dealing with traumatic content, which has perhaps in part led to our "censorship-driven culture"—a culture which both kaur and Satrapi urge us to re-think. Importantly, Chute places great emphasis on how these four women engage in "textuality that takes the body seriously," and discuss "concerns [that are] typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private" (Chute 4).

Chute also echoes American cartoonist Will Eisner's notion that comics "materialize lives and histories [by] put[ting] the body on the page" (Chute 10). She uses this function of comics to "put the body on the page" to further justify its usefulness for conveying feminist concerns—specifically those about "embodiment and representation" (Chute 19). Furthermore, she recognizes and highlights the "immediacy" of comics, which she views as "a process of

visual distillation that endeavors to capture the essence of moments, of circumstances, of people" (Chute 12).

In his book, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of Illuminated Poetry*, W.J.T Mitchell counters Suzanne Langer's claim that "there are no happy marriages in art—only successful rape," through an examination of William Blake's illuminated poems (Mitchell 17). Ultimately, Mitchell argues that neither the graphic nor the poetic aspect of Blake's art consistently predominates; the mixed media form facilitates a rich dialogue between two modes of expression. Mitchell outlines the difference between "symbolic" and "representational" illustration by comparing Blake's treatment of the theme of the expulsion from paradise with that of a contemporary, E.F. Burney. He explains that "Burney's version is designed as a plausible

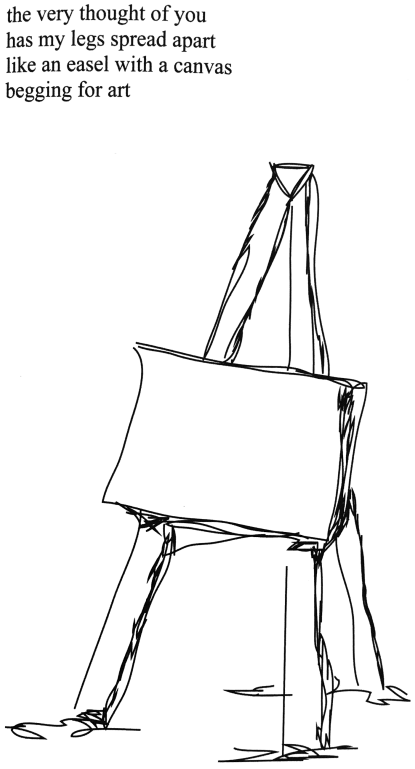

Fig. 4. kaur, rupi. "the loving." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 57. Print.

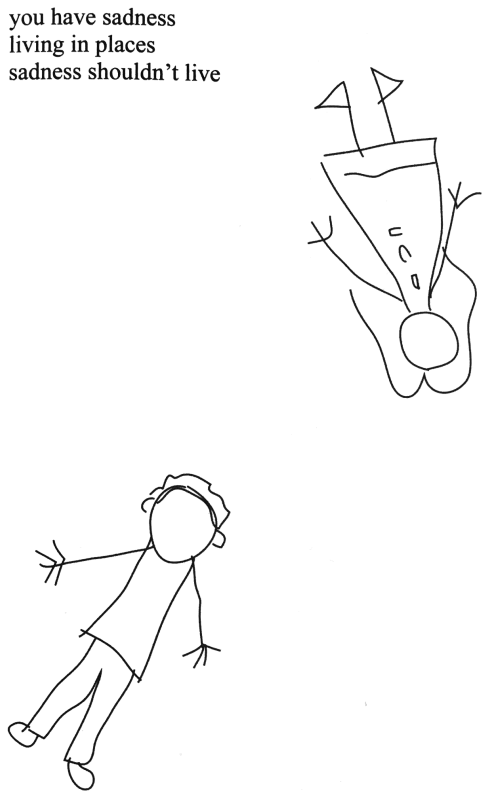

Fig. 5. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 27. Print.

visualization, with great attention to details of vegetation and drapery" (Mitchell 19). The result is a predominately realistic and thus "representational" scene, with few signs of the Biblical or Supernatural. In contrast, Blake's version is "more primitive, stylized, and emblematic...and it is dominated not by the concerns of visual illusionism or verisimilitude but by pictorial ideas, or what Blake would call 'Intellectual Vision'"(Mitchell 19). Applying Mitchell's categories to kaur's poems is a useful exercise, especially because kaur is often a "visionary and a visualizer;" "a transformer and a translator" (Mitchell 19). In other words, her collection represents a very dynamic and varying relationship between text and image. While certain drawings serve as clear illustrations of a poem's content, others have a much less obvious connection to the text. In Figure 4, the drawing is an illustration of the vehicle of the simile employed in the poem—the canvas. kaur often chooses to illustrate the vehicles or symbols through her drawings, but there are also instances in which she chooses to illustrate the tenor of a simile, or the main message of the poem. Figure 5 is an example of a poem in which the drawings have a very loose connection with the text. One could argue that the drawings vaguely connote feelings of sadness, but the drawings are by no means an example of "visual translation," to borrow Mitchell's phrase.

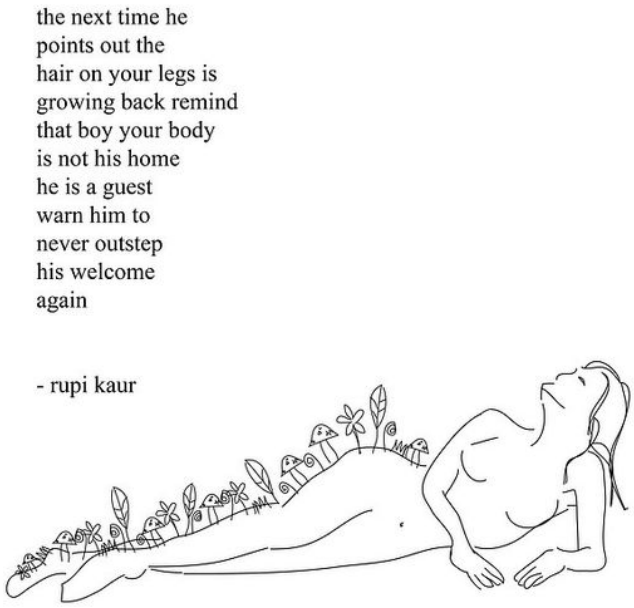

Fig. 6. kaur, rupi. "the healing." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 165. Print.

The drawing in Figure 6 above is also not a literal illustration of the poem's content. The poem urges women to remember that their bodies belong to them and to no one else, and that they should never allow anyone else to police their hair growth. kaur could have chosen to highlight the metaphor of the body as a home through a related drawing. Instead, however, she decided to introduce an entirely new visual metaphor through the drawing. While both the poem and the drawing could technically be read independently, pairing them allows for a dialogue between metaphors that ultimately results in a more robust argument. In an interview, kaur justifies her decision to use a cross-discursive medium by saying, "The topics I was discussing were very heavy, but the illustrations were so simple. I loved the power those two opposites created" (Hindustan Times).

As we can see in Figure 5, kaur's poems have the power to govern the reader's focus and highlight certain aspects of the text over others. In Figure 7, kaur's pairing of text and image allows her to play with notions of perspective. The text communicates a grand and dramatic metaphor of two people "light[ing] a whole city" and "set[ting] it on fire." The accompanying drawing, however, drastically opposes the grandeur of the metaphors used in the text, as it depicts two small, seemingly mundane lightbulbs. Therefore, this juxtaposition suggests that even seemingly small and insignificant beings can have significant impacts on the world. On a different note, the shape that kaur's drawing creates bears a resemblance to a woman's ovaries. This resemblance introduces a new dimension to the poem, as kaur argues that a woman is completely autonomous, using her ovaries—a symbol of womanhood and a synecdoche for the entire woman—to make her argument.

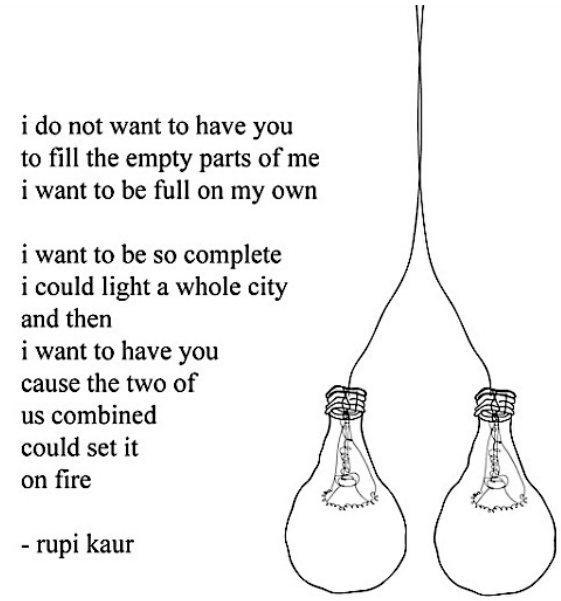

Fig. 39. kaur, rupi. (rupikaur_). "reading literature by revolutionary women…" Instagram, 9 March 2017

In their article, *Introduction: Graphic Narrative*, Chute and DeKoven assert that the form of the "graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language...that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on the page" (767). Considerations of hybrid media raise several questions about the relationship between the reader and the work. For example, which medium takes precedence for the reader? In mixed media, do images establish tone before words have the chance to? Either way, the presence of both image and text facilitates a more dynamic and turbulent interaction between the reader and the work.

Twentieth century British poet Stevie Smith serves as a useful point of comparison for kaur's work. Like Smith, kaur also blurs the lines between the public and private spheres, making a powerful feminist statement in doing so. In addition to the parallels between their feminist goals, both women often accompany their poetry with simple doodles or line drawings. Literary critic Linda Anderson helpfully identifies the distinct functions of Smith's drawings:

> …her drawings, never simply illustrations for the poems, suggest not only another dimension of meaning, beyond language, but also a continuity between doodling – the playful desire to inscribe rudimentary or unintegrated energy or meaning in a transitional space – and literature.

Here, Anderson points to the ways in which Smith's work was groundbreaking, in that it challenged "the hierarchy of literary forms, and…a dominant discourse which erases different kinds of speech" (Anderson 174). In a similar way, kaur challenges literary conventions and norms by bending boundaries between modes of expression and repurposing media on her own terms. Anderson argues that Smith's interweaving of parody, pastiche, nonsense, ballads, nursery rhymes and myriad other forms in her poetry allows her to "foreground an unacknowledged continuity between written and spoken forms of language, and between oral and literary traditions." Along the same vein, kaur interweaves verse, prose, dialogue, drawings, and even enumerated lists into her collection, proving her efforts to dismantle formal literary conventions. Furthermore, kaur greatly prioritizes spoken word poetry as a one of her main avenues for expression. In doing so, she adds an auditory dimension to her work, recalling the origins of poetry as an oral tradition.

Beyond her use of multiple different forms and styles, kaur also includes a wide range of topics into her collection, challenging both the norms for what subjects should be discussed in poetry, as well as the norms for what subjects should be discussed on Instagram. Moreover, kaur presents a multitude of jarring and surprising juxtapositions that highlight the diversity of subject matter and significant variation in tone and mood throughout *milk and honey*. Ultimately, this is what proves to be most genuinely human about kaur's work. While her brief poems present themselves as carefully selected vignettes of moments in life, together they create a comprehensive and all-encompassing account of the human experience. By including life's ordinary moments in addition to life's most challenging moments, both kaur and Satrapi not only

tell more genuine stories, but also show how "the conditionality of survival finds itself expressed through the disruption of everyday temporal frameworks" (Nabizadeh 161).

In both kaur and Satrapi's work, the combination of text and image permits them to employ tension and irony in a way that a non-hybrid medium would not allow for. Seeing as the first book of *Persepolis* is entitled "The Story of a Childhood", the visual representation of horror and tragedy is presented from Marji's "younger, directly experiencing voice" (Chute 97). As Chute points out, "Satrapi's older, recollective voice is most often registered in overarching narrative text" (Chute 97). This tension between the perspective of the narrator and that of the child protagonist of the story is constant throughout the narrative. Consequently, the drawings often reflect a child's naïve and overly simplistic perspective. For example, when Marji's family discovers that one of her family's friends has been tortured and assassinated by the government, the visual representation of his torture mimics how Marji speciously perceives this violent act. The text states that "in the end he was cut to pieces" and there is an image of a hollow man whose body has been neatly dismembered (see Figure 8) (Satrapi 52). Although clearly an unrealistic representation of a man being "cut to pieces," the image's impact on the reader is not diminished. Reason being, the image demonstrates a child's inability to fathom such horror, thereby emphasizing how unthinkably horrific the Iranian revolution truly was. In an interview, Satrapi explained her stlyistic choice in this instance: "I cannot take the idea of a man cut into

pieces and just write it…it would not be anything but cynical. That's why I drew it. People are not ready to read a book about all the misery of the third world, and I don't blame them."

