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“I Can’t Help It” Readings of Gender Performativity and Heteronormativity in Ruskin Bond’s Susanna’s Seven Husbands: A Critical Examination of Patriarchal Constructs and Female Autonomy

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond’s novella *Susanna’s Seven Husbands* offers a compelling lens through which to explore the intersections of gender, desire, and societal expectations. This paper examines how Bond’s narrative critiques and reflects the gender dynamics within a patriarchal framework, using the story of Susanna—a wealthy, aristocratic woman whose repeated marriages and eventual murders of her husband reveal underlying tensions between gender, autonomy and societal constraints in India. Through the lens of Butler’s concept of gender performativity, the paper explores how Susanna’s identity is constructed and deconstructed by the patriarchal gaze, and how her repeated need for marriage reflects a deeper quest for validation within a restrictive heteronormative framework. By situating *Susanna’s Seven Husbands* within the broader discourse of gender transformation and queer theory, this paper aims to illuminate how literature can act as both a mirror and critic of evolving gender norms, and how Susanna’s story serves as a provocative commentary on the limitations and possibilities of female autonomy within a patriarchal context.

Keywords: Gender performativity, Ruskin Bond, Heteronormative matrix, Desire and Identity, Female identity

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Introduction

“How can we read criticism?... I must shift my position: instead of agreeing to be the confidant of this critical pleasure—a sure way to miss it—I can make myself its voyeur... observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion; the commentary then becomes in my eyes a text, a fiction, a fissured envelope.”

- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Ruskin Bond, the Mussoorie-born writer of India, is an enigmatic figure of Indian Literature. His works are rich with layers of feminism, environmentalism and postcolonialism, amongst others. Despite this, scholars argue that his works warrant more nuanced “multiple-prong probes” (Paramaguru and Pattanaik) analysis, exploration of uncharted “contours” (Singh 1995,12), and critique of his texts from unexpected/unimagined context.

A salient example is “Susanna’s Seven Husbands”, initially appearing in *Collected Short Stories*, at the suggestion of Vishal Bhardwaj, was expanded into a novella and later a screenplay.

Susanna’s character by Ruskin Bond is an “empowered female character” (Abbas 2007), a “vamp of obscure traits” (Bhatt 2005) and an “anti-heroine” (Singh 2022). She is a symbol of the “social and political emancipation of women” (Abbas 2007). Her active sexual needs and desire present as a subversion of patriarchal society and the prowess of Bond to create complicated, multi-faceted female characters.

Yet, All the texts consider her gender acts as a “stable identity” or “locus of agency” (Butler 2011, 1) from which various acts follow. Instead of questioning it as an identity tenuously constituted in time and instituted in patriarchy and heterosexuality.

Judith Butler’s assertion, “Gender is...set of recreated acts” (Butler 2011, 76)-necessitates a thorough exploration of gender political implications within Susanna’s character. Incidentally, the paper will deploy a range of theoretical frameworks to interrogate the text, re-purpose the signified as a signifier, and challenge conventional interpretations.

Susanna lived in the outskirts of Meerut- “desolate and silent” (Bond, 194) as in the original short story, overrun by weeds, and rose shrubs, forming an image of a woman as of untamable nature, an image which is reflected in the euphemism of the “black widow”, her body streaked with “green and yellow” (Bond, 07). Colours which possess significance, since black widows usually range from red to yellow¹. The green symbolised the duality between fertile and ferocious, good and bad as in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Yellow is the colour of ‘self’, as in Sylvia Plath’s “old yellow” in “*In Plaster*” and deceit and madness in “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”. Thus determining and foreshadowing the character of Susanna, highlighting and emphasising her inner turmoil and subsequent fate.

The gothic description of the original short story is guarded and preserved in the novella, the “spacious” (Bond, 18) mansion is “overgrown with weeds” (Bond, 194)- from the motif of

¹ “Black Widow.” National Geographic, kids.nationalgeographic.com/animals/invertebrates/facts/black-widow.

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an abandoned mansion to the motif of the black widow and the detailed description of her culinary preference. Her location as an outsider and her genealogy of miscegenation ensures Susanna's initial impression as an outsider, exotic.

As Beauvoir (2012) writes, "Man seeks the Other in a woman as Nature and his peer.. an ambivalent relationship" Susanna embodies this difference in her body with her gender and genealogy. While her gender 'fates' her to a life of submissiveness, her genealogy as a miscegenation marks her as a societal outcast.

