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Negotiating Authority: Women, Gender, and Power in Saul Bellow's Short Fiction

Saleh Omar

Sakhnin College

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*Corresponding author: Saleh Omar

Abstract

Saul Bellow's fiction repeatedly examines individuals whose identities are formed through encounters with social expectations, cultural memory, family structures, and competing claims to authority. This article examines these processes through "Leaving the Yellow House," "The Old System," and "The Bellarosa Connection," three works separated by several decades and marked by distinct configurations of female and male conduct. The analysis focuses on India and Hattie Waggoner, Tina, Sorella Fonstein, and Harry Fonstein, asking how Bellow associates gender with authority, vulnerability, memory, and narrative performance. The article argues that Bellow's treatment of gender cannot be adequately described as a reversal of conventional roles. His characters acquire influence through different forms of conduct, including possession, economic independence, cultural guardianship, rhetorical intervention, moral judgment, and narrative self-fashioning. Hattie's apparent dependency develops into interpretive authority; Tina exercises familial power through her attachment to inherited culture; Sorella converts intelligence and initiative into ethical intervention; and Harry's restraint complicates assumptions about masculine strength. Drawing on established and recent Bellow scholarship, the article proposes that gender in these works operates relationally. Masculine and feminine attributes acquire significance through particular social situations, histories, and interpersonal exchanges. Bellow's short fiction consequently presents gender as a dynamic dimension of selfhood shaped by performance, memory, and the distribution of power.

Keywords: Saul Bellow; gender; masculinity; femininity; narrative authority; performance; vulnerability; Jewish-American fiction; Hattie Waggoner; Sorella Fonstein

1. Introduction: Reframing Gender through Authority and Performance

Saul Bellow's fiction is deeply concerned with the problem of how individuals become recognizable to themselves and to others. His characters frequently inhabit unstable positions between personal aspiration and social expectation, between inherited identities and attempts at self-definition. Questions of Jewish-American identity,

displacement, family obligation, intellectual life, memory, sexuality, and social status intersect throughout his fiction. Gender belongs to this larger field of identity formation, but it does not function as an isolated category. It becomes visible through relationships, conduct, speech, economic circumstances, bodily vulnerability, and the ability to influence other people.

This article examines that process in three works: "Leaving the Yellow House," "The Old System," and "The Bellarosa

Connection." The selection makes possible a comparison across three stages of Bellow's career: the late 1950s, the late 1960s, and the late 1980s. Rather than treating the texts as evidence of a straightforward chronological movement from conventional gender arrangements toward liberated ones, the article considers how different forms of authority are distributed among men and women.

The central question is more specific than whether Bellow presents "strong women" or "weak men." The more productive question is: How does Bellow connect gendered conduct with the possession, loss, transfer, and reinterpretation of authority? This formulation permits a closer examination of characters who cannot be adequately classified according to conventional assumptions about masculinity and femininity.

The study from which this article develops the argument identifies the central problem as Bellow's depiction of characters who exhibit masculine or feminine traits across the three selected works. The present study retains that concern but modifies the critical emphasis. Instead of treating gender nonconformity as the endpoint of the analysis, it asks what these departures from convention accomplish within the narrative.

This shift is particularly appropriate to Bellow because performance occupies a significant place in his fiction. Bellow scholarship has examined his characters through acting, rhetoric, role-playing, and the tension between performed identities and claims to a stable sense of self. Characters are frequently evaluated as rhetorical actors who move dynamically among roles and strategies alongside figures who seek a more stable referential reality (Cronin 2000, 114–120). This critical perspective is useful for the present discussion because gendered behavior in Bellow closely resembles a form of social performance. Characters occupy roles, resist prescribed roles, interpret the conduct of others, and attempt to establish their own meanings within situations they do not fully control.

