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THE SINISTER FEMALE:
REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE IN SELECT GHOST STORIES OF RUSKIN BOND

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ABSTRACT
Ruskin Bond is one of those rare authors whose writings have been loved and accepted by readers of all ages and groups. His depiction of small town life in India and of ordinary individuals struggling to make their lives and dreams worthwhile has an almost undeniable sense of appeal and beauty. His stories usually reflect this simplicity and good humour that have come to be associated with most of Bond's writing. Yet, there are certain aspects to his writing – as it is true of any other great writer – that deal with deeper and darker themes even if they aren't immediately apparent.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse certain stories of the supernatural by Bond in order to assess how the character of the female has been represented with a special emphasis on examining an element of the sinister which seems to be associated with each of these women. Whether as ghosts or as real, living individuals, these women exhibit a tendency to inflict harm on other characters which marks them as being decisively dangerous. What this paper tries to ascertain is whether these female characters can be simply branded as being evil or if there are actual, justifiable reasons behind their actions which provokes them to act in the ways they do. The study thus seeks to shed some light on the intentions and motivations of these characters who are evidently more complex than they initially appear to be.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond, feminine representation, sinister, supernatural, retribution

Ruskin Bond's contribution to Indian Literature in English is undeniable. In a literary career spanning nearly four decades, Bond has documented a way of life that is at once quintessentially Indian as well as simple. Often heralded as the resident Wordsworth of India, his writings reflect a love for nature and a deeply embedded belief in the old-world values of love, kindness, compassion, and understanding. His writings vary across genres and include short stories, novellas, novels, and even verse. Bond's short stories especially reserve a special position in his oeuvre for they not only cover an unimaginably broad range of subjects but also because they have a poignancy and a beauty which is born out of their very simplicity and straightforwardness which, in turn, lends to these stories a touch that is at once human and timeless.

Ruskin Bond's stories of the supernatural are an interesting lot. They deal with a motley of such creatures and beings as ghosts, fairies, jinns, prets, and munjias, some of whom are to be found only within the Indian conception of the supernatural. Bond's ghost stories are, however, rarely scary or thrilling; instead, they are often quite entertaining while some are downright funny. This can perhaps be attributed to Bond's own attitude towards the supernatural which Meena G. Khorana describes thus,

> Bond is primarily a writer of realistic stories. He does not favor modern fantasy, but his interest in the improbable is explored through stories of ghosts and supernatural beings. Hence, there is an "unseen" or magical dimension even to some of his realistic stories. For example, the protagonist sees visions of his dead father when he is in need, or the ghost of Great-Aunt Liliantucks in the author every time he throws off his blankets while sleeping. (108)

While this characteristic good humour is evident in most of Bond's stories, the aspect of the supernatural which we find in his stories is reflective not just of his own attitude but also of the people and the places that he writes about. As he states in *The Penguin Book of Indian Ghost Stories*, in the Garhwal Himalayas, where most of his stories are set, "the spirit world is still very much a part of the experience of people living in remote areas" (Introduction xiii). It is also interesting in this context that many of Bond's ghosts are British or Anglo-Indians; as he remarks in *Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine and Roses*, this is because the British "were restless here, so far from the shores of their small green island. And being restless in life, it was only natural that they should remain restless in death" (29).

In this paper the focus is on a different aspect of the supernatural in some of Bond's ghost stories. It aims to analyse the representation of the female characters as found in certain selected stories – especially where they are either the protagonists or seem to play a pivotal role - whether they be spirits or individuals of flesh and blood. By doing so, this paper intends to understand the motives or reasons that contribute to making these characters an almost sinister force to reckon with and which sets them somewhat apart from the array of harmless and gentle spirits which Bond otherwise characteristically writes about.

