

## Reimagining the Fictional Spinster: A Critical Reading of Barbara

### *Pym's Some Tame Gazelle*

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#### **Abstract**

In fiction, spinsters have always remained at the periphery of the narrative framework. Their presence in central and engaging roles has been marked by an invisibility. Even as secondary figures, their characterisation has been reduced to a set of demeaning stereotypes. A range of negative traits like lonely and miserable, frumpy and frustrated, manipulative and scheming have accompanied them. The fiction of 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist Barbara Pym is remarkable for bringing these sidelined characters to the narrative forefront and delving deep into the unexplored realms of their lived realities. The present paper seeks to examine the representation of the spinster in the novels of Barbara Pym with reference to her maiden novel *Some Tame Gazelle* published in 1950. The narrative plot remains focussed on the lives of the Bede sisters-Harriet and Belinda and the course of their humdrum lives. Within this framework, the paper examines how the characters negotiate the multiple issues of love and marriage, heartbreaks and acceptance, social engagement and inner conflicts, body image consciousness etc. Through a textual analysis of the narrative plot, driven by microscopic investigation of their lives, the paper tries to understand whether Pym reinforces, subverts or reinvents stereotypes attached to the conventional depiction of

spinsters. In the ultimate analysis, it transpires that contrary to societal perception, the lives of the spinster have its own worth and rewards.

**Keywords:** Spinster, Loneliness, Subversion, Romance, Fulfilment

In the more recent times, an academic interest in spinster centric fiction is gaining traction. Coming against the backdrop of a paucity of research in this area, a new found interest in the lives of the single woman is gradually making its presence felt. In this context, the fiction of Barbara Pym, considered the twentieth century counterpart to Jane Austen has fueled a lot of curiosity by virtue of its exclusive focus on the spinster woman. A novelist whose entire corpus of work revolves around the unattached woman, Barbara Pym's novels foreground the exclusivity and the particularity of the spinsters' lived realities. This marks a decisive break from conventional treatment of the spinster women. In the romance driven plots that predominate Victorian fiction, the young heroines cannot be technically called 'single' because the narrative ultimately culminates in their marriage. In the pre twentieth century fiction, single women have found themselves languishing in the fringes of the narrative plot. The single, unattached woman past her marriageable age stigmatized as the 'Spinster' is conspicuous by her absence. Apart from an occasional Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* or Miss Bates in *Emma*, the spinster woman is barely remembered. Dismissed as the 'unnecessary' female, the 'surplus' or 'redundant woman', the literary apathy in centralizing their experiences is too obvious to be ignored. Such an indifference is poignantly articulated by Letty in Barbara Pym's yet another spinster centric fiction *Quartet in Autumn*. Foregrounding this literary exclusion, Pym remarks on Letty's behalf:

"She had always been the unashamed reader of novels, but if she hoped to find one which reflected her own sort of life, she had come to realise that the position of an

unmarried, unattached ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction” (7)

In her study of spinsterhood, **Naomi Rosenthal** follows the historical evolution of the term ‘spinster’. Originally denoting a person who spins, the term went on to refer to women ‘still unmarried,’ no matter what their age or eventual marital intentions” (10). In the eighteenth century the term “spinster” became synonymous with “old maid” who “was not only an ‘unmarried’ woman, but also one ‘beyond the usual age for marriage,’ and the term . . . was used in such a way as to connote the sometimes foolish ‘habits characteristic of such a condition’” (Rosenthal 10). Subsequently, the term acquired pejorative connotations to refer to “middle-aged, eccentric, ill-natured, selfish or even evil” figures who were resented by others (**Chang 47**). Derogatory stereotypes of “comic, grotesque, ugly, dull [women], or . . . alienated misfit[s]” have invariably accompanied their characterisation while their “failure to achieve a relationship with a man” (47) has been subjected to harsh criticism. “Spinsterhood condemned one to a lifetime of peripheral existence: it was a function-less role played out at the margins of other people's lives without even that minimal *raison d' etre* the possibility of bearing children which was supposed to comfort and sustain the married woman.” (**Slater 84**)

