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## THE THEME OF CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES FACED BY INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA IN RUPI KAUR'S POEM *BROKEN ENGLISH* (2022)

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### ABSTRACT

The research focuses on the challenges and difficulties faced by Indian immigrants in Canada, as portrayed in the poem 'Broken English' by Rupī Kaur. The study analyzes the intrinsic elements of the poem, including theme, feeling, message, diction, rhyme and rhythm, typography, imagery, symbol, and figurative language, along with the extrinsic elements of biography and meaning. Qualitative methods are employed to analyze data on Indian immigrant issues. The expressive approach is utilized for analyzing poetry and implicit meaning. According to research, Rupī Kaur's "Broken English" revolves around the challenges faced by Indian immigrants in Canada. The second generation of Indian immigrants encounter a range of difficulties in adjusting to a new environment, including economic hardship and discrimination due to their non-native English proficiency. They also experience the consequences of discrimination that their parents faced, such as being denied recognition as Indian immigrants in Canada due to their thick accents. Furthermore, some second-generation Indian immigrants may discriminate against their fellow Indian immigrants.

**Keywords:** Challenges; Difficulties; Immigrant; India; Canada

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is composed of words arranged into beautiful and meaningful stanzas based on the author's imagination (Suryaman, W.M, 2013; Penke, 2019; Joranger, 2023; Mishra, 2025). The imagination becomes ideas or themes. Themes in poetry can be seen *implicitly* or *explicitly*. "Broken English" is an example of poetry with an implicit theme. The title and the content have different meanings, which require intrinsic and extrinsic analysis. The title refers to the language aspect while the content talks about Indian immigrants in Canada.

Immigrant or migrant is a term for an individual or group of people who move from their country to

live in another country. According to the *United States Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, several developing countries are the largest source countries of immigrants including India, Mexico, Russia, China, Bangladesh, Syria, Pakistan, and Ukraine. Additionally, North America and the South Pacific are among the largest continents with immigrant populations (Alamri, M.A, 2020; Ghimire and Kapri, 2023).

The process of immigrants moving to another country is called immigration (Alamri, M.A., 2020). There are various factors that can affect a person's decision to migrate. Personal factors, such as education, employment opportunities, income, and

better living conditions, can be motivating factors. Urgent reasons, such as poverty and security concerns, can also drive individuals to seek a new home elsewhere, as it may be their only way to escape danger and find a sense of security (Bidarti, A, 2020; Ahmed, et al., 2024).

Urgent factors such as poverty are prevalent in India, caused by numerous hunger cases. In 1995, based on data from the *Institute for Food and Development Policy*, approximately 200 million Indians experienced hunger. One of the continents that is a goal state for Indian immigrants is North America, Canada (Dominion of Canada) which has a multicultural country identity (Fur, G, 2014).

According to CIC NEWS (2014: *Story Indian Immigration Canada*), Indian immigrants first arrived in Vancouver, Canada in 1904, where the majority were Sikh, a religion originating from Punjab, India, which first appeared in 1469 (Rahman, V. E, 2021). Currently, there are 300,000 Indian immigrants living in Canada, called "*Indo-Canada*" for people of India who have Canadian citizenship in Canada such as Ontario, British Columbia, and Toronto.

Being an Indian immigrant in Canada does not necessarily mean that they will immediately achieve the desired life. According to BBC News's *My Canadian Immigrant Story: The Foreign Credentials Struggle* (2017), this can happen because of social inequality and differences in the level of confidence companies in foreign workers, and high expenses for licensing fees, exams, or for improving skills to gain

professional and international recognition. Expect that, immigrants often receive treatment that is considered to violate human rights such as an act of discrimination.

Discrimination is the act of rejecting differences and equality. One form of discrimination is racial discrimination, which can occur due to differences in skin color, religion, language, or accent of the country in which a person currently resides. (Aisyah, N, 2021). The group that faces racial discrimination are individuals of Indian descent due to their darker skin tone as a country located on the Asian continent, "*persistence of racism against Blacks and Aboriginals in Canada*" (Godley, J, 2018). The impact of discrimination tends to be felt by Indian immigrant women as they often keep the pressure to themselves for their family's happiness. (Mustafa. N., et al., 2020).

