

A Figurative Analysis of Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the various forms of figurative language employed in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* and analyses the context in which these literary devices are utilised. The poet Kaur received mixed reactions from critics for her concise and free-form poetry as well as its emotional impact on society. Her controversial writings explore issues on sexual assault and violence, and it was reported that *Milk and Honey* is one of the most banned books in the U.S. Thus, this paper aimed to highlight the significance of context in increasing the comprehension of a literature text. The data extracted in this research are based on the four sections in *Milk and Honey*, namely 'the hurting', 'the loving', 'the breaking' and 'the healing'. A descriptive qualitative method is employed for the study where data was gathered and analysed through observation and library research. Mainly, the frameworks used in this study were developed by the Knickerbocker and Reninger theory and the Halliday theory in classifying the various figurative language in *Milk and Honey*. The findings show ten types of figurative language, namely metaphor, personification, irony, hyperbole, allusion, dead metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, simile and paradox used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. The most utilised figurative language was a metaphor and the lowest were dead metaphors and allusion. This study offers insights for educators, which may serve as a pedagogical tool to help students gain a deeper understanding of literary works. Future researchers are suggested to discuss other works by Kaur or other rising poets, focusing on other frameworks, and examine how Kaur's works are effective at empowering women for the benefit of potential readers.

Keywords: *figurative language, literary device, poem, metaphor, allusion*

Introduction

Language is an essential tool for human communication, it functions as to enable individuals to convey thoughts and emotions through speeches or written expressions. Fasold and Connor-Linton (2018) emphasise that language consists of a limited set of elements and principles that allow speakers and writers to construct sentences for various communicative purposes. Communication commonly stems from spoken words, written text, or even non-verbal signs such as body language. Apart from that, one of the ways to communicate is by using figurative language.

Figurative language is found to be used widely in novels, poems (Tiarawati & Ningsih, 2020) and other works, often extending beyond the usual literal representations. It has been extensively studied, even being referred to in Grice's theory of conversational implicature as a departure from conversational norms.

However, figurative language is inherently subjective, resulting in numerous meanings and interpretations. Various related theories, including Knickerbocker and Reninger's theory (1963) as cited by Gayatri Manuaba et al., (2019), and Halliday's theory (1985), contribute to the understanding of this linguistic phenomenon. In contemporary society, poems have become a favoured means for individuals to alleviate stress (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2022) and tension that offer a complex form of expression, capable of soothing and conveying profound meanings. In other words, language, particularly in its figurative and poetic forms, continues to be a powerful tool for human expressions and connections.

Figurative language holds a strong appeal to the imagination, provoking fresh perspectives and new insights. This type of language, including metaphors, similes, and hyperboles, finds common use in poetry, just as seen in one of Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. The book contains four distinct sections namely The Hurting, The Loving, The Breaking and The Healing. Thus, analysing the verses and allegorical language in *Milk and Honey*, allows individuals to witness the enduring presence and significance of poetry in a literary world filled with profound meanings embedded in the writings. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the types of figurative language used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poem?
2. What are the contextual meanings of the figurative language used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*?

In terms of research objectives, this study specifically seeks to:

1. identify the types of figurative language found in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poem; and
2. clarify the contextual meanings of the figurative language used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*.

Literature review

Concept of Figurative Language

Figurative language sustains various expressions that are significantly distinctive from a semantic and syntactic perspective (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021). Authors also added that, figurative language serves both functional and artistic purposes which are, as the semantic indicator in texts, and adds beauty to literary works. Traditional theories of figurative language focused on proving figurative language as a literal meaning expression (Colston & Gibbs, 2021). Besides that, authors also established that new models of figurative language theories suggest when and how context prompts figurative meanings during linguistic analysis. In general, figurative language is defined as words or phrases that have meanings but are necessarily accurate. According to Perrine (1977), it is not always enough to express something about a poem's subject. Thus,

metaphor, personification, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, apostrophe, understatement, allegory, symbol, overstatement, paradox, and irony are all used by a poet to make his words strong.

Knickerbocker and Reninger's Theory

According to Knickerbocker and Reninger (1963), figurative language, often known as metaphorical language or metaphor, involves carrying meaning beyond its literal interpretation, as suggested by its Greek origin 'Metapherein'. The primary goal of literary devices is to convey the meaning of metaphorical texts, regardless of the specific device categories. The theory presents ten figures of speech for figurative language, including allusion, metaphor, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, paradox, dead metaphor, and personification. The study's core analysis revolves around the theoretical framework's hypothesis of these ten types of figurative language. Additionally, Halliday's theory complements and further elaborates the theory proposed.

