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Receptions of the Female Voice: Uncovering Value in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey* through Contingencies of Evaluation

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Abstract

Drawing on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's "contingencies of value" theory, this paper investigates the "continuously changing" factors that influence literary value (Herrnstein Smith 30). Throughout the centuries, contingencies have informed the way readers evaluate literature. When Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre* in 1847, critics responded to her work by speculating over her gender. *Jane Eyre*'s initial reception, along with Brontë's identity as a nineteenth-century woman writer, reveals her gender as a contingency of evaluation. Similarly, the publication of Rupi Kaur's 2014 poetry collection *milk and honey* exposes contingencies of evaluation, as the twenty-first-century digital landscape and Kaur's cultural background influence one's understanding of her work. This paper argues that these contingencies of evaluation are necessary to consider when uncovering the value in each work and expanding the Western literary canon to include female voices.

Keywords*:* Contingencies of Evaluation, Charlotte Brontë, Rupi Kaur, Female Voices, Reader-Response Theory

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Introduction

The Western literary canon and the criteria readers use to evaluate literature are always changing. Originally limited to white male writers, the evolving canon now seeks to include voices of various races, genders, and cultures. Terry Eagleton refers to the literary canon as a "*construct*," as the works in the canon vary based on the given time, cultures, and values of readers (10). Literary value is not contained within the works themselves but depends on "whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in light of given purposes" (Eagleton 10). Similarly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith maintains that value is not inherent in a literary work but, rather, relies on outside influences such as the identities of authors and readers, as well as an array of cultural and environmental factors (39). These "contingencies of value" are "continuously changing" and influence the way a person regards a given work (Herrnstein Smith 30). As readers evaluate literature and the literary canon transforms over time, the contingencies surface. From the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, the personal backgrounds and experiences of women writers reveal contingencies that shape their writing and influence the reception of their work. For example, critics were determined to uncover Charlotte Brontë's gender when she published *Jane Eyre* in 1847, which exposes her gender as a factor that influences the way one evaluates her work. Likewise, the twenty-first-century digital landscape and Rupi Kaur's cultural background inform the meaning one finds in her 2014 poetry collection *milk and honey*. Thus, one must consider *Jane Eyre* and *milk and honey* through contingencies of evaluation to uncover the value in each work and promote female voices within the ever-changing Western canon.

Gender as a Contingency of Evaluation: The Reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the Nineteenth Century

Through her esteemed novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë defies traditional nineteenth-century ideals of femininity in her portrayal of Jane Eyre as an individualistic, free-spirited woman capable of independent thought. Since the novel's initial publication in 1847, readers have praised Brontë for her artistic language, multifaceted storyline, and bold depiction of a woman (Weisser xiv). As with most groundbreaking literature, however, Brontë's "instant success" did not come without debate (Weisser x). Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* under the pseudonym Currer Bell, which – paired with her originality as a writer – prompted critics to speculate over her gender (Weisser xv). Unlike New Critics who would deem Brontë's gender irrelevant to *Jane Eyre*'s reception, Barbara Herrnstein Smith theorizes that one's determination of literary "value is radically contingent" and depends upon external factors such as gender (30). While Brontë sought to separate her gender from her role as a writer, one must apply Herrnstein Smith's "contingencies of value" theory to evaluate *Jane Eyre* as a masterpiece of feminist fiction since Brontë's identity as a nineteenth-century woman writer and the gender identity of her reader inform *Jane Eyre*'s reception within a given context.

Brontë's work received a variety of responses among readers, which reveals a subjective quality to reader reception. According to Terry Eagleton, reception theory relies on a reader's "continuous active participation" and interpretation of the author's words (66). Eagleton writes: "The text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning" (66). One's understanding of a literary work,

