

## Folk, Myths, and Resistance: A Feminist and Queer Retelling in Ruskin Bond's Narratives

**Sravana Jyothi Doddapaneni**

Assistant Professor

Department of English & Other Indian and Foreign Languages (EOFL)

Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research

Vadlamudi, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, India

sravani.alapati3@gmail.com

=====

### Abstract

Ruskin Bond, one of India's most celebrated writers, is often recognized for his evocative narratives rooted in nature, memory, and personal relationships. While Bond's work is not typically associated with the explicit retelling of myths, his exploration of cultural folklore and mythological themes reveals a subtle engagement with the ways gender, identity, and power dynamics are constructed within these stories. This paper investigates how Bond's stories re-imagine traditional myths through a feminist and queer lens, particularly in his engagement with themes of resistance, marginalized voices, and fluid identities. By analyzing works such as *The Room on the Roof*, *The Blue Umbrella*, and select short stories, this paper explores how Bond's re-configurations of myths reflect the intersections of gender, sexuality, and power, offering a nuanced critique of traditional mythic narratives.

**Keywords:** Feminist Re-imagination, Queer Theory, Gender and Identity, Mythical Retellings, Fluid Sexualities, Colonialism and Gender

### Introduction

Myths have long been a cornerstone of cultural narratives, shaping not only collective memory but also the social and political structures of societies. These traditional stories, often involving gods, heroes, and supernatural forces, have been instrumental in reinforcing established gender roles, expectations, and norms. In many traditional mythologies, women have historically been relegated to passive, secondary roles, while men dominate the mythic

landscapes as powerful heroes, gods, or rulers. In contrast, feminist and queer reinterpretations of these myths provide a counterpoint, challenging patriarchal and heteronormative conventions, and offering alternative depictions of power, agency, and identity.

The retelling of myths and folklore through feminist and queer perspectives has emerged as a significant literary movement, with authors such as Jeanette Winterson, Madeline Miller, and others offering nuanced reimaginings of traditional stories. However, lesser-known authors like Ruskin Bond have also contributed to this evolving narrative. Bond, primarily known for his evocative portrayals of life in the Indian Himalayas, has quietly engaged with themes of gender, identity, and resistance, subtly disrupting the traditional gender roles embedded in mythological and folkloric traditions.

While his works are often categorized as introspective, personal reflections, many of Bond's stories engage with cultural narratives that subtly question societal norms, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. His re-imagining of folk tales and mythic traditions provides a space for exploring marginalized identities and subversive acts of resistance. This paper aims to explore how Ruskin Bond's writings, while not overtly feminist or queer, engage with these themes, offering a subtle yet significant critique of traditional myths and social constructs.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist and Queer Readings of Myths**

To understand the feminist and queer dimensions of Bond's works, it is essential to first explore the theoretical frameworks that underlie these readings. Feminist theory, particularly as articulated by thinkers like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, interrogates the ways in which gender roles are constructed and reinforced through narratives.

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."(Butler, 1990)

Myths, as deeply ingrained cultural stories, often serve as instruments for perpetuating traditional gender norms, with women depicted as passive figures, often in need of rescue or protection. A feminist reading of myths challenges this passive positioning, seeking to re-

frame women as active agents with their own desires, powers, and subjectivities. Haraway's quote mentioned below emphasizes the power of re-imagining the past, much like Bond does with the mythic and folkloric elements in his work. "We are all chimeras, the past and the future are grafted onto us, and we are the hope and the uncertainty of our time." (Haraway, 1991)

Queer theory, in turn, deconstructs the binary understanding of gender and sexuality, offering a more fluid and inclusive interpretation of identity. In queer readings of myths, characters and relationships are freed from hetero-normative constraints, allowing for the exploration of non-binary gender identities, same-sex relationships, and a broader spectrum of sexual and emotional expressions. Queer theory encourages an open-ended approach to identity, rejecting fixed categories and exploring the complexities of desire, attraction, and connection. A person's desire for a person of the same sex, in other words, exists in a field of tension and overlap with all kinds of other desires". (Sedgwick, 1990)

In the case of Ruskin Bond's work, these frameworks offer a lens through which to examine his engagement with mythic structures. Though Bond's stories do not always present explicit feminist or queer messages, his nuanced portrayals of characters, particularly those on the margins of society, challenge traditional gender roles and offer possibilities for more inclusive understandings of identity and power.