Halliday's Theory

Another theoretical framework pertaining to figurative language is proposed by Halliday concerning rhetorical devices. According to Halliday (1985), metaphor is deemed to be one of the figures of speech acknowledged in rhetorical theory, in other words, it is also recognized as the general term for figures of speech. Besides, Halliday categorises figures of speech into three groups namely metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. This classification serves as evidence supporting the primary hypothesis proposed by Knickerbocker and Reninger (1963).

Contextual Meaning in Poetry

According to Gazdar (as cited in Thomason, 1995), contextual meaning is a sentence-context correlation. It is the interpretation of a message or an action in linguistics considering situational, social, and interpersonal factors related to a text or a discourse. There are several related studies found to have employed various frameworks to investigate the use of figurative language in poems. For instance, a study done by Preethi and Gayathri (2022) which highlighted the prevalence of repetition as a central element in Maya Angelou's works. Ferawati and Iskandar (2021) have also discovered eight types of figurative language, including simile, metaphor, personification, epithet, synecdoche, metonymy, apophysis, and alliteration, in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*, specifically in a section titled The Hurting. Their study concluded that Kaur utilized figurative language in her poetry to express her thoughts and emotions regarding sensitive subjects like sexual assault and domestic abuse.

Conversely, Heda and Bram (2021) found four types of figurative language namely personification, simile, hyperbole, and metaphor in Kaur's selected poems. By synthesising these various studies, a compre-

hensive understanding of the prevalence and diverse use of figurative language in poetry is achieved, with each study shedding light on different aspects of this expressive form.

Rupi Kaur has influenced her audience in terms of issues like women of colour, abuse, and harassment. According to a study conducted by Tarigan et. al (2021), Rupi Kaur's poems depict women's body rights through the themes of objectification, ownership, and self-acceptance. This suggests that literary devices also play a crucial role in conveying revolutionary messages in literature. Additionally, Jindal (2017) asserted that Kaur employs symbols, like fire, to represent her emotions and struggles as a woman.

Methodology

This paper employed a descriptive qualitative approach, utilising content, and thematic analysis to interpret figurative language used in *Milk and Honey*. Techniques such as collecting open-ended data, analysing drawings and text were presented through tables and figures. Data were also gathered according to trends using thematic analysis. It was found that there are 104 occurrences of figurative language in this writing. Aside from that, a purposive sampling technique is utilised in this study focusing on a figurative analysis on Rupi Kaur's four chapters in *Milk and Honey* namely, The Hurting, The Loving, The Breaking, and The Healing. In the analysis, the method of code-scheming is adapted to ensure that the data is organised and shows patterns or themes for an easier result interpretation as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Code-scheming template

No.	Types of Figurative Language	Occurrence	Percentage (%)
1.	Metaphor	n	%
2.	Irony	n	%
3.	Simile	n	%
4.	Synecdoche	n	%
5.	Hyperbole	n	%
6.	Paradox	n	%
7.	Personification	n	%
8.	Metonymy	n	%
9.	Dead Metaphor	n	%
10.	Allusion	n	%
Total			

Data was analysed by using Knickerbocker and Reninger's (1963) as well as Halliday's (1985) theory. The ten types of figurative language delineated in the initial theory were further elaborated in Halliday's framework leading to the adaptation of both theories in this study. To ensure the validity of this research, this study is anchored to maintaining the definitions of terms and figurative language throughout the entire data analysis procedure. The results of the current study were compared with those from earlier studies as part of the cross-checking process.

Findings

The table below showcases the types of figurative language found in Rupī Kaur's *Milk and Honey* poems. Metaphor, irony, simile, synecdoche, hyperbole, paradox, personification, metonymy, dead metaphors and allusion are among the list of figurative language applied.

