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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Subversive Vulnerability in Rupi Kaur's *the sun and her flowers*

A New Conception of Vulnerability as a Source of
Agency and Feminist Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the notion of vulnerability expressed in the book of poems *the sun and her flowers* (2017) by Indo-Canadian author Rupi Kaur. It analyses the traditional notion of vulnerability as a feminine characteristic understood in opposition to traditionally masculine attributes such as invulnerability, strength, and agency. This traditional conception of vulnerability is dismantled and replaced by a human and ambivalent attribute, as opposed to a feminine and pejorative trait. Kaur's book reveals the existence of a cultural dichotomy that defines vulnerability as a feminine and negative attribute opposed to masculine qualities praised in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, the author advocates for a new conception of vulnerability as a source of empowerment which allows women to exercise agency against the gender-based unequal distribution of power that maintains them as subalterns.

KEY WORDS: Vulnerability, Femininity, Agency, Empowerment, Resistance

RESUMEN

Este trabajo pretende explorar el concepto de vulnerabilidad tal y como aparece en el libro de poesía *the sun and her flowers* (2017) de la escritora indo-canadiense Rupi Kaur. Se analiza la noción tradicional de la vulnerabilidad como una característica femenina opuesta a otras características tradicionalmente consideradas masculinas, como son la invulnerabilidad, la fuerza y la agencia, la capacidad para ser un sujeto activo. Esta concepción tradicional de la vulnerabilidad se está desmontando y sustituyendo por un atributo humano y ambivalente, en lugar de femenino y negativo. El libro de Kaur refleja la existencia de una dicotomía cultural que define la vulnerabilidad como una característica femenina y negativa opuesta a características masculinas más valoradas en las sociedades patriarcales. Además, defiende una nueva concepción de la vulnerabilidad entendida como fuente de empoderamiento que permita a las mujeres provocar un impacto como sujetos activos en contra de la distribución de poder desigual basada en el género que las mantiene en una posición subalterna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Vulnerabilidad, Femenidad, Agencia, Empoderamiento, Resistencia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rupi Kaur is a contemporary Indo-Canadian author who published her second book of poetry, *the sun and her flowers*, in 2017. Femininity and vulnerability are two of the main topics of this book. This paper will analyse the treatment of vulnerability in five of the poems of the collection, which serve as a good example of this topic in Kaur's work. Vulnerability can be broadly defined as a human attribute characterized by fragility and susceptibility "to wounding and to suffering" (Mackenzie et al. 4), although I will delve more in depth into the definitions and considerations of vulnerability further on. This essay will explore how vulnerability has traditionally been associated to femininity and weakness, and with the expression of emotions and passivity. Accordingly, there is a dichotomy created where vulnerability and femininity are opposed to invulnerability as a masculine attribute linked with strength, action, and absence of feelings. Kaur's work defends the need to deconstruct this dichotomy, as it is both inaccurate and potentially harmful in reinforcing gender stereotypes and a patriarchal distribution of power.

A new conception of vulnerability as an ambivalent and human attribute has potential to transform this quality into a source of empowerment and resistance. Therefore, this paper will introduce theoretical approaches which explain the traditional notion of vulnerability and support the new definition reflected in Kaur's work. The poems will be analysed in relation to these theoretical notions to prove that Rupi Kaur's *the sun and her flowers* illustrates a new consideration of vulnerability which deconstructs the traditional constrictive and negative views about this concept and allows for a broader definition of vulnerability as a source of empowerment that fosters agency and feminist resistance.

2. VULNERABILITY: CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS IN RELATION TO FEMININITY AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE

Vulnerability has traditionally been associated with femininity and incompatible with traditionally masculine attributes. Moreover, in our culture, emotional traits traditionally associated with masculinity are perceived as more valuable and positive than those traditionally associated with femininity. In this section I will explore the consequences of that binarism, as well as an alternative conceptualisation of vulnerability, present in Kaur's *the sun and her flowers*, which can be helpful to subvert patriarchal narratives.