The significance of this approach becomes especially clear in "Leaving the Yellow House." Hattie appears at first to possess little authority. Her social circumstances, economic position, physical condition, and relationship with India place her in a subordinate position. Nevertheless, the narrative gradually shifts attention from the circumstances imposed upon Hattie to her capacity to interpret them. Critics have examined Hattie's position through questions of power, vulnerability, gender, memory, and narrative control. Michael Austin's discussion of Hattie and India emphasizes the complex power relationship between the two women, particularly the ways in which Bellow unsettles conventional gender roles (Austin 2013, 65–84). More recent scholarship has considered Hattie through the intersecting perspectives of gender, aging, vulnerability, and her response to social and personal restrictions (Cong 2024, 1–11). Studies of Hattie's characterization have also drawn attention to apostrophe, narrative control, power, and vulnerability (Assadi 2006, 112–115; Assadi 2026, 59–76). These approaches provide a useful foundation for examining how Hattie's apparent marginality gradually becomes a site of interpretive authority.

"The Old System" presents a different configuration. Tina's authority emerges within family structures and through attachment to inherited cultural practices. Her strength is not generated by abandoning tradition. Her authority develops through her ability to defend and interpret it.

"*The Bellarosa Connection*" complicates the pattern still further. Sorella is active, intellectually engaged, decisive, and prepared to intervene in circumstances affecting her husband. Harry, by contrast, does not conform to a model of masculine assertiveness. His restriction and reluctance become significant precisely because his historical experience gives them a moral and psychological dimension.

Taken together, these texts suggest that Bellow's treatment of gender involves a redistribution of characteristics conventionally assigned to men and women. Authority may appear in a woman; vulnerability may appear in a man; care may involve decisive action; tradition may become the basis of female independence; and narrative control may emerge from a socially marginal position.

2. The Critical Problem: Gender beyond Fixed Categories

Gender criticism provides a useful vocabulary for examining Bellow's characters, but a rigid application of binary categories risks simplifying the narratives. Social expectations concerning masculinity and femininity have historically assigned different forms of conduct to men and women. Men have commonly been associated with independence, economic provision, authority, emotional restraint, and public action, whereas women have often been associated with domesticity, emotional responsiveness, dependence, and care. Such distinctions are culturally produced and historically variable.

Bellow writes across a period in which these expectations underwent considerable change. His early fiction emerged in a postwar American culture that strongly emphasized domestic stability, masculine economic responsibility, and conventional family structures. His later fiction appeared after the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s had challenged many of these assumptions. The historical background is important, but the narratives should not be reduced to illustrations of social change.

Aaron's study of Bellow places his writing within the historical pressures surrounding the author and his generation, while the article itself identifies the changing expectations surrounding gender during Bellow's career. The selected works, however, demonstrate that literary representation is more complicated than a simple movement from restriction to freedom.

The distinction between social expectation and individual conduct is particularly important. A woman may exercise authority without rejecting every convention associated with femininity. A man may exhibit vulnerability without becoming devoid of agency. The category of "nonconformity" therefore needs qualification. It is more useful to ask which expectations a character accepts, which ones are modified, and what consequences follow.

Saul Bellow's documented interest in acting strengthens this interpretive framework. An analysis of *Herzog* demonstrates that acting, theatrical watching, apostrophe, and writing are deeply interconnected with the struggle over who controls interpretation (Assadi 2014, 117–127). Within this dynamic, characters actively observe, perform, script, and interpret one another. This same underlying principle can illuminate the short fiction examined here: social identity becomes partly dependent on who is permitted to define whom.

This issue is particularly significant for female characters. If a woman is represented primarily through another character's interpretation, her apparent identity may reflect the observer's assumptions. When she acquires the capacity to narrate, confront, judge, or intervene, the balance changes. Hattie, Tina, and Sorella each participate in such changes, although through very different means.

The male characters require similar attention. Harry Fonstein cannot be adequately described as simply passive. His historical experience, his gratitude toward Billy Rose, and his inability to secure the encounter he desires place his conduct within a specific ethical context. His reluctance to force the situation does not necessarily signify weakness. It may indicate a conception of human dignity that does not depend on domination.