The symbolic relationship of Susana as a black widow is essential. It ensures her gender places her in the duality of nature/culture and also emphasises Nature as the Other. If she can be 'tamed' by the 'culture' around her, then she can be the lovable Other. But if she can't- she is to be destroyed, burned alive.

Susanna is a paradox of sexed attributes with "large and lustrous" (Bond, 33) eyes, a "slender" (Bond, 32) figure, and "warm" (Bond, 32) smile. A "determined chin" (Bond, 33), "smouldering eyes" (Bond, 18), and "large, powerful hands" (Bond, 195). Using contradictory adjectives to describe similar features is a recurring trend in the novella and the short story. Susanna's eyes are "large" (Bond, 33) but also "smouldering"², her figure sometimes slender, sometimes with "large powerful hands" (Bond, 195).

These descriptions indicate more towards the narrator rather than the narrated. Anuj, as a narrator, cannot be easily trusted. If Susanna's body is the site of clash of cultures, a place where what you look like is what you are, then Anuj takes the place of the patriarchy, which indicates their perception and value of *her*.

Although Arun has been a first-person eyewitness to her husbands, along with some of her private thoughts. The readers never get to know *her* perspective, her internal monologue, or what her true feelings or motivations are. The only way for the readers to perceive Susana is through the gaze of the men around her and their perception of her, where she is only the object of the male gaze in whose reflection she reflects as a duality of a vamp and empowered woman- "(Her laugh).. mocking quality; at other times it expressed her sensuality and joy in being alive". Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that Foucault and Nietzsche indicate through their writing that cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body. Sex/gender isn't just imposed on the body, but also by trying to "unify" (Butler, 74) the body, it serves the purpose of "fragmentation, restriction and domination" (Butler, 74), which can be seen through the acts of gender performativity, "instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (Butler, 208)

Susanna was brought by her father, in a mansion on the outskirts of Masuri with little to limited interactions with other people. Her upbringing was largely unconventional where- "I went out riding with my father when I helped him train the horses when I followed his fortunes on the racecourse" (Bond, 47). It was only after his death that she was exposed to the people outside the 'gaze' of her Father and slowly realised her role, her position in society, and the

² An adjective which is often used to describe a person's intense, suppressed emotions or sexual attractiveness but is more commonly associated with male characters in literature and popular culture.

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extent her body plays in it. This can be best seen in the fact that the first time when Arun meets Susanna, she has “dark, smouldering eyes” (Bond, 18).and “figure of an athlete” (Bond, 18). But after the death of her second husband, she is described as “slender and dark-haired” (Bond, 32). An indicator of the struggle with how her gender- her female body becomes her main trait; it defines her, her desires, her reception and her position in society.³

Susanna’s gender performativity is a site of struggle between her upbringing and society’s expectations of her ‘womanhood’. She’s empathetic- she’s “kind to children and animals” (Bond, 19), her employees, “odd freaks and creatures” (Bond, 19), people like her, creatures who, like herself, do not belong.

Yet, she may have inherited the wealth from her father but she is unable to expand or maintain it. Even the fortunes of the racetrack were being maintained through her employee, Goonga. In the short story, it is emphasised that she was a strict zamindar, but all those characteristics of her character were lost in the novella with an aristocratic attitude towards work (or no work). Her only purpose in the novella is to find love. Her servants become accomplices in her murder, relying on absolute obedience and secrecy. And as much as this ensures that they will be good to her, this also works as a countermeasure where she can’t get rid of them on her will. The servants themselves are cautious but carefree enough with their insider knowledge- Shah Rukh and Maggie telling Anuj every detail of what happened with the missing husbands.

Similarly, Susanna relies heavily on Anuj for emotional and practical purposes. After the death of her 6th husband, Sammy- Anju helps with the funeral arrangements, “She had come to depend on me for help in practical matters” (Bond, 59)- painting a picture of Susanna who still lacks in the practical matters of the world, ironic considering that this is her 6th funeral (excluding her father)- portraying quite an inept image of the heiress.

I can’t help it,’ she said. ‘I feel the need of a husband, but the more I see of him, the more I hate him. It’s the sudden hatred.... I can’t help it (Bond, 45)

Susanna’s opinion on the presence of a husband is a “need” rather than a “want”. She does not want a husband; she wants to be able to satisfy all her needs, emotional and physical, on her own. But she is unable to. Despite having financial freedom, she doesn’t seem to be able to exist without a husband. Indicating that something else is afoot, something beyond economic or financial restrictions that force a woman to rely on a man for protection and safety.