2.1. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE DICHOTOMY VULNERABLE-FEMININE VS. INVULNERABLE-MASCULINE

Strength and agency have been connected to both masculinity and invulnerability and defined as antithetical to femininity. This has been pointed out by many feminist theorists such as Gilson: “vulnerability [...] is construed as a generalizable weakness (to the exclusion of strength)” (310), or Butler et al., who explain that vulnerability is “understood only as victimization and passivity, invariably the site of inaction” (1), while it “becomes projected and distanced from prevailing ideas of agency and mastery.” (4) Vulnerability and femininity are linked to weakness and passivity, creating a cultural narrative in which, as Gilson puts it, “if to be vulnerable is to be weak and subject to harm, then to be invulnerable is the only way to be strong and competent.” (314) That is, to be able to defend oneself against harm or damage and to be an active subject with the capacity to cause changes in the world are perceived as incompatible with vulnerability.

In countries like Canada, the US, India or Spain, men are usually those who hold authority and power and hence are presented as the opposite to vulnerable. Some of the examples will include the political leaders of these countries: Justin Trudeau, Joe Biden, Ram Nath Kovind and Pedro Sánchez. When these leading figures are women, their femininity is suppressed to strengthen their authority, that is, they adopt a masculine attitude because femininity is considered inferior. For instance, the vice president of the US, Kamala Harris or one of the vice presidents of Spain, Carmen Calvo. This does not only affect women, but also men, who are under a social pressure to suppress any sign of vulnerability and emotions because these features are erroneously considered feminine. Artists such as Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Kaur herself or Brit Marling prove this counterimage. Moreover, Marling refers to these leading feminine figures in fiction as the “strong female lead” and writes about “the narrow specificity of the characters’ strengths — physical prowess, linear ambition, focused rationality. Masculine modalities of power.” (“I Don’t Want to Be the Strong Female Lead”) Thus, she describes how even in female examples of leadership, femininity is suppressed and a masculine attitude is necessary to access positions of power.

This dichotomy is not only inaccurate and false, but also harmful for our development both as individuals and as a society. It is a very simplified vision of reality which does not suffice to explain the diversity of human experience. Besides, it has already been established that femininity does not necessarily entail weakness and masculinity does not necessarily involve strength. These are the very constrictive and negative notions of performing gender, “the masculinist account of sovereignty” that feminists “are called on to dismantle” (Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” 24). Kaur’s poetry dismantles gender-based prejudices and constrictions because she displays a vision of femininity in direct opposition to the oppressive and

patriarchal notion of it. While patriarchal structures impose on women gender attributes such as weakness, passivity and defencelessness that place them in a subaltern position, Kaur's work advocates for a reappropriation of characteristics such as vulnerability which can become the means for overcoming that subaltern position. This would mean that women could occupy positions of power and authority without having to deny and suppress their femininity. Not only that, but also men would be under less pressure to be hyper-masculine, impenetrable and violent, as traditionally feminine traits would no longer be considered a sign of inferiority.

Moreover, the binary distribution of feminine and masculine characteristics does not necessarily respond to reality. That is, personal qualities traditionally considered to belong to a specific gender are not necessarily so. Accordingly, a person can have any combination of different traits regardless of their gender and of their other personal traits. It is not only that femininity does not entail vulnerability, but also that vulnerability does not entail weakness and passivity and neither a lack of strength, agency or decisiveness. To consider that human beings are divided into masculine, agentic, strong, invulnerable subjects and feminine, passive, weak and vulnerable objects is a very narrow and restricted conception of human nature. In assuming that vulnerability is "a property that characterizes only certain individuals" (Gilson 311), this feature is perceived as a weakness and those individuals are therefore considered weak. This shift is well exemplified by Gilson, who writes that "statements such as [...] 'women are vulnerable to sexual assault,' [...] can then collapse into the belief, for instance, that [...] 'women are defenceless creatures; women are weak.'" (311) This identification of femininity with vulnerability often leads to labelling women as weak because of their gender. Vulnerability should therefore be regarded as a human attribute rather than a feminine trait, as I will explain later. However, it is a human quality that is

not evenly distributed, as one might be more or less vulnerable depending on the position they occupy inside a system of power hierarchies. Kaur's example is also relevant in this regard since her work deals with her experience as an Indian migrant in Canada. Therefore, her vulnerability can be explored from a feminist perspective, but it is also informed by her ethnic origin that determines to a certain extent her position inside Canadian society.

