Reclaiming Identity and Challenging Ageism: A Study of Aging in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract

Aging, an inevitable facet of human existence, has historically been viewed through a lens of decline and marginalization, especially for women. Cultural and societal narratives have often relegated the elderly, particularly women, to roles of insignificance, reducing them to household possessions and social ornaments. However, recent advancements in cultural and literary gerontology have begun to challenge these perspectives, offering more nuanced and inclusive views on aging. This study delves into Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, a groundbreaking narrative that redefines the concept of aging through its protagonist, Ma, an eighty-year-old widow who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The paper attempts to challenge the ageist stereotypes perpetuated by modernization and popular culture, which often prioritize youth and productivity over the wisdom and experiences of the elderly. By examining Ma's journey, this study emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive society that values the elderly's contributions, enabling them to reconstruct their identities with dignity and pride. The paper further explores how humanistic gerontology principles integrate literary and cultural analyses to present aging as a multifaceted experience shaped by gender, race, and societal norms. It argues for a collective effort to shift cultural narratives, fostering a world where the elderly are celebrated and their identities respected. This positive reframing of aging highlights the potential for personal and societal transformation, advocating for a more equitable representation of aging in literature and society.

Keywords: ageism, cultural gerontology, modernization, self-discovery, intersectionality.

Aging is an inevitable part of life, and since ancient times people have sought a fountain of life, elixirs, and herbal powders to extend

the strength and vitality of young age. Grand narratives like religion and culture have instilled the idea that youth is equal to desirability, adventure, and longevity of beauty, and on the other hand old age or aging is associated with reverence, wisdom, and experience. But in mainstream society and popular culture, they are not evenly represented rather, the former is considered better than the latter. Especially with the advancement of modernization and industrialization in the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and with the onset of the Eugenics movement and industrialization along with expressions like 'survival of the fittest (Spenser 1864)' propagated the idea that one's worth is determined by the ability to sell labour and producers of the market goods are the only valuable members of our society.

This perspective has historical roots that extend to the 18th century when Enlightenment ideals and utilitarian philosophies reshaped societal structures. Thinkers like Jeremy Bentham emphasized human value in terms of productivity and utility, sidelining those deemed non-contributory, such as children, the elderly, and the disabled. The Poor Laws in England institutionalized this marginalization by treating dependency as a societal burden, reflecting an economic and moral judgment. Simultaneously, the burgeoning medical sciences began pathologizing deviations from normative physical and mental standards, further stigmatizing aging and illness (Butler, 2008). Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1793), critiqued the gendered bias in these discourses, which often portrayed aging women as biologically inferior to men, an attitude that reinforced the cultural and literary depictions of the elderly as frail, burdensome, or malevolent (Wollstonecraft, 2001). These historical frameworks established a legacy of ageism that persists, underscoring the necessity of reevaluating these narratives within modern contexts.

The Workhouse Test Act, though not a specific piece of legislation, refers to a principle central to the implementation of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 in England and Wales. This policy aimed to instil discipline among the poor and discourage dependency, reflecting the Victorian belief that poverty was often a result of moral failings or laziness. Families entering workhouses were frequently separated, and the living environment was austere, reinforcing the punitive nature of the system. Workhouses treated older people as a homogenous group

without recognizing their specific vulnerabilities or contributions. The assumption that all recipients of aid were morally deficient dehumanized elderly individuals, reinforcing stereotypes of older adults as burdensome or unproductive. However, the workhouse test faced widespread criticism for its inhumanity, with many individuals preferring extreme poverty over entering such institutions. Over time, public outcry and shifting societal attitudes led to significant reforms and the eventual decline of the workhouse system, which remains a symbol of institutionalized poverty in 19th-century Britain (Englander, 1998; Rose, 1971).

