

**From Orality to Instapoetry: Digital Aesthetics, Platform Culture, and the Evolution of Poetic Reception in Rupī Kaur's Milk and Honey**

**Khushi**

Postgraduate Student  
Dept of English  
Central University of Jammu

**Dr Raj Thakur**

Assistant Professor English  
Central University of Jammu

**Abstract**

This paper examines the evolution of poetry from its oral roots through print culture to its contemporary manifestations within digital environments, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of Instapoetry as exemplified by Rupī Kaur's Milk and Honey. Situating poetry's development within historical shifts in communication technologies, we draw upon theories of primary and secondary orality, concepts of aura and mechanical reproduction, and contemporary digital media theories to analyze the emergence of distinct digital aesthetics. The paper argues that Instapoetry represents a significant site of "secondary orality," characterized by immediacy, participation, multimodality, and platform-consciousness. Using Rupī Kaur's Milk and Honey—a work that originated on Instagram before achieving print success—as a central case study, we employ a qualitative methodology combining close reading, multimodal analysis, and theoretical application. The discussion explores how Instagram's affordances and algorithmic infrastructures shape Instapoetry's aesthetic form (minimalism, visual-textual integration, lowercase typography), emotional resonance, and modes of reception. We analyze how participatory dynamics (likes, comments, shares) and concepts like "platformed intimacy" and culturally situated reception redefine the relationship between poet, text, and audience. Furthermore, the paper investigates the intersection of digital poetry with platform economies and neoliberal

subjectivity, highlighting how creative expression becomes entangled with self-branding and affective labor. Ultimately, this study contends that Instapoetry, epitomized by Kaur's work, marks a crucial transformation in poetic practice, reflecting a broader cultural shift towards networked, visually-oriented, and affectively-driven communication, demanding new critical frameworks that bridge literary studies, media theory, and platform analysis.

**Keywords:** Digital Poetry, Instapoetry, Rupi Kaur, Secondary Orality, Digital Aesthetics, Platform Culture, Multimodality, Digital Reception, Orality and Literacy, Media Theory.

## Introduction

Poetry stands as one of humanity's oldest and most enduring forms of literary expression, adapting across millennia to explore the complexities of human experience. Its evolution, from ancient oral traditions to the contemporary digital landscape, mirrors the trajectory of human communication itself. Etymologically derived from the Greek *poiein* ("to make"), poetry signifies a crafted artifact, distinct from prose's Latin origin *prosa* ("straightforward"). Yet, this distinction has always been fluid. The emergence of language, estimated around 50,000 years ago following earlier acoustic communication, likely coincided with the origins of poetic expression. Early language, rudimentary like simple tools, evolved alongside social complexity, relying on shared systems of meaning and imitation, particularly acoustic imitation which offered evolutionary advantages over gestures. The development of neocortical control over laryngeal muscles enabled greater linguistic complexity, crucial for oral storytelling—the primary means of preserving knowledge before writing.

This evolution, marked by constant branching and expansion, saw instinctive vocalizations (Fixed Action Patterns) gradually give way to controlled, symbolic language—a “Big Bang” marking the separation of emission and interpretation and, arguably, the birth of poetic devices like proto-metaphors. While the earliest recorded written poetry (Sumerian) dates to approximately 4,700 years ago, oral poetry, intrinsically linked to musicality, mnemonic devices, and performance, predates literacy, serving vital roles in cultural transmission. The transition to written forms, solidified by technologies like the printing press around 1450, fundamentally altered poetry’s function and accessibility, enabling its reification into a tangible object—the poem—consumed individually rather than collectively. However, as media theorists argue, new media rarely eliminate predecessors but rather coexist and transform them. Writing liberated oral tradition from purely mnemonic functions; print relocated manuscript culture; photography freed painting from mimesis; digital media now reshapes print and earlier electronic forms.

Within this context, the rise of digital platforms, particularly social media like Instagram, has spurred new poetic forms, most notably “Instapoetry.” This phenomenon, while immensely popular, remains under-theorized within traditional literary studies, which often struggle to account for the specificities of digital media, platform logics, and participatory culture. Contemporary academic discourse has not fully addressed how platforms reshape poetic production, circulation, aesthetics, reception, and even poetic subjectivity, particularly concerning the influence of neoliberal values on self-presentation in digital spaces.