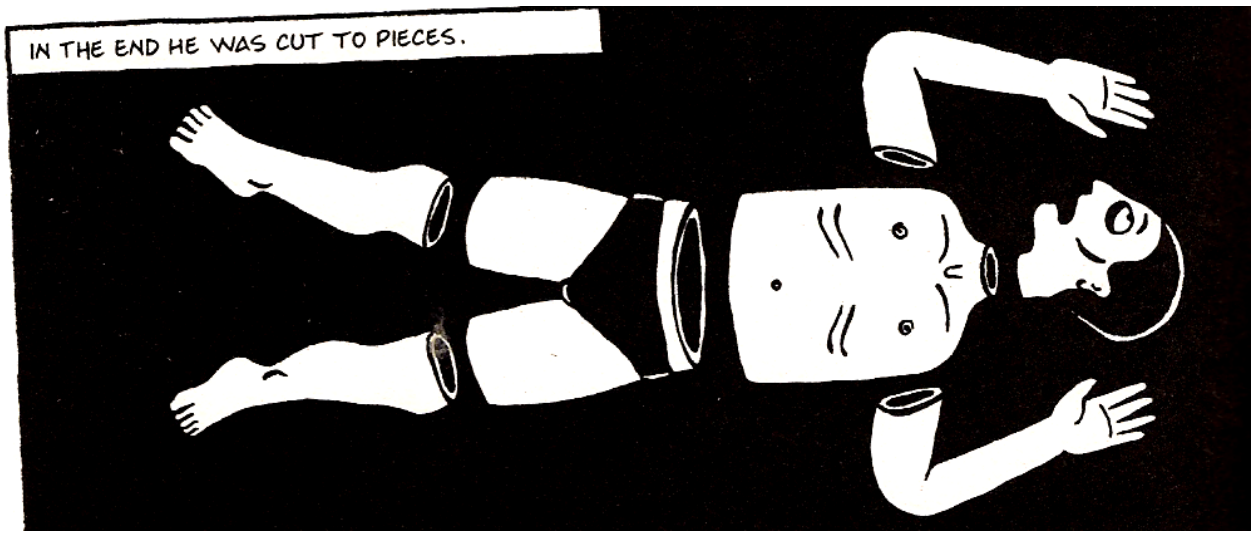

Fig. 8. Satrapi, Marjane. "Persepolis." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 32. Print.

The copresence of text and image continues to prove its effectiveness in storytelling throughout *Persepolis.* In regards to Marji's positive association with the floral scent of her grandmother's bosom, Elahi notes that Marji engages in "an imaginary formation of identity through senses other than the visual" (Elahi 319). In saying this, Elahi emphasizes that identity formation is a multi-modal project that engages all senses. It is precisely for this reason that a cross-discursive medium is most effective for the project of self-representation and life-writing. In *Persepolis*, the combination of text and image is especially useful in moments of Satrapi's self-reflection. While a purely textual medium can feature a character's inner monologue or introspections through narration, only a visual representation can literally depict a character *looking* at themselves in a mirror. Such a technique allows the reader to see both the subject *and* the subject's reflection in the same frame. Anne Hollander discusses the use of mirrors in Persepolis at length, arguing that "[t]he mirror is the personal link between the human subject and its representation" (Elahi 391).

Hybrid media also lends itself to the use of hand drawing and handwriting, which is a fascinating fusion of visual and textual expression that proves especially useful for feminist projects. In her article, Chute prioritizes the salience of handwriting and hand drawing in comics, since it "underscores the subjective positionality of the author" (10).

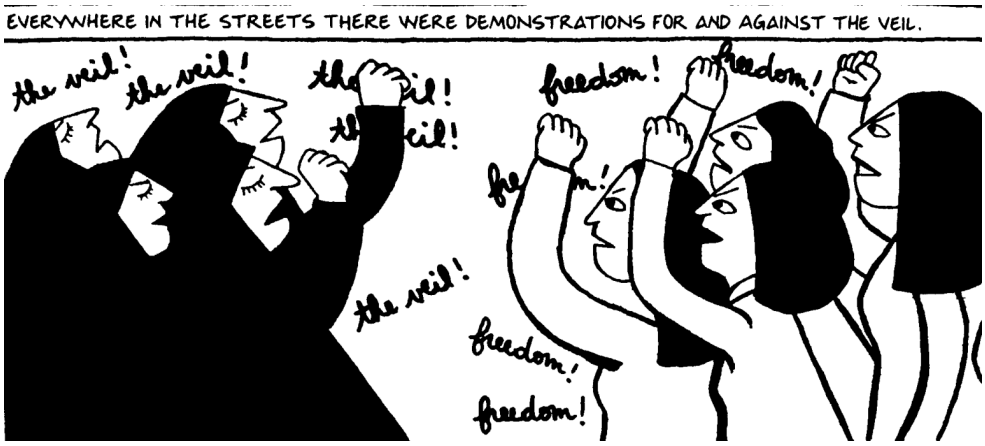

Fig. 9. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Veil." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 5. Print.

In Figure 9, we can see that the use of cursive writing in conjunction with drawings in this instance allow Satrapi to depict the women's chants in a way that is personal and that emphasizes their authenticity (Satrapi 5).

Fig. 10. Wade, Cleo. (cleowade). "Like the African proverb says…." Instagram, 16 March 2017

In this post by Instapoet Cleo Wade, the use of handwriting infuses the words with dynamism and exposes the artist's thought process. The use of the cross and the underlines, combined with the cursive signature at the bottom work to render this post a true hybrid of written and visual expression. Satrapi's occasional inclusion of Persian script throughout *Persepolis* has a similar effect. Naturally, it serves different purposes for different readers. For non-readers of Persian, the script serves a predominantly aesthetic purpose, adorning the panels and infusing the story with authenticity. For readers of Persian, it strikes a chord of familiarity and nostalgia, inciting a personal connection between the reader and the book.

Although pairing text and image is evidently a useful tactic, images alone are particularly powerful in contemporary expression, regardless of whether text is present or not. In their article, Chute and DeKoven argue that images are more relevant now than ever before:

> …it seems as though, one might say, in the present moment, images have never been more important, or more under siege. Donald Rumsfeld, detailing the trajectory of his

> own response to prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison, famously claimed, "Words don't do it." Rumsfeld went on: "You read it and it's one thing. You see the photos and you cannot help but be outraged." Perhaps this is why images of dead American soldiers, even at funerals and ceremonials in their honor, are currently prohibited" (Chute and DeKoven 771).

The scene in Figure 11 is an example of an instance in which visual representation is more effective than textual representation, given there is no text besides "and then one night…" at the very beginning of the scene (Satrapi 307-309). Nabizadeh discusses how this sequence builds tension as the reader follows the character's chase from the police across the panels. Satrapi's depiction of the character eventually falling to his death is effectively executed through drawing because of the capacity for comics to juxtapose images. Thus, the character's death is portrayed through his presence in one panel, and his sudden absence in the next. Nabizadeh notes that the moon—which remains a constant throughout the sequence— "occupies a presence similar to the

Fig. 11. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Veil." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 5. Print.

reader—a constant presence watching the story unfold" (Nabizadeh 160).

In the same way that certain occurrences and emotions can only be portrayed through visual representation, others are simply inexpressible. This is especially true for representations of trauma, given "the fundamental contradiction of all trauma literature, which 'defines itself by

Fig. 12. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Shabbat." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 142. Print.

the impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience'" (Heberle 282). In

Figure 12, Marji has just spotted the lifeless hand of her neighbor amidst the rubble of a demolished house. The two final frames of the page are startlingly bare and minimalist. The penultimate frame displays Marji covering her eyes and has no accompanying narrative text, whereas the final frame is solid black with "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" written below (Satrapi 142). In this depiction of trauma, the purposeful omission of detail in image and text represents the void by which Marji has been swallowed. Darkness (the absence of light and therefore color) seems to perfectly embody the untranslatable nature of her pain.

Section 3: Amplification Through Simplification

Both Satrapi and kaur are participating in the postmodern move towards a boldly simplistic style of expression, which is one that extends to art, literature, graphic design, interior design, and architecture. Major brands worldwide have drastically stripped down their aesthetic identities to appeal to the eye of the contemporary consumer. Coca-Cola is one such brand, with one of their primary design principles being "bold simplicity." Another contemporary example of this trend is the simplification of professional soccer team logos on Twitter to make them more immediately recognizable in the fast-moving context of a twitter feed. McCloud describes this trending aesthetic tactic as "amplification through simplification." In light of these contemporary examples, we can see that both kaur and Satrapi have created a niche for the use of boldly simplistic expression at a crossroads between art, literature, and popular culture. In this section, I will examine the ways in which Satrapi and kaur's styles of expression do not promote a reduction of meaning, but rather a proliferation of it.

McCloud provides useful terms and tools for analyzing questions of style and the role of abstraction in expression. He defines an icon as "any image used to represent a person, place,

thing, or idea," and a symbol as "one category of of icon...that are images we use to represent concepts, ideas and philosophies" (McCould 27). A picture, on the other hand, is "[a]n image designed to actually resemble [its subject]…In pictures...meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance" (McCloud 27). He provides a diagram for understanding the spectrum from realistic to abstract forms of representation:

Fig. 13. McCloud, Scott. "The Big Triangle." *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014. Print.

Referencing this diagram, McCloud develops a compelling argument for the art of amplifying by simplifying. McCloud elaborates:

> When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details…By stripping down an image to its essential "meaning," an artist can amplify that meaning…simplifying images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium…the ability of cartoons to focus our

> attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally" (McCloud 30).

In the above quote, McCloud attests to the power of abstraction and simplicity in effective storytelling. He reiterates that a minimalist approach does not suggest a lack of skill, but is rather a deliberate strategy used to manipulate the reader's attention and prioritize certain details over others. McCloud asserts that the universality of cartoon imagery is what makes it so popular and accessible. He explains, "the more cartoony a face is…the more people it could be said to describe" (McCloud 31). This logic could also be applied to kaur's work, leading us to believe that her extensive readership and vast internet fan base stem in part from the way her work functions as a blank canvas onto which people can project the particularities of their own experiences. McCloud observes this phenomenon in comics:

> The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it! (McCloud 36)

McCloud's testament to the power of amplification through simplification helps explain the recent trend towards minimalism and brevity in artistic expression. kaur's popularity leads us believe that this trend stems from the effect of the digital age on art and literature, to the increasing limited attention span of the millennial reader. Such discussions incite interesting questions about when brevity and simplicity facilitate powerful storytelling, and when they begin to detract from the quality and caliber of artistic expression. Considerations of accessibility and audience reception also incite questions about what it means for a work to be "accessible."

These questions of style are of the utmost relevance to both Satrapi and kaur's projects of feminist rewriting and reclaiming agency through art. Ultimately, both kaur and Satrapi manipulate the boundaries of reality and social norms by manipulating style. McCloud provides important insight into the effects of varying levels of abstraction through a work or a collection.

He uses an example from Japanese comics, wherein the sword is dramatically more realistic than the other elements in the frame:

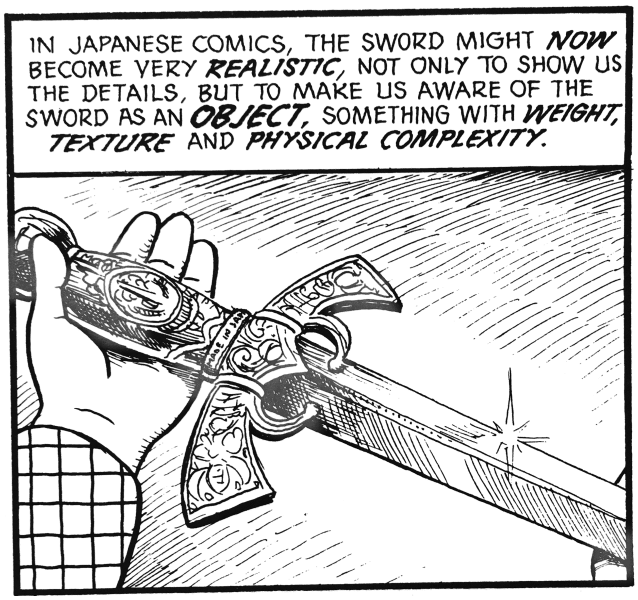

Fig. 14. McCloud, Scott. "The Big Triangle." *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014. Print.

