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# A Critical Study of Female Autonomy, Patriarchy, Power Dynamics and Suffering with Psychological Perspectives in Ruskin Bond's *Susanna's Seven Husbands*

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**Abstract:** The present research paper deeply explores a powerful independent woman's quest for identity and fulfilment in postcolonial society. It also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Susanna pondering over the conflict and consequences in the game of power mostly centered around gender roles in the society which looks upon female autonomy as the root cause of the decline of the womanhood and feminine qualities leading a bold and powerful woman toward an empty life and loneliness and the people closely related to her are exposed to suffering and guilt for being silent partner in her weird style of punishing her husbands as a remedy and revenge to her exploitation by them. Close reading of the text and qualitative approach has been used in preparing this research paper.

**Keywords:** Female autonomy, society, patriarchy, psychological, emotional fulfilment, suffering

The present paper aims to discuss the complex psychological impacts of patriarchy and power dynamics on Susanna and other characters closely related to her in '*Susanna's Seven Husbands'*. It is intended to present a deep analysis of the factors responsible for suffering and crime in the story delving deeply into the behavior and psychology of Susanna, the protagonist or otherwise antagonist under the restrictive environment for women, social taboos and vulnerability of a rich young woman with strong desire to fulfil her wishes that are denied by society. It also views the female autonomy and sexuality of Susanna in the light of the three basic principles of Freud's psychoanalytic criticism in which he argues

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that "our mental processes are assigned to three psychic zones-the id, the ego and the superego" (*Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, 111) which is further summed up in the words of Wilfred L. Guerin et al. as , "Whereas the id is dominated by the pleasure principle and the ego by the reality
principle, the superego is dominated by the morality principle." (*Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, 111).

'*Susanna's Seven Husbands'* is one of the most intriguing stories for the way it deals with the game of power, lust, and crime, leaving the narrator burdened with the guilt of knowing a secret to which he is supposed to carry with him throughout his life as his share of essential suffering for being an intended seventh husband of Susanna. The elements of irony and suspense add ambiguity to the story and it unfolds a clue about its themes of gender and power dynamics through the tale of black widow spider who feeds her husband, but devours on him while he is sleeping to get rid of the burden. The reference to the story of Begum Samru shows the author's over emphasis on female sexuality and corruption of power. The paper questions the writer's stereotypical presentation of Susanna as a murderous wife. Also, when the narrator recalls the story of Susanna, his lifelong friend and neighbor, there is a question mark on the word friend means there is something more important and secretive about their relationship more than friends.

In her pursuit to identity, Susanna, a woman raised in the postcolonial patriarchal society with abundance of riches and wealth finds herself all alone, deprived of any meaningful relationship in her youth. She is the owner of a powerful personality, but on times reflecting the contradictory aspects like innocence and authority, dependance and autonomy at the same time. Her inability to establish any meaningful connections is partially psychological arising out of the patriarchic societal construction more focused on restricting the women in their gender roles and denial of female autonomy. The narrator recalls that he first saw Susanna when he was twelve years old living in the bungalow next door Susanna's spacious estate on the outskirts of Meerut. She is about ten years older than the narrator, living on her own, running her estate with the help of her servants- Goonga, the dwarf Jockey who looks after her horses for races, Shah Rukh, the gardener and Maggie, the maid servant. Later, in the story we see Susanna has an ironical relationship with her servants too. Arun introduces Susanna, a fascinating woman as she had raven black hair, dark smoldering eyes and the figure of an athlete with an infectious, devil may care laugh.

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Susanna's boldness is revealed through her hobbies. She is fond of horse riding and many times takes her horses to participate in race. The conversation narrator had with Susanna was small but its impact was much deeper. The next day, Arun, the narrator gets a basket full of guavas on his front door which was brought by Jockey as a gift to them from his neighbor Susanna. However, when

Arun looks back into previous incidents that have happened and ponders over his and Susanna's relationship, finds it more than friendship throughout these years. When she is not there, he misses her and surprisingly he realizes if he was the ideal person, for whom Susanna was looking as an ideal husband, the one who could share her emotions, provide her unconditional support and could complete the image in Susanna's frame of a perfect man and he adds 'perhaps' not sure as maybe she would have been still looking for the seventh husband somewhere else.

