

## Ageing and/as Disability: (Re)Reading Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Kakababu* Series

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### Abstract

Despite man's lust for youthfulness, discovery of no such antidote to put the ageing process an end has made the contemporary world into a desperate search for 'productive ageing' or 'successful ageing'. Set against the negative stereotyping of the elderly where old age is deemed as a punishment, a burden, a socio-cultural death, spatial exclusion and the loss of self, postmodern discourse consider it to be socially constructed. The concept of 'old age' rebuts to be a monolithic category. Gerontology, therefore, undertakes to enquire the process of ageing on the one hand, and puts on show the techniques to make it as enjoyable as possible on the other. Literary gerontology instead of focusing on why we grow older, concentrates on and investigates into what growing older signifies culturally, socially, and politically, and the way it can be instrumental in fostering fecund interdisciplinary dialogue regarding how ageing as a lifelong activity is understood and experienced. Since time immemorial, Indian literature has been portraying a cross-section of perspectives on old age and the process of ageing. In the present study, efforts will be made to seek and show how the Sahitya Akademi award winner Sunil Gangopadhyay in his *Kakababu* series, falling 'usually' under the adventure genre of (children) literature grapples with the problematics of ageing.

**Keywords:** Ageism; Literary gerontology; Old age; Productive ageing; Successful ageing.

*enectus morbidus est*

(Old age is a disease.)

—Seneca (Achenbaum 681)

In our world today, there is little celebration of old age and the old person. We need the idea of the old wise man and woman, but he/

she seems to be present in the fairy tales than in our post-modern society. The wisdom of the old is not easily valued in an era of hi-fi and Wi-Fi, hi-tech and hi-speed in which the young, beautiful and ambitious are the emperors.

— Erel Shalit (148)

In our contemporary world of increased life expectancy, gerontology can no longer be consigned to ‘an academic backwater’. The incidence of a teeming *greying population* worldwide makes it imperative that we not only revise government policies on ‘threshold age’ and retirement schemes but also view the entire phenomenon of ageing from a new perspective. Down the ages, old age has been considered as an inevitable mishap, as “the only disease [...] that you don’t look forward to being cured of”. (Hamilton 4) Ageing, accordingly, has been expounded as the sum of the metamorphosis which decreases man’s capabilities and increases the possibility of death. This common definition of ageing as a kind of disability implies that old people be identified with dependent members in any collective rather than with its dynamic agents. In the context of the Indian society, the dominance of the discourse of *ageism* has meant, paradoxically, that old people be revered for their ‘wisdom’ – a stance which effectively implies their distance from ‘action’. Such stereotyping has a deleterious effect on the individual and social psyche.

Monolithic assumptions surrounding senility must be contested through inviting new narratives and imaginaries which re-count what it means to age actively and productively which is, in brief, the project of gerontology. In my paper I propose to critique the identity category of ‘old age’ by engaging with its various dimensions—chronological, psychological, social, ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ ages, and so on. To that end, I would like to proceed via literary gerontology and explore the politics of representation in *Kakababu*. Written by the Sahitya Akademi award winner famous Bengali litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Kakababu* is a series of adventure novels and short stories in the ‘young adult’ category surrounding the exploits of the aged but agile protagonist, the eponymous ‘uncle’ of the boy-narrator.

The ancient known manuscript bringing up ageing is perhaps a narrative written in 2500 BCE by Ptah-Hotep, noted Egyptian philosopher-poet: “How hard and painful are the last days of an aged man! He grows weaker every day [...]. Old age is the worst of misfortunes that can afflict a man.” (Shalit 154) Indeed, as Kate Davidson points out, “Reflection on ageing is as old as intellectual thought itself—from ancient

times, philosophers, scientists, theologians, economists, artists and writers have pondered the meanings and experiences of growing and being old." (Davidson 227) However, notwithstanding 'positive' narratives like the *antediluvian* and *Hyperborean ageing myths* or the Biblical Methuselah, or Cicero's famous assertion that "Old age is usually not only poorer, but is even richer [...] old age, so far from being feeble and inactive, is ever busy and doing and effecting something" (Achenbaum681), old age has been viewed down the ages as a punishment and an inevitable misfortune, or as Nobel prize winner Elie Metchnikoff dubs old age as "an infectious, chronic disease which is manifested by a degeneration, or an enfeebling of the noble elements." (Achenbaum682) Ageing is, as Butler clarifies, "a personal revulsion towards and distaste for growing old, disease and disability, and a fear of powerlessness, uselessness and death." (Minichiello et al. 2) Ageing, therefore, has conventionally been explicated as the sum of transformations which peters out human faculties and escalates the probability of death.

