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**THE ANXIETY OF DEPENDENCE AMONG AGED:
AN INCISIVE LOOK AT A FILM AND A SHORT STORY**

Vandana
Assistant Professor
Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi

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Abstract

This article deals with the intricacies of dependence in old age, and how the aged cope up with the thrusting forces such as the constant decline in physical health, along with loss of authority over their own assets, and gradually over the children, thereby turning totally dependent and having to spend the later years on others' mercy. In the Indian context, where ethics and tradition essentially co-mingle in an attempt to posit responsibility on the young towards their elders, gerontological studies offer an anthropological account of ground reality. In the same line of argument, instances from the Bollywood movie *Baghban* (2003), and Premchand's short story *Beton Wali Vidhwa*¹ are taken into account in the course of this paper so as to investigate the varied nuances of forced 'dependence' upon one's own-cum-others in old age.

Key-Words

Gerontology, Dependence, Aging, *Baghban*, Premchand, *Widow with Sons*.

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¹ Title in one of the English translations is '*Widow with Sons*'.



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"Pake fal pedo se rishta tod jaate hain,
Or apaahij baap hojaaye to bete chhod jaate hain..."²

Studying gerontology in the Indian context needs necessarily be placed within the scenario that the above-written lines point towards. Indian traditional ideas regarding the responsibility of the young towards their old parents/grandparents has been stereotyped enough that the elderly people, here, consider it to be their right that their children must take care of them the way they took care of them in their childhood — 'old age being the second childhood'³. Yet the figures of old and abandoned aged people fill up many plotlines of Bollywood films, and blanket the pages of many Indian stories and novels.

Perhaps ever since or with the onset of modernity, even the ageing body was started being judged on the basis of utility. We often hear people happily passing a sigh of relief attached to the idea—"chalte firte gaye hain... kisi pe bojh nahi bane..." thereby referring to the death of an aged family member who didn't cause any trouble to anyone in terms of 'service', and has passed away upholding his/her dignity. Perhaps it is this dilemma that Alfred Lord Tennyson records in his poem "Ulysses" — "dull it is to pause, to make an end, to rest unburnished, not to shine in use!"

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² Proverbial saying in Hindi by an Indian poet.

³ In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare writes of old age as being synonymous with "second childishness".

But how about the opinion of children whose bed-ridden aged parents do not die in that 'dignified' manner, rather cause much 'trouble' to the daughter-in-laws of the house with their bedsores, and ever-increasing 'demands' in terms of food or medical aid. Moreover, at not being able to support the materialistic needs of the family because of the aged body, the grandpa or the granny figure often suffer neglect at the hands of the new 'inheritors'. And living under this set-up, the grandchildren either happens to internalize this negligence, or as we see in Baghban, they goes on to oppose their parents in favor of what is right. For instance, the way the grandson of Amitabh Bachchan happens to spend the money taken from his father in the name of buying new school-shoes, in getting his grandpa's spectacles mended so that he would be able to read the letter from his wife.

Although here, in this film, it is not some natural calamity that separates the aged spouses, but the not-so-good intentions of their own children, who in order to get rid of taking charge of their parents' responsibility plans to discuss their separation. Yet much to their dismay, the disheartened parents agree to live with two sons, separately, at one time. This goes in line with what Cohen Lawrence describes as the "bad thing⁴" in the Indian context thereby referring to the breakdown of the traditional joint family structure under the pretext of modernity.

Nevertheless, the elderly protagonist in this film still had a job to retire from. But how about the people from the labor section who spend all their lifetime in toiling day-in-and-out to earn on a daily bases, or the self-employed middle-class Indian patriarchs whose all savings goes invested in, say, trying to settle the sons into some business, or in collecting dowry for their daughter's marriage? Seen from this light, even these exceedingly domineering patriarchs in their old age fall quintessentially into the domain of utter dependency and pity. The case of old street-beggars, however, falls much worse.