McCloud explains this as the use of realism to emphasize an object's otherness from the reader (McCloud 44). We can see a similar example of this technique in *Persepolis*:

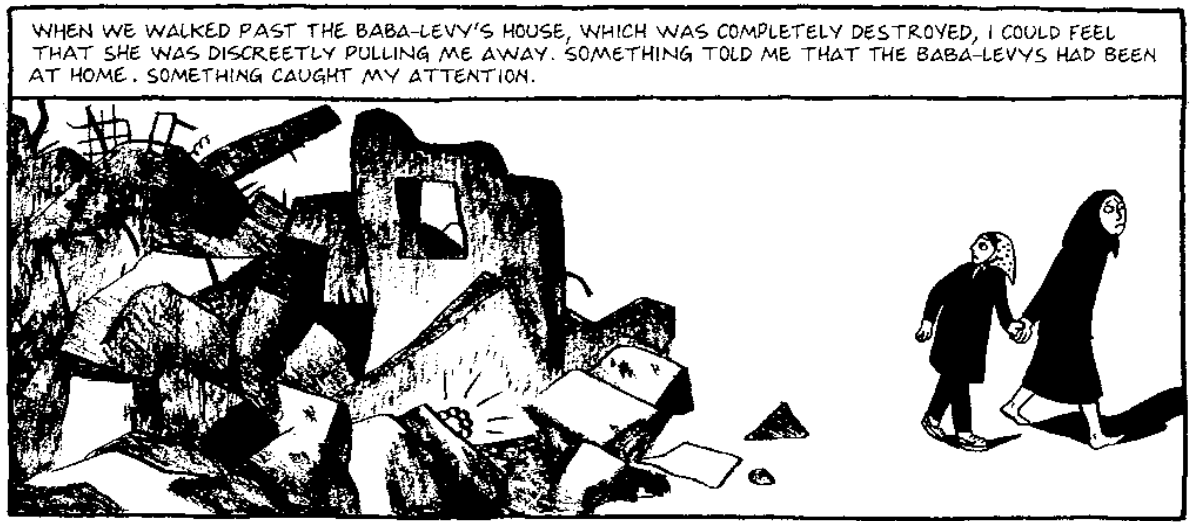

Fig. 15. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Shabbat." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 142. Print.

Figure 15 is the last panel in the book that attempts to visually convey trauma. The demolished building shown in the panel represents the remains of the "Baba-Levy's house" after a bombing (see Figure 15). It is also the first instance in which Satrapi shows evidence of shading and use of the third dimension in her drawings. The resulting drawing of the ruins is significantly more realistic than all prior representations of trauma, which take a more of an expressionistic approach as opposed to a mimetic one. It also starkly contrasts with the drawings of Marji and her mother in the same panel. Given it is the last frame to represent a traumatic occurrence in the first half of the novel, Marji's narrative perspective is at the pinnacle of its maturity. Her initially untainted vision of the world has now been sullied by the overwhelming amount of trauma she has endured and by her growing awareness and acceptance of reality. The stark contrast between this panel and the surrounding ones on the same page serves as a reminder of the fact that Marji is still only a young girl, but has had to rapidly mature due to the unfortunate circumstances of the Iranian Revolution.

McCloud importantly notes that "each artist has different inner needs, different points of view, different passions, and so needs to find different forms of expression," alluding to Wassily Kandinsky's 1912 essay, "On the Problem of Form" (McCloud 57). In Kandinsky's essay, he emphasizes the intimate relationship between form and content, describing the artist's process of choosing their desired medium as "the searching of the spiritual value for materialization." He goes on to say that "matter is…a storeroom and from it the spirit chooses what is specifically necessary for it—just as the cook would" (Kandinsky 2).

kaur

Like Satrapi, kaur employs different drawing styles and techniques throughout her work. To get a sense of the stylistic breadth of kaur's work, I will use this section to analyze several different examples of drawings and poems from kaur's collection. Doing so will explicate the ways in which she maximizes the potential of her simple line drawings for making feminists arguments. The table below displays differently styled drawings of hands throughout *milk and honey*, proving the significant variation in kaur's use of detail and abstraction in her collection.

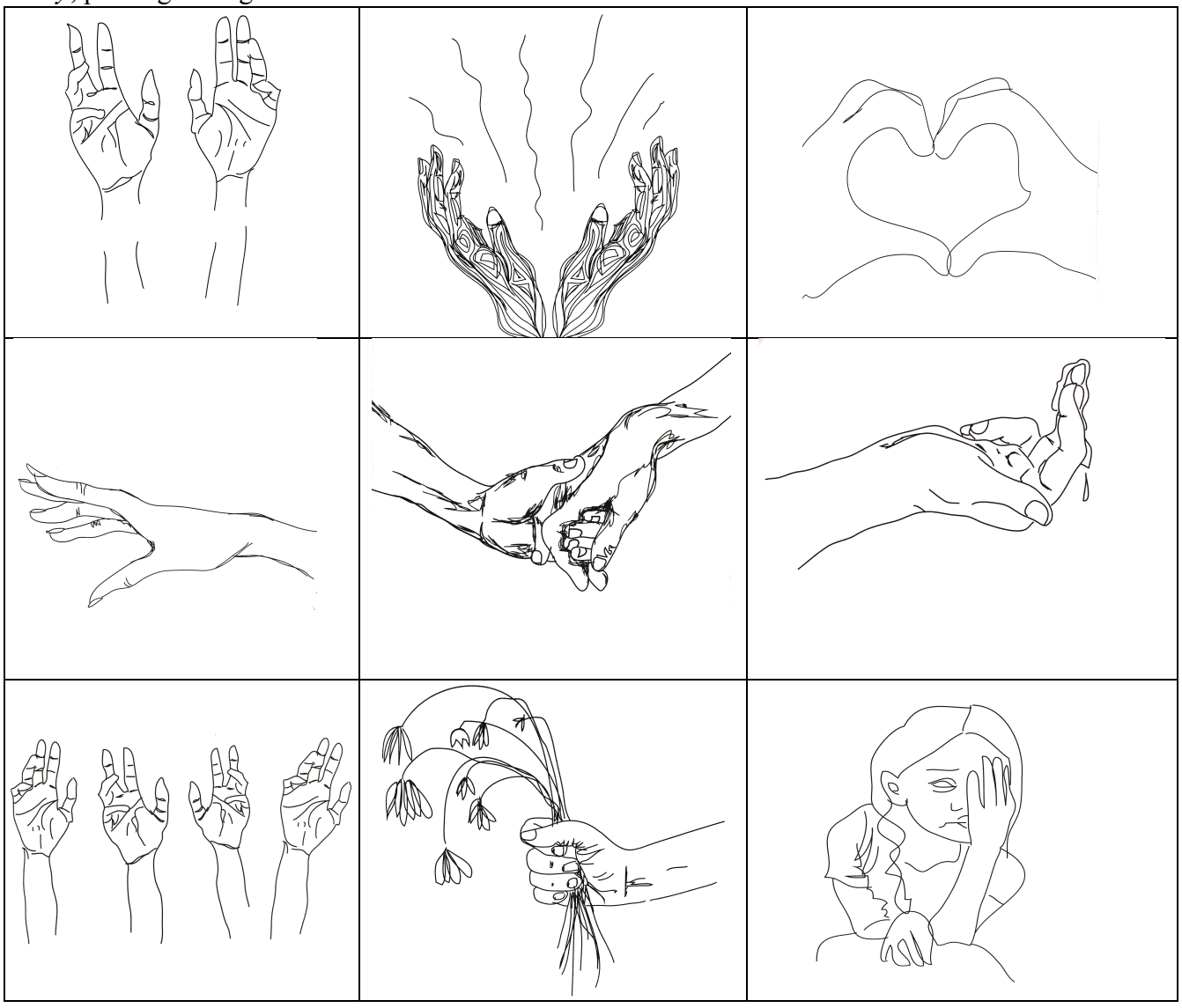

Fig. 16. kaur, rupi. *Drawings of hands.* milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 123; 127; 87; 101; 139; 111; 121; 131; 175. Print.

Notably, these drawings vary greatly in style and level of detail. Some feature intricate lines on the fingers and palms; some feature nothing more than the outline of the hand; and some

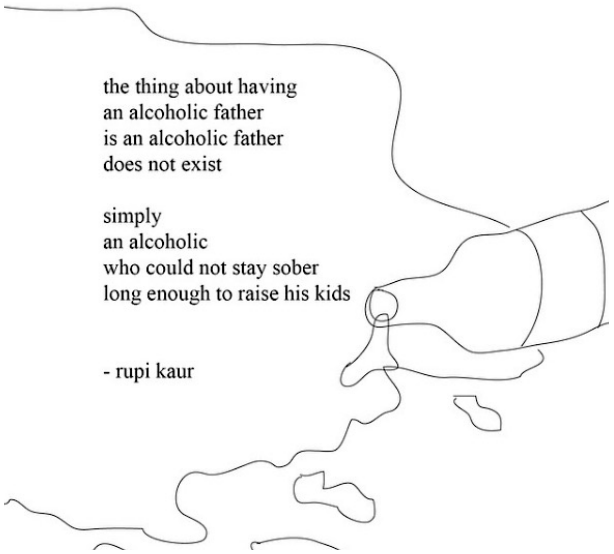

Fig. 17. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 39. Print.

are more stylized and artistic. Figures 17-20 are examples of instances in kaur's work where she has made deliberate choices of style and has made effective use of abstraction on different levels. Figure 17 is a poem represents one of kaur's more abstract drawings. There is a very simple line drawing of bottle with liquid pouring out and encircling the text. The imprecision of the drawing

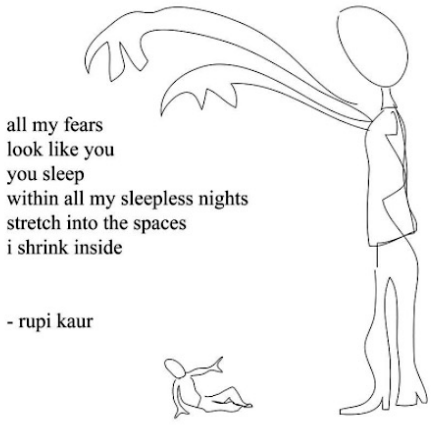

Fig. 18. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 27. Print.

conveys a lack of control and a difficulty to portray the consequences of alcoholism. The drawing creates a visual metaphor of alcoholism spilling over her father's ability to fulfill his expected role in her life. The puddle also suggests the slipperiness of roles that comes from alcoholism. Antithetically, the content of the poem is blunt and direct. Figure 18 is another example of an abstract and imprecise drawing. Here, the large figure on the right represents the visual manifestation of "all [the speaker's] fears." Notably, the figure's hands are inhuman and monster-like, thereby emphasizing the figure's frightening quality. Moreover, the arms encroach upon the poem itself, and tower over the small figure at the bottom of the page. Therefore, the large figure's arms literally "stretch into the spaces" and the small figure—which presumably represents the speaker—"shrink[s] inside."

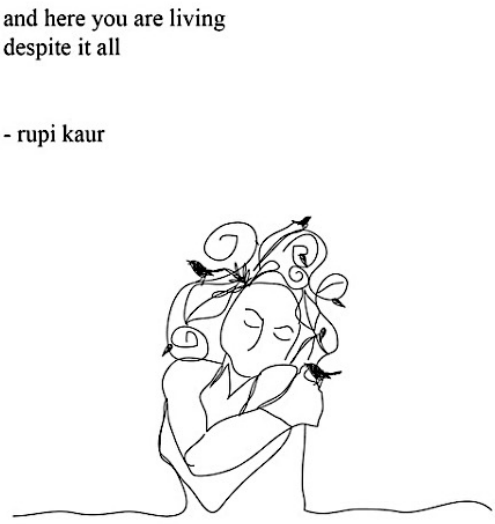

Fig. 19. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 39. Print

By beginning with "and" in Figure 19, the speaker enters the poem mid-thought, implying that the poem has a backstory. The implication of a backstory incites a sense of understanding and

empathy towards the reader and their past experiences, creating an important rapport. The vagueness of "it all" does not diminish the emotional intensity of the couplet, but rather renders it universally applicable. Any reader can look at this poem and feel imbued with a sense of pride and gratitude for overcoming personal hardship. The line break after "living" infuses the blank space with life, implying the very notion of continuity that the poem conveys. Furthermore, the swirling lines in the women's hair and well as her active position of embracing herself generate dynamism and life on the page. The birds and leaves in the woman's hair bring her figure to life even more.

The following three-line poem has no accompanying drawing:

how can our love die
if it's written
in these pages

In this example, kaur attests to the power of words to bear witness (kaur 128). Despite kaur's lack of punctuation, the reader can infer the interrogative construction of the poem from the "how can." Such a construction infuses the poem with ambiguity, giving the impression that the speaker is trying to convince herself of the preservative power of writing as she writes those very lines. To extend that thought even further, expressing the idea of writing as preservative through writing convinces her of that idea even more. kaur reiterates her uncertainty about the function of writing in a later poem:

the thing about writing is
i can't tell if it's healing
or destroying me

In this piece, kaur makes herself vulnerable as both a writer and a speaker. Instead of authoritatively deeming writing an unequivocal avenue for healing, she admits to her own hesitations and feelings of uncertainty regarding its value, proving that her relationship with writing is certainly multifarious (kaur 200).