Despite six failed marriages, Susana's pursuit of love and meaning remains unfulfilled. There is a kind of emotional vacuum in her life to which she tries to fill with her unconventional choice of marriages but every time chooses the wrong person. Her very first marriage with Major Hari Mehta is the first testament of her gender role. She has no other option either to accept the conventional role assigned to a woman as a wife or to reject it in totality. She chooses to reject the idea of a submissive wife which comes with a heavy burden to suffer throughout her life as a widow but again she rejects the idea of lifelong widowhood. She wants to live her life in complete perfection which seems an ideal state. She takes a chance on Jimmy. On him she invests a lot of her time, energy and money but everything goes in vain and again she is left to accept herself as an unfortunate woman who as per the gender norms might have born under some wrong stars. But this is the most fascinating aspect of her character that once again she takes a step on the forbidden path but this time with a prince in hope of a perfect life partner and perfect life. The prince turns out emotionally, mentally and physically hollow character. Again, her life turns off the track. She mourns for some time, but rejects the ultimate mourning and plunges into another failed marriage with the ambassador, leading her to find the longed perfection in her fifth husband Dr Gupta, who just like a poisonous mushroom, fills her life with toxicity. She overcomes the toxicity soon and marries Samy Das, an addict of phone and sex that reminds us the tale of black widow spider that this is the time for Susanna to get rid of the burden of a loathsome creature.

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Through all these relationships, Susanna portrays herself as an innocent person who has nothing to do with her failed marriages. She presents herself a victim. Each of her husband marries her for one or another reason. She wants pure love, but each one of them is manipulative in their own way as they exploit her mentally, physically and for her wealth as well. They all come wearing the clock of disguise to which Susanna's sharp eyes tear apart and expose them in their true colors. After every failed attempt it is not only that husband dies, symbolically, Susanna also dies and she creates a new identity for herself, a completely different and a new version.

But is it fair to call Susanna a victim? Is she really that innocent as she presents herself? Is it only about her efforts to establish her gender identity? The answer of these questions lies in the societal norms of patriarchy which expect a woman to act in a certain way. If she doesn't act according to the defined role, she is bound to suffer or otherwise revolts like Susanna. It seems that Susanna here is not one woman but she is a symbol of female autonomy always struggling with conventional approach of the society towards gender roles, in search of unconditional love. She challenges the social construction in which "women have generally been regarded 'sociological chameleons taking on the class, life style, and culture of their male relatives" (*Literary Theory, An Introductory Reader*, 122). She is a portrayal of different women who want to live their life on their own terms and conditions. So, as one person, Susanna might be wrong but at different times as a different woman she is a certainly, a victim. Her conflict with the social norms may be viewed as part of "women's struggles for equality" that "continue after formal independence and define the nature of postcoloniality". (Colonialism/Postcolonialism, 188)

It might be said that this unyielding spirit is the strength of Susanna's character. She is always full of energy to push back the societal pressure. She challenges the notion that a woman must have the secondary role. She takes her decision and instead of spending her life in regret, she makes clear choice but ironically, she does not come at peace with her choices. In order to assert her identity and autonomy, every time she plunges into more complex situation. The conversation between Susanna and Dr. Dutta, who was preparing the death certificate of her fourth husband Signor Romero who already had wife and children in Peru and who was very rude to her servants especially, Goonga, unfolds a lot of things about Susanna and her relationship with her husbands,

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'A massive heart attack; said Dr Dutta, making death certificate. 'Did he suffer from blood pressure?'
'Yes. And diabetes.'

'Had he exerted himself recently?'

'He had been out riding.' She did not mention the duel with whips. 'His horse fell, and he walked home in the rain.'

