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REVIEW ARTICLE

Conceptualizing of Aging Literature: A Global Perspective

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Abstract

Aging is generally represented by two stereotypes that present distinctly opposite views: the first views it as a stage of celebration relating it to experience and wisdom. The second is associated with a lamentation on the loss of physical and emotional vigor. There are organized bodies of literature about and for a specific group of the population that includes children literature, young-adult literature. But, there is no such organized body of literature that describes the unique life experiences, physical and psychological conditions, needs, and personal and social relationships of aging people. Though these issues have sporadically appeared in different literary texts, there is still a need to theorize aging literature from academic and other disciplinary perspectives. In this context, this paper serves three-fold objectives: first, it surveys various endeavors to understand aging from both eastern and western perspectives; secondly, it attempts to conceptualize literature on aging by referring to few representations of aging in literary texts; finally, it presents the prospect of literature of aging as a new field of creativity and scholarship.

Keywords: Aging literature, old age, biomedical perspective, cultural reductionism, gerontology, volledungsroman

Introduction

There is a body of literature written about and for children and recognized as children's literature. Similarly, literature is written for the young or teens and is established as young-adult literature. But there exists no systematically organized body of literature for senior citizens. Generally, senior citizens are people above sixty-five though this age may vary in different countries and cultures. The size of senior citizens in the global population is approximately 13 percent making it 910 million (United Nations). This population has different life experiences, physical and psychological conditions, needs, and personal and social relationships. So, there is a need to develop an

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organized body of literature that addresses these experiences that can be recognized as aging literature.

Whether they are children, youths, or adults, each person will ultimately have to pass through old age, except they end their life before that for some reason. The views about old age are either progressive with the stories of successes or negative as unproductive, full of suffering and lamentation. The author of *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (2013), Lynne Segal, argues that “stereotypes of old age, whether positive or negative, do real harm in the real world” (cited in Ceridwen Dovey). If aging is looked into from the perspective of cultural reductionism, then it is not possible to understand the varied dynamics of old age. The result is that people either consider it either as a time for celebration or a period of lamentation. In her article “What Old Age is Like” Ceridwen Dovey quotes age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s opinion that there is no possibility of diversified, personal approaches to aging if we are all reductively “aged by culture” (n/pg.). In her book *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette mentions that there are limitations of having only two socially accepted aging narratives: stories of progress or stories of decline. Segal also thinks that it does no justice to the “radical ambiguities” of old age. These binary forces either lament or celebrate old age rather than “affirm it as a significant part of life” (quoted in Dovey). People who have not reached ‘old age’ tend to consider old age as isolated, disconnected, prone to death, annihilating, and dreadful experiences. It has become essential to develop an organized body of literary writings that depicts the unique biological and socio-psychological conditions and other life experiences the way they are lived to rectify the ideological bias about ‘old age.’

The Global Context

There is no established body of literature on aging, and it is still a new avenue in academia for critical discussion and theorization. But the significant increase in the aged population has given rise to new literature and academic and professional interest in gerontology. In the 1990s, there was an attempt to publish a series on “Rethinking Aging” as a realization that there was a gap in understanding aging dynamics. Those publications on aging aimed to expand knowledge and gain insights into old age and address issues such as ageism, elder abuse, health in later life, and dementia. Other publications in this series are *Age, Race, and Ethnicity* by Kenneth Blakemore and Margaret Boneham; Maureen Crane’s *Understanding Older Homeless People*; and John Vincent’s *Politics, Power and Old Age*. Miriam Bernard’s *Promoting Health in Old Age* combines aspects of previous mainstream literature and the emerging field.

Similarly, Jon F. Nussbaum’s *The Handbook of Communication and Aging Research* describes the experience of aging and people’s attitudes towards aging in a cultural and social context. Mike Hepworth’s *Stories of Ageing* attempts to make a critical study of novels dealing with aging from a gerontological perspective. Anne Wyatt-Brown also studies how age is treated in literary texts in *Literary Gerontology Comes of Age* (1992). Sara M Deats and Lagretta Lenker have also discussed the new subgenres created within the literature of aging like Refungsroman, or novel of “ripening” and Volledungsroman, or novel of “concluding” (12). This indicates the attempts towards theorizing literature of aging.

The literature on aging can also include other aspects like aging male and female characters in literary texts. For example, King Lear and Prospero, in Shakespeare’s plays *King Lear* and *The Tempest* respectively, provides the physical, psychological, and political complexities the characters go through when they are aged. Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* dedicates its last act to “The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman.”