Wilson's Bridge has a distinct narrative structure. It is a story within a story where the events and characters portray a definite pattern of repetition. The outer narrative is that of a group comprising two married couples and the narrator who are on a vacation to the hills: the theme of marital strife and dissatisfaction is made evident when the younger couple, the Rays, are depicted as indulging in frequent fights from the very outset of the story. This theme is subsequently built upon when the inner narrative is disclosed. The narrator comes to know of Gulabi's story when he chances upon a lonely female figure jumping off Wilson's bridge on one of his solitary walks along the old wooden bridge. Even though he is immensely perturbed by the event, he is soon informed by the watchman, Ram Singh, that "(i)t must have been Gulabi. Only a ghost, my dear sir. Nothing to be alarmed about" (44). Gulabi's story, as it turns out, is a tragic one. Described as "childlike"and "ingenuous" (45), with "grey-green eyes and peach-blossom complexion" (44), Gulabi, whose name in itself means pink (and therefore refers to her complexion), had enchanted Wilson, "a British adventurer seeking his fortune" (44) in the Himalayan mountains. Once married, they had a satisfactory marriage for a considerable period of time before Wilson met an Englishwoman named Ruth and "decided that she should have a share of his affections and his wealth" (45).

Gulabi's character, from this point onwards, portrays a transformation which evidently stems from Wilson's betrayal of her. On one of Wilson's rare visits, Gulabi confronts him regarding his supposed affair with Ruth and demands that he leave the Englishwoman at once; this, however, turns out to be a futile attempt for Wilson plainly brushes aside all her resentments and pays no heed to her at all. The frustration and rage which fuels Gulabi's transformation culminates at this point in her act of shooting at Wilson which is described thus:

> When he turned away from her, she picked up the flintlock pistol that lay on the gun table, and fired one shot at him. The bullet missed him and shattered her looking-glass. Gulabi ran out of the house, through the orchard and into the forest, then down the steep path to the bridge built by Wilson only two or three years before...She had already thrown herself off the bridge into the swirling waters far below..." (46)

What is notable here is the mention of the bullet missing Wilson only to shatter Gulabi's looking-glass: the description seems highly symbolic for a mirror or glass can be taken to be a symbol of fragility or even of one's perception of one's own self or of the world. In Gulabi's case, what is shattered by the bullet is as likely to be her own perception of both Wilson and her marriage as of her own self, fooled for so long by her husband's lies, deception and betrayal. Her act of shooting at her own husband is thus indicative of a desperation born out of a helplessness and a lack of active agency which has traditionally been a woman's share. In choosing to 'act' - even if it is a destructive act – Gulabi therefore portrays a sense of selfhood which is remarkable in its novelty. However, in taking her own life, Gulabi is unable to break through the bounds of conventional patriarchal norms for her death, though perhaps liberating for her, cannot change the dynamics of her relation with Wilson – it is an act that declares her defeat in the face of her husband's betrayal; it is her last desperate act of failure which she is damned to repeat over and over again as is witnessed by the narrator in the story. Gulabi thus comes to represent a kind of female agency which becomes increasingly sinister with other stories in the volume.

In the next story, *Whispering in the Dark*, the element of the supernatural becomes more intrinsic and central compared to *Wilson's Bridge*. Set in a wild, stormy night, the story involves the narrator finding shelter in "a house cradled in mist" (64) after losing his way while returning home. A sense of eeriness pervades the "old-world" house for the narrator notices curiously that although it appeared to be crumbling from the outside, inside it was a "deserted cottage with good furniture and glass" with "no dust anywhere"(66). However, the narrator's uneasiness increases substantially when, in a full-length mirror in a bedroom, he catches a ghostly reflection:

> As I turned from the mirror, I thought I saw someone, something, some reflection other than mine, move behind me in the mirror. I caught a glimpse of whiteness, a pale oval face, burning eyes, long tresses, golden in the candlelight. But when I looked in the mirror again there was nothing to be seen but my own pallid face. (66)