## **1. Bond's Re-imagination of Myth: Case Studies**

### **The Room on the Roof (1956): The Hero's Journey and Subversion of Colonial and Gendered Norms**

At first glance, *The Room on the Roof* might not seem like a work engaged with mythic traditions, yet the novel's portrayal of Rusty, a young orphaned English boy navigating life in colonial India, mirrors many aspects of the hero's journey—an archetypal mythic structure. Rusty's journey in *The Room on the Roof* follows Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey model, as he progresses from being an isolated, constrained boy to an independent, self-aware individual. He decides to leave the oppressive environment of his guardian's house, which reflects the "call to adventure" in the Hero's Journey. "Rusty felt a strange restlessness, a

yearning for the unknown, as if he had to leave the safety of his old life and seek something new.” (Bond 12)

Rusty’s journey of self-realization and personal liberation offers a subversion of traditional narratives of masculinity and colonial superiority. His quest for identity and belonging involves his defiance of both colonialism and the gendered norms associated with his British upbringing. His refusal to conform to expectations regarding his identity—both colonial and gendered—mirrors the ways in which mythic heroes often break away from oppressive systems to embark on a personal journey of self-discovery. Rusty’s story highlights his resistance to the rigidity of colonial structures and social expectations, making his journey a feminist and queer re-imagining of mythic narratives. Rusty’s search for belonging can be seen as a metaphorical return to a more authentic, unencumbered self, freed from the constraints of colonial and gendered oppression. By the end of the novel, Rusty has achieved a greater understanding of himself, returning with new insights and personal growth.

“He had changed, and he knew it. His journey had taken him away from  
the constraints of his old life, but it had also brought him closer  
to understanding who he really was.” (Bond 119)

## **2. The Blue Umbrella (1980): Feminine Agency and the Subversion of Power Dynamics**

In *The Blue Umbrella*, Bond reimagines traditional gender and power dynamics through the story of Binya, a young girl who becomes the possessor of a beautiful blue umbrella that becomes the object of desire for an older man, Ram Bharosa. At first glance, Binya might appear to be a traditional heroine in a rural setting—an innocent girl whose life is turned upside down by her prized possession. However, her agency in the face of adversity repositions her as a feminist figure challenging patriarchal control. She does not submit to Ram Bharosa’s wishes but instead displays resilience and moral strength. She represents an active form of resistance that upends traditional notions of femininity and passivity.

“She did not cry, nor did she plead. Binya knew that if she gave in,  
the umbrella would lose its charm for her. It was not about the

umbrella anymore, it was about her pride.” (Bond 34)

Binya’s defiance of Ram Bharosa’s desires represents a subversive act of resistance. She does not rely on physical strength to reclaim her umbrella, but instead on her moral compass and resilience, which allows her to resist the societal norms that would typically place her in a subordinate position. In this retelling, Bond challenges the traditional myth of the "hero’s journey" by providing a feminist interpretation of power. Binya’s reclaiming of the umbrella, despite being a simple object, becomes a metaphor for resistance to male domination and a rejection of patriarchal values. Her journey demonstrates how women, even in traditional narratives, can be reimagined as active agents rather than passive subjects. The umbrella is more than just a prized possession for Binya; it becomes a symbol of her resistance to the control that Ram Bharosa seeks to exert over her. Binya’s act of reclaiming it reflects a rejection of patriarchal power structures. “What Ram Bharosa had taken for power—his wealth, his age, and his position—proved useless in the end. It was the strength of a child’s belief in right and wrong that triumphed.” (Bond 52)

Binya's journey, which might initially seem like a conventional story of loss and recovery, is instead a reworking of traditional gender and power narratives. Through her actions, she redefines the role of women in rural, patriarchal settings, showing that women can resist and reclaim agency.

“In the end, it was not the older man’s power or charm, but the simple, unyielding strength of a girl’s conviction that returned the umbrella to its rightful owner.” (Bond 56)

### 3. Selected Short Stories: Queering Desire and Challenging Masculinity

In many of Bond’s short stories, the themes of marginalized identities and fluid relationships take center stage. Two such stories, *The Man Who Would Be King* and *The Night Train at Deoli*, explore non-traditional notions of power, masculinity, and desire.