Recently, the advent of voices from below that provided the platform for underprivileged and ignored members of society paved the path for several new disciplines of inquiry and investigation such as subaltern studies, disability studies, critical race theory, etc. One such study that has emerged that conceptualizes age studies in a sociocultural apparatus is called cultural gerontology, which is a branch of humanistic gerontology. Humanistic gerontology centers around the interventions of branches of humanities such as literature, history, philosophy, arts, theatre, and ethics by observing aging and old age facets:

Historically, our Western culture has tended to focus on aging almost exclusively in terms of physical deterioration, but, as noted, gerontologists are becoming increasingly aware of the many spectrums of age: chronological age (the numerical total of years lived), biological age (the strength, health [...] of the body [...]), social age (the culturally constructed, often prescriptive behaviors linked to a chronological numeral), and individual age (our self-image, which is often at variance with all the other markers of age). (Deats and Lenker Introduction 9)

The field of discipline of old age was observed in context with human body only. From the seventeenth century onwards, and more especially since the late nineteenth century, various biomedical disciplines—such as anatomy, physiology, and cellular biology—have sought to decipher the basic operational mechanisms of the body (Hartung and Kunow 17). Upon closer look, inquiring about the experiences of aging only from a chronological time is skewed, unjust, and superficial. The experience of aging is shaped by multiple factors such as gender, race, class, literacy, nationality, culture, and tradition. Thus, there are several expressions and expectations unique to one's identity in a society, such as 'biological clock is ticking' is used specifically for women

and is a euphemism for her declining egg count as she grows old. For teenagers, everybody else is old, and throughout life, the biological clock ticks in a different rhythm for women than for men, so that the conjuncture of life and time is fluid and highly relativistic. Such discriminatory attitude towards growing old comes under the experiences of ageism.

Ageism is discrimination, prejudice, or stereotyping based on a person's age. It can manifest in various forms, such as discriminatory practices in employment, biased attitudes in healthcare, and negative portrayals in media and culture. Ageism affects both younger and older individuals, although it is most commonly associated with discrimination against older adults. The term "ageism" was coined by Dr Robert N. Butler in 1969. Butler, a prominent gerontologist and psychiatrist, introduced the term to describe systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, similar to how racism and sexism refer to discrimination based on race and gender, respectively.

The intersection of life and time is fluid and highly relativistic. The concept of being 'old' and the experience of aging for those labelled as 'old' are influenced not only by biological factors such as illness or pain but also by cultural frameworks that are perceived to encapsulate the essence of aging. In *Stories of Ageing*, Mike Hepworth says that ageing is at the same time both a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience. Literary gerontology, one of the dimensions of cultural gerontology, integrates literary work into aging studies and has helped link the objective aspect of old age with the subjective experience of aging. Under literary gerontology, discussions on age and gender have majorly been the analyses of literary responses to female aging.

"We think we age by nature; we are insistently and precociously being aged by culture" (Gullette qt. in Mellencamp 314). It is important to reflect on aging from the lens of markers of culture like cinema, art, and literature. The cultural construct of a particular time and space reflects the expression and attitude towards the marginal. There is thus a historically relatively invariable "double standard of aging," detected by Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century when she argues against the naturalizing effect of the two-sex model on the aging body which depicts women as aging biologically earlier than

men (187). Although literature positions the aged folks at the sight of valour and respect, their narratives rarely take center stage. The recorded literature is largely built upon the abstract concept of truth and beauty. A few instances like when William Shakespeare said in his Sonnet 73

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang (1988)

here he is discussing various stages of life and comparing himself to a tree in late autumn signifying the waning of vitality, fragility, and vulnerability of old age. In several instances, old age refers to a cold winter or autumn conveying a sense of melancholia and an inevitable approach to death.

Furthermore, many metaphors have been used by famous literary writers to convey a sense of distress, vulnerability, and nostalgia while talking about the passing of youth and the onset of old age. Couplets like "I grow old ... I grow old ... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled (Elliot 1917)" depict the inconsequentiality, frailty, and anxiety of growing old. A similar sentiment is echoed in a poem by Philip Larkin where he said "Old age is a kind of deformity /A permanent, incurable disease (1974)" here aging is associated with a disfigurement that happens to appearance and ability with a sense of mental distortion. Old is presented as an irreversible and undesirable change with declining health and overall functionality of the human body.

There is also a sense of duality associated with the figure of the old man therefore, his positioning in classical texts is a subject of great debate. On one hand, he is often portrayed as insignificant, and trivial and is observed as a figure diminished from his ascended stature as the lines of W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" says "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick (1928)" that highlights a loss of sense of purpose along with physical decaying of body. Whereas, poets like Dylan Thomas present the archetypical old man as a man of resilience, valour, and courage and urge him to not surrender to the death as ultimate fate as he said… "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light (1953)."