This approach also avoids reducing Bellow's women to symbols of emancipation. Tina remains committed to traditions that a contemporary reader might associate with conservatism. Sorella's assertiveness is inseparable from her concern for her husband. Hattie's movement toward self-possession occurs through memory and narration. Their differences matter.

3. Hattie Waggoner and the Transformation of Dependence

"Leaving the Yellow House" offers the most complex movement from externally imposed identity toward narrative self-possession. Hattie Waggoner lives in the house associated with India, her former employer and benefactor. India is absent from the present action, yet her influence remains powerful. The dead woman continues to occupy Hattie's mental and emotional world.

Michael Austin's influential discussion of the story identifies the relationship between India and Hattie through oppositions involving master and servant and masculine and feminine power. The distinction initially seems clear. India possesses wealth, education, mobility, property, and social authority. Hattie occupies a dependent position.

India's characterization is important because Bellow assigns her several attributes conventionally coded as masculine. She owns property, travels, commands, judges, and controls the circumstances of another person's existence. Her power does not arise from physical presence in the story's present; it survives through memory and material possession.

Hattie, by contrast, appears vulnerable. Her physical injury intensifies this condition. Her damaged arm makes dependence tangible, turning a psychological and social condition into a bodily one. The narrative thus creates an apparent correspondence between physical weakness and limited authority. That correspondence, however, does not remain stable.

Hattie's consciousness gradually becomes the most important site of the story. The dead India can continue to occupy Hattie's memory, but she cannot control how Hattie remembers her. This distinction marks the beginning of a transfer of power. India possesses the house; Hattie increasingly possesses the narrative.

A focused reading of Hattie proves especially relevant to this interpretive framework. An examination of the apostrophe reveals it as a rhetorical device through which Hattie addresses absent figures and objects, thereby gaining control over the narrative space (Assadi 2006; 2023, 112–115). The study draws directly

upon this argument in discussing Hattie's use of apostrophe and cinematic organization. Ultimately, the importance of these techniques lies in their transformation of a seemingly marginal character into an active interpreter of her own experience.

Hattie's speech has a double function. At the level of content, she remembers people and events. At the structural level, she determines the form through which those memories reach the reader. Her authority is narrative rather than institutional.

This distinction changes the meaning of her vulnerability. Physical dependence does not eliminate interpretive power. Indeed, the story links vulnerability with heightened reflection. Hattie must confront the limitations of the social world around her, but she also acquires the opportunity to reconsider the identity assigned to her.

The film-reel structure intensifies this process. Instead of presenting experience as a smooth sequence, Hattie organizes memory through fragments and episodes. The result is a form of self-reconstruction. She does not simply remember what happened; she determines which moments become significant.

The importance of this technique is consistent with a broader scholarly interest in Bellow's use of performance and representation. If social life resembles a stage, then narrative becomes a critical means through which a character revises a previously assigned role. Established critical frameworks describe Bellow's characters as figures who move dynamically among roles, situations, and strategies, complicating any assumption that identity is singular or stable. In "Leaving the Yellow House," this structural framework manifests as a character portrait where memory plays out like a literal film reel (Kiernan 1989, 72–75). Ultimately, identity is revealed not as a static assignment, but as a site of active negotiation and resistance against external limits (International Journal of Organizational Relevance 2025, 14–16). Hattie embodies this instability in a particularly striking manner.

Her development should therefore not be described simply as a transition from weakness to strength. Such a formulation would reproduce the binary the story complicates. Hattie remains vulnerable. What changes is her relation to vulnerability. She begins to understand it, narrate it, and incorporate it into a more complex conception of self.

The story offers a more complicated model of female authority. Hattie does not become powerful because she acquires the attributes conventionally associated with masculinity. Her authority emerges through reflection, memory, and language.

4. Tina and the Authority of Cultural Continuity

"The Old System" presents a different model of female power. Tina's authority develops within the family and is closely connected to cultural memory. Her conflict with Isaac is consequently more than a dispute between siblings. It concerns competing understandings of what should survive from the past.

