

## The Awakening Of Female Sexuality And Subversion In Ruskin Bond's Work

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to present a graphic exploration of the limitation of sexual liberty and gender bias as portrayed in Ruskin Bond's subversive tale, 'Susanna's Seven Husbands'. Bond is known for his impressive short tales making huge impact through its lucidity, and his women characters are well fortified in their personality. In the mentioned text, he brings down the conservative, prejudiced psyche of a society that intercepts the free expression of passion innate in women. With this he endeavours to expose the hypocrisy existing at social and political level. He has depicted the central figure as a courageous, extraordinary female who dares to challenge the prescribed norms of her times regarding the flow of her sensuality and emancipation, while also demonstrating her psychology in the patriarchal world that does best to suffocate her passionate desires.*

**Keywords:** *Sexuality, Psychology, Patriarchy, Oppression, Identity, Feminism. Gender*

Ruskin Bond, rightly observed as 'Wordsworth' of India, has made eminent contribution to Indian writing in English. His works, sophisticated yet simple, convey a large and complex meaning inherent in Indian life and culture. Prominently recognized for his treatment of nature, children and childhood in his notable works, Bond also established himself as an illustrious promoter of feminism. Under the wrap of dark comedy, he gracefully touches on the subject of sexual despotism and repression meted out towards women. In Susanna's Seven Husbands, he ruthlessly brings out the subjugation that a woman faces in a prejudiced society by subverting the established norms of system and institution regarding the general perception of women's place in society. As Wilhelm Reich rightly proclaimed, "*Sexually awakened women, affirmed and recognized as such, would mean the complete collapse of the authoritarian ideology.*" It's been largely perceived that many ancient and contemporary societies contemplate the sexually awakened female as both 'auspicious' and 'dangerous.' Naomi Wolf writes,

*"Men are visually aroused by women's bodies and less sensitive to their arousal by women's personalities because they are trained early into that response, while women are less visually aroused and more emotionally aroused because that*

*is their training. This asymmetry in sexual education maintains men's power in the myth: They look at women's bodies, evaluate, move on; their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or passed over."*

Bond in creating Susanna an enigmatic and wild seducer, has defied the prevailing norm that call women to be submissive, obedient, and meek, "*Her eyes were large and lustrous, and she had a strong, rather determined chin.*" (21) Ruskin bond's novelette, *Susanna's Seven Husband*, is about the journey and choice the protagonist, Susanna Anna-Maria Yeates, makes no matter how wrong she gets in the way. A descendant of Dutch and East India, Susanna is the confluence of West and East presenting the charming horrors of a contemporary India. The tone of the story is of formal realism. The theme of expressed passion is evident from the beginning with the imagery of notorious Black widow spider that is sexually advanced. Bond has painted his central heroine as an empowered female character who is a strong woman and whose domineering quality bends her male counterparts. The novelist has managed to embody within conservative tale, a subverted story in which the pictorial heroine is in control, both of herself and of men around her;

*Susanna's Seven Husbands* is a short story of a young, beautiful woman and her seven marriages told through the eyes of twelve-year-old narrator, Arun, who is of a blunt and honest character, and has teenage crush on Susanna, who is ten years his older when he first meets her,

*"I can still see her clearly in my mind's eye- slender and dark-haired, with a smile so warm that it could melt a Himalayan glacier...her delicate perfume-a flowery garden fragrance...Nor can I forget her laughter. Sometimes it had a mocking quality; at other times it expressed her sensuality and joy." (19)*

It is notable that even the young narrator, before hitting adolescence is very much palpable to Susanna's affecting voluptuousness and her gentleness. He develops a close bond with her and becomes an active pursuer of her intrigue conjugal adventures over the period with a mix of fascination, alarm and slight jealousy.

Becoming motherless at a very young age, Susanna's childhood is governed by three things: dogs, horses and servants. After her father's death, she inherits the property. She had grown up *"unaccustomed to male company"* (06), and is captivated with one when she comes into contact with them in her adulthood. Since she comes from an affluent background, she is more of a casualty to the demands of sexual oppression. Her vibrant flow of sensuality is taken offence by the community of the times in which she lived. Adhering to hegemony of social system, she has to marry many times in order to satisfy her sexual desires. But in each of her six marriages she is unsatisfied, hence driving her to take monastic vow in the end. To join a nunnery at those times could be comprehend as the only way Susanna could control her excessive natural desires. She is held in esteem by everyone especially her servants who possess mutual concern, love and loyalty for their mistress. She is tender and kind; *"Yes, she was kind to children and an animal even to old creatures and freaks...Her cruelty was reserved for another species of human..."*(05) Her warm attitude toward animals, children, the marginalized or abnormal, and her contempt for men bring into dark contrast the recurring betrayal by them, hopelessness and expectation to stay in the confinement of patriarchy which holds the rein of liberation of passion placed on men and women. This leads Susanna to gaze at them in abhorrence, and incline compassionately toward those who are also like her; the victims tyrannized by the norms of the society. Susanna, in search of true love, marries seven times, six of whom are shown to have idiosyncrasies- a fatal flaw, and meet their death in an unnatural manner. The narrator likens the 'merry widow' to the husband-devouring Black widow spider as he vividly weaves the image, *"It was sometime since she'd dined off a fat, juicy male. Now she was thinking of moving her web elsewhere."*(27). Susanna's actions unconsciously mirror those of the spider's. The spider is the dominant one who brings home the food, while her male partners thrive off on her earning. But in a moment of exasperation, she puts an abrupt and cruel end to their weakling, aimless existence. Likewise, each husband that Susanna marries prove to be vastly inferior to her and once the initial charm wears off, she finds it impossible to endure their annoying habits.

