

Gender Subversions and Identity in Saul Bellow's Short Fiction: A Comparative Study of Three Stories

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Abstract

This article investigates Saul Bellow's complex portrayal of gender identity and nonconformity across three of his most evocative short narratives: "Leaving the Yellow House," "The Old System," and The Bellarosa Connection. Situating these works within the cultural and intellectual transformations of postwar America, the study explores how Bellow constructs characters who resist or complicate conventional gender binaries. Female figures such as Hattie Waggoner, Tina, and Sorella Fonstein perform traditionally masculine traits—emotional restraint, moral leadership, financial control—while male characters like Harry Fonstein challenge hegemonic masculinity through their passivity, introspection, or ethical withdrawal. Through close textual analysis and grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's gender performativity, R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, and Stuart Hall's model of diasporic identity, the article traces how these gender dynamics intersect with questions of memory, trauma, and cultural inheritance. These characters are not merely literary experiments but are rendered as ethical agents whose gender performances speak to broader concerns of marginalization, displacement, and narrative power. The study further argues that Bellow's narrative strategies—particularly his use of fragmented memory, apostrophic voice, and mediated narration—serve to highlight the instability of identity and the performative nature of both gender and voice. By placing Bellow in conversation with contemporaries such as Roth, Baldwin, and Plath, the article situates his work within a broader dialogue on gender, ethics, and literary form. Ultimately, the article contends that gender nonconformity in Bellow's fiction is not a secondary feature but a central narrative force—one that reflects the tensions of Jewish-American experience while inviting a deeper ethical engagement with the politics of voice, power, and resistance.

Keywords: *Saul Bellow, Gender Nonconformity, Masculinity, Femininity, Identity, Jewish-American Fiction, Feminist Criticism, Short Stories.*

Introduction: Rewriting Gender in Bellow's Short Fiction

Born Solomon Bellows on June 10, 1915, in Lachine, Quebec, and raised in a Yiddish-speaking Jewish household, Bellow's bicultural upbringing profoundly shaped his literary style, imbuing his English prose with the rhythm and vitality of Yiddish idiom (Boyarin, 1997; Gornick, 1978). Over the course of his prolific career, he received numerous accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Medal of Arts, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976. Notably, he remains the only writer to have won the National Book Award for Fiction three times (National Book Foundation, 2022; Nobel Prize, 1976).

One of the most influential literary voices of twentieth-century America, Bellow is celebrated for his profound psychological insight, philosophical introspection, and intricate portrayals of cultural displacement. His fiction frequently engages with themes such as existential crisis, Jewish-American identity, and the intellectual disillusionment of the postwar era (Austin, 2013; Cohen, 2010). While Bellow's major novels—*Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and *Ravelstein*—have long attracted critical acclaim, a less examined but equally compelling aspect of his oeuvre lies in his nuanced representations of gender in short fiction. According to the Swedish Academy, Bellow's work blends "the mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of our culture, of entertaining adventure, drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation, all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue and penetrating insight into the outer and inner complications that drive us to act, or prevent us from acting, and that can be called the dilemma of our age" (Nobel Prize, 1976).

The short stories explored in this study—"Leaving the Yellow House," "The Old System," and *The Bellarosa Connection*—span from 1956 to 1989, representing a broad arc of Bellow's literary evolution. Each work is

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situated within a particular cultural moment marked by seismic shifts in the gender discourse of American society. The immediate post-World War II period witnessed a reinforcement of traditional gender roles; the 1960s and 70s ushered in the feminist movement and its redefinition of gender relations; and by the 1980s, postmodern critiques had begun to deconstruct essentialist understandings of identity itself. Within these historical currents, Bellow's fiction emerges as a subtle but forceful commentary on the instability of gender categories, their social enforcement, and the psychological toll they exact on the individual.

In Bellow's fictional world, female characters are often imbued with traditionally masculine-coded traits: assertiveness, moral clarity, financial independence, and emotional control. Meanwhile, his male characters frequently express vulnerability, indecision, emotional burden, and ethical hesitation—traits that are frequently coded as feminine within dominant cultural narratives. This destabilization is not mere character quirk; rather, it reflects deeper anxieties about authenticity, agency, and social expectations. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is especially apt here, as it posits gender not as a fixed essence but as a socially regulated performance—a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191). Bellow's characters repeatedly perform, subvert, and resist gender roles, embodying a complex interplay between interior identity and external norms.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by Connell (2005), provides another useful framework for this analysis. Connell's concept identifies the dominant form of masculinity in a given culture, which maintains power by subordinating both women and alternative masculinities. Bellow's fiction frequently features characters who either fail to perform hegemonic masculinity—such as Harry Fonstein's ethical withdrawal in *The Bellarosa Connection*—or who actively subvert it, such as Tina's economic and emotional authority in "The Old System." These figures, far from being pathologized, are often portrayed with a complex moral dignity that challenges traditional notions of strength, leadership, and visibility.