This paper addresses this gap by examining Rupi Kaur’s *Milk and Honey*, a work originating on Instagram, as a key case study illustrating the shift from print-based conventions to a digitally mediated form of “secondary orality,” a concept famously explored by Walter J. Ong. We argue that Kaur’s work exemplifies how the

multimodal affordances and algorithmic infrastructures of platforms like Instagram fundamentally shape the aesthetic form, emotional resonance, participatory reception, and cultural value of contemporary digital poetry. By analyzing Milk and Honey through the lenses of digital orality, digital aesthetics, platform culture, and theories of reception, this paper offers a comprehensive account of how poetic expression is being transformed in the digital age, contributing to a necessary reimagining of literary criticism in a landscape defined by interactivity, visuality, and platform-based communication.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology centered on the analysis of Rupi Kaur's Milk and Honey as a prime example of contemporary digital poetry transitioning between digital and print formats. The approach integrates textual analysis, multimodal analysis, and the application of media and literary theory to investigate how digital orality and platform aesthetics reshape poetic practice and reception.

**Textual and Multimodal Analysis:** We conduct close readings of selected poems from Milk and Honey, comparing their presentation and potential reception in both their original Instagram context (where available/reconstructible) and their print version. This involves analyzing literary features (theme, tone, metaphor) alongside visual and structural elements (typography, layout, white space, line breaks, integration of Kaur's hand-drawn illustrations). Figures previously included in the source text serve as specific examples for this analysis, examining how the interplay of text and image contributes to meaning-making, reflecting principles of digital aesthetics and multimodality derived from theorists like Drucker, Hayles, and Mitchell.

**Theoretical Framework Application:** The analysis is grounded in key theoretical frameworks. Walter J. Ong's concept of "secondary orality" is central to understanding how digital platforms revive characteristics of oral cultures

(immediacy, community, participation) within a technological context. Theories of digital aesthetics are employed, drawing on Walter Benjamin's ideas about reproduction and aura, N. Katherine Hayles' work on electronic literature and materiality, Lev Manovich's conceptualization of new media, and Johanna Drucker's insights on viscosity and interface aesthetics.

**Analysis of Digital Reception and Platform Culture:** We examine the dynamics of reception specific to digital platforms like Instagram. This includes analyzing the role of user interactions (likes, comments, shares) as participatory mechanisms of meaning-making, drawing inspiration from scholars like Henry Jenkins. Concepts such as Crystal Abidin's "platformed intimacy," Sara Ahmed's "sticky emotions," and M. Madhava Prasad's theory of Darshan are applied to understand the affective, communal, and culturally situated dimensions of engaging with Instapoetry online. The analysis also considers the influence of platform logics, algorithmic curation, and the broader context of the creative industries and platform capitalism, referencing critiques from scholars like Nieborg, Poell, van Dijck, and Hesmondhalgh.

**Data and Ethics:** The primary data consists of the text and images within the published version of *Milk and Honey* and publicly available examples of Kaur's Instagram posts. Analysis of audience interaction draws on the general dynamics described in secondary scholarship regarding Instapoetry reception. All analyzed digital content is treated as public data, respecting user privacy by not using personal data, and adhering to principles of fair use for critical analysis, with due respect for intellectual property and cultural sensitivities inherent in the work's themes.

This combined approach allows for a robust exploration of how digital media transforms the production, aesthetics, interpretation, and cultural memory of

poetry, using Milk and Honey to illuminate broader trends in contemporary literary and digital culture.

## Discussion

The journey of poetry from spoken utterance to networked digital text reveals a continuous interplay between artistic expression and communication technology. Rupri Kaur's Milk and Honey, born on Instagram, serves as a compelling focal point for understanding the latest iteration of this evolution, marked by the ascendancy of digital orality, platform-specific aesthetics, and participatory reception.

### The Aesthetics of Instapoetry: Brevity, Visuality, and Affect

Kaur's work epitomizes the aesthetic conventions that have come to define Instapoetry. Characterized by brevity, minimalist design, lowercase typography, sparse punctuation, and the integration of simple line drawings, her poems are optimized for the digital environment. This style is not merely decorative but functional. The visual simplicity and concise language cater to the "glanceability" required by fast-scrolling social media feeds, ensuring immediate emotional payoff. The consistent use of lowercase rejects traditional grammatical hierarchy, fostering an egalitarian, intimate tone that resonates with digital communication norms. Furthermore, the deliberate use of white space and line breaks transforms the poem into a visual object, aligning with concepts of screen-based materiality where layout intrinsically shapes meaning.