Additionally, invulnerability is not a masculine feature, but an impossible ideal which may produce the denial of one's own vulnerability, but not its elimination. As Butler puts it, "any amount of opposition to vulnerability does not exactly defeat its operation in our bodily and social lives. Indeed, vehement opposition to vulnerability may prove to be the very sign of its continuing operation." ("Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" 23) This dichotomy is also harmful because it maintains a set of constrictive gender roles which foster a patriarchal distribution of power. It is not only that certain characteristics are attributed to femininity and others to masculinity in an inaccurate way, but that the supposedly masculine features are related to mastery, power and agency, while the feminine traits are related to submission, passivity and weakness. In this sense, "the accoutrements of the white, male world [...] —detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control—" are the ones "that are highly valued in our culture." (Bordo 209) Therefore, this binary distribution of gender attributes maintains a hierarchical structure of power in which masculinity is rewarded and admired while femininity is disregarded and considered inferior.

2.2. REVALORIZATION OF VULNERABILITY AS A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE

The cultural conception of vulnerability is being redefined in the present time. The previously mentioned dichotomy is being contested and dismantled mainly from a feminist perspective. As opposed to vulnerability conceived as an exclusively feminine attribute and a negative undesirable trait, a new vision of vulnerability as a human and ambivalent attribute is being developed.

In the first place, “vulnerability is – and should be understood to be – universal and constant, inherent in the human condition.” (Fineman 1) This fact has been pointed out by various scholars with the objective of having a better understanding of what vulnerability means and the consequences it encompasses. Accordingly, Butler explains how humans are dependent upon and vulnerable to economic and social systems and infrastructures. We are dependent upon other humans and the systems of support that we have collectively created. (“Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” 21) No human could survive individually, and neither could they avoid being affected by the systems and the society around them. Fineman agrees with Butler and expands upon the biological, physical source of this vulnerability, which “should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events” (Fineman 9) Therefore, we are, as human beings, unavoidably vulnerable to the possibility of harm and injury. However, Fineman also points out that “undeniably universal, human vulnerability is also particular”, which means that the vulnerability experienced individually by each person depends on their position “within a web of economic and institutional relationships.” (10) That is, being human encompasses vulnerability, but

people who are under less favourable conditions because of political, social, cultural or any other factors are more vulnerable than others.

Moreover, the negative consideration of vulnerability present in patriarchal cultures is an incomplete vision which responds to a very narrow definition of the concept. Gilson explains very well “that there is a more fundamental understanding of vulnerability”, which would be that “vulnerability is a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways”, so that “vulnerability is conceived in more ambivalent terms rather than as an essentially negative state tantamount to harm” and it “is neither inherently negative nor positive.” (Gilson 310) Thus, vulnerability, as an inherent human characteristic, is conceived as an ambivalent term with potentiality to be both positive and negative. In this sense, Ziarek also refers to the “two contradictory meanings” of vulnerability, which “is intertwined [with] subjection to racist and sexist violence, with bodily injury and extreme destitution” but it also “can be reclaimed as a condition of intersubjective freedom, action, and political engagement.” (68) Thus, vulnerability is better understood as the quality of being open to others so that one can be affected in a negative but also in a positive way. Furthermore, acknowledging the inevitability of being affected by others unfolds the possibility of acting as a community, in relation to others who are equally vulnerable, affected and affecting the people and the world around them.

