



COMING OF AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF GORDON'S 'AT SIXTY FIVE'

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to interpret the Gordon's 'At Sixty Five' from narrative gerontological perspective. In the first part of the paper, it introduces the narrative gerontology as a literary discipline. In its second part, it argues that Gordon successfully illustrates the delusions of the youth in the old age by juxtaposing two opposite forces that she had to encounter at the onset of her old age. The paper appreciates how Gordon was successful in conveying the first-hand female experiences of old age to the youth her times.

Key Words: Narrative Gerontology, Aging, Gordon, Sixty Five, Old age.

Aging Studies and Narratives

Aging is a natural, involuntary, irreversible, indispensable developmental reality. It is more about the change that inevitably happens in any living organism in the body and mind; and the way it receives the change (Birren, 1959). Experiencing of aging happens when the individual is more preoccupied with decaying body and less confident about his/her strengthened mind and spirit (Hussain, 1997). These preoccupations can happen due to various factors: one's conception about the self; others conception about the individual. Social reaction and responses are key factors in both the cases. Hence, aging has been studied from various perspectives: psychological, social and biological.

Psychological aging is mostly interlinked with social factors. Lack of confidence in one's own ability and judgment, feeling of being redundant, unwanted, useless, neglected,

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1P a g e



humiliated, isolated, lonely, monotonous, bored, uncertain, insecure, tense and anxious are the common origins of psychological aging. These causes can be traced in the social changes that are happening in and around the individual. Widowhood, retirement, economic dependency on children or others, socially insecure atmosphere- where the aged are victimized to robbery, fraud, assault and vandalism-, migration of children, nuclear families, industrialized and urbanized social atmosphere and gadget culture introduced by technology are largely the social problems that contribute to the socio-psychological aging. Further, socio-psychological aging accelerate the process of biological aging and aggravates the situation.

Chronological progression of the age necessarily influences the mechanism and functioning of the body and mind. Body shows the changes mostly in terms of decay such as grey hairs, vision disorders, wrinkles, stooping postures, muscle decay, joint pains, less active respiratory mechanism, less powerful cardio performance and weak blood circulation system, loss of memory and improper neuron functioning types (Stuart-Hamilton, 2011). On the contrary mind shows the changes in terms of progress such as knowledge powered by experience, wisdom, capacity to understand things more farsightedly than youth etc. In another words, aging simultaneously strengthens and weakens the man in two different respects.

Along with numerous socio-psychological attempts to trace the aging experiences, literary gerontology has sought to explore the depictions of old people across the cultures, time and space. Studies have be undertaken in this field, though not as vigorously and exclusively as in feminism, colonialism, racism etc. Farheen Fathima (2012) argues quoting Beauvoir that ancient Chinese, Greek and Roman communities took an ambivalent attitude toward old people. Though there were cases of honors attached to their experience and knowledge in some cases, there are arguably umpteen examples of literary pieces, expressions and characters who testify that ancients also viewed old age with prejudice and stereo-types (Stuart-Hamilton, 2011). In a fast urbanizing, industrializing, digitizing modern society of identity-politics, to read the old age experiences from an exclusive perspective is becoming all the more important. Like any vulnerable, weaker, marginalized, and disabled sections of society, old people deserve a better understanding, environment and society.

‘At Sixty Five’

Emily Fox Gordon has written two memoirs, a novel, and a collection of essays, *Book of Days*. Her essay, “At Sixty-Five,” in the Summer 2013 *Scholar*, was selected for *Best American Essays 2014*.



‘At Sixty Five’ is a reflexive account by Dudley Clendinen at the time when she “really begun to feel age” and felt it in her “eyes” and “feet”. Going beyond the biological constraints she says: ‘As I say, I am feeling age, I feel it in my invisibility to strangers’. Since she was not “nubile” enough to get attracted in her younger age, she has been trying to convince herself that her “ordinary look” is a “protective coloration” with which “she could comfortably observe and take her shot”. She even felt sure for a “paradoxical reward that waited” her at sixty five, if she made that for. But to her surprise she found herself in an absolute dismissal. The defense that she managed to put up became an unrelenting, never satisfying endeavor.

