

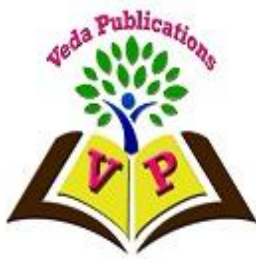
THE ART OF AGING

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ABSTRACT



The relation between culture and age has often been the subject of discourse in recent gerontological studies. It is argued that there is an inherent relation between the two. The difference marked by age or our perception of old age, in particular, is a cultural and social construction. Consequently, the meanings and value assigned to old age are also socially constructed. This in turn leads to a reshaping of identity or what Holstein and Gubrium term as 'self-construction' (Randall and McKim 235). However, what we need to consider is whether it is only this construct that is solely responsible for determining our response to aging. Does our environment have complete agency in shaping our attitude or is it also dependent on how we, as individuals, look at ourselves? Is not the concept of aging framed through a two-way process, that is, a simultaneous influence of the society and the individuals on each other? This can be elucidated through the two contrasting approaches towards aging as portrayed in *The Boss Came to Dinner* by Bhisham Sahni and *The Portrait of a Lady* by Khushwant Singh.

Keywords: *Gerontological studies, Women, Aging, Culture.*

The two short stories that are to be parallelly examined, represent two old women who are placed in a similar backdrop-that of the Eastern culture. Infact, the old lady in *The Boss Came to Dinner* is a very conventional representation of an old Indian mother whose entire existence centers around her son, Mr.Shamnath. The story opens with Shamnath and his wife making arrangements for a dinner party with his Boss. In preparing their house for the party, the couple makes sure that all the unwanted commodities are shoved underneath in order to be kept out of view. Included among such 'commodities' is his old mother: "Suddenly a problem reared up before Shamnath. What about mother? Till now, neither he nor his wife had thought of it" (94).

Later he even says, "Mother is a problem! There is no end to her oddities" (96). The mother thus becomes a 'nuisance', an inconvenience that is hard to be dealt with by the young son. To the son, an old and apparently unsophisticated mother becomes an object of shame. She is a blemish on his public image, not fit enough to be presented before the guests and therefore has to "stay in the verandah" and "quietly slip into the drawing room through the bathroom" (96). Old age is thus subjected to utter social rejection and to such an extent that it is reduced to a 'state of invisibility' (Freixas, Luque and Reina 52), an issue that is addressed by the feminist gerontologists. Old people become invisible in the sense that they no longer receive an appropriate recognition in society. Old age becomes synonymous with a loss of dignity, status and authority. It has been pointed out that "old age is a social location, conferring a loss of power for all those designated as 'old'" (Calasanti, Slevin and King 6). It is precisely because of this that the old mother has to suffer marginalization and exploitation in the hands of her own son.

Feminist gerontologists also address the issue of the 'double standard of ageing' where women are simultaneously 'invisible' and 'hypervisible' (Freixas, Luque and Reina 53). Hypervisibility¹ suggests how old bodies are 'all' that are conceived of old age. The word 'old' itself is wrongly associated with negative, derogatory ideas. Both the stories, in this case, portray a typically reductive image of old age. Thus Sahni paints the portrait of the mother whose face has to be "almost covered with a dopatta"(95), who keeps "telling her beads"(95) and causes embarrassment by falling asleep and snoring. Her wrinkled look is simply unacceptable, so much so that she is made to feel ashamed of it. Withered beauty thus has to be concealed in the garb of a white salwar kameez and bangles. This can also be contrasted to the description of the Boss's wife who is "in a black gown, a rope of pearls around her neck, wearing a loud perfume"(97). While Shamnath tries his best to keep his mother out of sight, this young lady becomes the "cynosure" (97) of the party. Similarly, the grandmother in *The Portrait of a Lady* is described as:

Short and fat and slightly bent. Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere. Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older (25).