Tina's insistence on Yiddish and her attachment to the family ring reveal the material dimensions of memory. Language and objects preserve relationships that modern economic values threaten to weaken. Her position is paradoxical: she resists the family's movement toward modernity while simultaneously demonstrating considerable independence.

The study describes Tina as a forceful woman who maintains family traditions and confronts her brother over questions of inheritance and value. The earlier analysis tends to classify these characteristics as “masculine.” A more precise interpretation is possible.

Tina does not become authoritative by becoming less culturally traditional. Her authority develops through her command of the traditional world. She knows its language, its symbols, its expectations, and its emotional claims. Her strength is culturally embedded.

This feature distinguishes her from Hattie. Hattie must reconstruct herself in relation to an inherited environment that has marginalized her. Tina derives much of her position from her knowledge of the environment itself.

Her confrontation with Isaac demonstrates this difference. Isaac's power is associated with wealth and modern economic values. Tina's power derives from kinship and cultural legitimacy. The conflict presents two competing forms of authority.

The family ring becomes especially important because it condenses these competing values into an object. To one perspective, it may appear as property. To another, it embodies continuity. Tina's attachment to it gives material form to her conception of family.

Her use of Yiddish has a similar implication. Language functions as a means of preserving a cultural position. Tina's insistence on it marks resistance to assimilation and to the reduction of family identity to economic success.

Her relationship with Dr. Braun further complicates the representation. The article emphasizes her sexual boldness and her ability to influence the conduct of men around her. Yet the more significant point is that Bellow refuses to isolate her assertiveness from other dimensions of her identity. She can be forceful, traditional, sexually confident, economically capable, and emotionally invested in family continuity.

Tina exposes the weakness of a simple masculine/feminine binary. If assertiveness is coded as masculine, her behavior appears masculine. If cultural preservation is coded as feminine, she appears feminine. The coexistence of these characteristics demonstrates that gendered behavior cannot be neatly divided into separate categories.

Her authority is relational. It becomes visible in confrontation with Isaac, in negotiations over family objects, and in her interactions with other characters. She does not possess an abstract form of power. She exercises influence within specific relationships.

This point connects “The Old System” with a wider critical interest in performance and the instability of identity within postwar American literature. In Bellow's narrative architecture, characters often become intelligible primarily through the performative roles they occupy in relation to others. Authority is actively demonstrated through social interaction rather than static social status. For instance, Tina's identity becomes most visible when someone attempts to disregard her judgment. Her resistance to Isaac also demonstrates that tradition need not automatically be associated with female subordination. Instead, inherited values are weaponized as a source of cultural depth and personal leverage against secular, capitalist assimilation. She does not need to reject the past in order to act independently and assert matriarchal authority within the present.

The result is an unusually complex representation of cultural conservatism. Tina may resist modernity, but her resistance itself requires initiative, confidence, and intellectual engagement. Bellow thereby separates cultural traditionalism from personal passivity.

5. Sorella Fonstein and the Ethics of Intervention

Sorella Fonstein represents another stage in Bellow's treatment of female authority. In “The Bellarosa Connection”, she is intellectually capable, physically striking, decisive, and deeply concerned with her husband's desire to meet Billy Rose. Her actions move the plot forward.

The study identifies Sorella as a woman who refuses passive femininity and acts decisively on behalf of Harry. Still, her implication exceeds the category of the “strong woman.” She is important because her strength is directed toward recognition and ethical obligation.

Harry's desire to thank Billy Rose is rooted in his survival of Nazi persecution. Rose helped him escape the death camps, and Harry wants to express gratitude. Rose, however, refuses the encounter. Harry's difficulty lies partly in his inability to convert gratitude into a demand. Sorella intervenes. Her investigation of Rose and her attempts to secure a meeting demonstrate practical intelligence. She researches, gathers information, and acts. She does not wait for Harry to solve the problem through conventional masculine persistence.