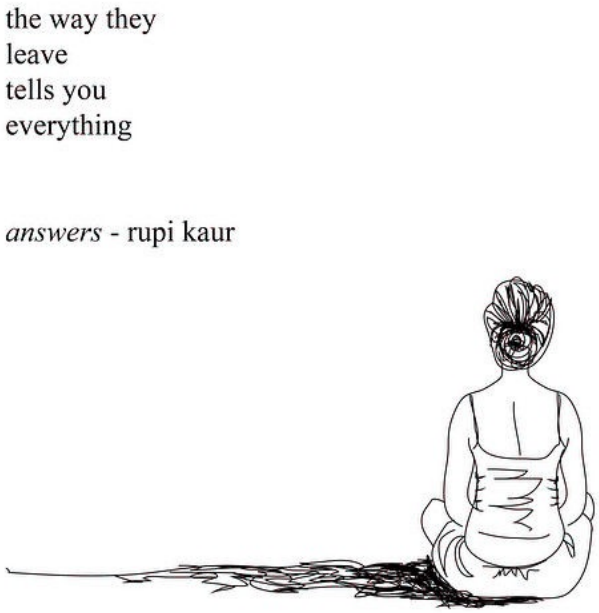

Fig. 20. kaur, rupi. “the breaking.” milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 143. Print.

The last one in the section “the breaking,” this poem of four lines and seven words highlights the importance of “the way [a significant other] leave[s]” (kaur 143). The drawing that accompanies this brief poem is among the more detailed drawings in kaur’s collection, featuring simple shading to show the strands of the woman’s hair, the wrinkles on her clothes, and the floor on which she sits meditatively. The placement of the woman to the far right of the drawing creates negative space to the left of her that implies the absence of the person who has left. While kaur

could have opted to illustrate "the way [the significant other] leave[s],"—which appears to be the focus of the poem—she instead depicts the woman sitting alone, thereby placing the emphasis on her. Like in many of her poems, kaur focuses on capturing the aftermath of events she describes, as opposed to illustrating the actual action. In doing so, she lessens the importance of accurately depicting a given event, and instead prioritizes the emotional effect of the event on the subject. According to Nabizadeh, Satrapi similarly focuses on the emotional imprint an event makes on a person's psyche, referring to it as an "afterimage." Nabizadeh specifically discusses the "visuality of death" in *Persepolis*, arguing that visual representations of death are often stylized portrayals of an "afterimage, through the act of witnessing or recall" (Nabizadeh 160). This poem of kaur's—as well as numerous others in her collection—similarly depicts the emotional aftermath of an event.

It is also notable that this poem is the last one in the section. The woman in the drawing is sitting upright with her back to the viewer in a meditative position. Her position exudes a sense of serenity, strength, and acceptance. In fact, this cross-legged meditative position recurs in another poem in the next section that specifically addresses the idea of acceptance (kaur 151). That her back is facing the viewer implies that she is looking onward toward the next section of the book—"the healing." It is also significant that this drawing responds directly to an earlier drawing in this chapter, which has a nearly-identical composition. However, in the earlier poem, the girl's body composition evokes despair and heartbreak, and the speaker is the one leaving (see Figure 19) (kaur 95).

Fig. 21. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 95. Print

Satrapi

Both Satrapi and kaur use media that do not allow for extensive explanations, and thus necessitate a "stripping down" of the content. This process of distillation does not take away meaning from the work, but in fact adds more. In *Reading Graphic Novels*, Achim Hescher discusses this attribute of comics style:

> Cartoonicity is said to lie in the reduction of the whole to the single, disproportionally stylized details (Packard 2009: 41). Ed Tan even calls them 'formulaic' (Tan 2001: 31). Specifically, comics, in contrast to graphic novels, seem to stylize emotions in the act of drawing: 'comic strip characters look like personifications of the basic emotions [...]. [...] This exaggeration of feeling, together with a complete absence of awareness and control, also lends a quality of childishness to characters (Tan 2001: 37-38, cf. Dittmar 2008: 94).

Hescher comments specifically on *Persepolis*, noting a "striking reduction of the characters' faces to basic, comic character emotions" (Hescher 37). While certain critics have referred to Satrapi's style as "naïve" and "unskilled," I argue that it is effective *because* of its simplicity. Nabizadeh claims that it is *Persepolis's* "lack of artfulness that provides the narrative with its affective power." However, I urge for an amendment of her statement that characterizes the book as not lacking artfulness, but rather as being replete of it.

Fig. 22. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Veil." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 15. Print.

This image is used to display the fatal fire in a Tehran movie theatre that ignited the Iranian Revolution (see Figure 22 above). From this image, it becomes evident that Satrapi's attempts to convey the view she had as a child strive to provoke the emotions that arise from trauma rather than to accurately represent it. This image, like myriad others in *Persepolis,* does not concern itself with the literal physicality of death and trauma. Instead, the Edvard Munch-

like figures become one with the flames as they burn to death. Although observably unrealistic, the tragedy of the occurrence is still just as effectively conveyed "because of its incommensurability—and yet its expressionistic consonance—with what [the reader] is provoked to imagine is the visual reality of this brutal murder" (Chute 100). A child's attempt to fathom such trauma is tragic in itself, as no child should have to be exposed to it.

Although *Persepolis* generally shows a gradual evolution and maturing of the speaker's perspective, there are times when Marji's child-like perspective of trauma is briefly interrupted. This image (see Figure 23 below) shows photographs which represent certain violent acts on the streets of Tehran seen through her father's "lens." Besides the sudden shift from a feminine to a masculine lens, in comparison to the other images in the book,

Fig. 23. Satrapi, Marjane. "Persepolis." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 29. Print.

this collage appears to consist of more realistic and less animated images. The inclusion of these images could serve as a temporary removal of the filter that is Marji's naïveté and obliviousness.

We can conclude that the form that kaur and Satrapi's works take is just as important as their content. By prioritizing accessibility in their choices of style and media, both women have a broadened emotional resonance in contemporary literary and artistic scenes.

Chapter Two: Content

Introduction

Through accessible hybrid media and a boldly simplistic style, kaur and Satrapi explore what it means to be a transnational female subject. While Chapter One explored elements of form, Chapter Two will examine the content of their respective feminist projects. Section 1 will look at how kaur and Satrapi fit into the larger tradition of using art and literature as feminist activism. I will also look at the ways in which both kaur and Satrapi use their crafts to reposition themselves in a social fabric that is too often restrictive for women. Both kaur and Satrapi discover ways to resist systems of oppression, discipline, and censorship. Section 2 will explore the ways in which both authors navigate familial and cultural influences while also trying to establish themselves as autonomous female subjects. Both kaur and Satrapi emphasize their desires to transcend boundaries between fixed identities. Instead of merely accepting one of two essential and monolithic cultures, they reconcile tradition and progress and ultimately customize their own identities (Elahi 319). Throughout this process, both women look to their maternal figures for guidance, seeking to extend the legacies of their mothers, grandmothers, and other female predecessors.

Section 1: Art and Literature as Feminist Activism

Art and literature have long served as crucial avenues for female self-expression. Virginia Woolf was among the many influential women who pioneered this practice in the early twentieth century, with seminal works such as *A Room of One's Own.* Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, foreshadows the premise of *A Room of One's Own*, as the main character Rachel greatly appreciates the privacy and freedom of the "room cut off from the rest of the house" that her aunt provides her with (Woolf 136). For Rachel, this space becomes "a room in which she could play,

read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary" (Woolf 136). It is specifically reading books that changes Rachel's perception of the world. She imagines herself "as the heroine"; the "heroic statue in the middle of the foreground dominating the view" (Woolf 136). It is significant that Rachel is not reading the classics—a set of works deemed important by male authorities. Instead, she reads Henrik Ibsen, who is known for his novel, *A Doll's House*—a novel about a woman trapped in a man's world. Thus, in this "imaginary world" that she creates through reading and through solitude, Rachel powerfully positions herself as central in her own narrative.

Woolf was among the first to inaugurate a tradition of women using artistic and literary expression as an avenue for feminist activism—a topic that Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr explore in depth in their book, *This Book is an Action*. Centered on the line, "this book is an action"—Robin Morgan's iconic introductory sentence to her anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*—their book explores the link between art and feminist activism through a collection of essays from Second-Wave Feminism (Morgan xiii). The essays in this collection emphasize the salient role of creative expression in the reawakening of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a review of the literary roots of the Women's Liberation Movement, Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr explore how women have turned to reading and writing as a form of self-expression and community building since at least the eighteenth century. They go on to explain the coining of the term "middlebrow" in the early twentieth century, which referred to the culture surrounding "sentimental novels…and the many manifestations of women's literary culture" (Harker and Farr 3). Janice Radway emphasizes the middlebrow's "investment in identification…[suggesting] that it encourages an apolitical personalism, meant to placate the professional-managerial class" (Harker and Farr 3). The term *middlebrow* soon

evolved as a gendered term that embodied a "feminized popular culture seeking to crush the masculine individual" (Harker and Farr 3). This dismissal of women writers as "middlebrow" persists even today. An article in the Huffington Post about *milk and honey* describes it as "the poetry collection every woman needs on her nightstand or coffee table" or "the poet every woman needs to read" (Spencer). This journalist presents the collection as sentimental and leisurely reading for women, as opposed to a literary accomplishment, suggesting that literature that tackles the intricacies of women's personal lives is almost certainly relegated to the private female sphere. Harker and Farr speak to this longstanding enforcement of literary hierarchies in their introduction:

> …questions of literary value are particularly apropos of second-wave feminist literature, which, like the literature of other politically inflected literary movements such as the Black Arts Movement, were dismissed by Cold War literary critics as polemical and artistically inferior. Indeed, U.S. literary history has generally reserved its highest aesthetic categories for productions by privileged white men. Meanwhile, a shadow tradition has long existed outside of mainstream U.S. literary culture, where works by nonmale, nonwhite, nonstraight, and nonprivileged writers reside. Texts relegated to these shadows have been easily dismissed as less significant, less influential, and, emphatically, less beautiful (Farr and Harker 2-3).

kaur and Satrapi are among those contemporary women who are continuing the efforts of women before them to centralize women's texts that have long been deemed a "shadow tradition" (Farr and Harker 2).

Alice Walker's seminal essay, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* also informs this section of my analysis. Walker describes her mother when she is gardening:

> I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty (Walker 241).

Walker's mother "ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" echoes God creating the universe in His own image in Genesis. Thus, Walker writes her own

creation story, positing her mother as the all-mighty Creator. Walker extends the use of biblical imagery by describing her mother as "radiant," which is reminiscent of God "burn[ing] with holiness" in the Bible. That she is "radiant…to the point of being invisible" amplifies her supernatural quality (Walker 241).

Satrapi

In an interview with ABC news, Satrapi made it very clear that she does not self-identify as a feminist:

> I am absolutely not a feminist, I am against stupidity, and if it comes from males or females it doesn't change anything. If it means that women and men, they are equal, then OK, certainly I am a feminist. It happens that I am a woman, so it becomes a "woman coming of age story." I think if I was a man it wouldn't change so much, they never call it a "man coming of age story." It is a human coming of age story, let's go for the humanity and humanism, it's a much better thing than this "womanhood" and "manhood" and I don't know "hermaphrodite-hood, and etc., etc. (Satrapi).

Upon reading this, one might be tempted to immediately abandon the thought of Satrapi's work as feminist. It is important, however, to take Satrapi's statement with a grain of salt, and to consider what it meant to be a feminist in France in 2008. While Satrapi might not have intended for her book to be "feminist" based on what she understood the term to mean, that does not take away from the extent to which her book participates in feminist activism. In fact, Satrapi's observation about male coming of age stories not being gendered is a strongly feminist statement, as she is referring to the practice of only specifying gender when it is female, because men are the norm or the standard. This harks back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* which explicates the ways in which women are considered the *Other* in every way, and are defined only in relation to men (de Beauvoir 12). In fact, Marji reads de Beauvoir in *Persepolis*,

and even attempts to urinate while standing per de Beauvoir's advice "that if women peed standing up, their perception of life would change" (Satrapi 175).

There are countless historical examples of women who, like Satrapi, were committed to their own emancipation, but who would not have self-identified as feminists. Attributing feminism to movements that pre-existed feminism—such as, for instance, the food riots organized by white Southern women in the United States in 1863—would be anachronistic (McCurry 200). The female dependents of soldiers fighting in the US Confederate army did not have feminist motives when engaging in violent protests. These women were hungry and frustrated, and were protesting out of desperation and necessity. They were begging for a kind of male protection that was based more on the human right to food and resources rather than on women's rights. Nevertheless, their refusal to being neglected by the government inscribed them in history as powerful and resilient women—precisely the kinds of women who have galvanized feminist movements.

Beyond claiming her place in a line of female activists, Satrapi specifically claims her place in a line of female artists who have resisted censorship and oppression through their work. An example of Satrapi's predecessors are female artists in nineteenth century Britain. In her essay, Michele Martinez explains how female artists in nineteenth century Britain began to claim their space in the professional sphere. In doing so, communities of mostly middle-class women writers and visual artists formed sisterhoods that "sought to increase women's professional and educational opportunities and to gain legitimacy for their art." She uses restrictions against female artists as a central point of analysis, explaining that women in nineteenth century England…

> …continued to be restricted from studying the nude in art schools and often avoided genres that might appear too masculine. Poets from L.E.L., Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti

> to Michael Field and Emily Hickey produced poems in response to the critical and institutional obstacles that faced women artists and to theories of art that assumed language to be masculine and pictures to be feminine (Martinez 626).