Furthermore, Bellow's engagement with gender identity is inseparable from his exploration of diasporic Jewish-American subjectivity. As Hall (1990) explains, the diasporic self is "constituted within, not outside representation," shaped by a fractured sense of belonging and historical memory (p. 222). Bellow's characters navigate identity at the intersection of trauma, migration, tradition, and assimilation. The Jewish diasporic condition, with its layered sense of displacement and inherited historical trauma, adds further complexity to the question of gender performance. The expectation to preserve cultural memory and tradition often falls on women in Bellow's fiction, while men appear alienated from both heritage and masculinity. In this context, characters like Tina and Aunt Rose are not simply gender nonconforming; they serve as cultural anchors and guardians of Jewish memory, wielding matriarchal power in the face of cultural erosion.

This cultural and gendered tension is further illuminated by critics such as Boyarin (1997) and Gilman (1991), who argue that Jewish masculinity has historically been portrayed in contrast to dominant Western ideals of masculinity. Jewish men are often depicted as cerebral, introspective, and emotionally complex—traits that deviate from the physical assertiveness associated with WASP masculinity. In Bellow's fiction, this tension is vividly embodied in characters like Harry Fonstein, whose moral strength lies in humility and silence rather than confrontation or assertion. His passivity is not framed as weakness but as a form of ethical resistance—what Butler might call a "livable life" beyond normative constraints.

In tandem, Bellow's female characters reject passive roles and often emerge as agents of judgment, memory, and moral force. Hattie Waggoner in "Leaving the Yellow House," for example, reclaims narrative control through memory and apostrophic address, turning her isolation into a site of reflection and resistance (Assadi, 2023, pp. 107–108). Likewise, Sorella Fonstein, in *The Bellarosa Connection*, channels what the narrator calls "vital energy"—a morally charged commitment to recognition and justice (Weatherford, 1992). These women are not merely empowered; they often serve as the ethical and symbolic centers of the stories, reinforcing what Cohen (2010) observes as the narrative centrality of female moral agency in Bellow's work.

The feminist reappraisal of Bellow's fiction has grown in recent years, moving beyond earlier critiques that charged him with marginalizing or caricaturing women. While early critics such as Gornick and Ellmann saw Bellow's women as muses or antagonists, more recent scholars—including Austin (2013), Behi (2018), and Sapkota (2007)—have emphasized their narrative power and emotional realism. Assadi (2023) further argues that characters like Tina and Hattie offer "alternative ethical systems, anchored in emotional realism and

discursive agency” (p. 96). This shift in critical reception opens up a space to explore how Bellow’s short fiction, in particular, crafts gender as a field of moral contestation, self-definition, and symbolic resistance.

Methodologically, this study draws upon feminist literary criticism, gender theory, and narratology to perform a close reading of the selected texts. The article integrates insights from Butler (1990), Connell (2005), and Hall (1990), while also building on the work of literary scholars such as Austin (2013) and Cohen (2010). This interdisciplinary lens allows for a multi-dimensional analysis of how Bellow’s fiction navigates the intersections of gender, culture, and power. By focusing on short stories rather than novels, the study emphasizes the concentrated, often experimental nature of Bellow’s engagement with gender within tightly constructed narrative forms.

In sum, this article argues that gender nonconformity in Bellow’s short fiction is not a thematic aside but a structural and philosophical imperative. His characters do not merely represent subversions of type; they embody what Lanser (1986) calls “politics of narrative voice,” where the power to speak, remember, and frame experience is itself gendered. Through these narratives, Bellow explores what it means to live ethically, remember faithfully, and resist quietly in a world that seeks to define, confine, and silence. By revisiting Bellow’s work through the lens of gender theory and feminist ethics, we uncover a body of fiction that not only interrogates patriarchal assumptions but also offers new models of narrative integrity, emotional truth, and moral resistance.

Research Gap, Contribution, and Analytical Approach

While scholars such as Austin (2013), and Sapkota (2007) have laid important groundwork in examining gender politics within Saul Bellow’s fiction, the field still lacks a sustained, systematic comparison of gender nonconformity across multiple short stories. Much of the critical focus has traditionally centered on Bellow’s novels, especially *Herzog* or *Seize the Day*, leaving his shorter works underexplored—particularly in terms of how they interrogate and perform gender. This article addresses that gap by conducting a comparative study of three short stories—“Leaving the Yellow House,” “The Old System,” and *The Bellarosa Connection*—published over three decades, offering a longitudinal view of Bellow’s evolving engagement with gender identity, performance, and disruption.

The study contributes to current debates in literary, gender, and cultural studies by arguing that Bellow’s portrayals of gender nonconformity are not incidental or peripheral but foundational to his narrative architecture and philosophical inquiry. Gender is not merely a secondary characteristic of his characters but is woven into the moral, psychological, and symbolic fabric of their identity and actions. The stories examined here present non-normative gender traits as central to the thematic and structural development of the narrative, often positioning such traits as vehicles for ethical agency and resistance.

Bellow’s treatment of gender cannot be separated from his broader engagement with Jewish-American identity, diasporic memory, and the cultural weight of tradition. His characters are rarely rendered as generic male or female archetypes. Rather, they are Jewish men and women whose gendered experiences are shaped by historical trauma, assimilation, dislocation, and the need to negotiate moral integrity within a fractured cultural inheritance. In Hall’s opinion (1990), the diasporic self is “produced, not by biology, but by representation,” and is always formed in relation to competing histories, locations, and identifications (p. 225). Bellow’s characters often stand at the crossroads of these forces, and their gender performance reflects the instability and hybridity of diasporic life.