This arrangement reverses an expected gendered distribution of initiative. Harry carries the historical experience; Sorella converts that experience into action. The distinction is crucial. Sorella does not simply dominate Harry. The study specifically observes that she recognizes his value and supports him without seeking to control him. Her intervention is relational rather than possessive. This is where care and authority converge. Bellow does not present care as passive sympathy. Sorella's care requires investigation, confrontation, planning, and persistence. The ethical impulse becomes active.

A performance-centric framework is particularly vital for decoding “The Bellarosa Connection.” Critical scholarship regarding the novella's dramatic structure frequently evaluates Sorella Fonstein as a character who actively rejects passive victimhood, transforming herself into an agent of judgment, cultural memory, and moral force (Weatherford 1992, 204–219). Rather than remaining a passive observer of historical atrocities or an isolated figure in her husband's history, she acts as a dramatic mediator who interprets events and seeks to teach others how they should be understood. Under this lens, theatrical tropes clarify her progression from an alienated witness to an affective participant who leverages personal agency to demand recognition and historical accountability.

Her intervention thus possesses a pedagogical dimension. She wants Harry's experience to be recognized. She seeks to create a situation in which Rose must confront the human meaning of his earlier action. This is different from conventional notions of feminine influence. Sorella does not manipulate Harry into becoming more masculine. She does not require him to imitate aggressive behavior. She accepts his temperament and acts within the circumstances available to them. Her role hence complicates the concept of female empowerment itself. She is powerful because

she acts, but her action is not an end in itself. It is connected to memory, gratitude, marriage, and moral recognition.

6. Harry Fonstein and the Limits of Masculine Assertion

Harry's characterization provides an essential counterpoint to Sorella. Without him, the novella might appear to offer a relatively straightforward representation of female strength. Harry makes the gender question more difficult. Harry is a Holocaust survivor whose relationship with Billy Rose is shaped by gratitude. His desire to meet Rose is emotionally intense, but he does not force the encounter. When Rose refuses him, Harry retreats.

From one perspective, this behavior may appear passive. Conventional masculinity often associates male dignity with persistence, confrontation, and the capacity to secure recognition. Harry does not conform to that model. The study interprets his conduct as a form of passivity that contrasts with conventional masculine aggressiveness. A more historically sensitive reading, however, complicates the label.

Harry has survived a system built upon extreme dehumanization. His relationship to power cannot be separated from this history. His refusal to compel Rose may reflect vulnerability, gratitude, exhaustion, ethical restraint, or an unwillingness to transform a personal debt into a demand. His conduct is therefore meaningful precisely because it cannot be explained through a single gender category. Harry's silence also contrasts with Sorella's speech and activity. She gathers information and develops strategies; he carries memory. She confronts the present; he remains attached to the past. The division is not simply masculine versus feminine. It is also action versus recollection, intervention versus experience, and external agency versus internal memory.

The novella's achievement lies in refusing to treat one position as automatically superior. Sorella's activity is necessary because Harry cannot achieve the meeting himself. Harry's vulnerability is meaningful because it gives the encounter its ethical depth. This is consistent with Bellow's larger concern with characters whose apparent weakness conceals another form of import. Established critical frameworks frequently examine how Bellow's characters are caught in a precarious balance between acting and being acted upon, emphasizing the inherent instability of their roles and the interpretive struggles that accompany them (Kiernan 1989, 88–94).

Harry's masculinity cannot be measured by his ability to dominate the situation. His historical experience has produced a different relationship to authority. He wants recognition from the man who saved him, but he refuses to demand it at any cost. This refusal is especially significant because it places moral value outside the conventional vocabulary of masculine achievement. Harry's dignity does not depend upon winning.

Sorella's actions then become an extension of his moral position. She does what he cannot do, but she does not erase his experience. Her strength protects his capacity to remain himself. The relationship between the two becomes a model of complementary agency. Bellow does not simply exchange male and female roles. He distributes different kinds of agency across the couple.