therefore, relies on the individual's own perspective and engagement with the text. For Eagleton, the words alone lack coherence and value (66). As evident in *Jane Eyre's* reception, readers tend to look beyond the pages and form their own assumptions about the author. Julie Sheldon, for example, notes that in a December 1848 "*Quarterly* review of Jane Eyre," contributor Elizabeth Rigby identified *Jane Eyre*'s author as a man (Sheldon 835) because Jane's behavior deviates from the standard etiquette for Victorian women (Sheldon 837). According to Susan Ostrov Weisser, Jane looks beyond "prescribed cultural norms" to develop her sense of self (xxxvii), which is evident in the way she asserts her voice throughout the novel. Rigby assumed that a woman writer could not have conceived of a female character who challenges the standards of femininity (Sheldon 837). Further, based on the portrayal of Jane, Rigby acknowledged that if the author was in fact a woman, "then she must be one who had long since 'forfeited the society of her own sex'" (Sheldon 838). In her assertion, Rigby applied her own knowledge of nineteenth-century customs for women to evaluate the work. She relied on traditional gender roles to interpret Jane's characterization and concluded that Currer Bell was either a man or a woman who was removed from female society (Sheldon 838). Similarly, James Lorimer commented in the 1849 *North British Review* that if a woman wrote *Jane Eyre*, then the woman writer "must be a woman pretty nearly unsexed" (Weisser 546). During the nineteenth century, therefore, readers like Rigby and Lorimer scrutinized women writers and defeminized them for breaking convention when they portrayed female characters as strong-willed, rather than meek and passive. Critic Terry Lovell recognizes the common challenge women writers faced at the time, as they were "despised as inferior" when they wrote "like ladies," but they were "attacked as 'unfeminine' when, like Charlotte Brontë, they did not" (Lovell 92). Since Brontë instilled authority in Jane that was not typical for women at the time, nineteenth-century critics like Rigby believed Jane's author not only undermined the character's femininity but also masculinized her own voice as the writer.

While Rigby believed Currer Bell was a man, other critics argued that the author was a woman and were eager to determine Currer Bell's gender. After the novel's publication, for example, William Makepeace Thackeray expressed his fascination with *Jane Eyre* and its author. He wrote: "Who the author can be I can't guess, if a woman she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a 'classical' education" (Weisser 543). Moreover, he questions: "It is a woman's writing, but whose?" (Weisser 543). Unlike Rigby, Thackeray recognized that a woman writer could possess a level of sophistication equivalent to that of a man; however, he still embraced the stereotype that most men writers had a better command of language than women writers. Further, in his review of *Jane Eyre*, he found it notable to declare the author as a woman, which indicates his desire to understand *Jane Eyre* in its broader context and receive insight into the author's identity. Similarly, George Henry Lewes praised the novel for "its charm" in 1847 and described the author as a woman in his writing (Weisser 545). In one letter, he asserted: "The writer is evidently a woman, and, unless we are deceived, new in the world of literature. But, man or woman, young or old, be that as it may, no such book has gladdened our eyes for a long while" (Weisser 545). He then continued to describe how "she" met the criteria of a "novelist" through her "perception of character, and power of delineating it; picturesqueness; passion; and knowledge of life" (Weisser 545). Although confident a woman wrote *Jane Eyre*, Lewes claimed to value the work highly – regardless of the author's

gender – because the novel presents “suffering and experience” in a way that brings the souls of the author and reader into conversation (Weisser 545). Readers, therefore, enjoyed the novel’s style and connected with the themes. Nevertheless, the fact that critics were determined to discover the author’s gender exposes a contingency of evaluation. The speculation over Currer Bell, in and of itself, suggests that the author’s gender affects the work’s value.

Brontë, however, was not pleased with that fact that her gender identity was in question. In an 1848 letter to critic William Smith Williams, she expressed her desire to preserve her own identity and reveal herself to the public only as “Currer Bell” (Weisser 546). Then, she wrote to Williams again the following year in response to critical interpretations of her gender. In her letter, she asserted: “To such critics I would say—‘To you I am neither Man nor Woman—I come before you as an Author only—it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me—the sole ground on which I accept your judgement’” (Weisser 547). Brontë, therefore, sought recognition for her writing alone without respect to her gender. Whether critics masculinized or feminized her voice, Brontë believed the critics should remove their assumptions regarding her gender when providing a value judgement of *Jane Eyre*. Brontë’s claim that her gender is not relevant to her role as an author reflects the New Critic’s approach to literary evaluation. As Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson describe: “The task of the [New Critic] and the teacher of literature was to analyze and describe objectively the formal properties of a literary text by a close, detailed reading, without regard to extrinsic considerations” (465). In line with Brontë’s wish to withhold her identity, the New Critic would argue that the author’s gender is an “extrinsic consideration” (Kaplan and Davis Anderson 465) that should have no bearing on the reader’s judgement of the text. Brontë, too, wanted readers to judge her written work, rather than her role and status as a woman.