In *The Bellarosa Connection*, for example, Harry Fonstein—a Holocaust survivor—is not cast as a traditional male hero. Instead, he is portrayed as soft-spoken, emotionally wounded, and morally cautious. He attempts once to contact Billy Rose, the American benefactor who once helped him escape the Nazis, but after being dismissed, he never tries again. Harry’s passivity and retreat from confrontation have often been read as weakness; yet this study repositions his behavior as a form of ethical resistance. In accordance with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), alternative masculinities often reject confrontation and control in favor of humility, reflection, and survival. Harry’s moral worth is affirmed not through action or dominance, but through restraint.

His silence speaks. It embodies a diasporic masculinity grounded in ethical minimalism and the quiet dignity of endurance.

Harry's masculinity is further illuminated through contrast with his wife, Sorella Fonstein, who exhibits powerful, traditionally masculine-coded traits: moral certainty, direct speech, and an unyielding commitment to truth. When Billy Rose dismisses her husband's quiet gratitude, it is Sorella who confronts him—not to demand acknowledgment, but to restore dignity. Her rhetorical clarity, emotional intelligence, and spiritual authority transform her into a modern-day *tzadikah*—a righteous woman who acts on behalf of those whose voices are erased or silenced. Her strength, as this study contends, is not framed as a rejection of femininity but as an ethical embodiment of Jewish historical memory. She channels the pain of her people not through lamentation but through righteous indignation—what the narrator calls “vital energy” (Weatherford, 1992).

In “The Old System,” gender and cultural preservation are intertwined in the figures of Tina and Aunt Rose. These women are not merely matriarchs; they are bearers of memory, speakers of Yiddish, and protectors of symbolic heirlooms. Their actions represent more than personal will—they perform the labor of cultural continuity. Tina's financial acumen, emotional restraint, and authoritative presence defy conventional femininity, but her resistance is not aimed at men *per se*. Rather, she challenges the cultural amnesia embodied by her brother Isaac, a man who has assimilated into secular, capitalist America. Tina's authority is drawn from cultural depth, not material wealth. She is not masculinized as much as she is the personification of inherited strength.

Aunt Rose plays a similar role. Though she speaks little, her presence is decisive. As the story's moral compass and symbolic judge, she grants or withholds approval with finality. Cohen (2010) reads Rose as both matriarch and moral legislator, a figure whose power lies in her rootedness to tradition rather than her adherence to gender norms. These women are not anomalies within Bellow's world; they are its stabilizers, its memory keepers, its ethical bedrock.

However, “Leaving the Yellow House” presents a more ambiguous but equally profound disruption of gender expectations. Hattie Waggoner, an aging woman living on the margins of society, is initially portrayed as feeble, dependent, and isolated. However, Bellow slowly reveals her inner world through apostrophic address and a narrative device likened to a film reel—a symbol of fragmented memory and nonlinear self-reflection. Hattie's monologues—addressed to absent others and even to herself—become acts of narrative reclamation. Austin (2013) notes that Hattie resists the roles imposed on her by community and history, instead crafting an identity through rhetorical defiance. Her use of apostrophe, as Assadi (2023) emphasizes, is not a sign of madness but of authorship: “Hattie speaks to the void and fills it with selfhood” (p. 107).

While Hattie's Jewish identity is less explicit than Tina's or Sorella's, her marginalization, moral complexity, and negotiation with memory echo diasporic themes. Her fractured identity, constructed in the shadow of others' expectations, mirrors what Hall (1990) describes as the diasporic self: fragmented, dislocated, and mediated through history. Her gender performance, which defies both submission and redemption, reflects a refusal to conform to narrative closure or feminine idealization. Instead, she asserts herself in pieces, like film frames, resisting any final summation.

Taken together, these characters demonstrate that Bellow's treatment of gender nonconformity is not a deviation from theme, but a critical dimension of his literary inquiry. His protagonists do not merely resist gender norms—they actively inhabit spaces of cultural contradiction, historical weight, and moral ambiguity. Their gender performances are informed by American expectations and Jewish traditions, by personal trauma and collective history, resulting in identities that are hybrid, unstable, and revolutionary. In this way, Bellow's fiction participates in a larger Jewish literary tradition that interrogates the limits of normative identity—not only in relation to faith or nationalism, but through the lived body, the spoken word, and the relational self. As Boyarin (1997) and Gilman (1991) argue, Jewish masculinity has often been constructed in opposition to Western ideals of rugged individualism and domination. Bellow's work not only reflects this condition but turns it into a lens through which to explore power, voice, and survival.