Table 2: Types of Figurative Language used in Rupī Kaur's *Milk and Honey*

No.	Types of Figurative Language	Occurrence	Percentage (%)
1.	Metaphor	37	35.6
2.	Irony	13	12.5
3.	Simile	13	12.5
4.	Synecdoche	11	10.6
5.	Hyperbole	10	9.6
6.	Paradox	8	7.7
7.	Personification	5	4.8
8.	Metonymy	3	2.9
9.	Dead Metaphor	2	1.9
10.	Allusion	2	1.9
Total		104	100

It was found that metaphor has the highest percentage (35.6%) among all the types of figurative language utilised by Rupī Kaur. Meanwhile, the second leading type of figurative language employed by the author were both irony and simile as the two types of figurative language were found to have similar number of occurrences (12.5%). Further, synecdoche was identified to occur 11 times (10.6%) in *Milk and Honey*, classifying it as the third most significant type of figurative language. Dead metaphor and allusion were found to be the least used of figurative language, where both were found to have only occurred twice in the whole

book. Hyperbole, paradox, personification and metonymy were found used at 9.6%, 7.7%, 4.8% and 2.9% respectively. Table below depicts among the leading types of figurative language identified in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*.

Table 3: Evidence of the Leading Figurative Language Types in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*

No.	Figurative Language	Chapter	Words/Phrases
1.	Metaphor	The Breaking	"she was a <u>rose</u> in the hands of those who had no intentions of keeping her"
			"you are a <u>war</u> "
			" <u>milk and honey</u> dripped from my lips as i answered"
			" <u>the border</u> between two countries"
			" <u>the art of being empty</u> is simple"
2.	Irony	The Hurting	"every time you tell your daughter you yell at her out of love you teach her to confuse anger with kindness which seems like a <u>good idea</u> "
			"you pinned my legs to the ground with your feet and demanded <u>i stand up</u> "
			"you pull the lump in your throat out with your teeth and <u>say fine</u> <u>numb really</u> "
		The Breaking	"if it was meant to be. fate will bring us to- gether. for a second i wonder if you are real- ly that <u>naive.</u> "
			"love <u>made the danger</u> <u>in you look like safety</u> "

3.	Simile	The Hurting	“till she grows up to trust men who hurt her cause they look so much <u>like</u> you” “trying to convince myself i am allowed to take up space is <u>like</u> writing with my left hand when i was born to use my right”
		The Healing	“i find hair beautiful when a woman wears it <u>like</u> a garden on her skin” “if you let it go slowly <u>like</u> a broken promise let it go”
		The Breaking	“you treat them like they have a heart <u>like</u> yours but not everyone can be as soft and as tender”
4.	Synecdoche	The Loving	“<u>your name</u> is the strongest positive and negative connotation in any language”
		The Healing	“do not look for healing at the <u>feet of those</u> who broke you” “our <u>backs</u> tell stories no books have the spine to carry” “my heart ached for <u>sisters</u> more than any- thing it aches for women helping women like flowers ache for spring”
		The Breaking	“the night after you left i woke up so broken the only place to put <u>the pieces</u> were the bags under my eyes”

Discussion

In this study, Rupi Kaur has utilised all ten types of figurative language, namely the metaphor, irony, simile, synecdoche, hyperbole, paradox, personification, metonymy, dead metaphor, and allusion (as shown in Table 2). According to Colston and Gibbs (2021), figurative language mainly delivers various contextual meanings effectively, displays politeness in writing, visualises an imagery, triggers an idea or emotions and avoids ambiguity on literal meanings (as cited in Peel et al., 2023). The aspects mentioned are seen to be illustrated in the Rupi Kaur's poems in which, based on the evidence above, contexts elucidate the usage of figurative devices in author's writing. Besides, politeness is typically employed in writings to avoid from offending readers. As *Milk and Honey* involved several taboo topics particularly relating to women, the author is believed to be using figurative language and politeness in her writing to be moderate and tactful in mentioning certain words or phrases regarding taboo topics. In addition, the author appeared to be utilising figurative language aiming to create a more concrete imagery in words. Creating clearer imagery can as well trigger an idea or emotion that may encourage readers to have a certain attitude or involvement as they read. Lastly, the use of figurative language in the book may help readers to understand a topic or situations illustrated as the author used the mentioned types of figurative language when describing actions and imaginations.

Based on the findings in Table 2, it is found that Kaur mostly brought out her intention of conveying messages metaphorically in her book. Metaphor is used to concisely compare two different things, in accordance with the similarity between their literal meanings and the situation being described metaphorically, without using *like* and *as*. Burkley (2017) concurred that it is more convenient to describe an abstract, hard-to-understand idea and compare it to a simple, concrete one with the use of figurative language. This can be seen in the first section of *Milk and Honey*, The Hurting, Kaur described a woman being taken advantage of by comparing her to a rose. As according to Gruber (2014), rose symbolizes purity. Hence, it was found that Kaur (2015) compared a woman to a pure soul suggesting vulnerability.