7. When Authority Changes Hands

A comparative reading of the three works reveals that Bellow repeatedly separates authority from gender. The relevant question

is less “Who is masculine?” than “Who controls the situation, and through what means?” In “Leaving the Yellow House,” India possesses material and social authority, while Hattie gradually develops interpretive authority. In “The Old System,” Tina exercises familial and cultural authority against Isaac's economic power. In “The Bellarosa Connection”, Sorella possesses practical and rhetorical initiative, while Harry retains the moral meaning of the historical experience that motivates the plot.

The movement can be represented as follows:

Text	Primary source of authority	Countervailing form of authority
“Leaving the Yellow House”	Property, wealth, social status	Memory and narrative control
“The Old System”	Economic power and modernity	Kinship, language, cultural memory
"The Bellarosa Connection"	Social access and institutional power	Ethical action, historical memory, relational care

This distribution demonstrates why the phrase “gender reversal” is insufficient. Bellow is not simply making women behave like men and men behave like women. He is transferring qualities associated with authority from one character to another and then examining what happens when those qualities operate in different contexts.

Hattie begins from dependency but acquires interpretive authority. Tina's strength emerges through cultural continuity. Sorella transforms care into intervention. Harry demonstrates that limitation can coexist with dignity.

The three narratives consequently complicate the assumption that authority must be visible. India's power is highly visible despite her absence. Hattie's power is initially invisible because it operates through consciousness and narration. Tina's authority is embedded in family relations. Sorella's power becomes visible through action. Harry's meaning lies partly in what he refuses to do. These distinctions also illuminate the relationship between gender and performance. A character may appear powerful because of the role assigned by society, but the narrative can subsequently reveal the limits of that role. Conversely, a socially subordinate character may possess forms of authority that are initially overlooked.

This pattern corresponds closely to a broader critical understanding of performance and identity negotiation within postwar fiction. Critical frameworks frequently describe Bellow's characters as figures who move through changing roles, situations, and rhetorical strategies rather than possessing a single, fixed identity (Kiernan 1989, 101–105). This concept is particularly valuable here because gender itself operates as one of the primary interpretative roles through which characters are evaluated. Nevertheless, the stories also demonstrate that performance does not equate to superficiality. These characters do not simply pretend to embody masculine or feminine archetypes; rather, their daily conduct and performative choices emerge organically from rigid economic circumstances, deep cultural histories, emotional needs, and complex interpersonal obligations (International Journal of Organizational Relevance 2025, 21–24).

The theatrical metaphor needs to be expanded. Characters do not merely perform gender; they discover themselves through the

consequences of performing, resisting, or being assigned particular roles.

8. From Gender Roles to Relational Selfhood

The strongest connection among the three works lies in their treatment of selfhood as relational. None of the principal characters exists independently of others. Hattie's identity is shaped by India. Tina's authority develops through conflict with Isaac and through her relationship to family tradition. Sorella's agency emerges through Harry. Harry's moral position exists because of his relationship with Billy Rose and his desire to acknowledge what Rose did for him.

This relational structure means that gender cannot be understood as a private possession. Masculinity and femininity acquire meaning through interaction. A woman may be described as authoritative because another character experiences her authority as threatening. A man may appear passive because another person assumes responsibility for action. A character's gendered position depends partly upon the social field surrounding that character.

This point also explains why the selected stories remain resistant to simple ideological classification. Bellow does not present a uniform feminist program, nor does he simply reinforce conventional gender hierarchy. Instead, his narratives repeatedly produce situations in which inherited assumptions become unstable. The study already identifies this instability by noting that Bellow's characters combine characteristics traditionally divided between masculinity and femininity. The present analysis extends that observation by arguing that these combinations are structurally important. They determine how stories distribute action, interpretation, and moral responsibility.

The distinction matters because a character can possess a trait associated with masculinity without becoming "masculine" in every respect. Tina is assertive but culturally traditional. Sorella is decisive but motivated by care. Hattie becomes narratively authoritative without acquiring institutional power. Harry is restrained without losing moral significance.

These combinations resist categorical thinking. They also correspond with Bellow's broader interest in the instability of identity. His Jewish-American characters frequently negotiate competing cultural expectations, and gender participates in this process. The self emerges at the intersection of family, culture, history, and individual desire.