Oftentimes we happen to see some aged singles find confidants among the aged of opposite or the same sex, which makes them sit on park benches with them for more than half of the time they stay at homes. Yet the sheer idea of re-marriage in the later years with a retiring aim of tackling loneliness, has not yet been granted approval from the Indian lenses. For haven't we heard people say —

"Moh-maya tyaag ke bhagwan mein dhyan lagao", thereby putting a veil of spiritual pursuit over the trope of isolation; or using slang language regarding an elderly woman

⁴ Lawrence, Cohen. qtd. in Sarah Lamb pp.139

interested in bright clothing and applying makeup as—“bhuddhi-ghodi laal lagaam”. Hence one can clearly see that the cultural attitude towards getting old in modern India is not seen as a constructive phenomena, instead laden with negative stereotyping regarding the aging body as separated from the soul. As such under this backdrop how can one expect to have a sanctioned remarriage in the later life without being thought of as “buddha satthiya gaya hai”, or “budhaape mein jawaani chhayi hai”.

Although it is taken for granted that old age do accompany wisdom in terms of understanding, forgiveness, and adjustment, the general sentiments attached with the figure of an ‘angry old man’, for instance, is that of a frustrated individual, lacking sense in life, tilted more towards insanity, saying gibberish. If this be contrasted with the image of an ‘angry young man’, the image that falls before our eyes incorporate a whole range of emotions implying the man in question to be energetic, strong-willed, and determined to take a stand. Similarly the figure of grandmother is seen as the conventional stereotypical woman, capable of imparting pearls of wisdom. Yet sometimes is talked of as — “dadi-maa ki tarah kud kud mat karo”, as if whatever dadi-maa says hold no essence.

Coming back to Baghban, the suffering that the character of Amitabh Bachchan, and his wife undergoes impels him towards the narrative urge to tell his story, i.e., to pen down his life experiences of life past and present, and it is then when the world turns topsy-turvy for him with the immediate publishing and success of his autobiography. As such, the way for narrative gerontologists, our lives stand as potent stories unto themselves appears quite convincing. For instance the argument that William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth Mckim establishes in one of their essays stating that leading from a number of narrative surroundings, aging and the experience of aging proves to be an active, creative process, which makes one embrace his/her experiences and helps developing one’s narrative identity. This argument also goes in line with what Gary M.Kenyon, et. al. establish in an essay under the subtitle “Narratives and Postmodern Aging” that our “lives and life stories are not constructed in a personal vacuum... [rather] are co-authored in an interpersonal, social, and structural context⁵”. However, this approach has other nuances attached.

If we take the classic case of an aged parent living with or without the spouse, under the children and grandchildren, it essentially means an extra dependency on

⁵ Kenyon, Ruth, and Mader pp. 52-53

the new 'patriarch' of the family, who may be one of the sons. And what if the aged body suffers more than in terms of loneliness—arthritis, cataract, dementia, heart and breathing problems or the Alzheimer's disease? If one of these be the case, with the loss of language and memory, would the aged person(s) in discussion by any means be able to narrate the experiences? Because under this context it would not be the quest of reconfiguring, remembering, or radically retelling the past, but the inability to jot down enough words to convey a point about his/her basic needs.

In his book, *No Aging In India: Alzheimer's, The Bad Family and Other Modern Things*, Cohen Lawrence while discussing such old age issues states that the aging body becomes subjected not only to the "decay of the body, its reason, its voice, [but] its ability to be heard as a speaking subject⁶" (p.xv). Ageing then appears to be a social and cultural construct in which "the bed of old age is also the deathbed⁷" (Ira Raja, p.xxvi). This deathbed, then, to use Lawrence's terminology becomes the "dying space" for the aged in question, whereby an old parent/relative/non-relative would be assigned a particular 'space' to die amidst the bedsores and its air—thereby being subjected to structural isolation. While the dying souls may continue to live for eternities, much to the dismay of those in charge of their responsibility.