Just as these women used poetry to combat restrictions on what women could study in art, so too does Satrapi retroactively combat the restrictions she faced as a young artist by suggesting the absurdity of them through humor (Satrapi 299). In their anatomy drawing class, Satrapi and her peers are forced to draw a model that is covered from head to toe in lieu of drawing a nude model as they would have before the Revolution. When Marji bends the rules by staying late to draw a male model after hours, a supervisor reprimands her. When her supervisor asks why she is looking at the man, Marji curtly responds by saying, "Well, because I'm drawing him." Her supervisor responds by saying that looking at the male model is "against the moral code," to which Marji sarcastically snaps back: "What would you have me do? Should I draw this man while looking at the door???!!" (Satrapi 300). Marji exchange with her supervisor not only attests to her consistent outspokenness and defiance against injustice, but also points to the absurdity of the Islamic regime's expectations for women. After all, there is no request more absurd than being asked to draw the human body without physically looking at it. The theme of censorship weaves throughout Satrapi's story, including when she finds a job as an illustrator at an economics magazine. In her position, Marji grapples with the very "risk of representation" with which *Persepolis* grapples (Chute 4). When an illustrator is arrested and physically abused for drawing a mullah as an assassin, the reader realizes the restrictions surrounding self-expression. The illustrator himself admits, "you pay dearly for freedom of expression these days" (Satrapi 334).

The historical context of *Persepolis* is especially important when considering how the book functions as a form of political and feminist activism. After all, the Iranian revolution used visual

and verbal expression to Islamicize the Iranian Revolution, just as Satrapi uses her book to reclaim her culture and her home. When Marji returns to Tehran after having been in Austria for four years, she is particularly perturbed by the propagandistic murals and posters plastered around the city (Satrapi 250). Critical considerations of this propagandistic art perfectly complement conversations about the power of visual expression in *Persepolis.* Peter Chelkowski defines the Iranian Revolution as "primarily a pictorial revolution, a revolution in full semiotic control of the representation of itself" (Chelkowski 9). Therefore, graphic art played a crucial role in mobilizing the masses. Propaganda took the form of graffiti, textbook images, murals, billboards, stamps, posters, and other public visual media. A wide array of propagandistic revolutionary art idealizes Islamic female figures to recall the original 7th century Muslim community and repurpose its central values in 20th century situations. In response to these revolutionary objectives, Satrapi seeks to undo the work of Islamic extremist and *re*-do it on her own terms.

While the Revolution undoubtedly affected all Iranians, its consequences were more grave for some than for others, and Satrapi makes sure to acknowledge her own privilege. As Chute and DeKoven point out, *Persepolis* is a book "about an upper-class, leftist family in revolutionary Iran [that] carefully frames differences between East and West" (Chute and DeKoven 777). I forward this observation to argue that the book also frames differences between classes. Even Marji's six-year-old self exhibits an accurate understanding of social injustices: her observation that "[her family's] made did not eat with [them]" reveals engrained Iranian social hierarchies; her comment about her father driving a Cadillac—and the awe-struck face of the boy in the bottom right-hand corner of the frame—points to Marji's awareness of her own privilege, proving that she recognizes the relevance of class in addition to other identity markers in the

Iranian experience. Marji continues to be reminded of the implications of class differences, including when her father explains to her why their maid Mehri could not date their neighbor. He tells her "their love was impossible…because in [Iran] you must stay within your own social class" (Satrapi 37). Marji's desperation and confusion in response to her father's explanation reveals the absurdity of classism: she asks whether "it is [Mehri's] fault that she was born where she was born." The final piece of narration on the page says "we were not in the same social class but at least we were in the same bed" (Satrapi 37):

Fig. 24. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Letter." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 37. Print.

This frame artfully encompasses the larger mission of *Persepolis* to prove that humanity transcends politics and class. The pair of shoes drawn on the left-hand side of the frame is also significant. If we assume they are Mehri's shoes, we can understand them as a material marker of class that she has removed. Although Mehri and Marji come from different social classes, laying together in the same bed serves as a temporary equalizer.

Towards the end of the book, Marji reiterates the vastly different experiences of Iranian people across different classes. When she and her friends are arrested for hosting a house party, their parents pay twenty thousand Tumans for them to be released from jail. Following this comment, Satrapi notes, “to be able to party, you had to have means” (Satrapi 306). This is an important instance of Satrapi acknowledging her own privilege. In many instances, she boasts the ways in which Iranians could circumvent government restrictions, but she recognizes it was primarily the wealthy people that had this privilege. Figure 25 is one of the most striking visual displays of class differences in *Persepolis* (Satrapi 102).

Fig. 25. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Key." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 102. Print.

The top panel depicts young children who were "promised a better life" exploding on a minefield. Notably, Satrapi reserves this striated shading technique for intense and gruesome scenes. Marji explains that "the key to paradise was for poor people" (Satrapi 102). Meanwhile,

in the bottom panel, Satrapi depicts a jubilant scene of her first party. This stark contrast in scenery demonstrates how vastly different Iranian people's experiences were during the war across different classes. The positions of the children dancing in the bottom panel are eerily similar to the positions of the boys in the top panel, which draws attention to the fact that they are all Iranian children, but they have hugely different fates.

In the scene depicted in Figure 26, Satrapi presents both dialogue between different versions of the self and dialogue between different feminist stances on beauty practices.

Fig. 26. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Shabbat." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 259. Print.

Marji is shocked that all her friends in Tehran resemble "heroines of American TV series, ready to get married at the drop of a hat" (Satrapi 259). In the top panel, there is a visible division

between Marji and her friends, with her friends glistening with makeup on the right, and Marji in shock on the left. The rest of the scene emphasizes Marji's lack of connection with the Iranian friends that she had not seen in four years. Ironically, Marj is unable to relate to her friends' interest in Western practices such as wearing makeup and going to night clubs, even though Marji was the one who had spent four years in Europe, and her Iranian friends had spent four years under a restrictive Islamic regime. The final frame of the page reveals Marji's older recollective voice empathizing with her friends' behavior:

> A part of me understood them. When something is forbidden, it takes on a disproportionate importance. Much later, I learned that making themselves up and wanting to follow Western ways was an act of resistance on their part.

This quote reveals the complexities of feminist resistance, specifically through beauty and dress choices. On one hand, emulating Western ways is an act of resistance against the the Basij (the Islamic morality police of the Iranian regime) and a reclamation of female agency and individuality. On the other hand, however, it could also suggest that the women are being subjected to a different patriarchy, similar to the one that dominates the West. While women in Iran face literal legal punishment for not abiding by codes of dress, Sandra Lee Bartky argues that women in the West also face punishment—albeit, not of the legal kind—for not adhering to a specific set of beauty standards:

> Feminine bodily discipline has [a] dual character: on the one hand, no one is marched off for electrolysis gunpoint…[but] insofar as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a "subjected and practiced," an inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers (Bartky 37).

From this quote, we can see that the Western patriarchal structure is indeed a disciplinary one, even if there are fewer laws that condemn unacceptable ways of dressing. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi

reveals the multiple different ways in which Iranian women were both oppressed and empowered during the Revolution.

kaur

When thinking of the types of women who have engaged in similar types of feminist activism as kaur over the course of history, we might look at Victorian female newspaper poets. A key example is Scottish female poet, Marion Bernstein, who published poetry in the *Glasgow Weekly Mail* in the 1870s. At the time, popular journalism was often dismissed for being vulgar and superficial, and newspaper verse was rarely considered worthy of "critical attention" (Cohen and Fertig 9). Popular journalism served a similar role in the Victorian era as digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr do now: they were considered recreational media with no legitimate academic merit. However, just as kaur is challenging contemporary perceptions of digital media, so too did Marion Bernstein legitimize newspaper verse as a medium for poetic expression and literary activism. In their essay, "Marion Bernstein and *the Glasgow Weekly Mail* in the 1870s," Edward H. Cohen and Anne R. Fertig examine how Bernstein "established her agency and identity in [the *Glasgow Weekly Mail's*] poetry columns" (Cohen and Fertig 9). Through her poetry, Bernstein made herself known as both a women's rights advocate, and a political activist more broadly. She strategically appealed to her local audience in Glasgow by publishing nautical themed poetry, given the reliance of the Glasgow economy on seafaring and shipbuilding (Cohen and Fertig 9). In addition to writing poetry that echoed newspaper accounts of local issues and current events, Bernstein defined herself through powerful indictments of injustices women faced. In her poem "A Rule to Work Both Ways," Bernstein urged victims of assault to stand up to their offenders:

> If beating can reform a wife,
> It might reform a husband too,

> Since such are the effects of strife—
> My sisters, I advise that you
> Should try it, not with fists—Oh no!
> For that would seem like some weak joker;
> In husband-curing let each blow
> Be given with the kitchen poker!

In this poem, Bernstein takes a similar approach to kaur, addressing her readers as her "sisters" as a way of generating solidarity among women. Indeed, Bernstein ignited the consciousness of many Glaswegian women, in part by interacting with other women in the poetry column. Ultimately, she facilitated important dialogue among women, just as kaur has done through her Instagram account and *milk and honey.* However, since kaur finds herself in an increasingly globalized world with the powers of technology at her disposal, she can reach a much wider audience with her work. As of October 2016, *milk and honey* had sold over half a million copies in the US, was named a New York Times Best Seller, and has now also been translated into Spanish. By reaching such a large and diverse audience, kaur uses art and poetry as an ideal platform for conversation, collaboration, and support among women. The notion of female solidarity pervades kaur's work: she emphasizes "how resilient / and striking the women around us are"; she expresses that her "heart aches for sisters" and "for women helping women"; and states that "other women's bodies are not our battlegrounds" (kaur 175, 187, 191). Through this dimension of her poetry, kaur proves that competition and lack of support among women also perpetuate patriarchal systems of oppression.

Much of kaur's work is centered on reimagining social constructions of the female body and prescribed narratives for women. To this end, she frequently uses nature as a motif in her re-representations of the female body. In her book, *What is Nature?,* author Kate Soper uses the chapter, "Naturalized Woman Feminized Nature," to explore the coding of nature as feminine that is deeply entrenched in Western thought (Soper 142). She argues that the "alignment of

[woman with nature]…derives from the female role in child-birth and her consequent activities as initial mediator between the natural and the cultural" (Soper 140). Throughout her collection, kaur consistently depicts the female body as being deeply connected to nature. Some might argue that kaur is perpetuating the long-standing essentialist association of women with nature. On the contrary, I argue that kaur redefines the association of women with nature by using it to resist socially constructed female beauty standards. The drawing in Figure 6—which appears in a discussion on form in Chapter One—promotes leg hair as natural by depicting the hair as pleasant flowers and mushrooms, therefore countering societal understandings of body hair as ugly and unwanted by beautifying it in her drawing. kaur's use of enjambment, deliberate choices of how many words to have on each line, and specific choice of line break placement all contribute to her deliverance of an indictment of body policing. For instance, the separation of "your body," "is not his home," and "he is a guest," allows for that thought to be extended and thus, granted more importance. Similarly, the isolation of "again" on the last line powerfully conveys the firmness and seriousness with which the speaker asserts her power over her own body. The metaphor kaur uses to compare a male/female interaction to a guest visiting someone's home is central to her reinvention of power dynamics in the poem. The choice of the word "guest" as opposed to "visitor" is notable, since it implies that the "homeowner" has *invited* the guest, for if she had not, she would have never accepted him into her body. In a different poem, kaur reiterates the idea of body hair as natural, stating that "we are at war with what comes most naturally to us" in the italics at end of the poem (kaur 193).

A scene from *Persepolis* about hair removal as "an obsession of [Middle Eastern] women" proves to be an interesting point of comparison for this poem. Through this comparison, we can see that kaur and Satrapi are functioning on different levels of feminist resistance. Satrapi

Fig. 31. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Shabbat." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 274. Print.

executes the preliminary step of social change in acknowledging the societal—and specifically Middle Eastern—expectation for women to remove excess body hair. However, Satrapi merely states that hair removal is a social norm for women, and then proceeds to explain how she herself participated it in the norm when attempting to "take [her]self into [her] own hands" (Satrapi 273,

274). Comparing Satrapi's depiction of leg hair and kaur's drawing of leg hair reveals the difference between their feminist projects. In a way, kaur attempts to dismantle the very gender norms that Satrapi explicates through *Persepolis.* For instance, when Marji's boyfriend, Enrique, leaves her bed before she can lose her virginity to him as she had planned, she immediately blames herself and her appearance: "It's my fault! I'm so unbelievably ugly. I'm sure that's why he didn't want me…I'm ugly. I smell. I'm terrible. I'm hairy!" (Satrapi 213). Indeed, we could identify countless poems of kaur's that respond directly to insecurities about body image. Nevertheless, Satrapi's sequence of images still expounds the intricacies of female body policing, even if she does not outwardly denounce it in her text. Instead, she illustrates the harshness of hair removal practices in her drawings through her facial expressions. It is only *after* she has removed all unwanted hair that she calls herself "a sophisticated woman" (Satrapi 273). The frame below that statement includes a staged portrait of Marji. Notably, Satrapi draws herself with curly hair—a popular hair trend in the 1980s—in situations where she is acting the way others want her to, and she draws herself with straight hair when she is being true to herself. In this portrait, she looks stifled and almost pained, suggesting the constrains of societal beauty norm being enforced upon her.