Having never had any beauty to lose, I reasoned, I’d be exempted from mourning its loss. But as I’ve grown older, this proposition has turned inside out. I see now that I did have at least some beauty—not much, but some—and exactly because I had so little, I could hardly afford to lose it. Now, at this inconvenient moment, I realize that I do care about my looks. I find myself spending more energy compensating for my inadequacies than I used to. I search for becoming clothes. I color my hair. I experiment, in a gingerly way, with makeup. I suspect these efforts don’t do a lot for me, though they do make some difference, if only in letting people know I’m trying.

The painful discovery is that “after 60, nearly every blessing is hinged to a curse that has fallen on someone else” since “reference class” in the society is constantly collapsing. So many women of her age “have fallen victim to disqualifying conditions”. This transition from an “aesthetic disinterestedness” into “superficialities” has made her wiser since she learns about line, mass and balance and she gets opportunity to identify herself with “other women”. “It’s becomes a odd surprise toher that those days she experienced as more feminine than she ever did in her childbearing years, or at least more identified with other women. She saw that the deep alienation she felt from my gender for most of my life was largely defensive” and “sags and wrinkles” in common with them have made her “kin” to them.

She felt a senile glee for red color and she understood why old people tend to like red color. “But instead of growing bolder and more heedless, I seem to be growing more circumspect, more nervously observant of the proprieties, more conscious of other people’s feelings”. And age has slowly melted her outer layer of personality away, “revealing the sweetness within”.

Age has affected her mood though it has liberated her mind from menstruation sluggishness. She grew inalienably stoic and stopped exploding, confronting or drinking when she is distressed. She explains age has improved her control of her ‘self’ and ‘appetite’. “Not only am I better at containing my emotions, I’m also much more in control of my appetites”.



However, “I’m more conscientious, more prudent, better organized, and more reliable”. But she can’t rule out the age related tendency to “peevisness” and age related “touchiness”.

She became stronger in mind even to the extent of braving the death which has been one of the dreadful realities that she has been fighting at the cost of her peace of mind. Diagnosis meant judgment, and sickness meant death. She realizes that she lived much of her adult life in a state of medical dread. She takes stock of her past life and self with exasperation and realizes that so much of the life wasted in vague neurotic terror. But now her “fear of death is considerably diminished, or perhaps it’s only more diffuse, more mixed together with the other elements of subjectivity” such as losing her husband.

She ends her essay commenting on the old-age wisdom about which she has repeatedly committed the mistake of taking for granted from her 12th year to menopause years. She asked her mid-70 husband: ‘What are the compensations of age? “Well,” he said, tentatively, “how about wisdom?” I was disappointed. That was it, wisdom? “Wisdom?” I said. “I’m wise enough already.”’ This indifference towards wisdom throughout human life has been illustrated by her own personal experience: “I’m reminded of the shame I felt when I was 12, and I told my eight-year-old cousin some nonsense about sex in a falsely wisened-up way”. She concluded with a mixed note of optimism and pessimism:

This is a good time in my life. To say otherwise would be rank ingratitude. I’ve finally worked free of the agitation and misery of youth, which in my case extended well into middle age. I’ve learned better how to live, to do my part in maintaining my marriage, to master impulse and cultivate self-respect”.... “I can’t know, of course, how long I’ll be able to keep it up. I can’t know where I stand in relation to the end. What I do know is that a lot can happen during the time I have. It’s a happening time: the late years are an avalanche of contingency”.

CONCLUSION

Gordon juxtaposes two binary possibilities of old age: the possibility her being attacked by all sorts of diseases and the possibility of her life being fine and going along, with a lot of internal energy. The essay not only gives a first-hand feminine experience of old age after excesses of youth and terror in the middle age, it very powerfully illustrates the delusions of middle ages. The literary devices that she employed to convey her conflicting experiences of life ensures that it is very lively monologue about the old age. Through the essay Gordon also answers some of the questions that she had asked herself as a young woman.



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