The methodological foundation of this study is rooted in feminist literary criticism (Moi, 1985; Eagleton, 1996), gender theory (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005), and diaspora studies (Hall, 1990). These critical perspectives facilitate a reading of Bellow's fiction that foregrounds gender as a performative and negotiable construct—one that is neither fixed nor inherited, but enacted, challenged, and at times, quietly reclaimed. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis through close reading of selected short stories, with particular attention to narrative voice, character construction and dialogue, symbolic markers of gender (including language, space, emotion, and occupation), and the tensions between cultural heritage and individual identity. This integrated approach enables a nuanced examination of how Bellow's characters inhabit, resist, or subvert gender roles within diasporic and socio-historical frameworks. The analysis considers several key dimensions: the construction of character and dialogue, where gendered traits emerge through descriptions and speech; the narrative structure and point of view, which influence how gender norms are shaped or challenged, particularly in relation to who holds narrative authority; and the use of symbolic markers, including recurring motifs and coded elements—such as occupation, emotional expression, language, or physical space—that convey “masculine” or “feminine” performances. Furthermore, the study explores the tensions between cultural heritage and individual identity, focusing on how characters' Jewish diasporic backgrounds and familial traditions intersect with or complicate their expressions of gender. Through these interwoven layers, the analysis foregrounds the performative and often unstable nature of gender in Bellow's short fiction.

This analytical procedure follows a comparative approach: findings in one text are weighed against the others to identify patterns of gender nonconformity across Bellow's short fiction, while also accounting for each story's unique historical and cultural context. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth interpretation of nuances in each narrative, rather than quantifying traits. Throughout the analysis, secondary sources and criticism are integrated to bolster and contextualize the interpretations. Prior studies of Bellow's characters (e.g. Sapkota, 2007; Cohen, 2010; Austin, 2013; Assadi, 2023) inform the understanding of how these characters have been viewed by other scholars, and theories of gender and diaspora (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005; Hall, 1990) provide a conceptual framework that sharpens the analysis of textual evidence. In sum, by uniting a clear research purpose with a robust qualitative analytical method, the section establishes both the scholarly gap this study fills and the lenses through which Bellow's gender-nonconforming characters are examined.

Comparative Readings of Gender Disruption and Diasporic Identity

This section offers a comparative analysis of three short narratives by Saul Bellow—“Leaving the Yellow House,” “The Old System,” and *The Bellarosa Connection*—to explore how gender nonconformity operates as a central narrative device. Each story presents a distinct configuration of gendered subjectivity, shaped not only by personal psychology but also by cultural memory, diasporic dislocation, and ethical agency. The protagonists in these texts—Hattie, Tina, Sorella, and Harry—challenge or invert conventional gender roles in ways that are deeply embedded in Bellow's broader philosophical and diasporic concerns. Through these close readings, the analysis foregrounds how Bellow destabilizes the binary logic of gender, embedding it within a framework of symbolic authority, narrative voice, and intergenerational struggle. In doing so, these stories reveal gender not as a static identity but as a site of negotiation, resistance, and moral engagement.

“Leaving the Yellow House”: Gendered Memory and the Struggle for Narrative Control

In “Leaving the Yellow House,” Bellow creates a dialectical tension between traditional femininity and narrative self-assertion, embodied in the complex portrayal of Hattie Waggoner. Though socially peripheral and physically impaired, Hattie refuses passive containment. Her conflict is particularly evident in her memory of India, the deceased benefactor whose legacy haunts Hattie's identity. India embodies traditionally masculine-coded authority—she was the property owner, traveler, and disciplinarian. Hattie, by contrast, is initially positioned as the dependent and voiceless “female,” echoing Michael Austin's observation that their relationship is defined by “master-servant,” “masculine-feminine” polarity. India functions in a constant and unseen opposition to Hattie. While India is described as rich, cultured, and well-travelled, Hattie is portrayed as poor, uneducated, and bound to a single place. India is said to have held the roles of property owner, provider, and master, whereas Hattie is depicted as the tenant, the beggar, and ultimately the slave (Austin, 2013 59, 60).

India's presence persists as an internalized judge, shaping Hattie's guilt and self-perception. Yet Hattie reclaims agency through two narrative strategies: apostrophe and the film-reel metaphor. Her use of apostrophe—addressing absent or inanimate figures—becomes a method of indirect confrontation. Through apostrophe, she confronts India, Wick, Darly, the Rolfes, and even herself, turning silence into speech: “Am I thy servant still? said Hattie to herself. No, she thought, let the dead bury their dead” (Bellow, 1971, p. 17). On another occasion, Hattie demonstrates a growing awareness of her emotional needs and inner grievances by projecting a scene in which India, the long-dominant figure in her life, pleads for forgiveness. Through apostrophe, she does not seize absolute power, but she creates a space where her feelings are acknowledged and validated, thereby exercising a quiet form of control rooted in self-recognition: “Please! I’m sorry. Don’t condemn me in your heart. Forgive me. I hurt myself in my evil. I always had a thick idiot head. I was born with a thick head” (p. 41). Rather than remaining a silent victim of memory, Hattie here narrates a reparative gesture, one that allows her to confront past injustice—not through direct confrontation, but through imaginative empathy and emotional truth-telling.

These moments of direct address unmask her subjugation, allow her to revise her relationships, and reveal a performative form of autonomy. Barbara Johnson's conception of apostrophe as “ventriloquism” (1998, 221) is apt here—Hattie animates silence into responsive subjects, projecting voice and intention onto a hostile or indifferent world.