This description of the phantom image he sees in the mirror is almost sensual in its details. When the narrator detects the same reflection once again in the mirror after a brief interval, he notices that the woman seemed to be holding a pillow in her hands. It is at this point that the narrator remembers the tales that he had heard long ago of "two spinster sisters – one beautiful, one plain – who lured rich, elderly gentlemen into their boarding-house and suffocated them in the night..." (68). What emerges here, then, is the figure of the sinister female who is desirable and yet deadly. The sensuousness of description we had encountered before is reiterated in an even more intense manner when the narrator, having gone to bed yet again in a vain attempt to get some sleep, dreams of the same beautiful woman bending over him and kissing him with "lips so cold, so dry, that a shudder ran through my body" (68). Almost a subversion of the sleeping beauty tale, the above portrayal is further complicated as the narrator goes on to describe how the face of the woman "became faceless and only the eyes remained" (69). This particular description is very interesting because soon after this episode when the narrator is finally frightened enough to decide on leaving the house immediately despite the rain outside, he rushes downstairs to hear a knocking upon the door from outside which is then followed by "a voice, low and insistent: 'Please let me in, please let me in...'" (71). This account, in a way, is reminiscent of Mr. Lockwood's experience on a stormy night like this of encountering Catherine's ghost in Wuthering Heights when he visits Heathcliff for the first time:

> The intense horror of nightmare came over me; I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed,
>
> "Let me in – let me in!"
>
> "Who are you?" I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself.
>
> "Catherine Linton," it replied, shiveringly (why did I think of *Linton*? I had read *Earnshaw* twenty times for Linton). "I'm come home, I'd lost my way on the moor!" (Bronte 20)

In both the instances, the image of the woman as the wanderer or the dispossessed becomes apparent, existing as a 'waif' or a 'ghost' on the periphery of the society. Remarkably, where the ghostly face of the

beautiful sister is described as being faceless with only the eyes remaining, the ghost of the second, plain sister who rushes past the narrator into the house on opening the door is described thus: "Not the pale, beautiful one, but a wizened old hag with bloodless lips and flaring nostrils and – but where were the eyes? No eyes, no eyes!" (71). This weird balancing of the faces of the two sisters with one face as having everything but the eyes and the other as having only eyes can perhaps be interpreted as a kind of blending of the two sisters into a single entity or rather as the two of them being the complementary facets of the same female entity who come together to pose a threat to the figure of the male – the narrator as well as the rich, elderly gentlemen mentioned before - thereby reestablishing the idea of the sinister female.

Eyes of the Cat deals with the story of a young school girl named Kiran who transforms into a tawny leopard to avenge the wrongs done to her by her teacher who is simply referred to as 'Madam' in the course of the story, making her the representative of what may be perceived as a definitive figure of authority. From the beginning of the narrative it becomes evident that it is Kiran's poverty which makes her the target of her teacher's relentless bullying. Taunting her because of her inability to "afford the tuitions that had become almost obligatory if one was to pass and be promoted" (114) and for her torn blouse and old tunic and her equally worn out shoes, Madam's cutting remarks in front of the others push Kiran to a state of desperate fury from which her intense desire for revenge is born.

Kiran's transformation into the leopard as well as her character contrast with Madam are both highly symbolic and fraught with irony. Even as a young girl – as certainly as she is as a leopard – Kiran is completely and utterly at home in the wilderness of the mountains; even though her friends seem somewhat nervous, she exhibits no fear or apprehension of wandering alone along the forest's desolate paths. Madam, on the other hand, appears to be relatively well-off than Kiran - she runs a private academy for girls and even the club with which she has her affiliation is named the "Kitten Club" (117), a fashionable name (reminiscent of Kitty Parties that affluent women are often known to throw and attend) but it is more notable here for its implicit irony: 'kitten' generally stands for harmlessness, innocence, and gentleness whereas Kiran is the 'leopard', the far more menacing and dangerous member of the same cat family. Also, Madam herself, in all her harshness and scornfulness towards the girls of her academy, can hardly be termed a kitten.

The description of the leopard waiting at Madam's doorstep is also ironic for it is described as sitting silently, "waiting with all the patience of an obedient schoolgirl" (117): after all the insults and hurt inflicted on her, the only occasion Kiran chooses to display obedience and patience towards her teacher is when she is finally able to exact her vengeance:

> When Madam saw the leopard on her steps, she dropped her handbag and opened her mouth to scream; but her voice would not materialize. Nor would her tongue ever be used again, either to savour chicken biryani or to pour scorn upon her pupils, for the leopard had sprung at her throat, broken her neck, and dragged her into the bushes." (117)

Kiran's desire for revenge thus sets her apart from the phantom sisters of the former story since they have no such motivation but it allies her, to an extent, with Gulabi because of her desire for retribution towards Wilson. However, in the next two stories, the themes of retribution and death become even more palpable and imminent.