Being piqued by methodical stereotyping and prejudice of the aged people simply since they were old, the US based 42-year old psychiatrist Robert Neil Butler in 1969 coined the term 'age-ism' during an interview in *Washington Post* to denote a "process of systematic stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish with skin colour and gender." (Butler 35) "Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different than themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings," Butler added. (Butler 35) The sturdy stereotypes around aging, according to Butler, are those that can be truncated as '3Ds' – disease, disability and death. Subsequently, as the term acquired wide reception, it was incorporated in the *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1979 and therefore came out to be the subject of gerontological discourse. In the context of the Indian society, ageism has meant, paradoxically, that older people be revered for their 'wisdom' – a stance which effectively and simultaneously implies their spatiotemporal distance from 'action'. It is reminiscent of John Dewey's 'paradox of ageing' where the renowned philosopher-psychologist observes, "we are [...] in the unpleasant and illogical condition of extolling maturity and depreciating age." (Dewey iv) Evidently, such entrenched ideas have a deleterious effect on the individual and social psyche.

Coined in English in 1903 from by Ilya Ilyich Mechinov from the Greek *geron* meaning 'old man', and *-logia* meaning 'study of', gerontology is the scrutiny of the socio-cultural, psycho-cognitive and biological facets of 'ageing'. Gerontology basically deals with locating,

investigating and comprehending the ageing experience and the consequence of ageing. It differs from geriatrics which is the medical study of old age disorders. Social gerontology examines the experience of later life which has been sustained by a resilient humanitarian as well as theoretical standpoint which considers old age to be a social problem. It was Clark Tibbits who gave the nomenclature 'social gerontology' in order to underscore how "aspects of gerontology [...] (bears) a major component of social factors and forces." (Cox et al. 17) The social forces include the "roles and status of the old, how the old are viewed by society, and the degree to which normative aspects of aging determine the behavior of older persons." (Cox et al. 17) Subsequently, this broad area of study evolved into what is called 'critical gerontology' which is "a critique of the social influences, philosophical foundations and empirical methodologies on which gerontology as a field has been historically constructed." (Ray 675) It is "a more value-committed approach to social gerontology—a commitment not just to understand the social construction of ageing but to change it." (Phillipson et al. 280) Harry R. Moody also argues, "critical gerontology is concerned with identifying possibilities for emancipatory social change, including positive ideals for the last stage of life." (Moody xv)

An offshoot of the humanistic approach, 'literary gerontology' designates the study of older people and ageing in various genres and sub-genres of literary work in order to achieve a diversely imaginative and empathetic understanding of what it means to be old. Significant contributions to this field include seminal works like *Old Age* by Simone de Beauvoir (1972), *Stories of Ageing* by Mike Hepworth (2000) and *Writing Old Age* by Julia Johnson (2004). As Hannah Zeilig succinctly puts it, "Literature has been used to diverse ends within gerontology and by those who are not gerontologists but who have an interest in 'age'." (Zeilig 20) As Steven Weiland in his article "Criticism Between Literature and Gerontology" points out,

Gerontology has shown a steady interest in imaginative literature, largely ignoring developments in literary theory and instead accumulating accounts of what are often called 'images of aging.' Studies of this kind represent the historical mainstream of literary inquiry and the belief in referential value. Accordingly, literature is used to illustrate negative or (less often) positive stereotypes of aging or to provide an aging character in a short story, novel, play, or film as an example of resignation, wisdom, or another quality understood to be unique to the experience of growing old [...]. Literary case studies may be seen as standing



side by side, albeit in a different vocabulary, with objects of scientific research to demonstrate the consequences of aging in cognitive and personality development, family relations, and social attitudes. For obvious reasons this approach favors fiction and drama in which human character appears in recognizable situations over time. (Weiland 78)

Indian literature too is replete with portraying the experiences of ageing. The problematic of ageing find skilful portrayal in the writings of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, Ayyappa Paniker, Buddadeva Bose, Upamanyu Chatterjee, K. Satchidanandan, Dilip Chitre, Amitav Ghosh, Girish Karnad, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das among others. (Raja 10) Kamala Das in her writings, for example, poignantly depicts the distress of the alienation of the old people. As Amit Bhattacharya notes, "In many of her poems and prose articles, Kamala Das had tackled the issue of ageing and its consequent degradation as well as discrimination that lead the aged to the accursed fate of 'structured dependency.'" (Bhattacharya 201)

Celebrated Bengali litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934-2012) has remained alert to and expressive of the 'experience' of 'ageing'. In a poem titled 'Age', he writes:

So I'm growing older? I ask myself, laughing,  
Several times in the bathroom before my shower  
Even a pirouette or two in such severe solitude  
Can do no harm –  
Should I exercise to slim down, wear tight trousers?  
Out of breath with laughter in the evening  
I tell Nira,  
Have you been told I'm growing older? It's in the papers.  
It's true – my chest hair, sideburns, stubble, are all greying  
Here, see for yourself  
Everyone will say, what do you mean young, he's old  
This magic can't be cracked – how a young man can age  
But still people always grow old and die  
I'll die too  
Having loved some more, written some more poems  
Surely I'll die too  
Isn't that right?  
What is this place I've wandered into, so unfamiliar  
My kingdom was huge, but beyond that the body's  
Infinite music gives me pangs even to lower my eyes  
I enjoyed this journey, saw not a few sights, after all,

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Even the darkness is sweet.

Very much sensitive to the polemics of 'ageing', Gangopadhyay penned *Kakababu*, a series of 39 adventure novels and short stories in the 'young adult' category surrounding the exploits of the aged but agile protagonist, Raja Roychowdhury, the eponymous 'uncle' of the boy-narrator. With the sole exception of Syed Mustafa Siraj's Niladri Sarkar, a Santa-bearded Ex-colonel, *Kakababu* is perhaps unique in the long line of 91 Bengali detectives till date. Whereas the Bengali detective fiction that started in 1892 with Priyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Banomali Daser Hatya* (*The Murder Of Banomali Das*) have since been portraying spirited young sleuth, *Kakababu* is aged and differently-abled. Launched into the literary circle in the autumn of 1979 with the publication of *Bhoyonkor b* (*The Emperor's Lost Head*) in the puja number of *Anandamela* magazine, *Kakababu* series kept going for 33 years on popular appetite until the death of Gangopadhyay in 2012.

Raja Roychowdhury a.k.a. *Kakababu*, an ex-Director of the Archaeological Survey of India and an advisor in CBI, despite being aged and crippled responded to the clarion call of his passion, thanks to his unmitigated will power and profound mental strength. In the parlance of psychological theories on ageing, this phenomenon could be viewed as what Peck calls the mental stage of *body transcendence versus body preoccupation* where the individual learns to accept their essential being and not be preoccupied with their bodily infirmities. In fact, by way of winning over his infirmity and leading an eventful, adventurous life, *Kakababu* seems to present himself as a fictional rebuttal to Cumming and Henry's 'Disengagement Theory' that postulates,

Aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement resulting in decreased action between the aging person and others in the social system he belongs to. [...] His withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself [...]. (Cumming and Henry 14)

A critique of this theory seems significant since, in Kate Davidson's words, "Although conceived some 50 years ago, Cumming and Henry's findings continue to resonate with lay perceptions of how and why older people come to terms with withdrawal from the labour force, society and, ultimately, life." (Davidson 231) *Kakababu* seems to have achieved 'successful ageing' through voluntary work or pursuing one's passion as proposed by *Activity and Continuity* theorists like Havinghurst and Atchley.

*Sabuj Dwiper Raja* (*The King of the Verdant Island*) introduces *Kakababu*, the chief protagonist of the 39 fictions in clear terms:

While Kakababu looked years younger than his actual age, the truth was that he *was* getting on in years. [...] he was probably fifty-three or fifty-four. [...] He was demonstrably fit and strong, with an enormous, intimidating moustache [...]. (AK114)

By way of a flashback, the novel recounts how Kakababu lost his leg:

Back then, Kakababu had still been a high-ranking official at the Archaeological Survey of India. During a work trip to Afghanistan, his Jeep had skidded off the mountain road and tumbled into a deep ravine. Kakababu had eventually recovered, but the bones of his right foot had been splintered beyond repair. Shontu had heard his family talk about it. 'Powdered to dust', they had said. Kakababu had slowly learned to walk again, but now he had slowly learned to walk again, but now he had to use a pair of crutches all the time. (AK 114)

Notwithstanding, his age and disability, Kakababu never remained in the close doors of his house. As the narrator of the novel writes, "After that incident, Kakababu left his job, but he cannot live a peaceful life in home. Passion for invention is still alive in him." (AK 114) When in *Sabuj Dwiper Raja (King of the Emerald Isle)* Mr. Dashgupto asked Kakababu about the *raison d'être* for his volunteering for 'certain death' in most number of cases, Kakababu answers,

Because not everyone's cut from the same cloth [...]. Some of us might prefer to let sleeping dogs lie, but me? I know for a fact that if I don't get to the bottom of this mystery, I don't have a good night's sleep for the rest of my life. (AK 178)

What is more, in spite of having poor eyesight and a life-long disability, Kakababu neither expresses his agony to anyone, nor does he tell in explicitly the incident how he became crippled. This reluctance on his part to recount his bodily or chronological history could be interpreted as Kakababu's strategy of 'age resistance' through what poststructuralist theorists term a 'performative body'.

