



LITERARY GERONTOLOGY: A STUDY OF FEMALE AGEING WITH REFERENCE TO THE TEXT FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN BY ANITA DESAI

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Abstract

Man is a social being. He lives in the society and keeps social relationship with his family members, kin, friends and neighbours. Thus each one in the family depends on the other. A wife depends on her husband for livelihood, and children born to the parents require their nurturing for being brought up properly and safely. In return parents expect children to provide old age security. The issue of ageing is raised here to encourage exchange of views and ideas, as ageing in the present scenario has become a mystery, though the old generation are the backbone of society and young are the future hope. The same society which tries to obliterate the differences of age, sex and race has also witnessed the rise of gerontology. The text discussed here presents the outburst and endurance of an elderly woman. The implication is that the physical sensibilities lie second to the emotional sensibilities which weaken and disappoint them intensely, making their existence more pitiable and impossible in a self centred society.

Keywords: Ageing, Literary Gerontology, Social Exclusion, Ageing Narratives, Role overload, Role Isolation, Generation Gap, Identity Crisis.

Introduction: Literature is known for being a mirror of society. We have literature of different centuries, each depicting the characteristics, peculiarities, issues, cultures and problems of a particular age and a particular society. Ageing has been a more interesting phenomenon depicted in literature throughout centuries. Literature has not only glorified the aged but has explored all the problems and issues related to ageing. It illustrated the changing status of aged from the past till the present. Literature signifies place of aged in the family and society and their contribution in the progress of family, society and country. It demonstrates aged as the objects of reverence, respect, and their status as the repositories of acquired wisdom. It also proves how the position of aged has been declined with the advent of industrialization, modernization and urbanization. Literature expresses life in terms of beauty and truth. Different virtues and vices incorporated with human life are highlighted to a large extent in literature. It demonstrates complexities, issues cultural patterns and customs, prevailing in different societies. The injustice, tyranny and impartiality done to human life are



understood through the exploration of different concepts like colonialism, feminism, marginalization and exclusion etc. Among these issues ageing occupies a significant position. Though ageing is a natural part of human life, but the aged are seen much oppressed and considered as the weaker section of society. For several decades ageing emerged as a special discipline which struggles for identity besides race, class, gender and sexuality. Age is also recognized as a variable in the creative process.

Modernization has been the most significant or influential concept which created wide gaps between society and ageing. The conflict between tradition and modernity resulted largely in the changing status of old people in modernizing societies primarily in terms of conflict between the cultural values of western modernity and original tradition. The ultimate result of this conflict is the breakdown of extended family that is joint family so much so that it became the central narrative in Indian Gerontology, as Lawrence Cohen says about Indian social gerontology that, “the sole criterion for assessing the well-being of old people is an important feature of post- independence Indian literature on old age (qtd. in Raja xviii)”. Prior to modernization it is presumed that societies all over the world particularly in India are performing its function of caring for all the members of the family from the cradle to the grave. But later there was a breakdown of family even in the most traditional societies like India. Apart from this the financial independence of youth makes them more self-dependent. So, it can be said that it is the power of money which leads to the degeneration of values more particularly in terms of respecting elderly. Thus these studies of social Gerontology ultimately inspired writers to focus on the issue of ageing and led to the emergence of new field Literary gerontology. Until nineteenth century “aged poor” were not mentioned in literature anywhere. Literature depicted only the privileged aged. Mostly aged women are seen less concerned than the aged men in literature.

Female Ageing in *Fire on the Mountain*: The focus of this paper is on the ageing women. Horace in his poem Epodes considered old women as ugly and as witches. He comments against the loss of physical beauty and treats old women as an object without any identity. Focus here is on the aged alienated self of Nanda Kaul the protagonist of the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Alienation is sharply characterized in the world of Anita Desai. Literature is abundant with individuals who are emotionally physically and spiritually alienated. Focus here is on the aged alienated self of Nanda Kaul the protagonist of the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Alienation is sharply characterized in the world of Anita Desai. Contrary to the