Critical frameworks in postwar literary studies have repeatedly approached this intersection through the lens of performance and social drama. Analyses of Bellow's narrative architecture demonstrate how characters construct social encounters through explicitly theatrical structures, spectatorship, and internal monologue, using rhetorical strategies as a means of navigating the tension between assigned identity and lived reality (Cronin 2000, 14–22). The short fiction considered here can be read within that larger framework. Gender operates as one of the principal scripts through which characters are understood, but the narrative repeatedly exposes systemic discrepancies between the rigid script and the fluctuating desires of the individual.

9. Cultural Memory and the Gendered Distribution of Voice

Another connection among the three works is the relationship between gender and memory. Hattie remembers India. Tina protects family memory through language and the ring. Harry carries the memory of survival and gratitude. Sorella attempts to prevent that memory from disappearing into silence. Memory, hence, becomes one of the principal means through which authority is preserved or transferred.

India's physical absence demonstrates that authority can survive after the individual has disappeared. Her memory continues to govern Hattie's consciousness. Yet memory also gives Hattie an opportunity to reinterpret the relationship.

Tina's memory is communal. She does not preserve a private past alone; she protects a cultural inheritance. Her use of Yiddish and attachment to family objects create continuity between generations. Harry's memory is historical and traumatic. His desire to thank Rose emerges from an experience that cannot be reduced to an ordinary interpersonal debt. Sorella's intervention seeks to give that memory public acknowledgment. These different forms of memory reveal why gender in Bellow cannot be detached from history. Characters inherit roles as they inherit stories. The effort to redefine oneself thus requires negotiating the past.

This is particularly important for female characters because memory can become an alternative source of authority. Hattie does not own India's social world, but she owns her recollection of it. Tina may not control the family's economic future, but she claims authority over its cultural inheritance. Sorella may not possess the historical experience that motivates Harry, but she becomes its active interpreter. The distribution of memory thus produces a distribution of power.

10. The Significance of Vulnerability

Vulnerability provides another conceptual link among the three narratives. Hattie's injured body makes vulnerability visible. Harry's history makes it historical. Tina's emotional investment in family exposes a form of vulnerability beneath her forcefulness. Sorella's commitment to Harry means that her intervention also involves emotional risk. Vulnerability cannot be treated as the opposite of power.

This point is especially important in relation to Hattie and Harry. Both characters occupy positions that might conventionally be described as weak. Hattie depends on others materially; Harry cannot secure the meeting he desires. Nevertheless, both possess forms of worth that are not measured through dominance.

Critical perspectives place power and vulnerability in direct relation, supporting an interpretation in which vulnerability can become part of the process through which authority is reorganized (Cronin 2000, 45–51; see also Assadi 2026, 59–76). The same principle can be extended to "The Bellarosa Connection." Harry's vulnerability is inseparable from his moral position. His gratitude has value because it emerges from a life in which survival depended upon another person's intervention. His refusal to force Rose may be frustrating, but it also preserves the emotional authenticity of his desire. Sorella's action then becomes meaningful because it protects a vulnerable claim without converting it into domination. Bellow thus constructs an alternative relationship between strength and vulnerability. Strength does not necessarily require emotional hardness. Vulnerability does not necessarily produce insignificance.

11. Bellow's Short Fiction and the Instability of the Gendered Self

The comparison of the three narratives finally reveals that Bellow's characters occupy shifting positions rather than fixed gender identities. India embodies authority without present physical presence. Hattie develops authority through narration. Tina combines forcefulness with traditional cultural commitment. Sorella joins intellectual independence to care. Harry combines masculine identity with restraint, gratitude, and historical vulnerability. The resulting pattern is not a progression from traditional gender roles toward complete liberation. Such a model would impose a linear historical narrative upon texts that are more ambiguous. The differences among the works are better understood as changes in the location of authority.

In "Leaving the Yellow House," authority moves from property and social status toward narrative interpretation. In "The Old System," authority is contested between economic modernity and cultural continuity. And in "The Bellarosa Connection", authority becomes relational and ethical, distributed between Sorella's action and Harry's memory.