This understanding of vulnerability as an inherent aspect of the human condition that entails an ambivalent openness to others is not opposed to agency and power. On the contrary, vulnerability can then be considered “as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance.” (Butler et al. 1) This is, vulnerability becomes in this sense a source of empowerment understood as the ability to exercise agency to overcome one’s subaltern position. Agency can be defined here as the condition of being an active

subject capable of causing changes in the world (Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”). Acknowledging that vulnerability is both part of the human condition and a potentially positive attribute enables an active resistance against oppressive gender roles that relegate women to a subaltern position, as femininity is culturally despised and diametrically opposed to the exercise of power.

A shift in the cultural narratives around the concept of vulnerability is crucial to replace its patriarchal connotations with an empowering perspective of the term. Rupi Kaur’s work *the sun and her flowers* contributes to this shift. Vulnerability becomes in this manner “a space to work from as opposed to something only to be overcome.” (Hirsch 81) Kaur’s vision of femininity and, specifically, of vulnerability both disrupts and subverts traditional oppressive femininity and helps create the possibility of resistance against patriarchal impositions by depriving femininity and vulnerability of their negative connotations. Resistance is thus fostered by offering an alternative narrative around gender-defining attributes.

3. *THE SUN AND HER FLOWERS*: SUBVERSIVE NARRATIVES OF EMPOWERING VULNERABILITY

This section will analyse the treatment of the topic of vulnerability in Rupi Kaur’s *the sun and her flowers* (2017). This theme underlies much of her work and Kaur offers a vision of vulnerability that is not antithetical to agency but is inherently human, ambivalent and empowering. In this way, her work acts as a cultural product that challenges the patriarchal conception of vulnerability and femininity and fosters the more positive and empowering notion that we are dealing with. Among Kaur’s work,

the sun and her flowers (2017) addresses this topic in a more explicit and direct manner. In particular, I have chosen the five specific poems in which vulnerability is pivotal.¹

Emotions and vulnerability, in contrast to strength, are the central topic in “i hardened under the last loss” (Kaur 53) and “what is stronger” (98). The former is a prose poem about the connection between the expression of emotions and strength in which the poet speaks in the first person describing her reaction to a loss that hurt her. This reaction involves the attempt to become invulnerable, but afterwards she declares that was not what she wanted, as it prevented her from expressing her emotions and being completely human. The latter poem is also about strength, in this case in relation to the “human heart / which shatters” (98), that acts as a symbol with two different connotations: the physical heart shattering as it pumps blood to maintain life and the metaphorical shattering caused by feeling emotions. “to hate” (187) also deals with emotions and the human condition: it establishes a contrast between hate and love. As opposed to the usual notion of love involving vulnerability to being hurt and weakness, the poem defends that love is a sign of strength and it is inherently human.

Finally, “when it came to listening” (109) and “it has been one...” (176) cover various topics, but vulnerability is among the central ones. “when it came to listening” is articulated as a series of four pieces of advice from the poet’s mother. One of them is about how to act in one’s life and deals directly with vulnerability. It presents the vision that this quality is human and necessary “*to live fully*” and also that it is possible to “*be tender and tough at once*” (Kaur 109) that is, to be emotional and vulnerable and at the same time strong and agentic. “it has been one” is another prose poem, in this case,

¹ The poems do not have titles so I will be referring to them by their first line. They are included in the appendix in page 17.

about lessons that the narrator has learned from “one of the greatest and most difficult years of my life.” (Kaur 176) Some of these lessons have to do with love, emotions, vulnerability and hurting, and the poet’s conclusion is that it is necessary to feel pain so as to “remain soft” (176) and have a full human life.