First husband, Major Mehta, suffers from false vanity. He is a manipulator, coward, boastful. He is even jealous of the servants who are in the confidence of their mistress. He meets his mysterious death while hunting. Jimmy Rogers, her second husband, *"wanted to be a Beetle"*(11), hence alluding his foreboding fate, i.e., a musical band, prey, and victim. He is shown to be immature, unemployed, arrogant, who only knows music, with no real talent for it. He suffers from two things- insecurity and extreme narcissism as he is weirdly fanatic about his music. In the end, *"poor Jimmy"* (16) dies of drug overdose. Susanna's third husband has been described as, *"Here he was- a handsome young Prince, the envy of all. But he didn't have the one thing that could make him happy- a normal sex drive."* (25). A soft spoken, thoughtful poet in day, his fatal-flaw was that he is a sadomasochist, rough and violent at night. Bond has revealed the extreme amorosness twisted with sadism in men. His dead body in car crash is like a *"broken-doll"* (26), implying the broken desires and dreams of finding real love of Susanna's, to be merely a plaything. Signor Eduardo Romero, an official as well a past-time painter, is tall, handsome and diabetic. His intolerance and rude nature displayed toward the inferiors becomes his weakness. He is a flirt and already has a family in Argentina. The infidelity has not gone unmentioned by the writer. Bond has cautiously given a streak of beastness in each of Susanna's husbands. While Susanna endures Signor's betrayal, she cannot forgive him for blinding her faithful, mute servant, Goonga. Signor dies of massive heart attack resulting from syringe injected by Susanna. Her fifth husband, Mr Gupta, is a dietician, and a great believer in mushroom, who has imposed vegan diet on the whole house, confining Susanna in her expression and the choice of her own meals. He dies eating a poisonous mushroom soup for dinner. Sammy Das, her sixth husband, is almost a perfectionist and a fervent lover in bed. He is old but active and attentive. But he suffer from over-addictiveness of cell-phones.

Bond has traced history to symbolize the amorosness and subversion that is layered in the whole story, and to point the reflection of Susanna's own progress and end that seem parallel to it. Begum Samru, a wealthy widow, beautiful in her youth, had lived to the age of ninety, going through a succession of lovers and husbands before becoming a devout Catholic and leaving her fortunes to various religious institutions. Likewise, disappointed and despaired in her inability to accomplish her dream of finding a true and an ideal love, Susanna sets her house ablaze in a suicide attempt, but is rescued by her maid, who is not so fortunate to survive the disaster. The narrator, learning of her survival, tracks her. She informs him she is getting married with someone who accepts her as she is with all her past. It turns out she imagines Jesus Christ as her seventh husband, who will forever protect, love and never hurt or betray her. She becomes a nun, turning to God for the fulfilment of ideal love that she has failed to find in this mortal word. Transcendentalism is brought here by Bond. Her last decision is open to multiple interpretations. One of them is that surrounded by celibacy, she struggles to power her spirited desires. In those times, marriage and joining nunnery could be seen as the only occupation for the women. People believed nunnery was the only solution for those women who provoke their chastity as seen from societal

point of view. By taking monastic vow, Susanna tries to control her candid excessive passion, submitting herself to the call of Holy Divine. In her final act, Bond openly condemns the forces that drive Susanna into succumbing to the authority of patriarchal oppression of sexuality.

"*She seemed to glow over, give out a certain radiance that attracted men as bright lamp attracts a variety of insects.*"(36). The simile of lamp, which shines but has no capacity to move, and insect, who has potential to fly, and climb, reveal how helpless man actually is in despite of his obvious masculinity, declared supremacy over women. Bond makes a mockery of male superiority. Ruskin bond has in his way protested against brutality of social system that suppress woman to be passive puppets, unclipping their wings of freedom of expression. In Susanna, he has created a female model who is bold, independent, fierce, and dominant, and who exercise a large amount of control over other male characters.

Also, Bond does not refrain from attacking society's rules regarding how women should live. Susanna remarries several times because she lives in a society where women could not live sexually with men without marriage. Susanna is also not naïve to outrageousness shown by the male characters. She raises the fury of men by participating in horse races which was unofficially considered as men's sport. She is looked down as the fair vow breaker, breaking her marital vows six times. This was something scandalous and disgraceful according to the norm of the society in which she lived. Apart from writer's ridicule of men's feebleness, and Susanna's

breaking of vows, the protagonist is shown to have ditched modesty that had been forced upon her by societal protocol. Though becoming the victim of human heart, she began journey of self-expression and self-realization, not allowing world to dictate her. Bond's portrayal of her shows her capability of influencing her own destinies in sexual and political ways. Hence, in this exquisite tale, Ruskin has highlighted the social and political emancipation of women in more than one way, strongly manifesting his feministic outlook. Susanna is model of all that what Robyn Rihanna Fenty writes, "*There's something so special about a woman who dominates in a man's world. It takes a certain grace, strength, intelligence, fearlessness, and the nerve to never take no for an answer.*"

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