Against such a dismal scenario, the fiction of Barbara Pym is refreshing for its unconventional take on the spinsters. In most of her eleven published novels, Pym's main character is in the position of the unmarried, unattached, ageing woman and it is this character's condition, thoughts, desires, and emotions that interest the author. Starting from *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women*, *Jane and Prudence* to *Quartet in Autumn*, the Pymian universe is populated by the single women. Such an obsession for the spinster as the prime movers in the narrative framework comes from Pym's own singular status. Pym herself never married even though she had multiple affairs. Hence, her delineation of her

fictional siblings comes from the vantage point of her own lived realities. Existing as her alter ego or surrogate, these women articulate the myriad shades of spinsterhood, previous writers have chosen to ignore.

The main intent of this paper is to critically examine the representation of the spinster in Barbara Pym's maiden novel *Some Tame Gazelle*. Published in 1950, the novel follows the lives of the Bede sisters-Harriet and Belinda. In their fifties, neither attached nor married, living in the London suburbs, the Bede sisters live by themselves with a maid, Emily. In the typical Pym-ian fashion, the novel moves at a languid pace lingering upon the uneventful lives of its characters. The Bede sisters are church workers with a close network of friends and neighbours including the Hoccleve couple -Henry and Agatha Hoccleve; Count Ricardo, Lady Aspinall, Edith Liversidge, just to name a few. The one-sided love and crushes, heartbreaks and alliances, surprise engagements and marriages constitute the thematic plank. Both the sisters are diametrically opposed to each other in their temperament and disposition. While Harriet is more flamboyant, vivacious and lively, Belinda is sober, sedate and mature. By positioning the spotlight on the lives of these two sisters, Barbara Pym demonstrates how the spinster siblings confront and respond to multiple issues of marriage, womanhood, love and loss, acceptance and reconciliation. Barbara Pym while not ditching existing stereotypes altogether also incorporates fresh perspectives in the depiction of these two women.

In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym engages in a deliberate subversion of the traditional marriage driven romance plot. "Pym contrasts her characters and their lives with those which have been presented in literature to mock the idealised view of the romantic paradigm and to emphasise that her tales present the truth of the matter"**(Brothers 62)**. The narrative deliberately avoids closing the proceedings on the marital note. It is the silent unrequited love, mild flirtations, jilted lovers and suitors that hold the narrative together. In yet another

departure from convention, Pym interchanges the gender roles that characterize a typical romance driven plot. It is the heroine who plays the dominant role and initiates the romantic proceedings. This is in stark contrast to the nineteenth century fiction where it is the hero who woos the heroine. For instance, Jane Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* maintains a feminine restraint and composure in responding to the romantic overtures of Mr. Bingley. In fact, it is her modesty and coyness that delays the onset of the relationship. However, with *Some Tame Gazelle*, Barbara Pym reverses this trend to cast the heroine as the pursuer and hero as the pursued. The gender performances are deliberately altered to represent the fifty something Harriet Bede frantically pursuing young curates for their attention leading Belinda Bede to remark that her sister Harriet is "especially given to cherishing young clergymen" (7). Frequently hosting every other curate who lands up in the parish for dinner, pampering and indulging them with various savouries or personally ferrying the goodies to their bachelor quarters, engaging in flirtatious conversation, the coquettish Harriet leaves no stone unturned to win them over. Reacting to her sister's obsession for the young curate, her sister Belinda humorously remarks "How many curates would starve and die were it not for the Harriets of this world." Harriet's aggressive pursuit of the unmarried curates in the faint hope of kindling their romantic interest is comic and pitiful at the same time.