Phillip Sipiora, in “Ernest Hemingway’s aging heroes and the concept of phronesis,” studies fiction that deals with old protagonists. Those old protagonists provide ‘practical wisdom’ to understand the “ways of the world, an acute sensitivity to a critical logic of human existence that can be attained only through extensive experience and suffering” (207). In his article “Bertrand Russell in His Nineties: Aging and the Problems of Biography,” William T. Ross argues that “senility” is a prism to look back into the author’s life if biographers are sympathetic. But they “are susceptible to powerful, distorting, and fictive predispositions as they “shape” their subjects’ later years” (67). Many fictional works represent the aging females in the form of old maids and barren sisters. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s representation of an old Crone in *The Hollow of the Three Hills* is also critiqued by Nancy F. Sweet in her article “The Glory Roundabout Her’: Hawthorne, Feminism, and the ‘Serious Business’ of the Aged Crone.” She questions, “Given the derogatory descriptors that Hawthorne so often applies to his crones, we are to conclude that Hawthorne also cared so little for the dignity or degradation of the elderly female, a verdict that would greatly undermine any case for a feminist Hawthorne?” William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, and Virginia Woolf have also portrayed aging female characters in their fictional texts.

Views about Aging

Though there is a body of literature informing aging experiences, there are few attempts to theorize the concept of aging in literature. Helene H. Fung, in “Aging in Culture” argues that “individuals make sense of life (i.e., figuring out what is important to them) through internalizing the values of their cultures, these internalized cultural values become personal goals that guide adult development.” Fung’s understanding is based on comparing the Western (North American and German) and Eastern (Chinese) populations. Fung further argues that people age and shape their world in ways that maximize their wellbeing but “within the confines and definitions of their respective cultures.” But her study does not explain the process of aging in cross-cultural contexts.

Understanding aging and its socio-emotional consequences are important because the demographic size of senior citizens is increasing. Sarah Harper discusses the main demographic drivers behind global aging, the dynamic relationship with globalization, and the societal implications in “Addressing the Implications of Global Ageing.” She views that the increase in the aging population will exert pressure on health and pension demand, leading to the collapse of health systems and economies (208). This ‘demographic burden’ hypothesis explains the perception of old age in western societies.

Sara Parker *et al.* discuss the different views about aging in the West and the East. They mention that aging in the West is generally viewed from a biomedical perspective where the emphasis is on medical treatment, health, and social care arrangements (231). The biomedical perspective is also prevalent in Nepali and other developing countries due to the “international health strategies, organizations, and the funding streams for aid” (231). Though longevity is a positive outcome of modern development models, it is not devoid of health and social care challenges. At the same time, it is important to consider that Nepal and other Eastern countries have distinct socio-cultural perspectives of understanding the process of aging.

In the east, aging is associated with a journey of salvation and spirituality. Swami Krishnanda writes, “Life has been always regarded [...] as a process of progressive self-transcendence from the realm of matter (Annamaya-Jivatva) to the realisation of supreme spiritual bliss (Parama-Ananda)” (n/pg.). According to the Hindu *varnashrama* system, human life is classified into *brahmacharya* (period of maintaining celibacy and education), *grihastha* (period of earning wealth and fulfilling desires),

vanaprastha (period of disentangling oneself from worldly attractions), and *sannyasa* (period of voluntary retirement from social orders and preparation of the *moksha*). These classifications suggest two main features of old age as perceived in Hindu societies: disengagement with society and the beginning of a spiritual journey. In the Hindu communities, a person who reaches eighty-four years is worshipped as a divine form. Similarly, in the Newari tradition, there is a ritual of *janku* where the person who has reached seventy-seven years, seven months, and seven days is made for riding on a chariot as a symbol of attaining divinity. However, the biological process and the bio-medical needs seem to be overlooked by this view.

As stated earlier, because Nepali societies have integrated the Western development model, there is an increasing tendency to view aging from a bio-medical perspective. With the advancement of modern medicines, there is a decrease in the infant mortality rate, and the average life span is going higher. The concept of social security and older people's rights is also developed with the influence of western concepts. However, Krishna Murari Gautam, a senior-citizen activist who runs a geriatric center in Kathmandu, views that they have tried to understand aging from a humanitarian perspective (qtd. in Parker and Pant 247). But Gautam has not sufficiently elaborated on how his understanding of aging differs or merges from and with the Western biomedical and Eastern spiritual perspectives. But he clearly indicates the deficiency of the Western right-based and biomedical approach, which advocates at providing all the health and social benefits to the senior citizens. But that does not integrate the emotional aspect, which is closely associated with the cultural values which shape the senior citizens' world view about the meaning of life.