*The Man Who Would Be King* is a story about a man who seeks to dominate and control, but who ultimately faces vulnerability and isolation. The narrative subverts traditional notions of masculinity by illustrating how even those who seek to uphold patriarchal ideals are

susceptible to the forces of nature and fate. The protagonist's desire for power is ultimately destabilized, suggesting a critique of hegemonic masculinity and the fragile nature of male authority. His quest for power ultimately fails, and his vulnerability is exposed, suggesting that traditional masculine ideals of strength and dominance are fragile and often undermined by fate.

"The man who sought to conquer all was brought low by forces beyond his control—his power was as brittle as the walls of the kingdom he sought to rule." (Kipling 34)

In this novel Bond critiques hegemonic masculinity by presenting a protagonist who strives for power and dominance but ultimately faces vulnerability and defeat. The story's treatment of masculinity suggests that even those who uphold patriarchal ideals are susceptible to the forces of nature and fate. The protagonist's desire to dominate ultimately proves to be fragile. This reveals the instability of masculine authority, as he is unable to control his fate and is defeated by external forces.

"He had planned for everything, but life has a way of bringing down the mightiest of men. His grand plans crumbled like the crumbling walls of a castle, and all his strength seemed futile against the forces that swept him away." (Kipling 34)

In *The Night Train at Deoli*, the narrator's unspoken longing for a woman and their fleeting encounter challenges traditional heteronormative expectations of romance and desire. The story's exploration of love as transient, unconsummated, and fleeting can be interpreted as a queer exploration of desire. The narrator's desire is internalized and never acted upon, emphasizing how longing can exist without the need for conventional physical or romantic resolution.

"There was a certain sadness in my heart as I watched her leave, for I knew that the connection we had was a fleeting one, a brief moment between strangers, unspoken and unfulfilled, yet unforgettable." (Bond 12)

The narrator's affection remains unspoken and unfulfilled, which challenges normative ideas of romance and highlights the fluid nature of desire, disconnected from conventional heterosexual norms.

“There was something unspoken between us, a longing that neither of us could name, and though we never touched, I knew that the brief meeting on the train would stay with me, like a secret never to be revealed.” (Bond 15)

The brief interaction and lack of traditional romantic fulfillment highlight the queering of desire, where longing itself becomes the focus, rather than the ultimate consummation or completion of the relationship.

"Our exchange was brief, a glance, a passing smile, and then she was gone, but the longing remained—a longing that didn't fit neatly into the box of love or desire as society understood it." (Bond 14)

## Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's works, while not overtly feminist or queer in the traditional sense, offer a rich space for reinterpreting mythological and folkloric traditions. His characters—often marginalized, defiant, and complex—engage with themes of resistance, identity, and power in ways that challenge traditional gender and sexual norms. By subtly re-imagining mythic structures and folk traditions, Bond provides a critique of the hegemonic ideologies that shape social roles, inviting readers to reconsider the possibilities for gender and sexual expression.

In examining the ways in which Bond's stories engage with mythological tropes, it becomes clear that his work provides a nuanced commentary on the complexities of identity, power, and belonging. Whether through Rusty's defiance of colonial and gendered expectations, Binya's act of resistance against patriarchy, or the fluidity of desire in his short stories, Bond's writing opens up space for a feminist and queer re-imagining of the world, one in which the rigid boundaries of identity are constantly being challenged and rewritten. Through these re-imaginings, Bond offers an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue around gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary literature. By subverting traditional gender roles, and offering alternative paths of resistance, Bond invites readers to rethink not only the folklore and myths they have inherited but also the social constructs they navigate today. Through his lens, Bond presents a refreshing narrative that seeks not just to entertain but also

to question, challenge, and offer new possibilities for the way we think about power, love, and identity.

## References

- Bond, Ruskin. *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*. Penguin Books, 2004.
- Bond, Ruskin. *The Blue Umbrella*. Penguin India, 2008..
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *The Man Who Would Be King and Other Stories*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.