Despite Brontë’s desire to isolate her authority as a writer from her gender identity, an understanding of Brontë’s identity as a nineteenth-century woman writer is crucial to a reader’s appreciation of *Jane Eyre* today. Insight into why Brontë did not want to publicize her gender, for example, can shape the way one regards her work. Like the writer herself, Brontë’s sisters also wrote in the guise of men (Ohmann 95). Charlotte Brontë recounted: “We did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’ – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice” (Ohmann 95). Thus, the Brontë sisters wanted readers to take them seriously as writers during a time when society failed to view women and men as intellectual equals. They knew that they rejected the norms of nineteenth-century femininity in their writing, but they refused to let spectators judge their own identities as women. Moreover, Charlotte Brontë encountered discrimination as a woman writer in 1837 when she sent a selection of poems to Robert Southey for his review (Weisser xx), which may have also influenced her decision to write under a man’s name. Southey’s bias toward women writers is evident in his claim that women should maintain their “proper” household duties because literature, according to Southey, “cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be” (Weisser xx). Despite Brontë’s disappointment with Southey’s feedback, her response to him is telling of her determination as a woman writer. Brontë proclaimed: “I trust I shall nevermore feel ambitious to see my name in print; if the wish should rise, I’ll look at

Southey's letter, and suppress it" (Weisser xx). Through her great success as the author of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë did indeed prove her capabilities as a woman writer who is worthy of publication.

From the exchange between Southey and Brontë, one can see that the voices of women were restricted in nineteenth-century society. Brontë's gender is significant, as women writers have historically been excluded from the literary canon. Through her characterization of Jane, Brontë critiques the gender disparities of her time. She presents her readers with a determined protagonist who demands recognition as a woman. Like her author, Jane believes women are capable of more than household duties to which their society limits them, which is evident in her assertion:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them; if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 130-131)

Just as Jane longs to "exercise [her] faculties" and believes women should have the freedom to explore their own interests (Brontë 130), Brontë sought to foster her talent as a writer without falling under the scrutiny of her "more privileged" (Brontë 131) fellow male writers. Jane maintains that society should not limit women to their traditional household duties but, rather, should free them from convention (Brontë 131). Likewise, Brontë was unsatisfied with Southey's claim that women must remain content in their traditional roles, and she defied his expectations through her accomplishments as a writer. Through her characterization of Jane, Brontë critiqued her own society that reduced a woman's potential and confined her to the domestic sphere. When readers take Brontë's perspective as a woman writer who challenged her own societal expectations into consideration, they can find value not only in the words on Brontë's pages but also in the relationship between the words and Brontë's lived experience. Thus, their value judgements expand, as they grasp the larger context of Brontë's work and the inspiration behind it.

In addition to one's perception of Brontë as a female author, one's reception of *Jane Eyre* depends on the reader's own gender identity. Herrnstein Smith argues that literary value is not solely "intrinsic," but instead depends on contingencies (30) such as "personal identity and history as gender," which affect one's taste in literature (Herrnstein Smith 38). Moreover, Herrnstein Smith argues that a literary value judgement depends on both the perspectives of the reader and author. She writes: "Every literary work… is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces" both the ever-changing identities of the writer and the readers at any given time (Herrnstein Smith 45). Thus, readers' personal experiences are vital aspects in the process of evaluating literature. Consequently, female readers and male readers will likely approach *Jane Eyre* differently due to their unique experiences as women or men. Critic Robert Scholes argues that all readers – and male readers especially – must possess an awareness of their own identities and the relationship between their individual experiences and the text (296). According to Scholes, men "cannot deny" the fact that they "shall never

read as women and perhaps not even like women" (296). While men can read *Jane Eyre* through a feminist lens, their experiences as male readers will differ from those of female readers. For Scholes, experience "confers authority," and readers must uphold the authority of the female experience by acknowledging their own biases (296). As a result, men and women will receive and interpret *Jane Eyre* in a way that is unique to their gender identities.

