

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

May 2015 Vol. 4. Issue III

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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The Different Contours of Ageing

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Abstract:

Ageing is an inevitable physical condition. However there are so many myths circulating on the process of ageing by translating it from a mere physical condition to mental instability and inefficiency. This is a larger project by the dominant sect to control the older people using art and culture effectively. This essay would demystify such works and also bring into picture out of the box works that distort intergenerational gaps.

Keywords: Ageing, demography, gerontology.

Age or the process of ageing is a phenomenon which goes unnoticed in theory, but incorporates a part of the unconscious of every human being. It starts from the birth of a baby who is one day old to its subsequent birthdays, the attaining of youth and the actions to not reveal one's age, the temptation to know other's age and finally the second childishness. Ageing is an inevitable physical manifestation, which is an important sociological factor. The importance of the process of ageing is bound to substantially increase in the coming years as the current demographic dividend of the most populous China and India will subsequently age. This will lead to a population composition in the shape of an inverted pyramid with a smaller base of youth and a larger percentage of older people. Hence interpreting ageing should be done very meticulously in order to not alienate them by constructing a limited space for the elderly, where they are expected to move about. This restriction slowly gets fostered into a stereotyping of them, finally resulting in a social othering.

Different genres of literature have fostered these gendered stereotyping by representing older characters in that particularly enclosed space. This paper would first outline the relevance of studying ageing. Then it will look into the many social representations of old age carried out in different areas of literature. Furthermore some candid examples of mature characters of old age with all their sophistication are examined promoting an against the grain reading outlook.

From time immemorial, fables about immortality has governed and enamored the world. Alchemists have long pursued in creating the elixir of life and pirates and mariners have gone in search of the fountain of life, but all in vain. However the attraction towards immortality never ceased to exist. All the fairy tales which for children are their first literature, always figure the petite, beautiful princess and the charming prince in the act of courtship. The tales seldom try to place their context in the common households, and even if they do are in a constant journey for upward mobility. Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty thus finally have to end up in the royal palaces. But, what is more outrageous is the conspicuous neglect of old people – both royal and otherwise – in prominent roles. It gives an impression that only the young have exuberant stories to them and the moment they grow old, their lives go stale, with no experiences. In addition to that, the witches who put the princesses in captive are old and ugly and are envious of the youth. This envy results in a pursuit for beauty as seen in the movie *Star Dust*. The three old witches try to abduct a beautiful young girl who is a fallen star to regain their young times.

This kind of portrayal in fairy tales and movies fashion the child to be an ageist. They would detest the phenomenon of growing old. This results in the formation of one dimensional characters as one crosses the hated old age mark. This formation might be voluntary for people who have imbibed already those characteristics. Others would be forcibly asked to align to those characteristics.

One can see this aversion towards ageing not only in fairy tales, but also in the canons of literature. W.B Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium* is an example where this modern poet resorts to occult uses and create the archaic Byzantine tradition where art and creation will be much valued in contrast to the Yeatsian England where young people revel and old people are isolated. He perpetually complained that he was listened to very well by his comrades of Irish revolution during his young days, but things are not the same as before and they fail to see his passion within branding him just as a 'tattered coat upon a stick'. In similar lines, Keats in "Ode to Nightingale" brands the nightingale as 'an artifice of eternity'. It stands for timelessness and is present throughout the passage of time witnessing everything. The reason why these poets are deeply engrossed by the stillness of time is their desire to be eternal like art itself. The artifact stays intact for time immemorial and the artist fades away, but there is an impending desire to etch the artist's name on the artifact.

This way of associating the author's name with one's work did not exist before the sixteenth century. It was the advent of Caxton's printing press, the publishing of Shakespeare's folio and the subsequent 'mechanical reproduction' in Benjamin's words that ignited this. The author or the creator who had failed to achieve immortality now tried to gain that bliss vicariously by the act of naming their work along with one's own name. The id's desire is satiated by superego by this process.

In addition to that, the yearning for perpetual youth can lead to the same 'hysteria' that Julia Kristeva has talked about in another context. In Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", Dorian is unable to even withstand the fact that his picture is ageing though he is still the same. What happens afterwards is the development of pure hysteria which is in contrast to all the dandyism that the book had celebrated till then.

Thus emerges a new area of criticism called literary gerontology which looks into the cultural representation of ageing in literature and extend it to other forms. It critiques the regulatory framework in which older adults are confined to and analyze it from the social to psychoanalytical levels. There are scores of books now thinking against the grain of immortality. The one that caught my attention the most is the "Harry Potter" series. There are a number of instances where J.K Rowling is trying to normalize the process of ageing and asserts that death is an inevitable essentiality. The first instance occurs in the first book of the series "The Sorcerer's Stone" where the stone that makes a person immortal is taken away from the picture and hidden in a locker enhancing the beauty of decay. The series itself is a quintessential example of a fight between mortality and immortality personified in Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort, in which the final victory is reaped by mortality in a classic and ironic way of killing immortality. This killing of immortality is again reinforced metaphorically by destroying the elder wand in "The Deathly Hallows" which makes a human invincible.

When Harry Potter distorts the stereotypes of ageing, it is done at a secondary realm. It can be identified only when the book is turned into a text and subjected to anatomy. There are some other books written especially for children, since they are the primary receivers of this stereotyped notion, to nullify the same. Intergenerational relationships are celebrated in *Grandpa Takes Me to the Moon* written by Timothy Gaffney. It is a pictorial bed time book where grandpa takes his grandchild to the moon and they have lot of fun collecting lunar artifacts. The book

shows how Grandpa is fun loving as well as competent in science. He was an astronaut in the Apollo mission of the USA and being old does not reduce his mettle. This jovial duo belonging to two generations is enough to break all the myths of sedentary old age from the child's mind.

Dear Hope... Love Grandma is another example of merging generations in which the plot revolves around a writing of a series of letters between Hope and her grandmother as a part of a project in Hope's school. The letters get interesting because the grandmother breaks all the barriers of the society to openly discuss about her desires and fears. Moreover these books put in front of us a lot of experiences otherwise forcefully kept away by us.

These books break the strategy outlined by the young people – the myth of a generation gap. It is appalling that generation gap is used to enervate almost one half of human population. The world is currently witnessing a demographic change. The old people are already in a majority in Russia, France, Spain and other countries. The Asian countries including India are witnessing a demographic dividend presently and African countries would have it fifty years from now. But what follows that will be an inverted pyramid with high dependency ratio. The need of the hour is to rephrase this word called dependency ratio by breaking all the boundaries created around the old. Only their self sufficiency can boost even the nations' GDP, speaking in economic terms. Old people generally have this clichéd phrase that they do not feel old though their hair has grayed and their skin has wrinkled. Thus as Ira Raja says, ageing is just a masque which conceals the normal psyche. But it should not be misunderstood that old age is a homogenous entity. It is a larger set which might be further othered on lines of gender, class, race and other social and cultural parameters. Only the judicious breaking down of these stereotypes upon stereotypes can bring them to the mainstream.

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