earlier perception that, elderly crave for interdependence, the protagonist of the novel *Fire on the Mountain* seeks for solitude. However if we analyze her solitude, we can find that depression is the root cause of her loneliness. It is the most common functional psychological problem in aged. Gerontology implies that aged individuals are depressed due to biological, social or psychological factors. Elderly appear sad, lonely, guilt-ridden, withdrawn, hostile and compulsive. It is depression which exhibits different signs, like the changes in cognition, motivational signs, physical signs, and in severe cases delusion and hallucination. Cognitive changes characteristic of depression include thoughts of worthlessness and uselessness, irrational guilt feelings, and a belief that world is without any positive thing to offer. Such persons can be called as psychotic as they feel delusional and hallucinate.

The text is analysed by applying the social perspective of Arun P. Bali, a sociologist who states four causes of depression, which leads to role constraints. These are, Role erosion, Role overload, Role isolation and Role conflict. The indifferent behavior of Nanda can be studied by taking into consideration the perspective of role overload. The problem of Role overload is more associated with the aged women. They are always found engaged in carrying out household activities rearing children, supplementing family affairs, kin keeping and giving care to each member of the family. Even at the threshold of old age she has to perform the duty of caring for her grandchildren. Such activities create physical as well as mental stress in aged women. Desai has beautifully described the agonized cry of this old woman who longs for quiet retired life. Her past is described as a “box of sweets” which is positively sickening. Besides this the life-long worthlessness of Mr. Kaul and the hypocritical situations make her an object without identity. Throughout her life, she has discharged her duties as a mother, grandmother and great grandmother. So is not the lack of social activity which makes her a recluse, but the excess of social activities without true love and affection.

The novel “*Fire on the Mountain*” presents the tragic view of life where innocents more particularly the aged suffer and bear heavy pains. The fire becomes an emblem of destruction and an unkind world for woman who tolerates injustice, inequities and clings to misfortune and finally commits suicide. However it is her revolutionary spirit and rejection of the society, which makes her residence or stay possible on the mountains. Her relief is presented as follows: “She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult look that she had read through and was not required to read again” (Desai 38). Her retreat with leisure at Carignano reminds one of Shelley’s “Ode to West Wind”.



Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf
a cloud I fall upon the thorns of life I bleed
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
(Poetry down the ages 52).

It proves a fact that the reconstruction of personal identity of the aged is not possible in a world which is full of futility, and treat woman like household possessions, social ornaments and sexual convenience. Nanda's refusal to conform to the society results in absolute sufferings. As old women are described as an object without identity by Greek writers, Horace in his poem Epodes considered old woman as ugly and as witch. He comments against the loss of physical beauty. Similarly Nanda is described. The colour of the bruised thigh is described as, "The putrid colour of old meat" (qtd. in Pathania 88).

Nanda Kaul's response to the need for self-authenticity, sense of objection, consciousness of her victimhood can be visualised as the most aspiring aspects of old age. Her object is explained in words of Kristava. "The abject would thus be the "object" of primal repression". (qtd. in Uniyal 195). Nanda Kaul looks untouched, cold, and still like the barren trees. Life-long frustration, disapproval and torture make her feel sun lit in the emptiness and futility of her house. "All wanted was to be alone, to have carignano to herself, in this period of life when stillness and calm were all that she wishes to entertain" (qtd. in Gupta 118). Though Anita Desai is a staunch feminist, she throws light in this novel *Fire on the mountain* on different gerontological aspects like mobility of Nanda by describing the stress of role overload, the financial problems of elderly like Ila and the exhausted service of Ram Lal towards mankind. The characters are found carrying the burden of old age and even a child is shown experiencing old age. She demonstrates how aged become recluse out of suffering and faithlessness in family relations. The implicit meaning is that family relations stay with elderly throughout their life, even if they reject them. Though rejection in family relationship is a significant part or aspect of the family, it simply does not come down to non-existing level. Family relationships lead to intense emotional relationships in elderly or it can be said that intensity and continuity are the main characteristics of the family relationships and characterize elderly from all the others. The psychological belief that "...the way a person behaves in old age is consistent with a lifelong behavioural pattern or personality style (Belsky 20)" is evident clearly in this text.