Why Literature of Aging?

Barbara Myerhoff, an anthropologist by training, who made the documentary film *In Her Time*, about a community of elderly Californians, believed that "we are dehumanized and impoverished without our old people, for only by contact with them can we come to know ourselves" (n/pg.). This statement by Myerhoff is sufficient to explain the need for the literature on aging. This paper tries to explore the relevance of promoting literary writing and academic discourse on aging from two perspectives: first, revising the existing socio-psychological biases about aging; second, from the perspective of the rights of older people. With the changes in socio-cultural and family structures, older people are deprived of family protection and interaction opportunities. Some of the problems that they face in general are: lonely life; social demeaning due to physical and mental weaknesses; perception of a burden to the family for their increasing dependency and the need for additional service; the trauma of leaving the family to live in old-age homes; and, challenges of adapting with new people and systems at service centers. The literature on aging can also have an educational role in making social attitudes elderly-friendly and increasing awareness in formulating laws and social security programs to address their special needs. Apart from this, aging literature can also bridge the generation gaps caused by social and developmental changes.

Hannah Zeilig believes age and aging as "cultural concepts." Zeilig views "the interrogation of stories of age and ageing via narrative approaches and as found in literature are increasingly recognised as an important source of knowledge for mining the intricacies of later life" (7). Different examples are available in literary narratives to substantiate this idea. While discussing the concepts of aging in American novels, Maricel Oró-Piqueras quotes sociologist Norbert Elias who claims that "aging" and "old age" have become frightening, almost taboo terms in Western society because death is increasingly invisible in advanced societies. According to Elias, death was earlier a part

of life, and the dead were granted the honor of passing away in their homes surrounded by their communities (qtd. in Oró-Piqueras 1). In present-day society, most people have never seen a corpse and are ignorant of anything related to death (1). For Elias, to keep people away from death is to bar them from viewing aging as a natural process. For example, in Kingsley Amis's *Ending Up* (1974) and Deborah Moggach's *These Foolish Things* (2004), the characters' physical signs of aging signal to others that they are old, so they find themselves increasingly removed from their homes and social spaces (Oró-Piqueras 196). When older people are disengaged from the social process, life becomes absurd for them. As the novel *Ending Up* progresses, "the characters do not have any real motivation in their lives; they perform their everyday tasks and continue, but their lives lack any meaningful sense, despite their support of each other" (197). The discussion above highlights the problems associated with specific cultural values and the process of aging.

Conclusion

Literature of aging has multiple prospects. It offers a bridge between the past and present through the alternative documentation of social, cultural, historical, and political experiences that can provide future directions. The insights and experiences of senior citizens can be utilized to formulate social security policies, health benefits, and laws related to the rights of senior citizens. Before that can happen, it is important to promote the literature on aging by developing appropriate methods of literary representation and critical study so that issues related to aging are adequately and appropriately represented.

Though this article provides a limited survey of the literature on aging, the discussions above clearly indicate the prospect of such writings for their literary value and their socio-cultural implications. This study shows few attempts made to theorize and understand the literature of aging in its broad spectrum. Therefore, the cultural reductionist views about aging have widely dominated the understanding of aging in Western and Eastern societies. In the context that the global demography of aging people is on the rise due to modern medical facilities, it is important to promote literary and critical discourses on aging so that aging is better understood and received by society. On the one hand, a holistic understanding of aging can create a conducive psycho-social environment for senior citizens' dignified life. On the other, it will also contribute to establishing a new field of creativity and scholarship.

This study presents three major issues related to aging and literature. First, a limited corpus of literary texts is available that focuses on representing the dynamics associated with aging. Within the available corpus, aging is not exclusively a process related to age. It also invites the dynamics of gender, class, and race as in other literary representations. Secondly, there is still a lack of specific critical tradition to study and analyze the literary texts about aging. Even though scholars like Fung have tried to develop a cultural understanding of aging, the discussions above show a need to theorize literature on aging from a more holistic approach. Thirdly, the study shows that literary representations have taken a reductionist approach by presenting stereotypes about aging. It is important to resist the tendency of presenting old age in the divine form of experience and knowledge or its worst form of ailment and loss. Such resistance can only be developed if the representation of old age brings in both the pains and pleasures of the natural process of aging. Understanding of aging can neither neglect the biomedical aspect of aging nor disvalue the spiritual and cultural aspects of the process. The void existing in the study and understanding of aging invites the integration of the gerontological perspective with the critical literary tradition to develop a new methodology of approaching aging.

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