Butler writes about Heterosexuality Matriz, as a concept influenced by Wittig’s notion of “heterosexual contract” and Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality”. Describing it as a grid of “cultural intelligibility” through which “bodies, genders, and desires” are naturalised to such an extent to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses

³ In one of his most famous quotes, —Anatomy is destiny,|| (182) Sigmund Freud encloses the very basis of essentialism, linking the human body—or, rather, its genitals—not only to one’s role in society but also to a ineludible, predetermined fortune.

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female) that is oppositional and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.⁴

Accordingly, Susana's body, gender and desire need to be in accordance with the coercive state. Her body needs to neutralise to become more like a 'female'. She needs to express her gender not through masculine presenting performances like horse-riding but rather through feminine qualities of household chores. If Susanna triumphs over those expectations, the patriarchal compromise upholds itself through her desires and her sexuality.

Susanna "needs" a man. She needs it to uphold the patriarchal compromise, to ensure that the institution doesn't ostracise her, and she needs it as a form of self-validation.

Wittig's writing talks about how a "lesbian are not a woman" (Wittig 1992)- a statement true in its radical and yet 'traditional' perspective. Radical since lesbian cannot be constituted as a woman since a Woman only exists as a term as a binary opposition to a man which solidifies and consolidates heterosexuality. And by rejecting it, she no longer fits into that "oppositional relation". Thus "transcending the binary opposition between woman and man" (Butler, 174)

But it is also true from a 'you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be' perspective (Wittig, 45). This discourse isn't just limited to lesbians but other alternate sexualities as well other than heterosexuality that might dare to read its desires. The discourse dictates that a woman "needs" to be heterosexual. If you're not straight, then you're something demonic, something strange, something... not a woman.

Heterosexuality and desire for men is a way "to remain respectable, to do what was expected of women because coming out of "abnormal" childhoods they wanted to feel "normal," and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfilment." (Adrienne, 25)

Like Mary from Mahasweta Devi's "Hunt", Susaana too never finds her place in the society and world that she lives in, oscillating between a 'nat(ural)ive' woman and an 'outsider', thus aiding her need for a husband and their eventual removal.

Susanna "need"(s) a husband. She needs one to be a woman, to be herself. To reject the possibility of the "symbolic order" (Wittig, 45) is to make it impossible to "maintain an internal coherence" (Wittig, 45). Something which is also visible in the manner she refuses to even consider Aman as an option, citing because he is younger than her.

In *Women Read the Romance* by Janice Radway, Radway proposes that romance allows women to bridge the gap between patriarchal beliefs and reality. A fantasy through which patriarchy's promise is fulfilled without the dream being broken. The writers, additionally allow their readers to imagine a fantasy world where their emotional (and physical) needs can be met by a hero who would still prove to be "spectacularly masculine" (Gunderson, 78).

⁴ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 222, footnote 6

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Susanna, newly (re) introduced into the world of men without the guardianship of her father, has no ‘equal’⁵ to guide her or advise her on what to look (out) for. Posited that she has been left to be raised on books- “every week she would visit the Wheeler Club to borrow a book from its lending library”, her first husband, Major Mehta, almost follows the likeness of a hero, and also possesses attractive, protective and having a good body- top three key characteristics that women like to see in a hero. (Radway, 95)

Alternatively, her second husband- Jimmy, was more subdued on a spectrum. He was “sensitive and gentle and understanding” (Gunderson, 84). . . leaning more towards the classification of “beta heroes”. (Lynch, Sternglantz, and Barot 2012).

But no matter how they were, if they were alpha heroes like Major Mehta, The Prince and the Ambassador or if they were almost romantic like Jimmy, the Doctor or Sammy Das - they still reached the same outcome; buried 10 feet underground with an epitaph of ‘Beloved Husband of Susanna’.

Adrienne Rich in “Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” talks about The Double Life as an “apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative-has been characteristic of female experience: in motherhood, and in many kinds of heterosexual behaviour” (Adrienne, 25) where women are taught to create a “richer” (Chodorow, 1976), more “outgoing inner world” (Chodorow) by the patriarchy to survive such that her romantic, physical, passionate, “needs” are taken care by a man but her “survival needs” (Adrienne 1980) are though other medium- usually motherhood after they isolate them.