The similar theme of sufferings of aged woman like uselessness, helplessness of elders and the meanness of youth is an important theme, projected in the novel *36 Chowranghee Lane* by Aparna Sen. Where an aged woman Violet, an Anglo- Indian school teacher is depicted, who has never been appreciated for her services and becomes lonely after the marriage of her niece Rose Mary. She craves for love and interpersonal relationships. The silence of her life is thrilled by her former student Nandita who with her boyfriend, makes her life lively and leave her mercilessly after utilizing all her services.

The novel *Fire on the Mountain* presents endurance and an outburst of an elderly woman, if the protagonist is compared with the hero of Hemingway. Santiago than one can draw conclusion that, there is similarity between the sufferings of both older women and men but contradiction is observed in terms of causes like the cause behind the identity crisis of older men is considered to be the loss of economy and detachment from work, and for women it is lack of affection and love from their family members, but the major cause remains the same which bitterly haunts the two sections that is their isolation and negligence them based on age by the society, family or the social networks around them. Both the groups pay little tribute to the materialistic and luxurious aspects of life. The only urge is the want of human affection and bonds of love and care in their life. They want someone to share ideas with, to interact in times of need and deeds, to console emerging problems due to old age or in other words it can be said that they want someone to fill the vacuum of life. The lack of availability of such bonds makes them feel alienated and further it decays the spirit of aged to a large extent. More than diseases it is depression due to stress and strain in the familial bonds or with society which exhibits symptoms of secondary ageing. Physical sensibilities lie second to the emotional sensibility which weaken and disappoint them intensely, making their existence more pitiful and impossible in a self-centred society.

Gerontology asserts that elderly strongly resist the ideas of leaving home as it is a matter of pride, autonomy and control anxiety, but we can see Nanda Kaul going far beyond the human existence and establishing her identity. She is found rebelling for prevailing vices of the society and establishes her own norms. Generally it is believed that older people are physically less able than most other adults to struggle for food and other resources. Elderly cannot travel long distances to where resources are not readily available. They find it difficult to endure even relatively short periods without shelter and accessories. The characters I focus here falsify this theme, she possesses the revolutionary spirit as she has been long oppressed



and her self-esteem is crushed. She searches the ways to leave independently after the long resistance and discrimination. But the writer Anita Desai came to the conclusion that there is no fruitful existence of elderly beyond human existence as Nanda could not succeed even after the seclusion. Further she demonstrates that elderly can achieve dignified identity by being actively engaged in life and also by possessing positive attitude towards ageing. The negative attitude of aged towards life and the disengagement in the lively activities result in bleak ageing which is evident by the characterization of Nanda Kaul.

The study here focuses upon how far the cultural saying "Old is Gold" comes true with the societies which have become very modernistic, mechanical and pay seldom attention to the familial bonds or human bonds. Thus the main intention of Gerontology and Literary Gerontology is to affirm that old age is a frailty not a disability. Therefore people should never consider them as weak, disabled section of Society but should honour them as the treasurers of knowledge, wisdom and experience. As Halls puts in that "There is a certain maturity of judgment about men, things, causes and life generally, that nothing in the world but years can bring, a real wisdom that only age can teach"(Hall 366).

Conclusion: The main intention of literary writers and sociologists is to focus on the issue of ageing, not in terms of extending life endlessly but to ensure livelier longevity for the elderly. The writers have attempted to put forth that birth, sex, race or caste is natural phenomenon as it cannot be chosen. Ageism despite being natural has become the more suppressed and obsessed phenomenon. It is the society and culture which determines certain roles, which becomes more compulsive for the aged.

Thus society and culture systematically stereotype the roles of an old person and discriminate against them. Such discrimination and marginalization is very dominant in society. Yet not condemned though it is as bad as racism, sexism or casteism. Such discrimination and stereotyping leads to identity crisis and elderly are made to lose hope form meaningful life. Chinua Achebe and many writers have proved that black can be beautiful land useful and now the immense need is to perceive grey can also be beautiful and useful.

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