3.1. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE DICHOTOMY VULNERABLE-FEMININE AND INVULNERABLE-MASCULINE

Weakness, pain and fragility embroider Kaur’s poetry. These elements appear as the reflection of a cultural inheritance that the poems deny and subvert. In “when it came to listening”, being tender is identified with being vulnerable and opposed to being tough (Kaur 109). Similarly, in “it has been one...” we find the opposition of being “soft” and “cold” (176). Moreover, in the three other poems -“i hardened under the last loss” (53), “what is stronger” (98) and “to hate” (187)- emotions and apparent weakness are identified with being vulnerable while they are presumably opposed to strength and hardness. In “i hardened under the last loss” being “so deeply emotional” makes her “crumble on demand”, associating emotions with weakness. To counteract this, she “hardened”, at least at the beginning, although later in the poem she realizes that this is not the right attitude (53). The opposing terms in “what is stronger” are to be strong and to shatter (98); and in “to hate” strength appears again as supposedly opposed to “love” and in a general sense to expressing positive emotions (Kaur 187).

Kaur’s poems prove that vulnerability is not culturally appreciated. Moreover, she argues that it can be a positive attitude which should be encouraged. In “when it came to listening”, she writes “*you need to be vulnerable to live fully*” (109) thus understanding vulnerability as a valuable attribute. “i hardened under the last loss” refers to this same idea in its last line: “all i dream is to soften” (53) which expresses that “to soften” and, by extension, vulnerability is more desirable than trying to be hard

and invulnerable. Nevertheless, this idea is clearer in “it has been one...”, where she argues that “vulnerability is always the right choice because it is easy to be cold in a world that makes it so very difficult to remain soft.” (176) Apart from stating that vulnerability is the right choice, the second part of the sentence refers to the social and cultural dismissal of it as an undesirable trait that should be repressed.

Not only does Kaur defend vulnerability as a valuable feature that fosters active resistance, but she also manifests the impossibility of becoming invulnerable. In “i hardened under the last loss” (53), she narrates how her first reaction to being hurt because of her vulnerable nature was that she “hardened” (53). That is, she tried to become invulnerable as a means of protection against the harm that others might cause her. She succeeds in seeming invulnerable, but not in truly being so, as she affirms that “of course i care about the ones around me. i’m just struggling to show it” (53). Her emotions have not disappeared, but she is unable to express them. Moreover, in the end of the poem she realises that she has become as “strong” (53) as she intended to be, but that was not what she actually wanted: after succeeding in becoming “so strong nothing could shake me”, she writes “now. i am. so strong. that nothing shakes me. / and all i dream is to soften.” (53) She uses a rigid language to express the “*numbness*” that trying to become invulnerable makes her feel and reveals that the right choice is “to soften”: to accept her vulnerability (53) as the means to exercise individual and collective agency. This agency is subversive in that it challenges the assumption that femininity entails passivity. Furthermore, it generates resistance against patriarchal constrictions based on gender.

3.2. REVALORIZATION OF VULNERABILITY AS A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE

Vulnerability's own agency permeates Kaur's selected poems. By recognising our vulnerable nature as human beings we can exercise power, agency and resistance and understand ourselves and the world better. From a passive position in which one only suffers other people's impact and their own emotions, this vision of vulnerability offers a transformative empowerment which allows the management of that impact and emotions. Thus, they become a source of agency to regain control over one's response to internal and external circumstances and counteract patriarchal narratives that maintain women in a subaltern position by defining them as passive victims of external factors with no power to respond to them.

Resorting to hardening and invulnerability is a possible reaction to the possibility of harm that vulnerability entails. It is the reaction that Kaur describes in "i hardened under the last loss", but she also mentions that doing this "took something human out of me" (53). Besides, in "what is stronger", the "human heart" is presented as a symbol of the greatest strength not for being cold, hard or invulnerable, but precisely because it "shatters over and over / and still lives" (98). In this way, vulnerability is presented as an essential part of human nature. Besides, in "to hate" Kaur asserts that "to love / takes strength / everyone has" (187) The very notion that to love requires strength is subversive in that love and emotions are traditionally associated with weakness and vulnerability. Therefore, the strength to which the poem refers stems from vulnerability and it is something that "everyone has" because it is an inherently human attribute, even if it is not encouraged or valued by a certain cultural system.