This plight of the forsaken Indian aged people is not so rare to be witnessed in our day-to-day lives. How can one overlook the wavering walk of old men and women standing in the never-ending queues in government hospitals, in spite of having full-fledged families caught with other preoccupations. Perhaps this inspires today's parents and grandparents to specify in their wills that their children would inherit the property only if they continue to serve them well till the very last day. Or how some insecure parents tend to make a press release stating that they are disinheriting their disobedient or an unsympathetic child from his/her inheritance rights. Or how some think it essential to specify in their wills that though their children would become the inheritors, yet they will not have the right to sell it off—the house being not just a material structure but a 'home'.

To cite an example from Munshi Premchand's short story, *Beton Wali Vidhwa*, the moment the recently widowed mother of the sons, Phulmati, realizes that she no longer has a say in the family matters, she makes her outcry loud enough establishing that—"I made this home, I saved up its wealth, I gave birth to you and reared you, and now I am an outsider in this house? It's the law of Manu and you

⁶ Lawrence, Cohen. qtd. in Sarah Lamb pp.139

⁷ Raja, Ira. Introduction. pp. xxvi.

want to go by it? Fine, take your house and the lot, but I won't agree to live here as your dependent. I'd rather die... I planted the tree and I'm not allowed to stand in its shade. If that's the law, then let it be burned".

Such a laudable voice of rebellion of an aged mother figure in pre-independent Indian literature impinges on the fact that the now-aged people have made much contributions in making their children stand where they do today. And in resisting dependence on her own sons, Phulmati's dependency anxiety about her widowed stature in the family as nothing but a marginalized figure, comes to the fore.

In fact the ending of the story whereby Phulmati drowns herself into the waters of the sea seems quite metaphorical, implying triumphant resolutions on the part of our aged protagonist who in a way refuses to live under continual sacrifice of her integrity in the hands of her sons. This resisting impulse parallels to what Vita Sackville wrote after Virginia Woolf's drowning—

"It felt that there was something in the idea of her being carried out to the sea, a small comfort in the midst of all these tragedy."

whereby sea does not represent a force of containment or confinement of any sort but a means of liberation, which by evoking the suggestion of privileging the dignity of the individual, propounds the idea of narrative foreclosure by the means of suicide. This suicidal strand, in fact, if taken a step further could be linked to the practice of euthanasia or the assisted suicide in order to escape prolonged pain and suffering, both physical and psychological.

If not a suicide, then what other options lie for such abandoned people to espouse? What else than seeking company and shelter in vridh-ashrams? While on the face of it, Phulmati would discard such an option in the name of bringing bad name to the family's reputation, yet in absence of proximity at home when several others turn to Old-Age Homes, doesn't this new machinery too only succeeds in propelling the idea of dependency on the state and the society? Certainly it does, but what does the government do beyond fixing a monthly pension of upto Rs.2000 for them? Is this enough amount to take care of the basic needs the elderly fall victim of?

As such whose fault is that if the elderly couple in Bhagban assumes that their sons would be dying to welcome and serve them? And if after the death of the father, the sons in Premchand's short story start exercising authority over their widowed mother

and the younger sister? However, an essential point to pay attention to in both the cases is the lack of a potent daughter figure available for the aged parents. For the support that an Indian daughter can be expected to lend to her parents after getting married is quite limited— with having a new family of in-laws to look after and take care of. As such the only ray of hope lies with expecting from the sons and the daughter-in-laws.

The Hobbesian society we live in clearly propagates the discourse which Darwin called 'survival of the fittest'. As such, to think of the enslavement angst among the aged people in this line of thought makes one imagine about where does the aging body stand in this trajectory? At the margins? Yes. Yet to take the crux of this theory to a secondary level, where Darwin suggests that it is not always the disabled, incapable body that would lose the race. Rather he states that the one with strategic brains, capable of adaptation and manipulation would succeed in finding a respectable place within this social order.

For this reason, a singular survival strategy to lead a socially respectable later life could be owning one's property till the very end thereby reducing the risk of becoming an unwanted dependent in the family. To think of real life situations undergoing such circumstances, one can apparently make out that a propertied aged, who might even be suffering from physical disabilities would not be subjected to a burdensome stature in the household. The power of owning wealth, hence, could make the aging process quite enabling instead of debilitating.

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