In 1990, Barbara F. Waxman's *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* played a pivotal role in situating gender politics and its interplay with experiences of aging. From novels to autobiographies, she critiques the themes and narrative techniques that depict aging. She anticipates that these works will leverage literary techniques, including innovative forms of life writing, thematic exploration, character development, nonlinear narratives, multiple voices, and rich imagery related to the aging body, mind, and spirit to reshape our understanding of the elderly (14). Additionally, Waxman applies Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia—the presence of multiple, sometimes conflicting voices in a text—to reveal the complexity and diverse perspectives within these autobiographies. This approach allows readers to understand the varied challenges and adjustments associated with aging, such as intergenerational conflicts, distinctions between different stages of old age, and the unique experiences shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, health, and memory (Mangum 394). Later theorists like Anne M Wyatt Brown and Janice Rossen brought their insights into ageism are further shaped by analyses of oppression from feminist, racial, sociological, and cultural-historical perspectives.

On investigating the phenomenon of aging, it is found to be a particularly vulnerable state for women for several reasons, such as regressive social codes, patriarchy, and lack of space and opportunities. It compromises their ability to procreate, and most elderly women in third-world countries are found to be financially dependent on the male folk of the family. The aging process takes a toll on the expectation of the physical beauty of females, and they are restricted from several routine acts in the name of 'age-appropriate behaviour.' They are constantly censored to stop them from transgressing the boundary of age and gender. As Debra Webb said men got better with age, like wine. On the other hand, women were like cheese—aged was good to a degree, then came the mold and the inevitable casting aside. The fear of appearing old became even more entrenched in women and thus in the year 1889, the first product to cover the appearance of wrinkles created and opened the floodgate of countless such products till today. It often intensifies the experience of cognitive and physical disability. Though aging puts forth a serious challenge to one's overall ability at max it should be seen on the spectrum of debility rather than a new kind of disability. Our mainstream society is constantly

bombarded with signs of anti-aging; popular culture ranging from literature, cinema, media, etc. propagates the idea of beauty and virality with youthfulness; and often one's ability to negotiate one's position in civil society is directly proportional to her physical appearance, agility, and vitality.

The figure of an old woman is portrayed either as a saint-like figure or as a cunning 'hag.' They are subjected to asexualize or hypersexualize and have been described as "…she was a lecherous old lady, found of young men (Chaucer)." The word hideous is particularly used by several writers in English literary canon to describe the figure of the old woman because she is seen as someone stripped down from the stature of youth, beauty, and ability therefore quotes like "The old witch, with her hideous features and her evil heart (Grimm and Grimm)." Additionally, a sense of darkness is also assumed to be surrounded by aging women and therefore, often refer as witches. The notion of 'femme-fatale' does not apply to them anymore because of the decline of physical 'beauty' and agility, so to position them as a threat to society they are associated with black magic or dark art. Nathaniel Hawthorne's line "Old Mother Rigby was a thorough a witch as ever dealt in art (1882)"

The pressure and manic obsession on women to look young can be traced back to Victorian England, as the Victorian philosophers were inspired by classical thinking, and promoted the theory that women age faster than men also popular literature promoted the notion that appearing old is undesirable. Authors like Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James portrayed women in their 40s and 50s as miserable 'hags' who were physically decaying. Tennessee Williams in his famous work *The Glass Menagerie* described Amanda Wingfield as "that hideous old woman, bloated with her lies and whiskey."

In contemporary times, First World countries do not solely depend on institutions like families to take care of the elders as the concept of shelter homes, community centers or old age homes is very much part of the civil infrastructures. Additionally, it is unlikely to secure wealth or pass down one's property entirely to the younger generation of the family. Also, it is quite common to take up new adventures, partners, hobbies, job opportunities, etc. past 40s and 50s which is highly unlikely in India. The treatment of elderly people in the Indian subcontinent is

vastly different from the West. Here institutions like family and marriage are still the dominant factors of one's life and the notion of respecting elders is a deeply entrenched practice of the Indian subcontinent, so much so that calling one's elder by their first name is considered demeaning and ill-mannered.