Susanna's Seven Husbands is a story by Bond which has aroused much curiosity and it has also been the subject of much contemplation and analysis. The story of a rich and powerful woman who unscrupulously murders her seven husbands when she tires of them, Susanna Anna-Maria Yeates is compared early on in the text to the infamous character Bluebeard drawn from French folktale. Notorious for killing his several wives who exhibited undue curiosity about a certain locked room in his palace, Bluebeard is depicted in the tale as a wealthy but cruel nobleman inciting terror in the minds of others. Susanna, like Bluebeard, thus comes across as a complex character whose motivations for her actions mostly remain a mystery and which consequently form much of the subject of the text.

The use of the first person narrative by the author lends a voice of authenticity to the account. The early description of the mansion that had once belonged to Susanna has deep sinister overtones – it is, as the

narrator states, "abandoned, feared and shunned" and stood "encircled in mystery, reputedly the home of evil spirits" (120). Even the peepal tree growing out of the ruins is telling for as Bond himself remarks,

> In India, the peepal tree takes pride of place in tales of the supernatural. Bhoots, prets, munjias and other unearthly beings all take up residence in this most hospitable tree; and when they get a chance they take possession of unwary passers-by and play havoc with their lives...(Introduction to *A Face in the dark and Other Hauntings* viii-ix)

In the midst of such a setting, Susanna's own description is almost that of a femme fatale: she is beautiful as well as wealthy, the "cynosure of all eyes" (121) and sought after by many men because of her desirability. Interestingly, the other aspects of her character as presented in the story seem indicative of a kind of role reversal or even a subversion of her femininity for she exhibits such traits and features as are commonly more associated with the masculine ideal.

Susanna, for instance, is described by Naushad, the furniture-maker to whom the boy-narrator addresses his queries, as "the Zamindari lady, the owner of much land" and as one who "administered her estate with a strong hand. She was kind if rents were paid when they fell due, but terrible if someone failed to pay" (122). Susanna thus appears as an immensely complex character; she is kind and cruel, malignant yet humane, pitiless yet generous; and no other account illustrates her complexity more effectively than the account of the deaths of her seven husbands which forms the crux of the story.

Her first husband, Tomkins sahib, as Naushad explains, was poisoned to death by her - yet it is but a painless death. The reference to the belladonna bushes growing or doing "well" (122) within her grounds is perhaps indicative of her own inherently poisonous or dangerous traits. The ambivalence of her character is attested to by Naushad who states that she was indeed "very humane, sir. She hated to see anyone suffer"(123). Again, the masculine traits in her are emphasized by the reference to her "large, powerful hands" (123), capable of strangling men – like her second husband – who might otherwise be physically stronger than her.

Along with her independence, both financial and emotional, another aspect which is emphasized is the sense of Susanna's being "born out of her time" (123) : her actions and attitudes were looked upon as being unconventional for her time. Yet, as the boy-narrator surmises, perhaps her actions would have been different had she been born at a later period, in a more radicalized and liberated world. Had the notion of an independent woman with a mind of her own and enjoying the company of various men while remaining unmarried been acceptable for her times, perhaps she wouldn't have needed to marry and then subsequently dispose of them.

Analyzing her character even further, it becomes evident that Susanna is, as referred to earlier, remarkably well-informed and competent in areas that have traditionally been a man's domain: for instance, her knowledge of poison (belladonna as well as arsenic used to kill her first and fourth husband, respectively), arms and ammunition (her third husband, the colonel's rifle), and physical strength (she strangles her second husband before drowning him in a tank). Even the continued references in the story to Susanna's unnatural connection with snakes is noteworthy. Snakes, especially in the western world, have been traditionally associated with evil which seems to reassert the earlier idea of Susanna being "evil" and "malignant" (120). As the narrator notices, both the spirit of Susanna as well as the snakes seem unable to leave the mansion and its grounds – they linger on in the absence of any other person or animal. The house in itself thus takes on an unmistakable aura of mystery, evil, and danger.