"That probably brought it on. Well, you'd better inform his embassy. Take care of yourself Susanna. You look pale and tired. You have been under some strain, I can see. Give Yourself a long rest. And don't get married in a hurry. Your husbands appear more of a liability than a support. You are the type that attracts men of weak character. They will fasten on to you as vines fasten themselves to a sturdy; independent tree. You don't need such men. Keep them at way." (*Susanna's Seven Husbands*, 34)

When it comes to the power dynamics, Susanna emerges a very powerful and dominating woman with wealth and resources and a free will to take her decisions. Her servants are her dependents and so become ally to her secrets and crime. They even do not dare to speak anything against her. They are always there at her back and call. For them what Susanna thinks is right, what she does is their faith and if she defies is their destiny. Susanna shares a familial bond with her servants where only she is allowed to speak and decide. Her kindness comes out to be manipulative especially in terms to her relationship with her servants. At the end of the story what seems a mere accident might be a well -planned strategy of Susanna to get rid of her past life, and all the secrets and witnesses to the crime are buried forever as Goonga the Jocky disappears and Maggie dies. Just before the fire incident, Susanna gave her gold bracelet to Maggie, might be as a part of her plan for her safe escape because if Susanna had to live someone had to die and it happens that a female skeleton is found in the ashes that is buried in the graveyard with a tombstone bearing the name of Susanna. Here, Susanna is seen as a very sharp, clever woman with a strategic criminal tendency.

Not only with her servants, Susanna is dominating in her relationship with her husbands and even with the narrator. None of her husbands are presented as the direct

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partner in the conversation. Instead, we come to know about them through the servants. All the incidents are reported indirectly and every time it is Susanna who decides the age of any of her marriage and so of her husbands. She is guided by the principle of her being superior and hence in a position to punish each of her husband for the imperfection they carry with them. She does not take a legal route to get rid of her husbands. She just removes them from her way so that she could gain sympathy for herself and under the veil of grief she escapes from all legal obligations.

Hence, if we look critically at the portrayal of Susanna, the author uses her negative traits, boldness and power as the main cause of her failure as a wife. His over emphasis on female sexuality through the presentation of black widow spider, Susanna and Begum Samru, is based on the stereotypical image of women that a powerful woman is more dangerous. The author has presented Susanna's approach of self fulfilment and womanhood the outcome of her being corrupted due to her wealth and power.

However, the question of the narrator's suffering and guilt is as ambiguous as his relationship with Susanna. It may be said that his suffering in silent is the result of his silence on Susanna's secrets over the years. Every time she reaches a certain point in her life after the death of her husband, she moves to the narrator to share with him some of her agony and pain. As the narrator admits, "I had been a companion in a way that her husbands had never been." (Susanna's Seven Husbands, 54) His relationship with Susanna is like two rivers meeting and diverting at certain points on their paths. They become so closely related to each other, "not as marriage partners, not as lovers, but as two people bonded together by shared experiences" (Susanna's Seven Husbands, 59). More than her friend, the narrator is her admirer, "the sharer of all her secrets" (59) who doesn't find any fault with her. Hence, he just listens to her without any moralizing or advising her. This is one of the most complicated aspects of the story that the narrator is made to act like a puppet who is always there whenever Susanna pulls its thread toward her. She moves on for a while and suddenly appears as she has been doing a new experiment that has failed despite her best efforts. He never asks her questions as unconsciously he also attracted by her sexuality. Indirectly, he becomes a silent partner in all her crime, like her servants, who share some of her secrets and hence pay its cost. But for the narrator, that cost of silence is his lifelong suffering under the burden of guilt.

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In conclusion, this paper explores the different dimensions of female autonomy and patriarchy offering complex perspectives on female subjectivity, frailty and power within a male dominated world. It also views that whatever the conditions are, Susanna's crime cannot be justified in the name of female autonomy. It highlights how the unconscious desires and lack of balance between ambitions and reality, and sexuality and submissive behavior brings suffering to several characters in the story.

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