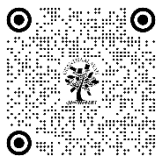


# SUBVERSIVE FEMALE AGING IN MUNSHI PREMCHAND'S "BUDHI KAKI (THE OLD AUNTY)"

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## ABSTRACT

The paper aims to dig beneath the contemporary apparent treatment met with female characters who have descended the peak time of their life i.e. teenage, adult, marriage and motherhood (post-menopausal phase of life) and stay at the periphery of the family and societal space and that the centre is occupied by those section of females who can voice out opinions, demand rights and protests against those who sideline them through careful study of Munshi Premchand's *The Old Aunt*.

The paper explores the common defence strategies that include denial (the refusal to accept the upsetting reality), displacement (the directing of anger toward people or things that feel unthreatening) and sublimation (and distracting of one's thoughts by engaging in physical or entertainment activity) and analyze the fissures and nuances present in the contemporary feminist studies that talk about power and equality to be shared between male and female and fails to actually acknowledge the violence and trauma inflicted to the females and which goes unnoticed as they find no seat but marginalized positions and find no recognition or place.

**Keywords:** Literary Gerontology, Premchand, Indian Literature, Postmenopause Women, Marginalisation, Subversion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Old age may be conceived of as 'Other' in youth-obsessed Western culture, 'a foreign country with an unknown language' in May Sarton's suggestive phrase (*As We Are Now*, 1973). Literary representations of older people, here, more importantly of aging female beyond 50 years of age, both shape and have the potential to counter our ideas about age and ageing. It may also help us to recognize the subjectivity of those who are already 'older' (since age is often understood relationally) and to understand the ways in which age and ageing are culturally constructed. On the one hand, the decreased social and physical mobility of older persons might naturally lead one to assume that they have little to offer regarding exciting tales of adventures or community machinations, excepting, of course, those heard from other sources. Their days of adventure supposedly having come and gone, replaced by what society often assumed were slow, quiet, pensive days in empty houses, elderly persons likely had little else to offer an audience besides reminiscences on bygone days. On the other hand, an old narrator is a convenient framing device, allowing an author to easily preserve the relatability of a first-person narrator while still providing the semi omniscience of hindsight that often otherwise only comes with a third-person narrator. As Looser and Chase have argued, old age is, in fact, perhaps the ideal state for a narrator, as it provides the emotional distance, wisdom, and perspicacity that much moralistic nineteenth-century fiction desired (19; 114). Consequently, even older narrators seemed to bolster the notion that the later stages of life are less

eventful and interesting — narration in old age was often merely an apparatus by which an author could present a compelling love-plot or adventure narrative of younger days as in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Real Durwan* (Lahiri, 1993).

In Indian literature for instance, *The Old Aunt (Boddhi Kaki)*, a short story by Munshi Premchand characterises the old aunt as a marginalised figure:

It was the pre-wedding ceremony of Buddhiram's eldest son, Mukhram, and the celebration was organized for that reason. Women were singing inside the house while Rupa was busy preparing a feast. There were large vessels on the stoves, in which delicious food was getting cooked for the guests; a tantalizing aroma spread in the house. The old aunt was sitting dejectedly in her room and the aroma reaching her nostrils made her restless. She was troubled by all kinds of gloomy thoughts: "It isn't likely they will serve me food; it is so late, yet no one has come with the food; it seems everyone has finished their meals and nothing is left for me." These gloomy thoughts made the aunt miserable, and she wanted to wail. But she held back her tears for fear of desecrating such a pious event. (*The Old Aunt*)

In her book, *The Coming of Age* (Beauvoir, 1972), an inaugural work on study of scandalous treatment of aging spanning across thousand years and a variety of different nations and cultures to provide a clear and alarming picture of "Society's secret shame"—the separation and distance from our communities that the old must suffer and endure. The questions raised in the book are: what do the words elderly, old, and aged really mean? How are they used by society, and how in turn do they define the generation that we are taught to respect and love but instead castigate and avoid? Most importantly, how is our treatment of this generation a reflection of our society's values and priorities?