Moreover, readers of all gender identities are constantly rereading and reinterpreting *Jane Eyre*. Based on the "contingencies of value" theory, works are reproduced, reread, and reinterpreted when they "enter into relation with the emergent interests of various subjects" and adapt to the ever-evolving circumstances of one's society (Herrnstein Smith 51). Unlike critics at the time of the novel's initial publication, readers today credit Charlotte Brontë as the author of *Jane Eyre*. Since the author's gender identity is no longer in question, contemporary readers can appreciate *Jane Eyre* within the context of Brontë's history and reinterpret the text within the framework of their own personal experiences. Today, readers find value in *Jane Eyre* not only in an academic context but also in popular culture through film and television adaptations (Weisser xiii). Brontë's depiction of female autonomy resonates with modern readers of the twenty-first century, and Jane's desire for respect and equality is not unique to women of the past. Women today, for instance, still struggle to assert their voices in a male dominated society. When readers consider their own experiences and draw connections between their cultural context and that of Brontë, they can find new value in *Jane Eyre*.

Readers today accept *Jane Eyre* as a canonical work of literature, but the Western literary canon is constantly evolving. While the women writers of today continue a female literary tradition that spans centuries, their works address newly arising circumstances. Under the growing need for cultural diversity in contemporary literature and the digital landscape of the twenty-first century, women writers today defy societal and literary conventions, diverging from the past. They not only create content that resonates with traditionally underrepresented readers, but they also experiment with literary styles and publishing platforms to reach a wide audience. Although innovative, the works of emerging voices spur a variety of critical responses. Like the reception of *Jane Eyre* in the nineteenth century, the receptions of new works in the twenty-first century reveal contingencies of evaluation.

Digital Landscape and Cultural Background as Contingencies of Evaluation: The Reception of Rupi Kaur's *milk and honey* in the Twenty-First Century

Just as Brontë faced challenges as a woman writer of the nineteenth century, women writers today still face criticism for straying from convention. When the "Punjabi-born Sikh Canadian" poet Rupi Kaur published her poetry collection *milk and honey* in 2014, her work sparked debate (Chasar 185). Some praised her for drawing upon themes significant to feminism and her Punjabi roots, while others criticized her for defying the standards of poetry and producing work that lacks complexity (Chasar 191). Critics in the digital age question whether Kaur's work, which originally surfaced on social media, is real poetry, as she writes with a simple style and discards punctuation and capitalization rules (Chasar 191). Nevertheless, readers must look beyond the words on the page when evaluating her writing, as the digital landscape of Kaur's time and her cultural background inform her work's value.

The digital advancements of the twenty-first century and the rise of social media have complicated the traditionally accepted publishing world. "Instapoetry," as Maria Manning defines it, "is a hashtag-turned-aesthetic-movement born out of the Instagram social media platform, a form of digital storytelling that has come to dominate print bestseller lists" (264). Through Instagram, instapoets juxtapose photographs or illustrations with "minimalistic, free verse poems of varying lengths" (Manning 267). These poems encompass a variety of themes but share an "honest, in-the-moment confessional style" (Manning 267). By distributing their work on social media sites, as Manning notes, "poets disrupt the traditional assumptions that poetry is an elitist form of literature" (265). Writers use the digital landscape of social media sites to make their work accessible to a large public audience (Manning 264). Instagram, therefore, becomes a "dissemination method" for these poets, but the aesthetic of this type of poetry has become so distinct that individuals often confuse "the term *instapoetry*" as a "genre" in and of itself (Manning 267). With her many followers, Rupi Kaur used Instagram to build her reputation as an "instapoet" by posting her work on the site (Manning 267), and many even credit her with starting the instapoetry "phenomenon" (Chasar 185). Although Kaur initially shared her work on Instagram, she did not restrict her poems to the site. In 2014, she migrated her work to print by self-publishing her "CreateSpace book *milk and honey*" (Chasar 185). As Mike Chasar notes, Kaur's abundance of followers on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter contributed to the book's success and helped her not only "sell over 2.5 million copies in 30 languages" but also "spend over 75 weeks on the *New York Times* Best-Seller list" (185). Although a printed work, Kaur's book captures the aesthetic of instapoetry with its illustrations and poems that rely on simple phrases. Kaur's use of everyday language prompts readers to debate the work's literary value. While some believe the book's popularity reflects an increasing interest in poetry among readers, others view it as a sign "that the public's taste is as bad as it has always been, or worse than ever before, making even more precarious the cultural fate of 'real poetry'" (Chasar 6). Thus, the reception of Kaur's book *milk and honey* raises questions over the criteria individuals use to evaluate modern poetry and the factors that influence their taste.