Her second strategy, the film-reel technique, challenges linear masculine narrative arcs. Instead of recounting her life as a coherent progression, Hattie envisions her identity as a collage of remembered scenes, looping and replaying like a film: “More and more, Hattie saw her life as though every moment had been filmed from birth to the present... There couldn't be much film left. Lying awake and thinking such thoughts was the worst thing in the world” (pp. 11–12).

Once again, Hattie turns to the film motif as a coping mechanism and a means of organizing her fragmented experiences. The act of imagining herself as both subject and spectator offers her a space of introspection, where her feelings, vulnerabilities, and performances are both captured and judged. In this cinematic self-construction, Hattie envisions herself as watched—not by others, but by a greater consciousness or future self, suggesting a desire for posthumous understanding and justification: “And as if being watched, she poured a drink and swallowed it... And afterwards, you could view your life. A hereafter movie...” (p. 34). Here, the “hereafter movie” functions as both metaphor and narrative device—a framework through which Hattie processes guilt, rehearses regret, and projects a coherent identity in the absence of real social validation. While it does not free her from suffering, it allows her to assert presence and memory within a life otherwise marked by erasure.

This cinematic model enables Hattie to relive past injustices, correct misreadings, and assert authority over memory. Notably, she replays scenes with her ex-husband Waggoner and suitor Wick, not merely as nostalgia but as moral inquiry and emotional redress: “Jimmy, Jimmy, how can you fling a wife away?” (p. 34). Hattie's inner dialogue continues to unfold within the imagined space of her cinematic self-reflection, where memory and emotion converge. As she replays her past relationship with Wick, she does not merely recall events—she re-experiences them through a critical, class-inflected lens. Her disappointment resurfaces with sharpened clarity, revealing a tension between emotional need and social aspiration:

“Trade Waggoner for Wick? She asked herself again with a swing of her shoulders... He was a cowboy. Socially nothing. He couldn't even read” (p. 35). In this moment, Hattie is not just reflecting—she is recasting her past according to an enduring logic of status and pride. Wick's lack of education and social standing, once perhaps tolerable, is now irreconcilable with the symbolic capital she assigns to the name Waggoner. Her disappointment is not only personal but structural: Wick fails to meet the imagined criteria that define her sense of worth and legitimacy. The rhetorical question, asked “with a swing of her shoulders,” signals not confidence but resignation—a performance of defiance masking regret. By invoking this judgment through the film motif, Hattie critiques her own choices but also reaffirms her identity as someone who refuses to settle, even if that refusal perpetuates her isolation. These self-narrated fragments not only assert Hattie's interpretive authority

but also expose pride, pain, and unresolved longing. The film does not simply serve as escapism—it becomes a space of reckoning.

Finally, Hattie's act of writing a will in her own name—an ultimate narrative intervention—affirms her defiant claim to selfhood: “I leave this property, land, house, garden, and water rights to Hattie Simmons Waggoner. Me. I realise this is bad and wrong. Not possible. Yet it is the only thing I wish to do” (p. 42). By naming herself the beneficiary, Hattie performs an assertion of identity and ownership in a world that sees her as socially valueless. Her resistance culminates in a refusal to accept death as final closure, choosing instead to fragment time into “early middle, then middle, late middle, quite a late middle,” (p. 42)—a denial of patriarchal finality, an embrace of present presence.

“The Old System”: Matriarchal Resistance and Masculinized Female Authority

Wonderful, Jamal. Based on your section titled “The Old System”: Matriarchal Resistance and Masculinized Female Authority, and supported by your rich article, here is a refined version of that section with direct textual reinforcement from *The Old System*, drawn from the article you shared:

◆ The Old System: Matriarchal Resistance and Masculinized Female Authority (Reinforced)

In “The Old System,” Bellow constructs a multifaceted portrait of gender and authority, centering on female characters who wield power through defiance, pragmatism, or preservation. Tina, in particular, emerges as a masculinized female figure, not because she emulates men, but because she claims a historically male-coded authority within a Jewish familial structure—financially, linguistically, and emotionally.

Tina does not struggle to construct an identity—she possesses one fully formed, rooted in her rejection of assimilation and insistence on preserving family heritage. Her dominance is personal and ideological, manifesting in her financial negotiations, her rejection of familial reconciliation, and her resistance to Isaac's calls for unity. Her verbal defiance encapsulates her refusal to play by the rules of male diplomacy: “Never! You son of a bitch, never!” “The Old System,” 67).

This aggressive disavowal of Isaac's appeal—framed by his invocation of familial duty—reflects a radical gender and cultural rejection. Tina will not be coaxed into performance or reconciliation; her voice, tinged with rage, refuses the patriarchal contract entirely. Yet Tina is not without sentiment. Her decision to return Aunt Rose's ring to Isaac—though symbolic—acknowledges the emotional residues of tradition. The act reconfigures her position: she remains resistant, but not wholly disconnected. The ring, a matrilineal heirloom, becomes a contested emblem of continuity and rupture. Through it, Bellow explores how women inherit and challenge familial authority, simultaneously preserving and redefining its meaning.