In all the poems the dichotomy of vulnerability is eventually proved to be formed not by opposites but by attributes that paradoxically complement each other. I have already explained the paradox present in “to hate”, in which the traditionally opposing terms of strength and love are presented not only as complementary but as dependent on each other. Similarly, in “what is stronger” the “human heart” is described as strong because it “shatters over and over / and still lives” (98) This means that, according to the poem, the source of strength is not to be hard and invulnerable but to be vulnerable – to shatter – and live with that vulnerability. The element of living and surviving is also present in “when it came to listening” and “it has been one...”. In the former, a poem about lessons from the author’s mother, her advice is to “*be tender and tough at once / you need to be vulnerable to live fully / but rough enough to survive it all*” (109). The qualities of being “tender” and “tough” (109) would traditionally be considered mutually exclusive. Yet, in the poem they happen simultaneously - “at once” (109). Likewise, being “vulnerable” and “rough” (109) are presented as equally important and necessary attributes to have a good life. “it has been one...” illustrates the ambivalent openness of vulnerability to be affected in both positive and negative ways, to feel either pain or pleasure. This is reflected in the statements “love is about [...] letting it hurt” and “it has been the year of hurting so bad but living so good” (176). Kaur’s work defends that “vulnerability is always the right choice” (176) to have a full human life, and it allows one to experience and express positive feelings, but also to be hurt, injured or harmed.

4. CONCLUSION

All in all, it has been proved that Rupi Kaur’s *the sun and her flowers* offers a subversive narrative around the concept of vulnerability which transforms it into an

empowering source of agency and resistance. This new narrative counteracts the negative notion of vulnerability as a feminine trait that contributes to the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures. In contrast, vulnerability is reappropriated and redefined as an ambivalent, human attribute, which subverts the idea that vulnerability and femininity should be something to be suppressed and ashamed of, diametrically opposed to the characteristics typically associated with power and agency. Thus, acknowledging vulnerability can be a tool of resistance against narrow, oppressive definitions of gender and patriarchal, unequal power hierarchies.

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APPENDIX: Selected Poems

i hardened under the last loss. it took something human out of me. i used to be so deeply emotional i'd crumble on demand. but now the water has made its exit. of course i care about the ones around me. i'm just struggling to show it. a wall is getting in the way. i used to dream of being so strong nothing could shake me. now. i am. so strong. that nothing shakes me. and all i dream is to soften.

- *numbness*

(Kaur 53)

what is stronger

than the human heart

which shatters over and over

and still lives

(Kaur 98)

when it came to listening

my mother taught me silence

if you are drowning their voice with yours

how will you hear them she asked

when it came to speaking

she said *do it with commitment*

every word you say

is your own responsibility

when it came to being

she said *be tender and tough at once*

you need to be vulnerable to live fully

but rough enough to survive it all

when it came to choosing
she asked me to be thankful
for the choices i had that
she never had the privilege of making

- *lessons from mumma*

(Kaur 109)

it has been one of the greatest and most difficult years of my life. i learned everything is temporary. moments. feelings. people. flowers. i learned love is about giving. everything. and letting it hurt. I learned vulnerability is always the right choice because it is easy to be cold in a world that makes it so very difficult to remain soft. i learned all things come in twos. life and death. pain and joy. Salt and sugar. me and you. it is the balance of the universe. it has been the year of hurting so bad but living so good. making friends out of strangers. making strangers out of friends. learning mint chocolate chip ice cream will fix just about everything. and for the pains it can't there will always be my mother's arms. we must learn to focus on warm energy. always. soak our limbs in it and become better lovers to the world. for if we can't learn to be kind to each other how will we ever learn to be kind to the most desperate parts of ourselves.

(Kaur 176)

to hate
is an easy lazy thing
but to love
takes strength
everyone has
but not all are
willing to practice

(Kaur 187)