Margaret Gullette mentions how the body carried through time is the default body(Woodward 180). The body itself becomes one's identity. Thus the narrator exclaims that the thought of his grandmother "being young and pretty" is almost 'revolting'-"She

often told us of the games she used to play as a child” (25). However, the narrator confesses that it seemed ‘absurd’ and ‘undignified’ to identify her grandmother in terms of such youthful images. It is as if old age is perceived not as a process of development but as a completely different status altogether. While the apparently deteriorating beauty of the body is condemned by Shamnath, it is valued and appreciated by the grandchild in Singh’s narrative-“her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer. Yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment” (25). The conventional images to describe the old are subverted to romantically define beauty in its own terms by dissociating it from ‘youth’.

It is interesting to note that in both the stories, the old women characters are called ‘mother’ and ‘grandmother’ respectively. This signifies that the women here are recognized only in terms of the role that they play. This becomes their sole identity. The question that arises out of this is what is the essential activity of a woman in the society? Are they only meant to adhere to the ideals of femininity? Are they essentially required to play the role of the fundamental carer²(Freixas, Luque and Reina 48)? The mother in Sahni’s story fits into this conception of a woman. Right from the beginning of the story, the author suggests her extreme concern and love for her son as she keeps feeling anxious that “everything should go well”(95). She willingly or unwillingly accepts all his orders and even goes to the extent of agreeing to make a ‘phulkari’ for his Boss inspite of her weak eyesight only to ensure that her son gets “a lift in the office” (101). The son on the other hand is opportunistic enough to exploit her love to meet his own needs. This also points at the question of power-play in the mother-son relationship. There is infact a power reversal where the old mother is dominated by the son. In return, all that the mother asks for is some space of her own. She wishes for independence: “Son, send me to Hardwar” (100). She is indeed given a space but a space of imposed solitary existence in her own household where her freedom is compromised.

However, the problem that lies here is that if she is being relegated to the background by society, she is not bold enough to rebel against it. There is enough evidence in the story which shows that she is herself acknowledging and accepting her helpless, subordinate status. It is perhaps because their relationship is now that of obligation and her attitude towards him is of ‘non-interfering assistance’ (Bliezner and Mancini 179). This is where her view of herself differs from that of the grandmother in Singh’s story. Even she plays her role of the ‘carer’ to her grandson thereby developing a bond with the younger generation. That she takes him to school, takes interest in his studies are somewhere suggestive of what gerontologists term as ‘reverse socialization’³(Freixas, Luque and Reina 50) though later we find her rejecting all that is taught in his new school either because it makes her feel her inadequacy to teach him or because she simply refuses to accept the new ideologies. She does experience a sense of displacement when she is made to move to the city from her village. Yet she doesn’t feel obligated to adjust with the new environment. She may have initially “accepted her seclusion with resignation”(26) but the story reveals that she does enjoy her solitude. She willingly carves out her own world:

From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows...Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders...She smiled but never shooed them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her(26).

Contrasted to the emotionally dependent mother, the narrator says that she was not a bit sentimental on the day of her grandson's departure. He also says that "even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes"(27). She is thus able to come out of the stereotypical presentation of the old, dependent woman and assert her individuality.

If the mother's acceptance of her condition and her attitude to life can be defined as the 'strategies of the oppressed'⁴(Freixas, Luque and Reina 51), a sense of 'active ageing'⁵(54) can be located in the grandmother's approach towards her life. She engages herself in feeding the birds or in reciting prayers or even collecting women of the neighbourhood, beating the drum and singing. Even at the point of her death, she does not consider it necessary to be talking to her family. So, unlike the mother, the Singh's narrative presents an old woman whose identity is not formed merely in terms of her relationship with her family members.