This progression does not mean that Bellow's later work simply rejects earlier assumptions. Instead, the narratives increasingly demonstrate how difficult it is to assign authority according to gender alone. The stories also challenge the assumption that female empowerment must be represented through rejection of tradition. Tina's case makes that particularly clear. Her strength is inseparable from her attachment to a cultural inheritance. Sorella's case adds another dimension: female agency can take the form of care without becoming passive. Hattie provides yet another possibility. Her authority develops through storytelling itself. Harry then complicates the male side of the equation by demonstrating that control can possess moral connotation. The four characters therefore create a spectrum of conduct that crosses conventional gender boundaries without erasing gender altogether.

12. Conclusion: Authority beyond the Binary

"Leaving the Yellow House," "The Old System," and "The Bellarosa Connection" demonstrate the difficulty of reducing Saul Bellow's treatment of gender to a simple opposition between masculine and feminine behavior. His characters inhabit gendered expectations, but they also modify them through memory, action, cultural affiliation, vulnerability, and interpersonal responsibility.

Hattie Waggoner begins from a position of dependence but gradually acquires interpretive authority. Her transformation is achieved through memory and narrative form. India's power remains significant, but the story ultimately allows Hattie to determine how that power will be remembered. Tina exercises authority through family and cultural continuity. Her attachment to Yiddish and the family ring demonstrates that tradition can itself become a source of female power. Her conflict with Isaac is consequently a contest over competing systems of value. Sorella Fonstein demonstrates another form of authority. Her intervention on Harry's behalf combines intelligence, persistence, care, and moral judgment. She does not need to dominate her husband in order to act decisively. Her strength is relational. Harry Fonstein complicates conventional masculinity through restraint and vulnerability. His historical experience makes his behavior

inseparable from memory and gratitude. His refusal to force recognition does not eliminate his dignity. These characters demonstrate why Bellow's gender representations deserve analysis beyond the terminology of "strong women" and "weak men." The narratives repeatedly separate authority from biological sex and attach it to particular forms of conduct. Property, cultural knowledge, narrative control, moral intervention, and historical memory become alternative sources of influence.

Bellow scholarship has repeatedly connected his fiction with acting, rhetoric, role-playing, interpretation, and struggles over authority. Studies of "Leaving the Yellow House" have approached Hattie from different perspectives, including gender, power, aging, vulnerability, memory, and her relationship with India. Michael Austin's discussion of Hattie and India examines the ways Bellow complicates traditionally defined masculine and feminine roles and constructs a complex relationship of power between the two women (Austin 2013, 57–66). Earlier criticism by Constance Rooke addresses the gendered limitations surrounding Hattie's intellectual and social position (Rooke 1977, 184–187), while Noriko M. Lippit considers Hattie's confrontation with death and her movement toward a form of recovery (Lippit 1975, 281–283). More recent scholarship has extended these discussions to questions of aging and vulnerability. Within this critical context, contemporary analyses examine how narrative control and rhetorical agency operate as defense mechanisms against social isolation, specifically tracing how the relationship between structural power and deep personal vulnerability shifts through Hattie's internal monologues (Cong 2024, 4–8). These approaches provide a useful foundation for examining how Bellow constructs gendered identities through performance, interpretation, memory, and shifting relations of authority.

Seen from this perspective, gender is one of the forms through which Bellow explores the unstable relationship between role and self. His characters inherit expectations, perform identities, resist classifications, and interpret one another. Their significance lies in the tension between the positions assigned to them and the actions through which they reshape those positions. The three narratives do not offer a simple reversal of the traditional hierarchy. They produce something more complicated: a literary world in which authority can be exercised by women, vulnerability can characterize men, tradition can support female independence, and care can become a form of action. Gender remains present, but its meaning is generated through relationships. Bellow's achievement in these works lies in making that instability narratively productive. His characters become most revealing at the point where the expected role no longer completely explains the person who occupies it.

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