Intergenerational romance appears as a recurring motif in the novels of Barbara Pym. In this respect, *Some Tame Gazelle* too is no exception. Here again, Barbara Pym flouts the romantic conventions by making the much younger male protagonist the object of an older woman's love interest. Since the day the young curate arrives at the parish, Harriet's excitement is palpable. The dinner invitation is immediately dispatched and readily accepted by Edgar Donne. Dressed in her flowered voile, Harriet comes down to greet the curate unable to contain her girlish excitement. Though almost half her age at twenty-three, Edgar Donne is the object of Harriet's romantic fantasy. In her later novel, *Quartet in Autumn*,

Marjorie's inter-generational romance with a young priest comes to a halt when he chooses to marry a younger and attractive lady. Harriet's infatuation for the young curate also runs the same course when she receives the news of his sudden engagement with Olivia Berridge, an attractive lady ideally suited to his age. This pursuit of older middle-aged women for young and attractive bachelors serves as cautionary tales against the perils of inter-generational romance in which women and not men are on the wrong side of age. As an older woman seeking a younger lover, Harriet's similarities with the 'cougar' woman known for her capacity to 'flirt, flourish and fornicate into [her] fifties and beyond' (**Salisbury 3**) is **all too apparent**. No doubt, such a desire on her part runs the risk of being labeled dissident and is ridiculed. To these women who are at the risk of censure and ridicule, what feminist **Germaine Greer** says strikes an optimistic and consolatory note. 'To be unwanted is to be free'(67) she says. Calling women and spinsters, for that matter, to reject heterosexual romance and celebrate the opportunities presented by old age, not least the formation of stronger bonds with fellow women, Greer adds a different dimension to the lives of the ageing spinsters. Harriet also reconciles to the painful episode of her sexual rejection without making a fuss of it. This is the endearing aspect of Pym's spinster women. They are able to take rejections and failures in their stride and move on. Rather than wallowing in self-pity, Pym-ian women chose to look forward with renewed hope and enthusiasm. Their disappointments are fleeting. No sooner than she suffers the heartbreak, she is all agog to welcome the new curate in town and explore her romantic prospects with him instead.

Even while Pym deals with spinsterhood in her fiction, she refrains from presenting them as miserable and unfortunate women. They might have missed out on marriage and motherhood, but the narrative intention is not to focus on the sense of loss, regret or disappointment. True, they are reminded of their 'difference' and 'deprivation,' but these moments of self-pity are few and fleeting. Clearly, Pym does not want to sentimentalize

their condition. Neither does she depict them as woeful figures or martyrs. Far from being redundant or useless, the spinsters in Pym's world lead active and productive lives engaging in community activities like teaching or church services. As in Austen's universe, their preoccupation with social visits, hosting dinners, attending garden parties and harvest festivals, church sermons etc keep them invested. Though trivial or insignificant they might seem, these mundane affairs lend a sense of meaning, order and coherence to their lives. Die-hard romantics at heart, their hidden romantic fantasies for the men in the novel suffice to keep them romantically invested and add spice to their lives. It does not matter that their love is never expressed nor reciprocated. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Belinda has loved none but the Archdeacon for thirty long years. **Keener** puts it this way: '[t]he bubble of secret desire in an inhibited woman's heart is the central impulse [of *Some Tame Gazelle*] .... (93). That the Archdeacon has not the slightest inkling of her feelings hardly concerns her. Her unwavering love and devotion for the Archdeacon gives her a sense of emotional fullness and wholeness that needs no recompense. By foregrounding Belinda's one-sided love for the Archdeacon as romantic and passionate, Pym debunks the myth of marriage as the source of ultimate happiness. By drawing attention to the lackluster marital relationship of the Hoccleve couple, Pym seems to suggest that marriage, more often than not, is a loveless trap rather than a source of pure joy. The marital relationship of the only married couple in the novel is placed under investigative spotlight and found wanting in romance and passion. In the few interactions that they have in the novel, they come across as dissatisfied, unhappy and tired of each other. The Archdeacon is presented as peevish, pompous and irritable while his wife looks forever frustrated. The incompatibility of the Hoccleve couple is talk of the town. Being a spinster herself by choice, no wonder, Pym was highly critical of marriage. The fact that the Archdeacon does not bother to accompany his wife to Karlsbad where she goes to cure her rheumatism also hints at the lack of concern and affection. The quibbling

and complaining couple seem to be at loggerheads over trifling issues. As if that were not enough, Henry Hoccleve's wife Agatha nurses a secret admiration for the new curate. Viewed against their jaded marital life, Belinda's yearning for the Archdeacon appears far more emotionally fulfilling. Belinda's draws emotional sustenance and joy from her passionate yet unrequited love for the Archdeacon. It makes her feel whole despite the overwhelming loneliness of her life. As **Jane Nardin** writes, "Paradoxically, then, it is by not marrying that one keeps passion alive in *Some Tame Gazelle*" (68).