Rupi Kaur is a writer who was born in Punjab, India. Rupi and her family moved to Toronto, Canada when she was four years old. Discrimination against Indian immigrants is a recurring theme in Rupi Kaur's literary works. According to The Kit magazine, through an interview with Rupi Kaur, Rupi has a distinctive writing style following her faith as a *Sikh* which has a Gurmukhi writing style. This writing style only recognizes one type of letter, is lowercase letters with dots as punctuation marks, and treats all letters the same creating harmony and simplicity. Rupi Kaur's aim in using this writing style is to show her identity as a Punjabi Indian, and this writing style is in line with her views of her poetry.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative and will be analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. The approach used in this research is the expressive approach by observing the corpus, which is the poem “Broken English” by Rupi Kaur, and supporting theories from theory books, scientific journals, and articles that support the discussion of this research.

## III. DISCUSSION AND FINDING

### *broken English*

by Rupi Kaur

*i think about the way my father  
pulled the family out of poverty  
without knowing what a vowel was  
and my mother raised four children  
without being able to construct  
a perfect sentence in english  
a discombobulated couple  
who landed in the new world with hopes  
that left the bitter taste of rejection in their  
mouths  
no family  
no friends  
just man and wife  
two university degrees that meant nothing  
one mother tongue that was broken now  
one swollen belly with a baby inside  
a father worried about jobs and rent  
cause no matter what this baby was coming  
and they thought to themselves for a split  
second  
was it worth it to put all of our money  
into the dream of a country  
into is swallowing us whole*

*papa looks at his woman's eyes  
and sees loneliness living where the iris was  
wants to give her a home in a country that looks  
at her*

*with the word visitor wrapped around their  
tongue  
on their wedding day  
she left an entire village to be his wife  
now she left an entire country to be a warrior  
and when the winter came  
they had nothing but the heat of their own  
bodies  
to keep the coldness out*

*like two brackets they faced one another  
to hold the dearest parts of them their children  
close  
they turned a suitcase full of clothes into a life  
and regular paychecks  
to make sure that the children of immigrants  
wouldn't hate them for being the children of  
immigrants  
they worked too hard  
you can tell by their hands  
their eyes were begging for sleep  
but our mouths were begging to be fed  
and that is the most artistic thing I have ever  
seen  
it is poetry to these ears  
that has never heard what passion sounds like  
and my mouth is full of likes and uhms when  
i look at their masterpiece  
'cause there are no words in the english  
language  
that can articulate that kind of beauty  
i can't compact their existence into twenty six  
letters and call it  
a description  
i tried once  
but the adjectives needed to describe them  
don't even exist  
so instead i ended up with pages and pages  
full of words followed by commas and  
more words and more comas  
only to realize that there are some things  
in the world so infinite  
they can never use a full stop*

*so how dare you mock your mother  
when she opens her mouth and  
broken english spills out  
don't be ashamed of the fact that*

*she spit through countries to be here  
so you wouldn't have to cross a shoreline  
her accent is thick like honey  
hold it with your life  
it's the only thing she has left from home  
don't you stomp on that richness  
instead hang it up on the walls of museums  
next to dali and van gogh  
her life is brilliant and tragic  
kiss the side of her tender cheek  
she already knows what it sounds like  
to have an entire nation laugh when she speaks  
she's more than our punctuation and language  
we might be able to paint pictures and write  
stories  
but she made an entire world for herself  
  
how is that for art?*

*Broken English* is a free verse poem consisting of four stanzas and 79 lines written by Rupi Kaur. This poem was published on October 3 2017 about the struggle of life as an immigrant, inspired by the true story of Rupi Kaur's parents. The immigrant in the poem is an Indian immigrant, and the country is Canada.

In stanza one, that shows immigrants in the poem such as; “*who landed in the new world with new hopes*”, “*no man no friends just man and wife*”, “*two university degrees that meant nothing one mother tongue was broken now*”, and “*was it worth it to put all our money into the dream of a country that's swallowed us whole?*”. The poem highlights discrimination towards an Indian immigrant, seen through the rejection of his identity, as seen in the line “*that left bitter taste of rejection in their mouth*”.