Section 2: Rendering Personal Identity

Extending a Maternal Line

Satrapi

Satrapi's parents were clearly instrumental in the development of her identity; in fact, she dedicates *Persepolis* to them. While she is in Vienna, Mari is shocked by her housemate's behavior towards her own mother: "In my culture, parents were sacred. We at least owed them an answer…To behave [so rudely] to one's own mother made me indignant" (Satrapi 180). From

this quote, we can see that even Marji's rebelliousness is quelled by her respect for her parents authority, and her commitment to Iranian cultural values. That Marji's parents are well-educated, loving, and supportive greatly contributes to her identity formation and political views. When Marji's teacher expresses concern to her parents about Marji wanting to be a prophet when she grows up, they immediately jump to Marji's defense, stressing to her that she should never limit her aspirations. Moreover, Marji's parents buy her many books from the time she is very young, thereby fueling her unending curiosity and love of learning. (Satrapi 175). While most Iranians fled Tehran when it was under attack, but Marji's parents stay because they believe the possibility of a future after the war is "linked to [Marji's] French education…and Tehran was the only place [she] could get it" (Satrapi 137). Reading and education remain central in Marji's project of identity formation over the course of the book.

While Satrapi places great importance on the role of her family in her identity formation, she places the most importance on the role of maternal figures—especially for young girls. In fact, both kaur and Satrapi join many female authors who preceded them in venerating their mothers as powerful role models through their writing. The function of the character Hecuba in Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* is a useful example. In Wolf's novel, Hecuba is not portrayed as the stereotypical nurturing mother, but is instead portrayed as stern, unsympathetic, and powerful. However, Hecuba's strictness is paradoxically liberating for her daughter, Cassandra. Hecuba recognizes her daughter's inherent independence and asserts that Cassandra "does not need [her]" (Wolf 12). Per her father, Priam, "Hecauba dominates only those who can be dominated. She loves the indomitable ones" (Wolf 20). Therefore, Cassandra ultimately realizes that her mother's lack of compassion is precisely what facilitates her independence. Hecuba and Cassandra's mother-daughter dynamic is reminiscent of that Marji and her mother in certain

moments. The scene below attests to Marji's mother's unrelenting prioritization of Marji's education. Her sternness stems from a deep-rooted desire for her daughter to become a strong, successful, and independent woman (Satrapi 113).

Fig. 27. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Cigarette." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 113. Print.

The work of both Alice Walker and Lucille Clifton are also relevant in conversations about the importance of a maternal line. In Walker's essay, she stresses that we must regularly honor our mothers' and grandmothers' legacies as "Artists:"

> ...these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane (Walker 233).

Here, Walker urges the reader to cherish maternal lineage. Clifton expresses a similar idea in a poem in her collection *Two-Headed Woman*:

> i was born with twelve fingers
> like my mother and my daughter.
> each of us
> born wearing strange black gloves
> extra baby fingers hanging over the sides of our cribs and
> dipping into the milk.
> somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells
> and our wonders were cut off
> but they didn't understand the powerful memories of ghosts. now
> we take what we want with invisible fingers
> and we connect
> my dead mother my live daughter and me
> through our terrible shadowy hands.

In this poem, Clifton points to the lasting spiritual legacy that mothers leave for their daughters. In the penultimate line of the poem, Clifton artfully separates "my dead mother," "my live daughter," and "and me," with spaces, suggesting an elongated female genealogy.

In his essay, "Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," Babak Elahi emphasizes "the importance of the mother as a key figure in the authorial persona's sense of self" (Elahi 318). Satrapi consistently portrays her mother as a strong female role model. When her mother comes to visit her in Vienna for the first time, Marji frantically prepares for her mother's arrival. Marji seems to want to cleanse herself of the impurities she has accumulated since she last saw her mother. It is as if cleaning will return her to prior physical and mental state (Satrapi 199-201).

Over the course of the book, Marji's mother continuously advocates for her daughter's independence. When Marji is a little girl during the early stages of the revolution, her mother does not stifle her fervor for activism. Even when Marji's father warns that her attending a

protest would be too dangerous, her mother insists, "She's coming too…she should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now" (Satrapi 76)**.**

Fig. 28. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Trip." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 76. Print.

Later in the book, when Marji gets married, she finds her mother crying in a room as she imagines her daughter's life as a young married woman in Iran:

> I have always wanted for you to become independent, educated, cultured…and here you are getting married at twenty-one. I want you to leave Iran, for you to be free and emancipated…" (Satrapi 317)

Her mother maintains this attitude towards her daughter's future when Marji leaves Iran at the end of the book. She says, "This time, you're leaving for good. You are a free woman. The Iran of today is not for you. I forbid you to come back!" (Satrapi 341). In this moment, Marji's mother prioritizes her daughter's freedom and ultimate happiness over her desire to live in the same place as her.

Significantly, both kaur and Satrapi connect with their mothers through reading, writing, and drawing. Miller extrapolates on this notion in relation to Marji and her mother:

> …it is through the mediation of books, and in particular the encounter with women's writing, which maintains and strengthens [Marjane's] affective links with her mother.

One of the most obvious examples of this is Marji reading her mother's favorite book: de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

Fig. 29. Satrapi, Marjane. "Pasta." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 175. Print.

Miller places this scene within a larger conversation about the role of reading in the development of female identity and subjectivity:

> Satrapi's frequent representation of herself reading connects her not only to her mother but to another female genealogy: that of the history of women painters in both East and West, much of which was long suppressed and has been disinterred relatively recently by feminist art critics (Miller 49).

Therefore, it is ultimately through both the consumption *and* the production of art and writing that Satrapi extends a maternal and more broadly female line, all the while forging her own feminist path.

The bottom right panel in Figure 29 identifies Marji as not only a woman, but an "Iranian woman" (Satrapi 274). Therefore, when she turns to her mother as a figure of guidance, she does so not just to shape her understanding of womanhood, but specifically to shape her understanding of Iranian womanhood. As a part of her larger agenda of redefining Iranianness on her own terms, Satrapi frequently portrays her mother as non-conforming with the ideals of Islamic motherhood and womanhood. We can draw useful comparisons by comparing representations of Marji's mother with representations of the ideal Muslim woman in revolutionary posters of the time:

Fig. 30. White Silhouette of Fatimah, 1979

Middle Eastern Posters Collection
Box 2, Poster 30
Special Collections Research Center
The University of Chicago Library

Fig. 31. Satrapi, Marjane. "Pasta." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 175. Print.

Figure 31 portrays the white silhouette of Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic Republic promoted Fatemah as the "true leader of women" and the "Mother of Martyrs." The figure's white silhouette symbolizes purity, and invites Iranian women to imagine themselves in her place. In post-revolutionary Iran, women were encouraged to emulate her qualities of piety, patience, and obedience (University of Chicago Library). Satrapi's representation of her mother in Figure 31 clearly rejects the ideal of Islamic womanhood that Figure 30 promotes. In Figure 31, Marji's mother has her fist in the air, her mouth open, and her eyebrows furrowed. Her hair, sunglasses, and collared shirt suggest present her as Westernized and obviously resistant to Islamic fundamentalism. While many revolutionary posters did indeed represent women as active participants in the revolutionary effort, those women had the end goal of supporting the Islamic Regime.

Satrapi's commitment to cherishing and learning from her maternal figures continues through the end of *Persepolis*. In the last scene of the book, the reader learns that Marji's grandmother dies (Satrapi 341). We could interpret this as the end of one female life, and thus the official shifting of the maternal line as Marji begins her new life in Europe. Throughout the book, Marji's grandmother is a constant source of maternal wisdom and guidance. Therefore, her death signifies Marji's transition into womanhood, as well as the great responsibility bestowed upon her to make her grandmother proud by always "be[ing] true to [her]self" (Satrapi 150).

kaur

Like Satrapi, kaur also joins a long line of female artists who came before her in venerating her mother as the most influential figure in her life. Appropriately, the first poem in the section, "The Loving," establishes kaur's utmost awe and admiration towards her mother, as she was "changed…to see [at age four that] the entire universe rested at [her] mother's feet"

(kaur 45). This poem emphasizes kaur's high regard for her mother, and the ways in which it infiltrates all aspects of her life. Furthermore, on the bio of her website, kaur attributes her artistic inclinations first and foremost to her mother: "at the age of 5 [kaur] began to draw and paint—a hobby picked up from her mother" (kaur). This is significant because, like Satrapi, kaur finds a connection to her mother through artistic expression.

In addition to her mother's influence, kaur's overall family dynamic also greatly affected her self-development. She repeatedly emphasizes the ways in which her relationships with the men in her family have set a precedent for her relationships with other men, and she reiterates her unfamiliarity with healthy relationships (kaur 20). One of the poems at the beginning of her collection sets a precedent for kaur's focus on the role of family and heritage in self-development. In this poem, kaur artfully combines specific detail (i.e. 4 a.m. and 4:35 a.m.), sensory description, personal reflection, and narrative into just four stanzas. She also introduces the idea of being conditioned or taught how to treat oneself and others, which is closely related to the idea of upbringing. While many of kaur's poems appeal to a vast and diverse readership, this first poem launches the reader into a particularly jarring situation that most readers will not have experienced. The first stanza gradually intensifies, with each line shorter than the last, culminating in the last and shortest line, "I was five"—the most shocking revelation (kaur 12).

Reconciling Tradition and Progress

Satrapi

Fig. 32. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Vegetable." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 194. Print.

As Marji's character develops over the course of the book, the reader comes to understand her identity as increasingly hybrid, comprised of an amalgamation of her memories and past experiences. The above figure perfectly encapsulates the multiple parts of Marji's fragmented identity (Satrapi 193, 194). Despite her liberal views, Satrapi maintains a strong connection to Iranian history, culture, national identity, and natural landscape. When she is in Vienna, she becomes painfully aware of everything she misses about her life with her family in Iran, despite realizing how fortunate she is to not be subjected to the hardships of war and oppression. Although Marji's opinions do not always align with those of one of her host mothers, Armelle, she enjoys spending time with her "because she was the only one who knew Iran. She understood [her] nostalgia for the Caspian Sea. She was also the only one to have seen a

Samovar" (Satrapi 181). A Samovar is an ornately designed heated metal container used to boil water for tea in Iran. Ann Miller describes it as "a metonym for everyday life in Iran" (Miller 48). In her book *Embroideries*, Satrapi also uses the Samovar as an important cultural symbol.

Fig. 33. Satrapi, Marjane. Embroideries. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 175. Print.

Notably, the Samovar acts as the center of social interactions in Iranian culture, and often as a kind of fulcrum for female conversation. In fact, the plot of *Embroideries* revolves entirely around Iranian women's conversations about their sexuality over tea. Satrapi emphasizes the

Fig. 34. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Return." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 249. Print.

centrality of the Samovar and tea in Persian culture in other moments as well, including when she devotes three panels to her mother offering her tea when she is back in Iran (Satrapi 249). By devoting three entire panels to a seemingly insignificant occurrence, Satrapi highlights how precious even the most pedestrian activities can be, especially when she has been deprived of them for so long.

When Marji's mother comes to visit her in Vienna, she is overjoyed to be able to "taste…the heavenly food of [her] country." She also finds it relaxing to talk to her mother in Persian, as "it had been so long since [she] had been able to talk to someone without having to explain [her] culture" (Satrapi 206). Marji's mother's visit to Iran also exposes cultural dissonances between Western and Iranian culture. While in Vienna, Satrapi suddenly feels significantly more conservative than her European peers, admitting "[she] came from a traditionalist country" (Satrapi 185). Her mother experiences this apparent shift in positioning on the ideological spectrum to an even greater extent when she visits, despite her being considered extremely liberal in Iran:

Fig. 35. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Horse." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 201. Print.

Marji's mother's reaction in this instance is a testament to the intricacies and complexities of ideological spectrums. In Iran, both Marji and her mother are extremely forward-thinking, but in Vienna, even they are shocked by the people's liberal attitudes.