Belinda having loved the Archdeacon when she was twenty and not having anyone to replace him since, had naturally got into the habit of loving him, though with the years her passion had mellowed into the cosiness of a winter evening by the fire than the uncertain rapture of a Spring morning (17)

Comparing the predicament of Agatha and Belinda, Pym seems to suggest that emotional or romantic deprivation is not exclusive to the lives of the unattached woman since even woman in marriage too experience it. To quote Belinda, Spinsters or not, what matters is something to love

Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove:

Something to love, oh, something to

Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove:

Something to love, oh, something to

In her diary, Pym repeatedly expressed the suffering and frustration caused by her unrequited love for men, such as Henry Harvey, Gordon Glover, and Richard Roberts. Like Alfred Tennyson, Pym and her major women characters believe that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all (STG 213).

In *Some Tame Gazelle*, the life of the Bede sisters challenges the discourse of the lonely and frustrated spinsters that has characterised conventional characterisations. Even

some of Pym's spinster heroines like Letty or Marcia in *Quartet in Autumn* recreate this stereotype. However, with *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym dumps this hackneyed construction to create unmarried and unattached ageing women who are capable of leading content lives far removed from the ennui, frustration or oppressive boredom that is believed to be central to the spinster's existence. Harriet Bede is the elegant and plump spinster who keeps herself busy with hosting dinners for young eligible bachelors, making and ferrying homemade cakes, hams and jellies to their quarters, attending church services and garden parties to meet and greet. Her zest and energy for life sharply contrasts with that of Letty and Marcia in *Quartet in Autumn* who inhabit a world of shrieking nothingness and sterility. On the other hand, Belinda's profound yet unrequited love for the Archdeacon is enough to make her feel alive and emotionally fulfilled. With all these external busyness, a lurking sense of loneliness may still haunt the sisters. But nowhere in the text is the feeling voiced or made palpable. Pym tries to deliberately overlook this uncomfortable aspect of a spinster's life to strip spinsterhood of its horrors and present it as phase not be dreaded but embraced. Rather than going into social withdrawal and self-imposed exile, spinster women in *Some Tame Gazelle* are presented as leading socially active and vibrant lives.

The Pym-ian heroines are spinsters by choice not circumstances. Despite receiving multiple marriage proposals, they prefer to remain single as a matter of choice and self-assertion. In a patriarchal society, the identity of a woman is inextricably linked with marriage and motherhood, "Familistic ideologies positively support constructions of womanhood as married and mother, a context in which singlehood and the opposition between woman identity and single identity are problematic. In the absence of positive and powerful counternarratives, singlehood is disparaged and stigmatized, constraining the identity possibilities for all women" (Byrne 16). Against this scenario, the spinster's decision not to marry can be seen as a resistance to patriarchal order. In their fifties and ageing, the

Bede sisters have comfortably settled down to their singlehood. True, they do experience and acutely feel the lack of romance and passion in their lives, yet they are not in a tearing hurry to get married. They remain unmarried not because of individual shortcomings but because they haven't found the one "who could be all things to the heart." Both sisters would rather wait than rush into a loveless marriage. There is no dearth of suitors for the sassy and spunky Harriet. Count Ricardo Bianco has been her steadfast and ardent admirer for quite long. However, his countless marriage proposals to Harriet have been met with a firm rejection. Similarly, Nicholas Mold, the Deputy Librarian's proposal to Harriet barely two to three days into knowing her is also refused. It is the young curate Edgar Donne who excites her romantic fantasy and she would settle for none but him even though it involves an uncertain and inordinate wait. Her sister, Belinda also finds herself in a similar predicament. Her one-sided and unyielding love of thirty-five years for the much-married Henry Hoccleve is her source of romantic fulfilment. Therefore, the Bishop's proposal is understandably spurned. The decision to let go the opportunities to marry is the outcome of their individual choice and will. Yet their choice is not between marrying or not marrying but whether to marry a particular man. Further, their rejection of the aforesaid proposals despite its lucrative social and economic dividends underscores the high value they place on love as the sole determinant of an ideal marriage. As **Janet Fink and Katherine Holden** write, the figure of the spinster "challenge[s] the institution of marriage and the emotional, sexual and financial dependency assigned to the roles of wife and mother by the marriage contract" (233)