Tina's masculine-coded agency is not limited to her speech. Her physicality, described as “obese monstrosity,” exaggerates her social conspicuousness: “Life, accordingly, she devalued, filling up the clear light remaining (which should be reserved for beauty, miracle, nobility) with obese monstrosity, rancor, failure, self-torture” “The Old System,” 70). This portrayal casts Tina not as an empowered body but as a grotesque one—a parody of feminine decorum. Still, within this grotesquerie lies power. She turns even death into an operatic stage, resisting both grief and submission: “In Dr. Braun's opinion, his Cousin Tina had seized upon the force of death to create a situation of opera... there was a feedback of mockery. Death the horrid bridegroom, waiting with a consummation life had never offered.” “The Old System,” 70). Here, Tina's mourning is a performance of control—a transformation of suffering into spectacle. Bellow grants her narrative control through dramatization, not passivity.

Aunt Rose, in contrast, commands a different mode of matriarchal power. Hers is a financial dominance rooted in ownership and transactional governance. Yet her power, too, is unlegitimized: “Uncle Braun died angry with Aunt Rose... She collected rents in the slums of Albany and Schenectady from properties he had left to his sons.” “The Old System,” 51).

While men weep, Aunt Rose moves to secure property and legacy. Her willfulness is not rewarded but resented. Her description as “the original dura mater... to cut mercy like a cotton thread” (“The Old System,” 48) captures the tension: she is a survivor in steel, not in sentiment.

These female figures together challenge binary expectations of gendered behavior. They neither conform to traditional models of nurturing femininity nor fully adopt patriarchal authority. Instead, they negotiate power on their own terms—asserting presence through speech, property, and memory. Their power is not subversive because it is hidden—it is confrontational, visible, and uncomfortable, both within the narrative and for the reader.

The Bellarosa Connection: Feminine Strength and Masculine Retreat

In *The Bellarosa Connection*, gender roles are inverted once more—but this time through the coupling of Sorella Fonstein, a woman of remarkable moral and intellectual force, and Harry Fonstein, her emotionally passive husband. Where Hattie and Tina

In *The Bellarosa Connection*, gender roles are inverted through the pairing of Sorella Fonstein, a woman of formidable ethical and intellectual resolve, and Harry Fonstein, her emotionally reticent husband. Unlike Hattie or Tina, Sorella’s resistance is neither impulsive nor rebellious. It is calculated, civic, and enduring. Her pursuit of recognition for Harry’s Holocaust survival is grounded in ethical pedagogy, not vanity. As she is portrayed, her drive is not theatrical in the trivial sense but in a moral one. She possessed an energy that could not be called neurotic, egotistical, or hysterical. It had nothing to do with feminine charm, emotional blackmail, or obsession. It was vital energy, something ethical and classical.

Her confrontation with Billy Rose, the Broadway producer who once saved Harry but now denies his debt, embodies her role as a traditional teacher/playwright, casting each encounter as a scene in a script designed to restore justice and memory: “She raised her arm as though to mark a check on the blackboard beside a student’s sentence. ‘Here comes the strange element. This is where Billy Rose plays a part’” (*The Bellarosa Connection* 9). But Billy refuses the role: “Billy views everything as show biz,” I said. “Nothing is real that isn’t a show. And he wouldn’t perform in your show because he’s a producer, and producers don’t perform” (65). During the pivotal confrontation in Jerusalem, Billy Rose lashes out at Sorella in what the narrator describes as “a screaming fit,” hurling the deeply degrading insult, calling her “a heap of filth” (p. 62). His words are not only personally abusive but symbolically dismissive, aiming to erase her moral authority and invalidate her role as a witness to Jewish history. Sorella, however, refuses the role of victim. Rather than retreat in shame, she meets his insult with direct moral condemnation, delivering a line that reclaims her agency: “You’re filth. I want no part of you” (p. 63).

In this exchange, Bellow dramatizes a clash between two opposing worldviews: Sorella, the bearer of historical memory and ethical commitment, and Billy, the embodiment of self-interested theatricality and cultural amnesia. By declaring that Billy is “not fit” for her script, Sorella symbolically rejects his refusal to bear witness and excludes him from the collective memory she insists must be preserved. Her words are not just a retort; they are a final judgment, delivered with the authority of one who speaks not only for her husband, but for historical truth. Through these scenes, Sorella transforms the domestic into the political, asserting moral clarity in the face of historical erasure. Her performance destabilizes gender expectations—not by mimicking masculinity, but by appropriating its rhetorical force and public authority.

By contrast, Harry Fonstein’s passivity is a study in quiet masculinity. He makes one attempt to reach Billy Rose, is rebuffed, and resigns himself to silence. The narrator the narrator presents is that Harry Fonstein is not without feeling, but he cannot manage indignation. He cannot even confess his own cut .

Harry’s moral depth lies in his humility; yet it is Sorella who carries the burden of visibility. She is the one who believes that Holocaust memory must be actively witnessed, that survivors’ stories are not private tragedies but communal imperatives: “It was a part of the destruction of the Jews. On our side of the Atlantic, where we weren’t threatened, we have a special duty to come to terms with it...”(60). Ultimately, Sorella performs superiority, not for pride but for truth. Her role is didactic and moral—to stage memory and demand acknowledgment. In Bellow’s world, her strength is not gendered; it is ethical, generational, and pedagogical.