As Marji continues to grapple with her fragmented identity, she seeks to avoid becoming a social pariah, even resorting to denying her Iranian nationality: "…at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear. It was easier to lie than to assume that burden" (Satrapi 195). Eventually, Marji becomes frustrated with denying and hiding her Iranian identity, and loudly exclaims, "I'm Iranian and proud of it!" to her Austrian peers. (Satrapi 197). Nabizadeh notes that "Marjane's disavowal of her Iranian identity is inverted after her return to Tehran," since her international experiences change her perspective, making it more difficult for her to identify with her old friends. Marji sternly tells her mother that she does not want to see anyone when she first returns to Iran.

Although Marji becomes a transnational and hybrid subject as she comes of age, Satrapi nevertheless stresses her sincere sense of Iranian pride all throughout. For instance, when she and her family happen upon a channel that is playing Iran's national anthem, they are all "overwhelmed" because it has been over a year since they had heard it. The composition and size of the panel functions to disrupt the page in the same way that the emotional experience of hearing Iran's pre-revolutionary national anthem disrupts the scene that is depicted (Satrapi 83). Besides this instance, Satrapi consistently refers to Iran by saying "my country," thereby reinforcing her patriotism and emotional investment in Iranian culture.

Satrapi also portrays her identity as being rooted and grounded in Iran's natural landscape. Before leaving for Vienna, Marji fills a jar with soil from her family's garden as a way of taking a piece of Iranian land with her (Satrapi 149). She takes this notion to the next

level before she leaves Iran for good at the end of the book. Importantly, she spends her last three months in Tehran indulging in a close intimacy with the Iranian landscape:

> Between June and September '94, the date of my definitive departure, I spent every morning wandering in the mountains of Tehran, where I memorized every corner…I went on a trip with my grandma to the Caspian Sea, where I filled my lungs with that very special air. That air that doesn't exist anywhere else (Satrapi 340).

Marji finds it difficult to navigate the multiple facets of her identity; she finds this especially challenging when trying to assimilate to Western culture in Vienna: "The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else's rules" (Satrapi 193). The panel below perfectly depicts Marji's feeling of being pulled in two different directions:

Fig. 36. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Vegetable." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 193. Print.

This is certainly not the only instance in which Marji occupies a liminal position. Notably, both the sections of the book end with Marji in the airport—a symbolically liminal space. Marji's complicated identity makes it difficult for her to keep her promise to her grandmother of "always stay[ing] true to [herself]." Her grandmother's counsel is significant because of the weight

Satrapi places on maternal influence in identity formation. When Marji falsely accuses a man on the street of being indecent to evade her own punishment, her "grandmother yell[s] at [her] for the first time in [her] life" (Elahi 137). Elahi notes that "the loss of her grandmother's approval provides the impetus for her, in fact, to work towards the ideal self, a self-imagined for her by her grandmother, her uncle, her mother, and her father" (Elahi 137). This incident reinforces the centrality of Marji's family in her ongoing project of identity formation.

kaur

Although online biographies of kaur often lead with the fact that kaur is a Canadian-based poet, she never once mentions her Canadian identity in her collection. Instead, she prioritizes her Indian family heritage, identifying strongly as both "a woman of sikhi" and "a woman of color" (kaur 171). Her poetry evokes a visceral connection to her ethnic roots.

the name kaur
makes me a free woman
it removes the shackles that
try to bind me
uplifts me
to remind me i am equal to
any man even though the state
of this world screams to me i am not
that i am my own woman and
i belong wholly to myself
and the universe
it humbles me
calls out and says i have a
universal duty to share with
humanity to nurture
and serve the sisterhood
to raise those that need raising
the name kaur runs in my blood
it was in me before the world itself existed
it is my identity and my liberation

-kaur
a woman of sikhi

In the poem above, kaur exhibits her deep-rooted sense of family pride, and the connection she feels to her name and the women who share it. (kaur 184). This poem is especially important because of the symbolism of the name "kaur," which Lakhpreet Kaur explains in an article in Ms. Blog magazine:

> Many…[Sikh] women have the last name Kaur. They are not necessarily related. Many women of the Sikh faith share the name Kaur as a way to indicate equality and sisterhood. The 10th Sikh Guru, or prophet, asked all Sikhs to adopt a collective name reserved for royal families to signify the inherent equality and nobility of every individual: Kaur for women and Singh for men. This challenged the Indian caste system, in which traditional family last names were used to signify one's social status, and undermined the patriarchal practices of taking the husband's name.

kaur takes the practice of deconstructing conventions of language to the next level with her use of all lowercase letters. On her website, kaur's explanation of her decision to only use lowercase and periods in her poetry is centered on striving for an aesthetic that reflects her values and her visions of social justice:

> although i can read and understand my mother tongue (punjabi) i do not have the skillset to write poetry in it. to write punjabi means to use gurmukhi script. and within this script there are no uppercase or lowercase letters. all letters are treated the same. i enjoy how simple that is. how symmetrical and how absolutely straightforward. i also feel there is a level of equality this visuality brings to the work. a visual representation of what i want to see more of within the world: equalness.

This goal of "equalness" is the fundamental glue between kaur's feminist and Sikh values. The poem urges for equality in the context of female beauty standards:

> my issue with what they consider beautiful
> is their concept of beauty
> centers around excluding people
> i find hair beautiful
> when a woman wears it
> like a garden on her skin
> that is the definition of beauty
> big hooked noses
> pointing upward to the sky

like they're rising
to the occasion
skin the color of earth
my ancestors planted crops on
to feed a lineage of women with
thighs thick as tree trunks
eyes like almonds
deeply hooded with conviction
the rivers of punjab
flow through my bloodstream so
don't tell me my women
aren't as beautiful
as the ones in
your country

In this poem, kaur denounces what the reader assumes to be the Western "concept of beauty," arguing that it is centered on exclusion. Throughout her poem, she draws on natural imagery—as she does frequently throughout her collection—to emphasize how naturally beautiful all different types of women's bodies are, regardless of whether they adhere to socially constructed beauty standards. Importantly, kaur does not only depict body hair as *not* ugly, but rather depicts it as especially beautiful, comparing it to a garden that a woman "wears…on her skin" (kaur 171). She goes on to reimagine negative perceptions of specifically ethnic body characteristics, drawing on more natural imagery to highlight their beauty. While social norms typically deem big noses as undesirable, kaur interprets them as empowering. She does not merely describe non-white skin as being "the color of earth," but goes further to say it is "the color of earth that [her] ancestors planted crops on," therefore forging a connection between her own body, the earth, and her ancestry. The reference to her ancestors planting crops "to feed a lineage of women" also underscores the value of a woman's body beyond vanity—its value for labor, survival, and sustaining a family. Her final metaphor evokes an image of "the rivers of punjab flow[ing] through [her] bloodstream." This metaphor marks the climax of the poem, as it contains the first

specific geographical reference, and also creates an image of kaur being deeply infused with a sense of place and origin. The seamless progression from a description of a woman of color's body, to the land, to an ancestral past reflects the interconnectedness of those elements, as well as the ways in which every facet of a woman's body is rooted in a natural and familial past. This poem plays into kaur's larger resistance against the equation of whiteness with beauty, suggesting an oppositional relationship between white and non-white women with the mention of "my women" and "your country."

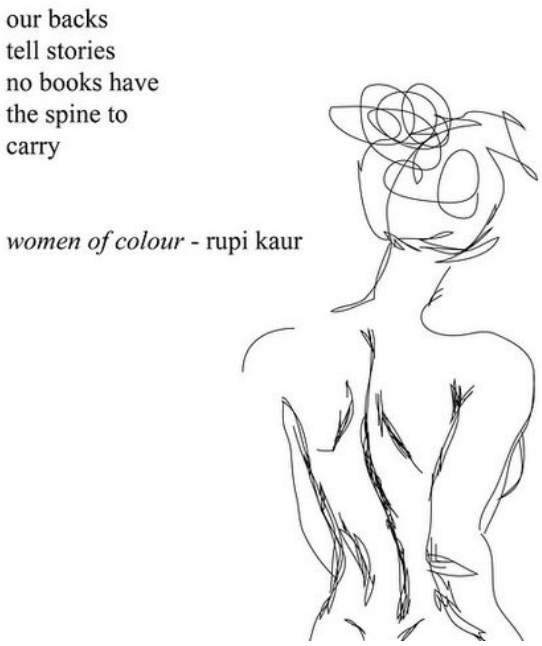

Fig. 37. kaur, rupi. "the healing." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 171. Print.

Figure 37 is another poem dedicated to kaur's fellow women of color. kaur uses "spine" as a double-entendre to draw a comparison between written stories and the stories engrained in women's backs. kaur uses darker and harsher lines to display the strength of the women's spine, using the softer and thinner lines of her hair as a visual counterpoint. If we regard "backs" as a

metonym for women's lived experiences, and "books" as a metonym for scholarship, this poem could serve to critique the elitism and homogeneity of the feminist academy (kaur 170). Such a critique welcomes kaur into a larger scholarly conversation with theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Anzaldua, who argue for the use of feminist scholarship as a testimony of real women's lived experiences as opposed to a replacement of them. kaur's popular and accessible work functions as a necessary counterbalance to lofty feminist literature that is often inaccessible to those women to whom it is most relevant.

Drawing on the Old to Generate the New

Satrapi

Satrapi named her book "Persepolis" after the ancient capital of the Persian Empire in (ca. 550–330 BC) (Ancient History Encyclopedia). It is very significant that Satrapi titled her book "Persepolis" and begins it with historical introduction. Satrapi tactfully introduces her book by painting an image of Iran as an "old and great civilization" (Satrapi Introduction). Satrapi's drawing style also exudes a traditional Persian essence. Tara Bahrampour describes her drawings as "woodcut like drawings with touches of classical Persian art" (Bahrampour). According to Chute, "[Satrapi's] style locates itself along a continuum of Persian art," as it is often reminiscent of Persian miniatures, murals, and friezes (Chute 98). Satrapi confirms Persian art as one of her sources of inspiration, describing it as "the Iranian side [that] will always be with [her]" (2004a). This incorporation of traditional Persian style contributes to Satrapi's overall effort to recall Iran's rich cultural past that is often shrouded by Islamic extremism and political turmoil.

The practice of recalling old Persian traditions also permeates contemporary Iranian society and Iranian feminist movements. An example of this is the contemporary Iranian fashion

brand, *Pooshema.* Started by designer, Farnaz Abdoli, *Pooshema* is a domestic clothing line—now officially registered in Iran—that features female, and now male "street style fashion" clothing that is bold, colorful, and unique, but that also respects all government-instated clothing restrictions in Iran (Serjoie 3). By wearing brands like *Pooshema*, young women in Tehran use fashion as means of self-expression and to reclaim their agency in light of codes of dress that are enforced by the Basij—the Islamic morality police of the Iranian regime. Designer, Naghmeh Kiumarsi is particularly known for recasting traditional Iranian patterns onto her work (Serjoie 4). Her designs—and others like them—embody a fusion of the traditional and the modern: they are bold and fresh, but also feature calligraphy, Iranian textiles, and lines from famous old Persian poems.

While recent fashion trends in Tehran constitute resistance against the Islamic Republic—which was founded on the principle of demonizing the West—it can also be regarded as a kind of resistance against Westernization. Being "fashionable" in Tehran has long been equated to having a Western sense of style. Iranian women seldom consider domestic clothing lines to be "in style." In their article, "A World in Motion," Johnathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo discuss the ways in which non-western subjects are "constructed as passive receivers of globalization," as well as the assumption that the flow of globalization is "west to the rest" (Inda and Rosaldo 7). In resistance to this assumption, *Pooshema* draws inspiration from traditional Iranian designs and other Eastern traditions, as discussed above. The recent fashion movement also recalls a more recent Iranian past, specifically the pre-revolutionary fashion culture. However, the contemporary fashion movement is distinct because, unlike fashion trends during the Shah Pahlavi's regime, current prevalent trends are *not* inspired by Western styles. *Pooshema* literally means "our cloth" in Farsi, implying a very firm assertion of Iranian identity and the

expression of a strongly Iranian style. Thus, Abdoli subverts the long-standing Iranian idea of "fashionable" clothing being Western clothing. In this sense, they are not only resisting the oppression of the own government, but also resisting the reductive Western perceptions of Iranian women as constantly oppressed and victimized.

While in art school, Marji and her husband take on a project "to create the equivalent of Disneyland in Tehran" (Satrapi 329). The premise of their project is significant because it proves that they are defining progress for themselves, as opposed to simply equating progress with Western ways. Marji encapsulates this mentality when defending her dissertation (Satrapi 330):

> Our mythology is one of the most complex mythologies on earth, but we have never known how to mine it, for fear of making it vulgar. Many things, like the holy grail, the knights of the round table, etc., etc., come from Iran. In our country, we have theme parks, but the motifs are American. Which is the reason behind our initiative.

That Marji carries out this project at the end of the book renders it symbolic of the autonomy she has gained over her own cultural identity. As a child, Marji admires Western icons such as Bruce Lee, Kim Wilde, and Michael Jackson, and associates them strongly with her own liberation. However, living in Vienna complicates her notions of freedom and progress. Although her project can never actually be executed under the Islamic government, her mission to create a theme park that replaces American motifs with motifs from Persian mythology embodies Marji's achievement of becoming autonomous without necessarily becoming Westernized.