Pym's spinsters are respectable women who exhibit high moral standards and discipline. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, the otherwise timid and unassertive Belinda Bede stands out because of her moral strength and ethical control. For thirty long years, Belinda has steadfastly loved none but the Archdeacon. Ironically, the much-married Archdeacon is unaware of Belinda's feelings. On her part, Belinda exercises extreme care and caution to

guard her behaviour lest she gives it away. Torn between her love and its futility, Belinda is content to love him from afar. Her unspoken and silent adoration of the Archdeacon shows her high regard for the sanctity of the institution of marriage. Therefore, she never oversteps her moral boundaries to warm up to the Archdeacon despite many missed opportunities. In this context, Foucault observations about disciplinary power sounds justified. Sharing his thoughts on disciplinary power, Foucault goes on to say that individuals engage in a constant policing and surveillance of their individual behaviour to fit societal norms in order to avoid scrutiny and censure. Belinda's cautious approach is also influenced by similar concerns. Fearing that her over indulgent behaviour or concern for the Archdeacon might jeopardise his married life apart from fuelling unwanted gossip, Belinda is sensible enough to draw the line and interact with him from a safe distance. The very thought of being relieved when Agatha goes on a vacation without her husband- the Archdeacon fills Belinda with momentary pleasure. But the very next moment she chides herself for thinking so:

Belinda went downstairs, humming God moves in a mysterious way, and telling herself that it was not right that she should feel relieved because Agatha was going away.

Thus, the very sense what is right and wrong, ethical or unethical, socially acceptable or unacceptable is deeply ingrained in Belinda's moral psyche and governs her decisions and actions.

Pym further describes how the ageing spinsters exhibit a body image consciousness. As an ageing spinster, Harriet's sartorial choices are unconventional. Harriet, for instance, has a fetish for high heels, python skin shoes and corsets. Further, her choice of bold colours and vibrant floral prints over subtle shades and sober prints defies the ageist assumptions. Harriet's fashion choices are guided by her desire to retain a youthful appearance and appear sexually alluring. It stems from a need to camouflage the visible impact of ageing on her face

and body through the use of a carefully crafted youthful exterior. She resorts to these age concealment techniques, because “Older women’s bodies are more likely to be perceived as deformed, ridiculous looking, and desexualized” (Silver 385). Since men look and women appear, Harriet tries to enhance her ‘looked at ness’ and cater to this male gaze by objectifying herself. In following fashion, a willing self-objectification is a necessary component, as **Karen Hanson** has noted: “A personal interest in dress and open responsiveness to the changing whims of fashion depend upon a recognition that one is seen, that one is—among other things—an object of others' sight, others' cognition” (70). In this context, **Woodward** states, ‘both men and women “put on” youth so as not to be classified as old’ (159). Further, **David Sudnow’s** concept of social death denotes the single women’s diminishing market value, through which they cease to be worthy sexual subjects and in turn gradually lose their value in the dating marketplace. The experiences of invisibility described by these single women also resonate with **Goffman’s** definition of “non-persons.” Goffman viewed non-persons to be “a standard category of people that are sometimes treated in social interactions as if they are not there” (152). Harriet also dons the mask of a youthful appearance to avoid this ageist marginalisation and reclaim her sexual subjecthood.

In the ultimate analysis, Barbara Pym’s novel *Some Tame Gazelle* offers a fresh and unconventional take on the issue of spinsterhood. Conventional plot-lines are subverted and the spinsterhood experience re-evaluated. Negotiating the highs and lows of spinsterhood, the narrative attempts to present it in a far more realistic light than has been attempted in the past. Pym reimagines it as a phase of life that needs to be welcomed, lived and celebrated despite its pains and perils. Her reconceptualization of spinsterhood strips it off its usual dread and horror and makes it an experience worth living.

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