Taste, as Herrnstein Smith argues, is contingent, as the value one confers in a literary work depends on many "continuously changing variables" (30). Robert D. Hume further argues that the process of "valuation is subjective" because it depends on an "individual critic's adoption or rejection of possible evaluative criteria" (141). The mixed responses among Kaur's readers demonstrate this subjective quality of literary evaluation. Some praised *milk and honey* in online reviews, calling the book "raw and authentic" and "powerful and authentic" (Chasar 192). *The Economist*, according to Chasar, even "attributes much of Kaur's appeal to the 'authenticity' of her 'direct, uncluttered phrases'" (192-193). Thus, these readers value Kaur's work for its authenticity, but the criteria for what one considers authentic is subjective. While some find her writing style powerful, others criticize it. Some have described *milk and honey* as unoriginal, stating that it "'reminded me of the stuff you'd see on a high schooler's tumblr feed,' 'reads like a 15 year old's angsty journal,' and 'seems to be a series of extremely cliché sentiments… chopped up to look like poetry'" (Chasar 192). The fact that some readers regard Kaur's simplicity as powerful and others find it cliché suggests that taste differs among readers. The different identities, backgrounds, and interests of readers function as contingencies that

affect whether readers like or dislike a given work (Herrnstein Smith 38). Moreover, the idea that her writing only "look[s] like poetry" to some (Chasar 192) denotes an ambiguous nature to the accepted standards of poetry. One of Kaur's poems in *milk and honey* consists of three short lines: "you / are your own / soulmate" (Kaur 189). While critics argue that Kaur's line spacing only gives the effect of poetry, the criteria individuals use to define poetry – like their tastes – are subjective. According to Terry Eagleton, individuals can view "straightforward" statements on road-signs and railroad signs as poetry if they read them in a certain way (6); they may note the "*staccato* of the first monosyllables… and the inflection of [other words]" (Eagleton 6). Thus, the perception of a written statement as poetry depends on the way the reader interprets it (Eagleton 6). Similarly, Kaur presents her work in a way that some accept as poetry and others reject. The critics who deem her work as too simple for the genre of poetry, like the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, assume that poetry must intensify "ordinary language" (Eagleton 3). As Eagleton explains, however, one cannot effectively define poetry and literature based on the type of language it uses, as "a single homogenous linguistic community does not exist" (4). Language and discourses differ among different individuals, societies, communities, and cultures (Eagleton 4). Nonetheless, critics often discredit Kaur's work because it relies on language in a way *they* consider ordinary.

Although some use an ambiguous poetical standard to assess *milk and honey*, the context behind Kaur's work suggests that literature and the criteria readers use to evaluate it are constantly changing. For twenty-first-century readers, the digital landscape provides new considerations that affect literary evaluation. As Herrnstein Smith argues, "the particular physical and social environment" shapes the value one finds in a work (38). In the past, academic institutions sought to standardize the tastes of male students by reinforcing western values and "*discounting… all other contingencies*" (Herrnstein Smith 41). The vast digital landscape of the twenty-first century is significant because it challenges the accepted Western canon "as an institution of literary value" (Vadde 37). According to Aarthi Vadde, social media sites like Instagram allow writers to form "massive followings that operate entirely outside the professional literary circles that dictate prestige" (38). By building her reputation as an Instapoet and then self-publishing *milk and honey*, Kaur challenged traditional publishing methods. Chasar finds meaning in the way Kaur's "mass-media landscape" allows her to preserve her poetry and safeguard it from editorial authorities (189). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural businessman" and Elizabeth Barnett's "Little Magazine Effect," Chasar explains how publishers and editors sought control over poets throughout the twentieth century (175). The "cultural businessman," according to Bourdieu, exploited poets by "publishing" or "staging" their work in a way that deprived the poets of their autonomy (Chasar 176). Likewise, the "little magazine editors," as Barnett describes, not only selected "material for publication," but also altered the work of poets by "cut[ting] and mov[ing] lines," which gave the editors authority over the poets (Chasar 175). Chasar argues that Kaur's work is "a reaction" to the "editorial practices" of the twentieth century because she assumed total control over her work when she posted poems on Instagram and self-published *milk and honey* (189). Chasar further claims that her poetry functions as a "product" of her digital landscape, as "digital media" allow for "the relative decolonization of 'the poet'" (189). Thus, through "social media and other self-publishing mechanisms," twenty-first century poets like Kaur claim