"The least debatable of all the phenomena of our day, the surest in its progress, the easiest to foresee far ahead and perhaps the most pregnant with consequences is the ageing of the population", says Sauvy (1948). With the gradual evolution the literature of contemporary times is at loggerheads with the inspiration to emulate works wherein aging women come alive and readers become involved with them; when these characters grow up instead of "down" (Reifungsroman), readers not only cheer but also the marginalized stature of ageing females get a subsequent attention. The emerging sub-genre traces a different sort of maturing whereby 'Reifung' pertains both to ripening and maturing in an emotional and philosophical way. Barbara Frey Waxman in a groundbreaking paper *From Bildungsroman to Reifungsroman: Aging in Doris Lessings' Fiction* (1985) which opens way for the respective sub-genre in her contemporary novels and warns wherein that we misconstrue the true nature of old age for a woman; far from being a "dark" period of a woman's life, and prophesied that old age may offer the opportunity for "sun drenched" spiritual growth and increasing self-appreciation – a kind of New Jerusalem – and provocatively attributes it to the freedom that comes from the shedding of one's sexuality. The bridge between middle age and old age, the years of age from 50-60 is one that can liberate a woman from an inhibiting fear of death and enable her to develop true self-respect to become more receptive to relationships with others.

Very similar to Bergson and the Stoics, Giles Deleuze makes a Theory of surfaces integral to understanding the relationship between the body, time, and sense. In *The Logic of Sense*, by inverting Plato's association of the body with surfaces and ideas with depths, Deleuze reconfigures the surface as the site where sense is produced. At the "incorporeal limit" of the surface, however, sense does not arise merely from bodily causes but as a "surface effect" in the double sense of causation and difference (in the way an optical effect produces a secondary impression distinct from the elements that form it) (Deleuze, 1990). He writes, "Sense, the expressed of the proposition, is an incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition". To show how sense emerges from the surface, Deleuze references the way authors represent a battle:

They see the battle and make their heroes see it. But it is above all because the battle hovers over its own field, being neutral in relation to all of its temporal actualizations, neutral and impassive in relation to the victor and vanquished, the coward and the brave; because of this, it is all the more terrible. Never present but always yet to come and already passed, the battle is graspable only by the will of anonymity which it itself inspires.

The sense of the battle does not coincide with its representation but "hovers over" it. The temporality of narrative representation prevents the final arrival of sense, which remains in the liminal time of the "never present but always yet to come and already passed." The congealing of sense, its fluidity and expansiveness, arises at the soft membrane between the body's depths and the bewildering infinity beyond the surface: "Sense appears and is played at the surface...in such a way that it forms letters of dust". As in Deleuze's description of the battle, the representation of aging leaves behind something of its becoming as it slides into the past tense of narrative. Yet the sense of aging "hovers over"

the description. While a focus on reading into the aging of characters makes aging about something deeper- for example, the sudden appearance of grey hairs referring to a character's marital unhappiness- the surface of aging conjures the inarticulate feeling that characters grow older. Focusing once more on the outside signs of aging rather than the inward ones- to locate the duration of aging with the description rather than the structural elements that invisibly constitute it- demonstrates that aging is not a process that occurs behind the scenes, but right in front of us, on us, and in us.

The changing roles of women in the postmodern world have developed a gap between pre- and post-menopause women. The condition of post-menopause women is still vulnerable. The vulnerability is reflected in certain pieces of literature – sometimes as it is and some other times in a subversive way. Even Indian feminism, like its Western counterpart, has left the condition of post-menopause women unstudied. The studies in Gerontology assume the old age to start from sixty years, the post-menopause women of age between fifty to sixty years thus remain unacknowledged. The least debatable of all the phenomena of our day, the surest in its progress, the easiest to foresee far ahead and perhaps the most pregnant with consequences is the ageing of the population', says Sauvy (1948).

A basic assumption of narrative gerontology is that the narrative side of human life is as complicated and as critical to fathom as, for instance, the biological side, about which gerontology has acquired an impressive range of knowledge. An appreciation for the narrative dimensions is equally essential, however, if we want to seek a balanced and more optimistic perspective on what aging is about. And it is essential for honoring the dignity, humanity, and uniqueness of the lives of older persons.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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