Personalizing Religion and Tradition

Interestingly, both kaur and Satrapi—and the avatars that represent them in their books—straddle progressive and traditional thinking. This duality mainly reveals itself in conversations about spirituality and religion. I hope to examine the strong spiritual undertones in both works. Both women cleverly deconstruct the typical oppositional relationship between religious and

feminist thought, allowing the two to work together symbiotically. In *Persepolis*, young Marji considers herself to be deeply religious. Although her family strongly opposes the Islamic ideology enforced by revolutionaries, she cherishes her personal relationship with God (See Fig. 1). Many of kaur's poems explore her connection to the Sikh religion. The chapter entitled "the Healing" was particularly influenced by Sikh principles. Moreover, the title *milk and honey* is an allusion to God's promise to Moses of "a land flowing with milk and honey." However, in the Old Testament, the "honey" refers to fruit nectar, specifically date honey. kaur's interpretation of the honey as bees' honey is a deconstruction in itself (see Fig. 2). kaur's connection to milk and honey is also deeply personal, since both are tied in closely with her community. Her father studies and practices homeopathy and Ayurveda medicine, and is a strong believer in the healing powers of both honey and milk. Therefore, neither Satrapi nor kaur allow their spirituality to be prescribed or governed by others. Instead, they personalize their spiritual journeys to act as tools for female empowerment in the face of oppression.

Satrapi

Fig. 38. Satrapi, Marjane. "The Vegetable." Persepolis. Paris: L'Association, 2003. 193. Print.

In her chapter "A Female Prophet? Authority and Inheritance in Marjane Satrapi," Rachel Trousdale examines how young Marji personalizes her spirituality: she is "deeply religious" but also very unorthodox (Trousdale 243). The top left-hand corner of Figure 37 encompasses this internal conflict of hers, which Babak Elahi perfectly articulates:

> Placing Marjane's ideologically hailed Islamic identity alongside her mimicry of Western cultural and commercial (though potentially counter-cultural) identity, we arrive at the heart of this narrative: the attempt to piece together a divided identity, a fragmented

> subjectivity, a subjectivity that is split not between some absolute and essential "West" and some monolithic Islam, but between self-consciously iconic and ideological images of Western and Islamic worldviews (Elahi 318).

Although this frame draws a hard line between religion and progressive thought, Satrapi ultimately facilitates a harmonious coexistence and conversation between the two through her own spiritual and political journey. Deviant from the typical narrative, Marji's family is not the reason for her spirituality—she has a very secular upbringing. Her relationship with God is personal and derives from an internal locus of motivation. Satrapi depicts her faith as centered on one-on-one conversations with God, thereby presenting an intimate religious experience that greatly contrasts with how Islam functions at the national level in Iran. Trousdale expands on Marji's religious autonomy, stressing that "[s]he is the center of her own moral universe," and that she also intends "to become central for others" (Trousdale 243).

Appearing in the first few pages of the book, young Marji expressing her desire to be a prophet is arguably one of Satrapi's boldest acts of subversion. Drawing a shining sun around her face and showing a group of people kneeling at her feet, she posits herself as the center of the universe. Moreover, to insert herself in a line of male prophets is to re-write the ancient scripture from which women's subservience to men originates. Young Satrapi does not express any doubt about her ability to be a prophet. One might dismiss this determination as merely a child being naïve, but Satrapi is suggesting a much more legitimate and profound kind of resistance. While Trousdale is justified in saying that "Marji is aware her gender sets her apart from earlier prophets," it is important to acknowledge how briefly she entertains the idea of her gender being a handicap. Marji wants to be "the last prophet"—not the first *female* prophet. In fact, the only mention of her gender appears as "a woman?" which floats above illustrations of seemingly irritated male prophets (Miller 43). Therefore, at age six, Marji has already decided to never let

her gender limit her aspirations. In addition to having an elementary understanding of sexism, Marji's real-life experiences are limited and her perspective is narrow (see Figure 39). Nevertheless, even her six-year-old self exhibits an accurate understanding of social injustices: her observation that "[their] made did not eat with [them]" reveals engrained Iranian social hierarchies; her comment about her father driving a Cadillac—and the awe-struck face of the boy in the bottom right-hand corner of the frame—points to Marji's awareness of her own privilege, proving that she recognizes the relevance of class in addition to other identity markers in the Iranian experience. Marji reveals that she understandably still has a self-centered world-view at age six, since the cause about which she cares the most is her grandmother's knee pain. Trousdale appropriately characterizes this scene, pointing to how it shapes Marji's subjectivity:

> Marji's very first religious stance is both conformist, in its desire to emulate traditional models, and transgressive, because she is choosing models that, as a woman, she is not supposed to emulate" (Trousdale 245).

Ultimately, Satrapi's explanation of her childhood aspiration to become a prophet introduces Marji's ongoing oscillation between conformity and rebellion throughout the book.

Satrapi continues to prove her commitment to personalizing her own faith instead of succumbing to the government's prescription of religion. When Marji is being interviewed for her the "Ideological Test," she admits to the Mullah that she does not know how to pray. She explains herself honestly: "Like all Iranians, I don't understand Arabic. If praying is talking to God, I prefer to do it in a language I know. I believe in God, but I speak to him in Persian" (Satrapi 284). Marji's explanation expounds the centrality of language in agency and autonomy. For Marji, speaking to God in a language she does not understand would diminish her connection to God and render the act irrelevant and meaningless. Her ardent insistence on practicing her faith in a language she knows reflects her larger commitment to seeking power and autonomy

through language. The chapter ends with positive news of Marji passing the exam. In this instance, Marji is rewarded for speaking her mind and remaining true to her beliefs in the face of authority and at the risk of sabotaging her future. The overarching narrative texts bears an extremely powerful statement: "I was lucky, I had stumbled on a true religious man" (Satrapi 284). In saying this, Satrapi is boldly denouncing the basis of the Islamic Regime, and reminding her readers of her own view of what "true" religion is.

kaur

when my mother opens her mouth
to have a conversation at dinner
my father shoves the word hush
between her lips and tells her to
never speak with her mouth full
this is how the women in my family
learned to live with their mouths closed

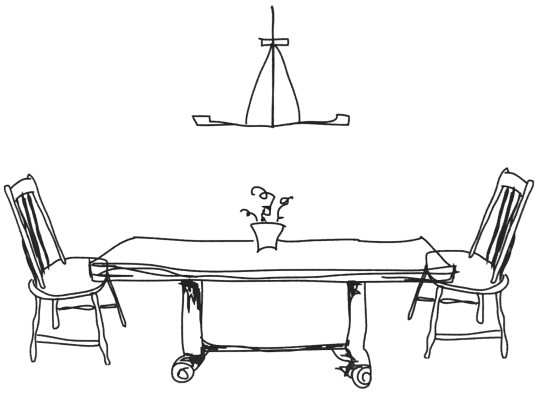

Fig. 39. kaur, rupi. "the hurting." milk and honey. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2016. 35. Print.

kaur experiences a similar dilemma to Satrapi's, which Elahi describes as having to "construct subjective wholeness out of abstract divisions and fragments of self" (Elahi 318). In a poem in "the hurting," kaur poignantly notes the suppression of female expression within her

family (kaur 35). In Figure __, kaur presents a jarring metaphorical representation of her mother being silenced by her father at the dinner table (kaur 35). The clever interplay between having a mouthful of food and a mouthful of words allows this one instance at the dinner table to serve as a symbol for women being silenced more generally in her family. By communicating this reality through poetry, kaur directly resists this silencing, claiming a space for her own voice.

Beyond the patriarchal power structures that dominate her family dynamics, there are other parts of kaur's identity that contradict her feminist motives. An example is her Punjabi and Sikh identity, and her feminist identity. Through her poetry and photos on her Instagram page, kaur exhibits a great pride in her identity as "a woman of sikhi." kaur's long flowing hair is a prominent visual motif on her Instagram page, and cutting hair is forbidden in the Sikh religion. Moreover, kaur's general mission of promoting love and peace through her work aligns with the ways in which "Sikh teaching emphasizes the principle of equality of all humans and rejects discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, and gender" (Encyclopedia Britannica). She also promotes the concept of "seva" (selfless service) in her poetry, which the Sikh gurus teach as a method for overcoming egoism—"the primary root of five evil impulses and the cycle of rebirth" (Encyclopedia Britannica). The Sikh religion defines these "five evil impulses" or "Five Thieves" as ego, anger, greed, attachment, and lust. kaur's work is largely commensurate with the Sikh goal to combat these five evil impulses. However, the fifth impulse, lust, possibly gives rise to some complexities in kaur's devotion to Sikhism. After all, many of her poems promote a sex-positive attitude, condoning masturbation and sex before marriage—both actions that the Sikh religion forbids. Therefore, in self-identifying as a "woman of sikhi" while still promoting unconventional and non-religious behavior, kaur presents a new inspiring option: the option of being both religious *and* feminist; the option of being both traditional *and* progressive.

Conclusion

The phrase "bending boundaries" proves to be multifarious in the context of this thesis. As immigrants, both kaur and Satrapi have traversed geographical and cultural boundaries, and their crafts have served as the perfect platform for retelling their transnational experiences. While Satrapi tells a personal and detailed story of her experience, kaur provides less personal details, thus generating a more universally applicable work. Comparing kaur and Satrapi's expressive choices reveals the complexities of forming women's movements given the vast diversity that exists in women's experiences. On one hand, it is important to find commonalities among women to achieve strength in numbers. On the other hand, however, it is important not to dismiss the multiple differences that exist within the category "woman," and to actively challenge the intersectional systems of oppression that divide the feminist movement. kaur and Satrapi prove the importance of reconciling differences and similarities among women in feminist projects.

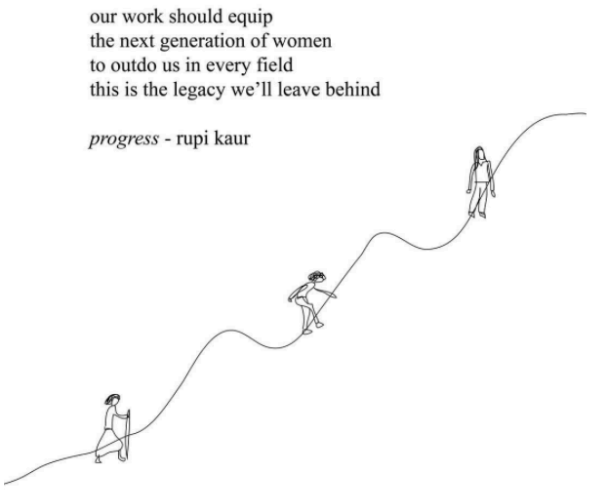

Fig. 40. kaur, rupi. (rupikaur_). "reading literature by revolutionary women…" Instagram, 9 March 2017

My project has focused on the ways in which these women have transcended boundaries between different modes of expression, pairing text and image to the end of proliferating meaning and strengthening their feminist claims. In doing so, they transcend societal boundaries set in place for women, forging new paths for female artists and writers to come after them. kaur's recent Instagram post in honor of International Women's Month epitomizes this notion (see Figure 40). Indeed, both kaur and Satrapi's work will equip the next generation of women to continue their legacies. kaur and Satrapi establish their place as forerunners in the collective women's struggle through their willingness to reconstruct social norms and prescribed narratives on their own accord. Just as Satrapi is among those who have repurposed comics as a medium of expression, kaur is among those who have repurposed Instagram—a popular social photography platform—to become a site for poetry and composite art. Considering both kaur and Satrapi's texts as inaugural and revolutionary in their own domains further proves the way in which both authors use written and artistic expression as activism and resistance. Through the clever pairing of text and image, they privilege a distinctly feminist perspective of their experiences. Ultimately, both Satrapi and kaur transcend the borders between separate modes of expression as a strategy for carving out a space for historically silenced multi-ethnic female voices in the autobiographical tradition.

Although "Persepolis" the film is outside of the scope of this thesis, future projects might consider bringing it into conversation with kaur's use of digital platforms. Instagram comments on kaur's work could also serve as useful primary evidence to measure the impact of her work on her readers. This type of evidence would substantiate claims I make about how language can instigate tangible social change. Such considerations would forward my project, continuing crucial discussions about how artistic expression and activism are changing in the digital age.

Notes

1. While the title only refers to *milk and honey* (kaur's published hardcopy collection) this thesis also examines kaur's constantly evolving Instagram page, considering all her work as one collective entity.
2. I will not capitalize "kaur," "*milk and honey*," or any of the collection's section titles out of respect for kaur's choice to use exclusively lowercase letters.
3. To ensure a clear distinction between the various narrative levels in *Persepolis,* this essay will refer to the author and narrator of *Persepolis* as "Satrapi," and the child protagonist as "Marji." I will maintain other scholars' use of Marji's full name, "Marjane" when quoting them.

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