The Integration of text and image is fundamental. Kaur's drawings function not as mere illustrations but as "material metaphors" or "living pictures," extending and complicating the textual meaning. This multimodality requires a negotiation between seeing and reading, demanding a different kind of literacy from readers.

The visual field becomes constitutive of the reading experience. This aesthetic—often centered, isolated on a plain background, fitting Instagram’s square format—is inherently platform-conscious, designed for easy consumption and sharing. The result is a form of “emotional capsules,” potent distillations of feeling readily digestible in the digital stream.

### Secondary Orality and Participatory Culture

Ong’s concept of secondary orality finds clear expression in Instapoetry’s reception dynamics. While transmitted through visual text, Instapoetry culture recreates features of primary orality: a focus on the present moment, a formulaic simplicity facilitating memory and sharing, a sense of communal participation, and an emphasis on performance (albeit digital). The platform itself fosters this. Likes, comments, shares, and remixes transform reading from a solitary act into a public, participatory one. Users are not just consumers but “prosumers,” actively involved in the circulation and re-contextualization of poetic content. This dynamic interaction reshapes the traditional author-reader relationship into a more fluid, networked exchange. The concept of Darshan, adapted from Indian devotional contexts, provides a lens to understand this reciprocal gaze; engaging with an Instapoem becomes an active, affective exchange that contributes to communal meaning-making. The poem’s “stickiness,” its ability to accumulate emotional resonance through repeated sharing and interaction, further highlights this collective dimension.

### Platform Culture, Creative Industries, and Neoliberal Subjectivity

Instapoetry cannot be divorced from the platform economies in which it thrives. Platforms like Instagram are not neutral conduits but “technological-cultural

constructs” that shape creative labor through algorithms, engagement metrics, and monetization strategies. Kaur’s success exemplifies a shift from the traditional “culture industry” model, with its gatekeepers, to the “creative industries” logic, which emphasizes flexibility, entrepreneurship, and market performance – now further evolving into platform industries. In this environment, poetic value becomes entangled with visibility, virality, and affective engagement. The poet operates as a brand, managing a curated persona whose emotional expressivity becomes a form of “affective labor.” This fosters a “platformed intimacy,” where vulnerability and connection are mediated and often quantified. This aligns with broader trends of neoliberal subjectivity, where the self is presented as emotionally transparent, authentic, and strategically optimized for visibility within the attention economy. Emotion is not suppressed but commodified, transformed into cultural and economic capital.

## Conclusion

The evolution of poetry, traced from its origins in oral performance to its current iteration as Instapoetry, underscores the profound influence of media technologies on literary forms and cultural practices. Rupi Kaur’s *Milk and Honey*, situated at the confluence of digital orality, visual culture, and platform capitalism, serves as a vital case study for understanding contemporary poetic expression. Its minimalist aesthetics, multimodal composition, and reliance on affective immediacy are not mere stylistic choices but are deeply intertwined with the affordances and logics of the digital platforms where it first gained prominence.

Instapoetry embodies a form of secondary orality, characterized by participatory engagement, communal meaning-making, and ephemeral-yet-persistent circulation. The interactive nature of platforms like Instagram transforms poetic reception from a private, interpretive act into a public, affective, and collective experience, echoing



concepts like Darshan. This shift challenges traditional notions of authorship and literary value, foregrounding instead circulation, resonance, and user engagement. Furthermore, the phenomenon of Instapoetry illuminates the complex relationship between creative expression and the economic imperatives of platform culture and neoliberalism. The poet's subjectivity, the aesthetic form, and the modes of reception are all shaped by the demands of visibility, self-branding, and affective labor within the digital attention economy.

While Instapoetry like Kaur's has faced criticism for its perceived simplicity or departure from traditional craft, understanding it requires a critical framework that acknowledges its specific media context and cultural function. It represents not necessarily a decline, but a transformation—a reconfiguration of poetry for a networked, visually-oriented, and emotionally immediate era. Analyzing digital poetry necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis with media theory, platform studies, and cultural critique. As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too will poetic expression, demanding ongoing scholarly attention to the dynamic interplay between word, image, technology, and human connection. *Milk and Honey* and the Instapoetry movement signal a significant moment in this ongoing evolution, prompting a necessary expansion of how we define, analyze, and value poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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