Modernization has been a profoundly influential concept, creating significant disparities between society and aging. The treatment of elderly people especially in countries like Japan with its rapidly aging population has developed a range of policies, such as the Long-Term Care Insurance system introduced in 2000, which aims to provide elderly people with accessible care while fostering dignity and independence (Matsumoto, 2018). However, despite these efforts, Japan faces challenges related to the growing demand for eldercare services, leading to concerns about social isolation and inadequate support for the elderly in rural areas (Takagi & Hoshino, 2019). This can be seen as a reflection of both positive advancements in care for the elderly and the continuing struggle to address deeply ingrained ageist attitudes and systemic issues affecting older adults worldwide. It has ultimately disintegrated the extended, or joint, family structure, becoming a central theme in Indian gerontology. Lawrence Cohen remarks on Indian social gerontology, stating that "the sole criterion for assessing the well-being of old people is an important feature of post-independence Indian literature on old age" (Raja xviii).

Before modernization, it is presumed that societies worldwide, particularly in India, effectively cared for all family members from birth to death. However, modernization has led to the breakdown of family structures, even in traditionally strong societies like India. Additionally, the financial independence of the youth has fostered greater self-reliance, suggesting that economic power has contributed to a decline in values, especially concerning respect for the elderly. Consequently, social gerontology studies have inspired writers to address aging issues, giving rise to the new field of literary gerontology. Until the nineteenth century, literature rarely mentioned the "aged poor," focusing instead on the privileged elderly. Moreover, literature often portrays aged women as less concerned than aged men.

In Indian English literature, the portrayal of old women remained fairly homogeneous as they were mostly saintly, wise, and rooted, reflecting

on the past with a sense of nostalgia. She is like a 'banyan tree' and 'her roots are deep (Markandaya 1954)' and 'her face was a map of wrinkles and stories untold (Ghosh)' or 'she was a wizened little old lady, bent double with age, her eyes sparkling with an ageless wit and humor (Narayan 1943).' In a large part of South Asia, this age is considered to prepare oneself for retirement and a gradual withdrawal from family duties, jobs, romance, society, or trying something new. They are largely expected to submit to spiritual or religious practices, hand over the wealth to the younger generation, and live a fairly complacent life. Therefore, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* feels like a breath of fresh air that unfolds new possibilities and opportunities for Ma that transcend the boundary of gender, age, and traditions.

An old widowed woman as a protagonist is a rare sight to behold because, at this stage of life, they are treated as largely inconsequential though such a character has lived a long life her story is not considered worth narrative especially if the new chapters begin at the age of eighty. Shree's novel was originally written in Hindi and later translated by Daisy Rockwell; she also won the prestigious Booker Prize in the year 2022. The novel touches upon the themes of family, gender roles and tension, tradition and modernity, partition, and politics. The story is set in northern India and is about an eighty-year-old woman, who is in deep depression at her husband's death. She is referred to as Ma/ Amma. She has a son named Bade and a daughter referred to as Beti. There are several other characters but besides Beti, Ma's transgender companion Rosie plays a pivotal role in Ma's life in navigating widowhood, aging, and loneliness.

Old age with a connotation of retreat is expected, felt, and widely expected. From this perspective, the later stages of life are envisioned as a 'waiting room' where individuals pass their time until they die. This waiting room is predominantly occupied by women. The connection between old age and death is rooted in an ontogenetic master narrative of the human genome, which is fundamentally "chronocentric" (Fry 276). The novel opens with Ma lying in her bed with her back turned to the doorway, in a state of such deep retreat that her family despairs at being able to engage with her. She observed a position like a Buddha statue, almost submerging into a wall, and just kept getting closer and closer to the wall, and her back became a wall itself (17). This wall perhaps has various barriers and divisions—both physical and

metaphorical—that she faces and must overcome. It represents the separation between the past and present, different cultures, and personal identities also it is a symbol of social constraints and expectations especially those placed on women and the elderly.

But slowly the sands of Ma's self-imposed 'tomb' shift as she emerges already changed, perceiving herself for a while as Kalpataru, as she said "I am the Wishing Tree. I am the Kalpataru" (145). She is suddenly found missing, and the Buddha statue along with her and Ma now decides to pursue a path quite different from the life she had led so far, which had been characterized by the conventional domestic roles that define the lives of women. Now this widowed mother who is ideally expected to live at her son's house, decided to shift her daughter's place. This caused much consternation and unhappiness on the part of her son and daughter-in-law but she remained firm at her stand.