authority over their own work by "circumventing traditional literary gatekeepers or tastemakers" (Chasar 193). As Kaur explains on her website, she knew that "to surpass the gatekeeper would be looked down upon by [her] literary peers," but she decided to self-publish *milk and honey* because she wanted complete "creative control" over her work (Chasar 186). Furthermore, she refused to publish her poems "individually" in "literary journals, magazines, and anthologies" to preserve her poetry collection as a unified body of work (Chasar 186). Although Kaur's publishing methods deviate from convention, she capitalized on her digital platform to develop her name as a poet and then self-published a book that became a *New York Times* best-seller (Chasar 185). As the times change and the methods writers use to showcase their work expand, new voices emerge. The digital landscape freed Kaur's voice from the restraints of traditional publishing methods and facilitated the public's recognition of her work (Chasar 189).

The digital landscape and self-publishing methods Kaur uses liberate her not only as a poet but also as a woman, as she addresses intersectional feminism in her writing. Through her work, Kaur condemns misogyny, sexual violence, and the western ideals of feminine beauty (Chasar 187). For example, in *milk and honey*, Kaur writes: "my issue with what they consider beautiful / is their concept of beauty / centers around excluding people" (170). She then continues to criticize the way the women in her culture have been excluded from the western standard of beauty through her assertion: "don't tell me my women / aren't as beautiful / as the ones in / your country" (Kaur 170). Thus, Kaur's work functions as a critique on the way western societies use their own standards to evaluate women's bodies, which excludes all non-western women from the aesthetic ideal. These exclusionary principles are not limited to the female body but extend into the literary canon that has historically excluded diverse female voices. Kaur challenges not only what Sasha Kruger refers to as "the western criteria of physicality that attempt to colonize her body" (Kruger), but also the western publishing traditions that seek control over women's writing and silence many voices. As Miriam J. Johnson explains, the modern publishing practices – such as the ones Kaur used to develop her digital reputation and publish *milk and honey* – allow women writers to disrupt "the power dynamic in the traditional, and traditionally male dominated, publishing industry" (137). As a female "citizen author" who "bypass[es] the traditional gatekeepers of the industry" (Johnson 136), Kaur disrupts a publishing tradition that is built on exclusion and asserts her voice as a Punjabi woman poet.

Considerations of both Kaur's cultural identity as a woman of color and the digital landscape on which she originally published unveil meaning in her work. "Women of color," as Manning explains, "have been underrepresented" in the Western literary canon (272-273). With the ongoing need for diversity in the Western canon today, social media sites like Instagram provide a platform for "a variety of voices" that would otherwise remain unheard (Manning 274). In addition to giving them "greater control and [the] ability to disseminate their work" (Manning 272), social media sites allow poets of color to share their work "with a greater audience than traditional publishing might allow them" (Manning 270). Instagram, as Manning argues, "opens up the available space in the canon and allows for the depiction and representation of a greater variety of voices to be embodied as subjects rather than the objects they may once have been restricted to in much of literature" (270). Social media, therefore,

gives underrepresented writers a stage to connect with others, and Instagram presented Kaur as a woman of color with this opportunity. Through her work, she asserts her identity, as she writes poems about her Punjabi heritage and the oppression of women in her culture. In *milk and honey*, for example, Kaur reflects on how her father used to silence her mother:

> 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 (35)

From this poem, Kaur exposes the oppressive treatment of women in her family, as her father censored her mother's voice. Kaur's personal family history, therefore, contextualizes her work. By publicly sharing her writing, Kaur resists a tradition that tells women "to / never speak" (Kaur 35). In a blurb at the end of *milk and honey*, Kaur even admits that she is "the first woman in [her] lineage" who can "say what is on [her] mind when [she] want[s] to" (205). Thus, Kaur takes pride in her identity as a poet because her female ancestors did not have the freedom – or the platform – to express their voices.