This serves as a plausible explanation for Susanna who was born in a family where her father satisfied all her emotional needs. He was a parent, friend and companion such that she never had to learn (or witness) the institution of “double-life” that Rich and Chodorow talk about. He was a medium for all of her needs, something she expected from her husbands as well. When they are unable to bridge the gap between her emotional and physical needs and try to isolate or dominate her to establish their supremacy, she kills them.

Susanna’s existence is a nightmare for patriarchy and hope, albeit constrained, for women. She serves as an ideal vamp who ‘will’ rise if economic and financial constraints by the patriarchal on women are loosened. Yet the arguably sympathetic portrayal of her by Bond makes the readers empathise with her struggles and places her as a prototype for ‘good-for-her’ (Heimberger 2022) and the “anti-heroine” genre.

There is no escape (from the political regime of heterosexuality and heterosexual matrix)... The only thing to do is to stand on one’s own feet as an escapee, a fugitive slave, a lesbian. (Wittig Monique. The Straight Mind And Other Essays)

A woman “untamed” is destructive. Akin a black widow, a woman independent and older, will “draw the sap out” (Bond, 61) of men. A viscerally direct contrast to the death of her last husband who dies *on* her, after she draws everything *in* her.

⁵ Using the word equal because despite growing up with househelp, it is clear that she does not see them as human but mere possessions as shown by her disregard for Maggie’s life at the end.

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After the death of her last husband, Susanna's possessiveness and declining possessions come to the surface. The death of Sammy Das leads her to realise that 'the' ideal husband "did not, could not exist", and that the heterosexual society cannot produce a breed of a man who can fulfil the patriarchal promise.

Yet her obsession with Anuj and her unwillingness to imitate the relationship shows the hold and control the heterosexual matrix holds over Susanna. Her crumbling financial freedom is contrasted with Anuj's rising claim.

It is during this time that Susanna decides to burn everything. "Sun and Fire are male divinities" Beauvoir writes (Beauvoir, 220). From "fire of mankind" to "fire in the lions", fire is used to symbolise life, activeness and men. And it is almost exclusively used to ritualise and cleanse women, or the "otherness of nature". From the fire trial of Sita to the witch trials, and hazing, Bertha Mason jumps from the fire of the Thornfield Hall, refusing to be saved/consumed by him.

Susanna's escape is symbolic. She could have silently disappeared and escaped for her new life. But the text demanded retribution, retaliation to (re) establish the patriarchal order. The fire was then necessary, but for whom? Susanna uses the fire as a cleansing ritual, for "too much have happened here. Too much unhappiness" (Bond, 66), but her act of 'cleansing' ends up binding her in the matrix.

By submitting, and actively 'desiring' the fire to burn everything she knows, she also submits her fire. In the movie, after the fire, Susanna decides to dedicate her life to Christ, her 7th husband, the transcendental signified, Name-of-The-Father, someone who can be the 'perfect man' to Susanna's "imperfect woman" (Bond, 67). Thus, satisfying the patriarchy by devoting herself to the original Father and restoring the patriarchal order.

But the ending of the novella is more ambitious and leaves further room for speculation. Her last meeting with Arun, her explicit evocation to Arun that she is "not looking for the right person" (Bond, 67), despite being complicit and unable to express the taboo of age-gap relationships, presents hope.

Arun is her 7th husband and the only husband that survived. And then, her not killing him, actively leaving him is the act she needs to be free. For as long Susanna is deemed to be alive, she can never be free- from the heteronormativity, the heterosexual matrix and the heterosexual contract. She will have to abide by it, continuously wanting the "need" to have a husband to resent, love and eventually murder.

Conclusion

Susanna has been hailed as a feminist in some analyses of the novella. A bold and uncompromising feminist on whom the complicit restraint and expectation of patriarchal society and heteronormativity do not weigh, someone who can live her life on her terms, and her conditions, "that we do not ask for perfection... but only resistance from her." (Showalter, 2001). Susanna pushes hard. Hard enough that her husband falls from the machaan on the big shisham tree, yet not enough to consider why she needs the big tree at all. This catharsis is something which alludes to her till the end. Yet she pushes. Her strength and stubbornness to "need" the perfect husband, to not settle for less-than-enough treatment, understanding her

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worth, makes her a prototype of the good-for-her genre and a provocative, subversive and patriarchal commentary on the limitations and possibilities of female autonomy within a patriarchal context.

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