Beti, Ma's headstrong daughter lived her life on her incomprehensible terms, leaving home, living with an unmarried partner, and writing all about 'women's consciousness, sexuality, the female orgasm (62).' Beti's elder brother felt that her choices were odd and too progressive for the time but came on board when she started getting invitations from Rashtrapati Bhawan. Despite always being critiqued she lived as she pleased and gradually her odd choices met with 'right' accomplishments

The compassion entered even more troubled waters when the poor thing bought a fancy flat in a fancy neighbourhood, and a TV, microwave, and a car too. They learned she was always on her way to or back from the airport—traveling all over the world. There were irritable whispers in the house about how things are done with sleight of hand nowadays, whether right or wrong, just to earn money and a name, if you're good at networking, and if you're a woman, and young, then, then…well (63).

Amma or Ma always had a soft corner for Beti and she understood her daughter's need to spread her wings. Sadly, Betis's relationship with her brother deteriorated with time. When Ma shifted to her place, it caused trouble in Beti's personal life as "Beti became the mother and made Ma the daughter (241)." Moreover, Ma's actions challenge and ultimately reshape the family dynamics, especially with her children, as they are forced to confront their prejudices and assumptions about aging, independence, and identity. For instance, Ma's relationship with

her daughter, Beti, evolves as Beti begins to understand and respect her mother's need for autonomy and self-expression. Additionally, Ma becomes involved in various social causes and activism, using her experiences and newfound freedom to contribute meaningfully to her community. Her engagement in activism is exemplified by her efforts to support marginalized groups, asserting her presence in the public sphere and making a tangible difference.

In *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree, the character of Ma embarks on a series of transformative adventures after becoming widowed. Everyone believed that "at eighty, Ma had turned selfish (529)" because she started living on her terms unbothered about her 'duty' as a mother or her 'conduct' as an old woman, and let her suppressed desires get new wings. As though she'd removed all her layers, one by one, wife mother aunt this that, now at last she was simply herself, laid bare, apart, her own, untouched by the thoughts and concerns of any other. She abandoned her Kanjivaram and Patola saree to adorn new fancy gowns arranged by her new transgender friend Rosie.

At the beginning of the novel Shree uses an interesting analogy to describe her "She's being turned into pakoras. Moistened, ground, grated, cut into pieces, reclining in boiling oil eek eek flip flop sliding into bellies and disintegrating" (60). This can be interpreted as Ma is no longer an entity of her own but something that has gone through a tedious process of life and is now only good for others. Later when Ma turned selfish and decided to rebuild herself once again, and this time for no one else but herself as she discovered new friendships and new worlds, proving that it's never too late to start anew. Ma's new friendships, notably with members of the transgender community, broaden her perspective and enrich her understanding of life beyond conventional norms.

One of the most significant journeys she undertakes is her decision to revisit Pakistan, a land tied to her past and the trauma of Partition. This journey symbolizes Ma's confrontation with her history and unresolved emotions, marking a pivotal step in reclaiming her identity and agency. During her travels, Ma reconnects with Anwar, an old lover from her youth. This reconnection allows her to rediscover aspects of herself that had been suppressed by years of societal and familial expectations. Ma's journey was not just about revisiting her past, but

about reclaiming her identity and finding peace with herself. She visited her home in Pakistan, met her old connections, and reclaimed a new identity. After partition and coming to India, she was called Chandraprabha Devi but now at eighty, she wants her old identity back as she reclaimed loudly "I am Chanda, Ma says to him loudly. C-h-a-n-d-a. Chanda (628).

Through these adventures, Ma not only redefines her own life but also impacts the lives of those around her, demonstrating a powerful narrative of empowerment and transformation in the later stages of life. She showed that age is just a number and that the spirit can remain youthful and adventurous no matter how old you are. Ma's story is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the power of self-discovery. Her journey illustrates the themes of resilience, self-discovery, and the breaking of societal barriers, highlighting the profound changes that can occur at any stage of life.

This highlights the challenging reality that the reconstruction of personal identity for older individuals, especially women, is difficult in a society that often dismisses them as mere household possessions, social ornaments, or objects of sexual convenience. However, it also underscores the transformative potential of an environment that values and respects the elderly. By fostering a world that celebrates the wisdom, experience, and contributions of older women, we can create a more inclusive society where personal identity and dignity are preserved and enhanced, regardless of age. This positive shift requires a collective effort to challenge and change the pervasive cultural narratives that marginalize the elderly, thereby empowering them to reclaim and reconstruct their identities with pride and respect. As Beti once said this to Ma "Live, Ma, live to your heart's content! (Shree 32)

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