Comparative Observations: Patterns and Divergences

Across the three stories, Bellow presents a consistent critique of rigid gender binaries, but the forms of nonconformity differ in scope and outcome.

Character	Gender Nonconformity	Narrative Function	Power Source
Hattie (Yellow)	Passive woman → Narrative agent	Defies marginalization through voice	Memory, voice, rhetorical tactics
Tina (Old System)	Masculine-coded matriarch	Resists assimilation and familial collapse	Cultural tradition, economic role
Sorella (Bellarosa)	Assertive, ethical woman	Challenges historical erasure	Moral clarity, intellectual agency
Harry (Bellarosa)	Feminized man	Retreats from masculine responsibility	Emotional depth, historical trauma

These portrayals are not static; they evolve across the decades of Bellow's writing. Where Hattie fights for internal coherence, Tina fights for external tradition, and Sorella fights for ethical justice. All three, however, dismantle the presumption that gender correlates naturally with behavior, responsibility, or emotional labor.

Intertextual Dialogues and Feminist Reappraisal: Repositioning Bellow in Contemporary Gender Discourse

Saul Bellow's exploration of gender nonconformity, while often underemphasized in traditional scholarship, positions him in subtle dialogue with other major postwar writers who similarly interrogated identity, performance, and the authority of voice. At the same time, feminist and gender studies critics have increasingly re-evaluated Bellow's literary corpus, especially his short fiction, uncovering beneath its canonical surface an intricate engagement with the politics of gender, power, and representation. This section bridges two dimensions of Bellow's evolving critical legacy: first, his literary kinship with authors such as Philip Roth, James Baldwin, and Sylvia Plath; and second, the shifting critical reception of his work, particularly as it pertains to feminist and masculinity studies. Together, these perspectives help reposition Bellow not as a writer bound to patriarchal forms, but as one whose narratives often unsettle them from within.

Bellow's engagement with Jewish-American masculinity places him in a revealing contrast with Philip Roth. While Roth foregrounds the erotics of rebellion—especially through hyper-sexualized protagonists like Alexander Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)—Bellow's men often withdraw from spectacle. Harry Fonstein in *The Bellarosa Connection* is a paradigmatic example: quietly traumatized, morally reticent, and reluctant to assert himself. Roth's women often serve as narrative projections or symbolic foils, whereas Bellow's Tina and Sorella possess ethical weight and discursive power. In this sense, Bellow's gender politics—though less overt—may offer more structurally integrated critiques of masculinity and more autonomous female figures.

James Baldwin's work, particularly *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962), deepens this comparison. Baldwin, writing at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, constructs male characters whose struggles with vulnerability and identity mirror those of Bellow's more internalized men. Like Harry or Dr. Braun, Baldwin's protagonists seek intimacy yet fear exposure, revealing masculinities fractured by personal and cultural histories. While Baldwin's racial and sexual contexts are distinct, both authors use narrative voice to reveal the costs of inhabiting, resisting, or failing to perform dominant masculinity. Though writing from a different positionality and with a more lyrical aesthetic, Sylvia Plath also interrogates gender scripts through intense narrative interiority. In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath's protagonist resists submission through breakdown and reinvention. Similarly, Plath's poetry often uses silence and confrontation as literary strategies for reclaiming agency. Her women, like Bellow's Hattie or Sorella, refuse confinement, though their emotional registers differ. Where Plath wields confession and fragmentation, Bellow offers moral weight and narrative structure.

Across these literary landscapes, Bellow can be seen as participating in a gender-critical conversation, even if his methods are more implicit. His short fiction stages gender not as a fixed identity but as a philosophical and ethical terrain. His characters do not simply “perform” masculinity or femininity—they endure it, reject it, reshape it, and ultimately use it to engage with trauma, memory, and moral responsibility. Though Bellow did not write with the explicit political language of feminist or queer theorists, his fiction often anticipates the discourses they would later formalize.

This intertextual positioning intersects with an evolving critical reappraisal of Bellow’s work. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have debated whether Bellow’s women are fully realized or merely instrumentalized within male-centered narratives. Early critics such as Vivian Gornick and Mary Ellmann viewed his female characters as symbolic projections—muses, tempters, or burdens to male selfhood. Indeed, in novels like *Herzog* and *Seize the Day*, women often appear as disruptive forces, functioning more as narrative devices than as autonomous agents. However, more recent scholarship has begun to complicate this picture. As Assadi (2023) argues, characters like Hattie Waggoner and Tina are not merely resisting patriarchal structures—they embody alternative ethical systems rooted in emotional realism and discursive agency. Michael Austin (2013) emphasizes how narrative strategies in stories like “Leaving the Yellow House” subtly empower female characters through rhetorical control and symbolic voice. These figures may not wield institutional power, but they shape the story’s moral and symbolic direction. Similarly, Bellow’s male characters have been subject to redefinition. Critics such as Cronin and Trepanier observe that Bellow’s men—particularly in the short fiction—are often portrayed as uncertain, guilt-ridden, or emotionally paralyzed. This gendered irony—where women preserve and act while men retreat and reflect—disrupts the presumed centrality of patriarchal authority. Rather than serving as straightforward representatives of masculinity, Bellow’s male protagonists become sites of rupture, anxiety, and ethical questioning.