In *Pahar Churaye Aatwonko (Horror on the Hilltop)* Kakababu endeavours to climb Mt. Everest, the highest peak in the world by foot to solve the mystery of Yeti (Snowman). Being astounded, Shontu, his nephew cum assistant asks him,

Kakababu, you, I mean, I mean you are really going there? [...] Isn't it hard to believe that a lame footed man who can't walk without the help of a crutch will climb up to the Everest? (KSI 186)

The idea made the teenager Shontu all the more delighted, for

Kakababu will be the first on one count. For, never has a lame footed man with a crutch in his hand has ever dared to climb up the Mount Everest. (KSI 186)

In fact, Kakababu, the representative of Lansett's seminal concept of the 'third age' that denotes *active citizenship* as opposed to the 'fourth age' that "functions as social imagery of a fear of incapacity" (Kydd et al. 2018) goes to the extreme hilly areas time and again during his adventures giving a rebuttal to the traditional ageist concept that posits old age as a metaphor of unproductivity and death. In the short story *Ekti Lal Lonka (A Red Chilli)*, for instance, Kakababu goes to the far off Himalayan ranges in search of a strawberry like fruit that supposedly makes people invisible. (KSIII 259-276)

Kakababu never gets afraid to fight, actually he a man who is open to all the extremities of life. In *Shontu o Ek Tukro Chand (Shontu and a Moon Stone)*, to cite an instance, when the criminal Thakur Singh threatens Kakababu by saying, "[...] you have come with police to hackle me. I'll cut the two children along with you into pieces with this sword and bury you here [...]", the daring Kakababu retorts,

Thakur Singh, one of my legs is crippled; people think I'm weak. Yes, I'm weak, I can't run. But these hands of mine possess much strength than many. I can see more than anybody sees. Even my mind works more. I have been in trouble many a times, but none can kill me. You'll kill me so easily, don't you dare to think. (KSIII 400)

Then, keeping his crutches aside, Kakababu picking up a sword from the wall implored Thakur Singh for a duel. Despite Singh thought Kakababu to be a mere aged 'crippled Bengali', Kakababu jumping on his one foot whitewashed at ease Singh in no time. Thakur Singh became doubly ashamed since, "He could not believe that even having such a stout muscular body, he has got overpowered by a crippled, middle-aged man." (KSIII 402)

Kakababu's take on disease too is a remarkable one: he scarcely falls ill but even if, sometimes he feels unwell, he regards it not worth bothering about it at all. Shontu in *Kakabaur Prothom Abhijan (The First Adventure of Kakababu)* informs his mother: "Mother, Kakababu is running a high fever. But he's forbidden to tell you." (KSIV 287) When Shontu's mother noticed it, she insists on calling a doctor, but Kakababu dissuades her to

do so, saying:

No, no, there's no need to call a doctor. Just a fever, it will be naturally cured. If doctor comes, he will prescribe a lot of medicines, and push injections. (KSIV 287)

Kakababu further points towards the unpleasant situation he would be likely in if the news of his fever reaches his friends and relatives:

Now, the news of my ailment will spread everywhere and the friends and relatives will come in groups will visit me. This is the very nature of the Bengalis, they gather in the sick person's room and talk about their known ones who have died in various diseases. And have tea-snacks! (KSIV 287)

From a sociological and human rights perspective, we could theorize Kakababu's aversion to being designated ill and requiring medical help as a resistance to what is referred to as the *medicalization* of old age, that is, becoming the 'subject' of medical sciences who become the sole authority on ageing.

True, Kakababu being called aged and his consequent overpowering the societal notions of ageing and disability make him a brilliant case who has adapted quite successfully his age along with his deformity in due course of his life. Regarding disability, Debra Sheets in his article *Ag-ing with Physical Disability* asserts, "Disability is not a static condition but rather a process of continuous adaptation to changes across the life course." (Sheets 2) In Kakababu's case the process of ageing has been superimposed on disability, the phenomenon that has been dubbed by Campbell et al. to be 'accelerated aging'. (Campbell et al. 1999) It is indeed unfortunate that functional debilities that are often associated with 'old age' caught Kakababu on the hop in his mid-life.

**Note:** All the translations of Sunil Gangopadhyay's works are mine, if not otherwise mentioned.

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