The last aspect of her character which remains to be discussed is when, free of any marital responsibilities or burdens, Susanna is described as being especially generous towards social causes – giving to orphanages, to the poor, to various schools and institutions, and even a home for the widows (which she ironically has been herself, seven times). This particular trait somehow prevents us from simply characterizing her as 'evil' for she does them without any outer motive: she indeed appears to be generous with her own money so long as it is hers alone – the husbands pay dearly with their lives for being "fortune hunters" (123); her malignity seems reserved expressly for those that had ulterior motives. She thus proves her own

superiority and independence over them repeatedly even if her means and ways are objectionable, not to mention, unconventional. Ruskin Bond's own remarks seem notable in this context for it reiterates and emphasizes the same attributes that have been discussed here:

> Would Susanna have set out to destroy her husband's if some childhood experience had not turned her against men in general? Or was it simply in her nature to want to dominate the opposite sex? Some people climb mountains for pleasure; others climb in order to conquer peaks. A friend of my youth, who was sexually impotent, went on to conquer peak after peak. Each one, he confided, was like conquering a woman" (Introduction to *When Darkness Falls and Other Stories* viii)

Towards the end of the story, the boy-narrator compares Susanna to a Black Widow spider - such an analogy becomes vital for, in the natural world, this particular species of spider is known for the practice of sexual cannibalism in which the female devours the male after mating. Grimly true of Susanna, this specific idea becomes crucial in the context of the last and final story which builds upon this very theme.

Possibly the most macabre story discussed here, *The Night of the Millennium*centres around themes that are relatively rare in Bond's oeuvre, namely, technology and sexual exploitation. Pasand, the central character of the story, embodies traits of the modern, technologically-oriented, fast-paced world and appears impatient and intolerant of anyone or anything that fails to keep pace with him. Intoxicated by his sense of power and superiority he presents a worldview in which exploitation and unscrupulousness form the primary pillars:

> Ah well, mused Pasand, not everyone could have the brains and good luck, as well as inherited family wealth of course, that had made life so pleasant and promising for him. This was going to be the century in which the smart-asses would get to the top and all other varieties of asses would sink to the bottom. It was important to have a ruling elite, according to his philosophy; only then could slaves prosper! (195)

With such philosophical affiliations, it becomes obvious that Pasand has no moral qualms whatsoever about exploiting another fellow human: hence his walk at midnight "past the old cemetery" (194) to look for the widow of the cemetery's caretaker who lived nearby with her "brood of small children" (196) and who was known to be "lavish with her favours to those who were generous with their purses; for she needed the money for her hungry family" (196). The description of the woman herself borders on the strange for she is supposedly a "little mad", preferring to sleep in "one of the old domed tombs" (196) instead of in the quarters provided for them.

Pasand's quest for "sensual pleasure, not romance" (196) brings him to this woman whom he then progresses to exploit sexually for, as the text specifies, he felt an intense need to "prove his manhood in some way": this account clearly seems to point an almost narcissistic personality since the boy's sexual quest was meant, in some way, to compensate for his rejection by other girls which had evidently adversely affected his self image. His liaison with this woman was evidently an attempt on his part to salvage whatever he could of his sense of superiority and self-worth. His intentions are, however, brutally shattered when the whole experience turns against him – soon after the boy reaches his climax, he is attacked by the woman, followed by her children, who then go on to hungrily feast upon him in a most macabre act of cannibalism: "(s)mall mouths, sharp teeth, pressed against his flesh...Those young teeth bit – and bit again..." (197). As the boy had metaphorically feasted on the mother, so does he in turn become a feast for her and her children as even his bones become food for the hungry jackals prowling in the ravine; "only the cellphone" he had been carrying is rejected for it fails to serve any purpose for any of them.

In a way, the story offers a kind of contrast to *Wilson's Bridge.* Whereas in the former story the mother chooses to forsake her children in the face of her husband's betrayal, in the latter story the mother turns the male exploiter into a victim instead of being merely victimized herself. The boy's sexual exploitation of the woman is crude and without any sympathy or feelings: for him, his lust and sexual gratification are all that matters. By contrast, the final description of the final cannibalistic act has a slow and detailed deliberateness to it which is disturbing in its imaginative potency. The final line, "(o)nly the cell phone would

be rejected" stands as an antithesis to the attitude found towards the beginning of the story: it seems to imply that technological progress and the false sense of superiority provided by the supposed virtues of power and superiority are, in the end, futile in the face of certain evils that are perhaps of our own making.