There is a ***pars pro-toto synecdoche*** in line three where the word “*vowel*” not only represents specific vowels but also English as a whole. There is **irony**

present in lines eight and nine “*who landed in the new world with hopes*”, “*that left bitter taste of rejection in their mouths*” which illustrates the contrast between the Indian immigrants' hopes and the reality of rejection by Canadians. Line 13 and line 14 “*two university degrees that meant nothing*”, “*one mother tongue that was broken now*” also contain **irony** as they highlight the futility of the Indian immigrants having university degrees, and the brokenness of their tongue. The **metaphor** in line 19 and line 20 “*put all of our money into the dream of a country*” emphasizes the figurative word “*put or save*” all their money in a country, which means Indian immigrants spend a lot of money in that country. **Personification** “*swallowing*” in line 21 means that the country where they currently live which is Canada, can eat or bury them and their dreams.

The first stanza reflects the decision to migrate as a result of the Indian immigrants' determination to free their families from the cycle of poverty “*I think about the way my father*”, “*pulled the family out of poverty*” to a country that accepted Indian immigrants like Canada. Despite having obtained degrees, individuals with broken English face challenges in the Canadian job market. This is due to a preference for applicants with Canadian education and work experience, as well as those with English names. Many companies are concerned about the foreign language skills of non-native English speakers, which can diminish the perceived value of their degrees.

This fact makes Indian immigrants reflect on their decisions because in reality, they got rejection *"that left the bitter taste of rejection in their mouths"*.

In stanza two, the poem portrays the loneliness of an immigrant, as seen in line 23 *"papa looks at his woman's eyes and sees loneliness living where the iris was"*. Through line 23 *"loneliness living where the iris was"* contains **personification** suggesting that *"loneliness"* resides within the woman's eyes like a human who can live, then *"iris"*, is also found in line 25 *"wrapped around its tongue"* which means that scorn for Indian immigrants is often uttered by Canadian. In lines 27 and 28 of the poem *"she left an entire village to be his wife"*, *"now she left an entire country to be a warrior"* are **parallelisms** that use repeated words, to emphasize that not only male Indian immigrants make sacrifices, but female Indian immigrant *"she"* also do the same. In line 28 of the poem, the phrase *"entire country"* is an example of **totem pro parte synecdoche**. It refers specifically to India and all of its inhabitants. The word *"warrior"* in the same line is a **metaphor** that compares women to superheroes, highlighting their exceptional qualities.

In the second stanza, it shows that being in an Indian immigrant family has its own desires, like the figure of *"papa"* who really loves his wife and wants to give her happiness. However, living as an Indian immigrant in Canada is not easy. The pressure on Indian immigrant women is higher because they tend to hide all their existing pressures for the family's happiness. Their loneliness comes from the absence of family around them, the pressure of having to

adapt to a new culture, environment, and language, as well as experiencing discrimination which harms mental health and physical health, causing discomfort and distrust towards Canada. Therefore, the title of *"hero"* or *"warrior"* is often considered fitting for Indian immigrant women.

In the third stanza, there is a line that shows immigrants, *"to make sure that children of immigrants wouldn't hate them for being the children of immigrants"*. This line highlights discrimination, a reason why some children of Indian immigrants may resent their parents due to the fear of facing discrimination from Canadians if they don't succeed. Lines 36 and 37 *"to make sure that the children of immigrants"* and *"wouldn't hate them for being the children of immigrants"* refer to Canada implicitly.