This reappraisal is reinforced by the rise of masculinity studies, which situate Bellow within a broader tradition of writers grappling with postwar identity crises. As Kimmel (2006) and Connell (2005) note, modern masculinity is increasingly defined not by dominance, but by its crisis—its fragmentation under the weight of modernity, feminism, and cultural pluralism. Bellow’s fiction, far from resisting this shift, seems to chronicle it intimately. Moreover, Bellow’s Jewish-American identity complicates simplistic gender readings. Scholars such as Boyarin (1997), Gilman (1991), and Behi (2018) argue that Jewish male identity in American literature frequently diverges from WASP masculine norms, often emphasizing introspection, intellectualism, and ethical burden. Within this framework, Bellow’s “feminized” men and morally potent women do not reflect a simple inversion of gender roles, but a deeper engagement with cultural marginality and spiritual inheritance. His gender politics, in other words, are profoundly diasporic—marked by the memory of exile, the tension of assimilation, and the search for a viable moral voice in a fractured world.

In light of this critical evolution, Bellow emerges not as a patriarchal relic but as a writer profoundly attuned to the gendered dynamics of voice, power, and silence. His short fiction offers spaces where female agency, masculine vulnerability, and hybrid identities converge—not in stable resolutions, but in narratively generative tensions. His literary legacy, therefore, must be reconsidered not only through the lens of Jewish-American experience but also through the frameworks of feminist and gender theory. This study thus contributes to a growing chorus of scholars urging a more nuanced, intersectional reading of Bellow’s work—one that does not seek to exonerate or indict, but to understand. By situating Bellow in dialogue with other literary voices and within shifting critical landscapes, we recognize his fiction as a living archive of gender performance, cultural anxiety, and ethical introspection.

Discussion

Unsettling the Binary: Saul Bellow's Gender Politics and Narrative Ethics

This study has demonstrated that gender nonconformity in Saul Bellow’s short fiction is not marginal, but structurally central. Through characters such as Hattie Waggoner, Tina, Sorella Fonstein, and Harry Fonstein, Bellow presents a literary universe in which traditional gender roles are not merely questioned—they are actively dismantled, rewritten, and repurposed in the service of deeper philosophical, cultural, and ethical interrogations.

The comparative analysis reveals that Bellow's characters defy binary categories not for the sake of provocation but as a mode of survival—psychological, moral, and existential. Hattie appropriates narrative authority through apostrophe and symbolic fragmentation; Tina maintains patriarchal control through matriarchal force; Sorella reclaims historical voice through ethical assertiveness; and Harry, in his quiet withdrawal, challenges hegemonic masculinity by exposing its emotional cost.

These portrayals resonate with Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performative, not essential—that individuals enact, resist, or repurpose gender expectations depending on cultural and narrative constraints. At the same time, Bellow's diasporic and Jewish-American context layers additional complexity onto this performativity: his characters are also negotiating trauma, displacement, assimilation, and memory. Their gender performances are not only about self—they are also about heritage, mourning, and resistance. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have noted, masculinity is not a singular, stable identity but a constellation of practices shaped by culture and power. Bellow's feminine men and masculine women do not invert this constellation; they redraw it, often with moral or narrative consequences. Indeed, the power to narrate—whether to speak, remember, or assert—is revealed across the stories as the highest form of agency.

From a literary standpoint, this study contributes to the reevaluation of Bellow not only as a chronicler of Jewish-American masculinity in crisis, but as a writer attuned to gender multiplicity and resistance. While his novels have historically overshadowed his short fiction, this analysis reveals that his shorter works are fertile ground for examining gender, identity, and symbolic authority. Thematically, the characters examined in this study illustrate that gender nonconformity is deeply intertwined with narrative ethics—with who gets to speak, who is heard, who is forgotten, and how memory is gendered. This opens new avenues for critical exploration, linking feminist literary studies with trauma theory, diaspora studies, and narratology.

While this article focuses on three short stories as representative texts, a more expansive survey of Bellow's corpus—including his early novels and later essays—may reveal additional iterations of gender subversion and narrative asymmetry. Moreover, intersectional analyses involving class, race, and sexuality may further illuminate how gender performance interacts with other axes of identity in Bellow's work. Additionally, while this analysis is rooted in a Western and Jewish-American framework, comparative readings across global masculinities or postcolonial feminist theory could yield new critical insights, particularly regarding the cultural specificity of Bellow's gendered representations.

Concluding Thoughts: Narrative as Gendered Resistance

Ultimately, Bellow's fiction reveals that identity—be it ethnic, national, or gendered—is always in flux, always being negotiated in the shadows of history, memory, and silence. His characters do not simply subvert gender norms; they struggle to make meaning in a world that constantly threatens to erase or redefine them.

In their refusal to conform, these figures become something more than literary archetypes. They become what the narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection* might call “figures of vital energy”—embodied challenges to the structures that limit what a person may be, say, or remember.

In this way, Bellow's short fiction not only contributes to American literary traditions—it joins a global, ongoing conversation about freedom, voice, gender, and the power of narrative to resist forgetting.

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