Shamnath's mother, however, continues to function as the prototype of a culture that expects women to be sacrificing in nature. She is not blind to her son's hypocrisy, yet she keeps silent about it. This brings us to the question of wisdom that is so often associated with old age. A stage is reached when Shamnath's mother is completely disillusioned: "No sooner had she sat down than her eyes flooded with tears...as if the flood-gates of years of old pent-up feelings had suddenly burst open. She tried to control herself..."(100). Can such endurance of exploitation be called wisdom? Perhaps, she is caught in the conflict between her sense of suffering and her love for her son which she values over her self-respect. So "she folded her hands before the image of Krishna, she prayed for the long life of her son, but unlike the monsoon showers the tears kept flowing"(100). Perhaps, this is where her wisdom lies as it is said that wise people may behave in various ways- from silent gaze to political activism to social eccentricity(Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 52). Thus she responds to her son with compassion rather than anger.

The grandmother on the other hand, shows her wisdom in her detachment from her family issues. Nor does she allow any interference in her own life: "We protested. But she ignored our protests"(27). Interestingly, the story doesn't address the issue of the grandmother's relation with her own children. Even in that case, it can be assumed that she would never have allowed a compromise with her dignity and authority.

Further, wisdom is manifest in one's response to death. Death is not something tangible but it is indeed a very real certainty, an unavoidable truth that is absolutely integral to the fact of life. Pablo is Sarte's (1969) *The Wall* remarks, "...this will keep behind us, Pablo, and we won't be able to prepare for it". It is interesting to note that both the women anticipate death. Contrary, to the general association of death with old age, these two women look forward to it not just because they are 'old'. The mother's desire for death derives from a sense of

despair in life. She lacks a sense of the future. At some level, such contemplation could be the source of respite from her social entrapment. Contrasted to this, the grandmother's attitude displays a ready acceptance of death as something that life culminates into. There is no trace of any regret:

But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near... She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads...A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead (27).

The author himself has a very positive take on death. It is not something that marks a complete closure of life. It is not a mere loss. It is said that the loss a fellow traveller does not remove the experience of what the person meant to the traveller who remains(Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 49). This is described beautifully towards the end of the story:

The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a blaze of golden light. We stopped half-way in the courtyard. All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirruping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread.(28)

In a youth-obsessed culture, where aging is not considered to be a favourable progress in life, it is important to point out that whether the individual perception of old age is in conflict or in consonance with society's response to ageing depends to a great extent on us. Cultural norms do limit free existence of aged people but is it not possible to negate such cultural constraints? Is not there a possibility of transcending the reductive role or the reductive image of old age? In this regard, it is essential on our part to break away from social stereotypes, reduce the divisive effects of 'age-war'(Clasanti, Slevin and King 4) thereby attempting to transform the anti-age culture into a pro-age one. Old women are subjected to social rejection at two levels- as a 'woman' and as an 'old woman'. This patriarchal invalidation of older women has to be fought against. However, such an endeavour does not demand a complete denial of the fact of aging, rather a resistance against discrimination with respect to old age. One should thus look forward to aging but with dignity.

NOTES

1. Gerontologists point out that there is a paradoxical attitude towards old women's bodies. While on one hand their bodies suffer social rejection, it is impossible for them to avoid being judged only in terms of their decaying bodies and are thereby made to feel shameful about it.
2. Women are ideally expected to play a major role in looking after her family members. Gerontologists argue that women have to give up their private time for free and involve themselves in the task of bringing up children.
3. Old women tend to derive new ideas, tastes and ways of life from interactions with the younger generation. They incorporate the same in their own lives and in the

process learn to accept the social and family changes that they encounter in their everyday lives.

4. Old Women are often exposed to socio-economic and political exploitation and deprivation. In such situations, they adopt certain survival strategies to sustain themselves.
5. It refers to the process of remaining active to avoid getting old. Many value 'doing' over 'being'. Inactive people are regarded as 'old'. In doing so, however, there is a loss of respect for the desire to be 'doing nothing'.
6. Margaret Gullette speaks about the discrimination made on the basis of age. The media often fuels animosity between generations, most importantly, in matters of employment.

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