The **simile** in line 32 is *"like two brackets"* which means that Indian immigrants are interdependent and rely on each other, like brackets that can protect each other. **Parallelism** and **personification** in lines 40 and 41 describe the struggle of the characters as immigrants *"their eyes were begging for sleep"*, *"but our mouths were begging to be fed"* To support their children, Indian immigrant parents were willing to sacrifice their sleep and work longer hours. There is a **paradox** in line 43 where the word *"artistic"* is used to describe the beauty of a scene that contrasts with the harsh reality it represents. There is a **symbol** in line 46 *"masterpiece"* which symbolizes that life's journey is a masterpiece. In lines 54 to 56 *"pages and pages"*, *"commas and commas"*, *"more words and more commas"* there is an **alliteration** that



emphasizes that the life story of her parents is so extraordinary that it cannot be expressed verbally or in writing. Line 59 contains the phrase "full stop" which is a **symbol** that signifies the end, but in this poem, the phrase emphasizes the never-ending greatness of Indian immigrant parents.

This stanza explains that recent immigrants from India in Canada struggle to achieve their dream life due to social barriers, employment gaps, and expensive licensing fees. Indian immigrants often have to work harder to achieve the life they desire in Canada. Many of them sell suitcases filled with clothes and rely solely on their income to build a better life for themselves and their families. They do this to ensure that their children do not resent them for being the children of Indian immigrants. The persistence can be seen even from the physical appearance, from the hands that look like they are carrying a lot of heavy loads to the dim eyes, all for the children to get good and sufficient food intake. The persistence of Indian immigrants in Canada is like a beautiful work of art or a moving poem. Their determination and perseverance are so powerful that it can leave us speechless. Even if we try to describe it, we may find ourselves at a loss for words. In the end, we may end up with a page full of words, but without the proper punctuation to truly capture the depth of their efforts.

In the fourth stanza of the poem, there is a line that emphasizes the importance of not ostracizing the previous generation of Indian immigrants. This should not happen just because they may not be

fluent in the language or culture of the new country. The line reminds us to look back at the various sacrifices they made in their journey as Indian immigrants. The figure of an Indian immigrant mother who made great sacrifices to support her family's pursuit of a better life in Canada represents the previous generation of Indian immigrants. "*So how dare you mock your mother*". Line 60 of the poem "*so how dare you mock your mother*" contains an **irony** in "*mock*" which refers to discrimination carried out by the next generation of Indian immigrants to the previous generation just because of their ability to speak English. There is a **simile** in line 66 "*her accent is thick like honey*" which implies that the Indian accent is very identic. The **metaphor** in line 69 is "*richness*" which refers to the characteristic of identity in Indian immigrants as a gift, and line 76 uses the words "*punctuation and language*" to describe the abilities or advantages possessed by children of Indian immigrants compared to their parents. Line 71 "*Dali and Van Gogh*" has a **metonymy** that mentions the names of the Dali Museum and the painter Van Gogh, both of these artists' works are truly extraordinary and deserve to be immortalized, like the life story of the Indian immigrant "*mother*" deserves appreciation. Then the words "*brilliant and tragic*" in line 72 have an **antithesis** combining two opposite words in one sentence which shows that her life is beautiful but painful. The **personification** in line 75 "*entire nation laugh*" means the whole world laughs because of the "*mother*" language's inability.

Indian immigrants from previous generations who migrated to Canada tend to maintain their culture and show their identity as Indians, as a form of love, and practice old cultural values as Indians. The next generation of immigrants often assimilates and adopts Canadian behaviors and appearances due to the adaptation process. However, this can lead to some members of the next generation mocking the previous generation for their lack of English proficiency, resulting in discrimination. As the next generation of Indian immigrants, it is a must to remember the persistence of previous generations so that current Indian immigrants can have a good life.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on discussion, the decision of Indian immigrants to migrate to Canada is based on their aim and hope for a better life. The experience of Indian immigrants can be challenging due to isolation in a foreign country and the pressure to assimilate to a different culture and social norms. This pressure has an impact on the mental and physical health of Indian immigrants, especially women. The theme of Rupi Kaur's "Broken English" revolves around the challenges experienced by Indian immigrants in Canada. These challenges include adjusting to a new culture, navigating the economy, and encountering prejudice due to their limited English proficiency. The second generation of Indian immigrants also grapples with discrimination and adaptation, leading them to embrace broken English as a common form of

expression. The experience of discrimination in the first generation affects the second generation, who may have a thick accent and feel that their existence as Indian immigrants in Canada is denied.

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