“she was a rose
in the hands of those
who had no intentions
of keeping her”

By using metaphor, Kaur seamlessly conveyed hidden messages, allowing contextual meaning to be understood without explicitly stating the literal meaning (Larsson, 2023). Secondly, metaphor may also demonstrate actions without mentioning it. This assists readers to understand that concept and physical ref-

erent bear resemblance which helps readers to understand the meaning behind each poetry (Larsson, 2023). Ultimately, metaphor goes beyond a reference and a concept as it can alter a reader's perspective unconsciously (Burkley, 2017). This is supported by Gibbs (1994), where metaphors can be necessarily powerful, especially in enhancing a reader's understanding on the relationship between language and concepts.

The second most prominent figurative language utilised by Kaur are both irony and simile, each occurring up to 13 times in the book. Irony is portrayed when Kaur wrote about satire topics such as modern love and parenting. As depicted in the first section, *The Hurting*, Kaur discussed about toxic parenting which is portrayed satirically as a guise of love when she said *you teach her to confuse, anger with kindness, which seems like a good idea*. The usage of *good idea* in her writing is to represent irony. As according to Witek (2022), irony is commonly used to imply sarcasm.

“every time you
tell your daughter
you yell at her
out of love
you teach her to confuse
anger with kindness
which seems like a good idea”

Meanwhile, simile is employed by Kaur in describing any similar notions or resemblance (Samadova, 2022) using the terms *like* or *as*. Among the topics discussed by Kaur involving the usage of simile are pertaining to womanhood, breaking-up, absence of parents and relationships. Author compared the topics using simile as she intended to mention them indirectly. As an instance, in the last section, *The Healing*, womanhood is compared aesthetically to nature using simile.

“i find hair beautiful
when a woman wears it
like a garden on her skin”

The last leading type of figurative language identified in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* is synecdoche that was found to occur 11 times in the book. According to Ibrahim (2021), synecdoche can be regarded as words that are employed to represent something. Therefore, Kaur implies that the person that she is referring to in her poem could elevate or lower the mood. In this context, *your name* illustrating synecdoche because it represents a person.

“your name is
the strongest
positive and negative
connotation in any language”

Conclusion

The study aims to identify, analyse, and elaborate the contextual meaning of the types of figurative language found in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. Based on the theoretical framework used, the results highlighted that context is an essential element in analysing the figurative words or phrases found in Kaur's writing. Besides that, this study has clearly answered the two research questions proposed; 1) What are the types of figurative language used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*? and 2) What are the contextual meanings behind the figurative language used in Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*? Ten types of figurative language, which are metaphor, irony, simile, synecdoche, hyperbole, paradox, personification, metonymy, dead metaphor and allusion were utilised in Kaur's writing. Apart from that, the contextual meanings of each type of figurative language were also discussed and described in response to the second research question. Based on the analysis, *Milk and Honey* represents a woman's journey in life based on distinct aspects such as the process of growing up, having a family, friendships, relationships and self-love. Additionally, there are also some issues addressed by Kaur in *Milk and Honey* such as feminism, double standards, modern love, abuse and survival. Therefore, the results of this study may contribute particularly to providing a better comprehension about the concept of figurative language and its context. By analysing the types of figurative language and its use, students' skills in interpreting literary works can be enhanced and broadened, which can also enable educators to apply this analysis in the classroom. Figurative analysis can improve readers' comprehension of complex literary texts, deepen their knowledge of literature and help them interpret beyond the literal meaning.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, N.N.K.L.; methodology, W.I.; validation, D.A.A.R., Z.B. and N.M.L.; formal analysis, N.N.K.L.; investigation, N.N.K.L.; resources, W.I., D.A.A.R., Z.B. and N.M.L.; data curation, W.I., D.A.A.R., Z.B. and N.M.L.; writing—original draft preparation, N.N.K.L.; writing—review and editing, W.I.; visualization, D.A.A.R.; supervision, D.A.A.R.; project administration, W.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The data analysed in this study were extracted from *Milk and Honey* book by Rupi Kaur, published by Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015. The book is available for purchase or can be accessed through libraries.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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