While at first glance, it is easy to dismiss Kaur's poems as "cliché" (Chasar 192), her cultural background and her digital presence unveil the deeper meaning within her craft. Although her work differs from traditionally valued western poetry, readers in the twenty-first century must consider that a literary work is not "valuable *in itself*" (Eagleton 10). As Terry Eagleton maintains, literature "has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time" (10). Thus, the new literary works that emerge in the twenty-first century are unique to the specific time and the societies that produce them. Kaur's readers must consider her work in the context of her digital landscape and personal identity, as these factors differentiate her work from the literature of the past. When readers ignore these contingencies of evaluation and claim that Kaur's work is not poetry solely based off the words on the page, they perpetuate the exclusion of diverse female voices from the Western literary canon.

Women's Writing throughout the Centuries: A Comparison between the Experiences of Charlotte Brontë and Rupi Kaur

Charlotte Brontë and Rupi Kaur are in many ways unlike, the first author praised for her renowned Victorian novels and the latter noted in more recent years for her contributions to instapoetry. Brontë, writing *Jane Eyre* under a male pseudonym in the nineteenth century, would not have imagined the technological advancements that have allowed Kaur to establish herself as a woman poet on social media and self-publish *milk and honey*. Although they differ by writing styles, cultural identities, and two distinct centuries, Brontë and Kaur share three major commonalities in their experiences as women writers.

First, both use their authorial voices to challenge the values of femininity of their day. Brontë through her characterization of Jane asserts that women have desires and capabilities beyond their domestic roles. Kaur appeals to twenty-first century feminism in *milk and honey*,

rejecting western standards of femininity throughout her work. Writing nearly two hundred years apart, Brontë and Kaur both grapple with the roles, expectations, and identities of women in society.

Second, both are met with critics who debate the literary merit of their work, which exposes contingencies of literary evaluation. In response to the publication of *Jane Eyre*, nineteenth-century critics attempted to decipher Currer Bell's gender. Some suspected the author was in fact a woman, while others considered *Jane Eyre* an anomaly among women's writing at the time. As Elaine Showalter expresses, critics "felt stunned by [*Jane Eyre*'s] unconventionality" (92). At the center of *milk and honey*'s reception, too, is a woman writer's unconventionality that has prompted opposition from critics. Kaur's writing strays from what some twenty-first-century critics view as poetry, and the methods she used to disseminate her work deviate from traditional publishing practices. In Kaur's case, the modern digital landscape functions as a contingency of evaluation, whereas Brontë's critics regarded the author's gender a noteworthy criterion in their assessment of her work.

From the publications of *Jane Eyre* and *milk and honey*, a third similarity between Brontë and Kaur arises: both authors utilize tactics to assert their voices despite attempts to silence them. Under the pseudonym Currer Bell, Brontë hid the truth of her gender and successfully competed in a male-dominated profession. While Brontë achieved authorial autonomy as a woman through her pseudonym, social media and self-publishing gave Kaur complete control over her work. Kaur capitalized on her digital landscape to project her voice and appeal to a large audience. Although through different means, Brontë and Kaur both found original ways to make their voices known.

Conclusion

The inclusion of female voices in today's literary canon is especially crucial, as the Western canon originally functioned on the exclusion of women. From the nineteenth century, women writers struggled to publish their poetry and compete with their male counterparts. Charlotte Brontë's correspondence with Southey reflects this unfortunate reality, as he told her it was not her "business" as a woman to write poetry (Weisser xx). Although today Brontë is regarded highly as a novelist, "the literary value of her poetry [still] is not recognised" (Sadiq 833). Under the male-dominated publishing industry, women like Brontë struggled to establish themselves as writers but even more so as poets. Today, unlike in Brontë's time, the digital landscape of the twenty-first century enables female poets like Rupi Kaur to assert their voices more easily on a public platform. Due to the distinct circumstances of Brontë and Kaur, readers cannot evaluate *Jane Eyre* and *milk and honey* by the same standard. Nevertheless, readers must consider the gender and cultural identities of both women writers as contingencies of evaluation. Brontë's gender identity is significant because she became a successful novelist during a time when society valued women for their domesticity, not their voices. Similarly, Kaur's identity as a Punjabi woman gives meaning to her work, as her ancestors did not have the same writing opportunities as she (Kaur 205). Thus, both women defy traditions that silence women. There is a need to include not only women writers like Brontë in the canon, but also women writers of various races, classes, and cultures. As readers view Kaur's poetry and the work of modern women writers through contingencies of evaluation and accept that

literary value is not “a fixed attribute” (Herrnstein Smith 30), they open the Western literary canon to new voices.

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