In all the stories discussed above, it is the supernatural or the uncanny which apparently unifies them despite their difference of scope and subject-matter. Yet, as this paper analyzes, the representation of the women characters in each of the stories transcends the bounds of the supernatural to represent aspects of female existence which are decidedly human. Hilary Grimes, in her discussion on the relationship between women writers and the genre of the ghost story, puts forth the notion that this particular genre was especially favoured by women in the Victorian era since "the form was a transgressive space which allowed women to write in politically coded terms about their ghostly role in society" (Grimes 91) and adds that "the ghost was a powerful, subversive, and inspiring emblem for female identity" (Grimes 92). Even though the stories discussed in this paper are not by female authors, the presence of strong female characters in each of them enables us to draw parallels with stories of the supernatural that are indeed written by women writers. It is in this context that a final recurrent theme or idea emerges that gives further coherence and cohesion to these feminine representations – namely, the economic aspect.

In *Wilson's Bridge*, Gulabi as the innocent, simple girl from the hills is utterly without means and hence dependent on and bound to her husband, unable to eke out a space for herself without him. Wilson, on the other hand, having made his fortune from his timber business, has no qualms about dividing his wealth and affections between Gulabi and the Englishwoman Ruth since he is himself sure of his wife's feelings and loyalty towards him.

In *Whispering in the Dark*, similarly, the stories that the narrator recalls at one point of time revolves around the two spinster sisters who lured rich men for their money and murdered them during their own lifetime. Possessing wealth, or the acquiring of it, thus recurs as a theme time and again. The money that these sisters accumulated in such a manner, we can speculate, could have been instrumental in affording them a comfortable livelihood, respectability, and an independence which could have been denied to them otherwise - as women - had they been unmarried *and* penniless.

Economic deprivation forms a central tenet of *The Eyes of the Cat* since Kiran is humiliated by Madam in front of the other girls because of her poverty which in turn gives rise to her deep antagonism and desire for vengeance that ends with the latter's brutal death in the hands of the leopard which Kiran transforms into. In addition, it also becomes evident that Madam's scornfulness is born out of her own privileged position which seems to have stripped her of any sense of kindness or empathy or humility that could have fostered a closer bond between her and her students instead of alienating her from them.

Perhaps in no other story wealth figures as a factor so prominently as it does in *Susanna's Seven Husbands*. If there is one characteristic which is reiterated time and again while describing Susanna, it is the fact of her having been exceptionally wealthy. In fact, it soon becomes evident from the narration that it is her economic advantage which enables Susanna to control and dominate over everyone and everything around her - a rare female figure who gets away with all that she does, however morally or ethically wrong they may be. Beauty and wealth culminate in her to create a character which is remarkable for its assertiveness, sheer strength, and power: she remains unrepentant till the very end, exercising her once famous charm even after death to victimize yet others who might fall prey, intentionally or not.

Lastly, even in *Night of the Millennium*, economic deprivation forms a key idea which is embedded within the text. Pasand asserts his masculinity and economic superiority over the widow of the caretaker of the cemetery through his act of sexual exploitation of her; she, in turn, regresses to an act of cannibalism to sustain herself and her children. This ironically puts her in a final position of power 'over' him thereby undermining his earlier supposed superiority. The title is suggestive - 'millenium' stands for a new beginning, a new period of time with fresh possibilities and opportunities. Yet, this macabre story set in the night of the millennium exposes certain facts that are disturbing: the powerful continuing to exploit the powerless and the apparent helplessness of the latter. However, as the story unfolds, we begin to suspect a different dimension

to it - that of the powerless rising in a terrible rebellion against the powerful who are comfortably complacent in their imagined sense of security. The woman and her children thus seem to symbolize the figurative rise of a new order which is simultaneously frightening and yet, in its own way, justified, for it is only a reciprocal of the same exploitation that they have been subjected to for long. This new order – destabilizing and terrifying - is only the logical consequence of actions that have sought to dehumanize and exploit the weaker echelons of society endlessly and timelessly.

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