

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: Deconstructing the Ageing Narrative

Jushna Baruah

Abstract

In a youth obsessed society, representation of ageing in the cinematic space is marked either by underrepresentation or misrepresentation. The interest of popular culture in the ageing experience is of recent origin. Following the emergence of Gerontology and Ageism Studies in the 1970s, a cinematic interest in elderly lives has been observed. However, cinematic construction of ageing is limited to a host of negative signifiers like disease, dependency, decline, isolation, loneliness, vulnerability etc. The purpose of my paper is to examine, to what extent, Hollywood cinema incorporates or challenges these conventional modes of characterisation. To this end, I have chosen the John Madden directed 2012 Hollywood movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Drawing on theories from the realm of Gerontology, Ageism and Feminism, the paper focuses on how the characters in the said movie conform or resist existing societal stereotypes about Ageing. Centred upon a group of British retirees who decide to travel all the way to India in search of a life of dignity and economic security, the paper engages in a rational analysis of their ageing journey.

Keywords: Ageing; Disengagement; Identity; Productivity; Representation; Sexuality.

In the cinematic culture that glorifies the young and denigrates the old, the near invisibility of older characters in substantial roles is not surprising. Youth obsessed Hollywood too is not exempt from such discriminatory practices. While it cannot be denied that older characters have been very much a part of cinematic narratives, what is disappointing is the lack of interest to penetrate deep into the complexities of their lives. Languishing on the fringes of the narrative in secondary roles, Hollywood's exploration of the realm of the old and elderly still leaves a lot to be desired. The same old stereotypes associated with old age have been churned out ad

nauseum. True, a *Sunset Boulevard* and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* in the 1960s are exceptions, but by and large an exclusive focus on mainstreaming the ageing journey is still to come of age. However, with the emergence of newer disciplines like Gerontology and Ageism Studies in the 1970s, the scenario has improved somewhat in the recent decades. The changing market dynamics too has been largely instrumental in a new found interest in Senescence. With increased longevity of people, the aged and elderly too constitute a significant chunk of the cinemagoers. Therefore, films catering to the lived realities of old age have also followed. Especially in the new millennium, Hollywood has seen an upsurge in the number of such films.

With films like *About Schmidt* (Payne 2002), *The Devil Wears Prada*, (Frankel, 2006), *Sex and the City* (2008) *Mamma Mia*, (Lloyd 2008) *Julie and Julia*, (Ephron 2008) *It's Complicated*, (Meyers 2008) etc, an attempt has been made to couch ageing in a different cinematic vocabulary. What sets these movies apart is the curiosity to explore the diverse experiences of ageing rather than ghettoizing it within the restrictive framework of physical decline and degeneration. Fictional representations of ageing conceive it in terms of pejorative connotations of disease, decline, dependency, loneliness, isolation, vulnerability etc. But this is not the whole story of Senescence. Looking beyond these visible markers of ageing, one enters a fascinating and complex realm of diverse experiences. The intent of this paper is to examine whether Hollywood relies on stock images or conjures up fresh and innovative constructions of ageing, in the light of 2012 Hollywood release *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. The potential of the cinematic space to usher in attitudinal changes is well acknowledged. By coming up with an alternative discourse of ageing, films can help redefine and reconfigure the ageing experience. "The imaginative freedom to enjoy ageing, to recognise its possibilities and rise to its challenges, depends to a considerable extent on how we see our ageing represented in the world around us" (Bryski 2). Viewed in this context, the role of Hollywood in capturing the true essence of ageing from a multi-dimensional perspective bears immense significance. The paper attempts to answer the oft repeated question 'what it means to be old' in the light of the movie under discussion.

A Dune Entertainment Production with the screenplay helmed by seasoned scriptwriter Ol Parker, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* was released in 2012. Under the directorial vision of ace director John Madden, the film takes a kaleidoscopic view of the ageing experience in all its shades. With veteran Hollywood stalwarts like Judie Dench, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith, Penelope Wilton, Celia Imrie in the lead, Madden's endeavours to central-

ize the ageing experience on screen. The plot uses the trope of travel on a literal and metaphorical level to enact the process of change and transformation that its elderly protagonists undergo. The story unfolds against the backdrop of Britain where the ageing characters find themselves entangled in their own personal battles. In such moments of crisis, the promise of a peaceful and placid life in a residential hotel situated afar in the fort city of Jaipur lures them with the prospect of a safe haven. Without too much of a serious thought, the characters take the plunge and embark on a solo trip, unsure of what to expect in the new city. This diverse group includes a widow Evelyn Greenslade still recovering from her husband's loss; Muriel Spark, waiting an urgent and affordable hip operation; the Ainsle couple- Douglas and Jean; a retired high Court Judge, Graham; a lothiar Norman Cousins and a sassy grandma Madge Hardcastle. Well past their 60s and 70s, these characters tear apart the ageist scripts that deny the old age agency and power.

In choosing to take charge of their lives, these characters counter the geriatric theory of Disengagement that perceives detachment as an essential condition of the ageing experience. Disengagement theorists Cummings and Henry contend that old age is a period marked by a withdrawal from social life. Postulating their theory, they remark "Ageing is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement resulting in decreased interaction between the ageing person and others in the social system he belongs to" (Cumming and Henry 14). Bereft of any meaningful and substantial roles to perform, they retreat into a shell of social isolation. Such a self-imposed exile from an active social engagement is an inevitable outcome of ageing. However, the characters in the movie travelling across the foreign skies challenge this reductionist view of old age. It is the quest of a dignified life and opportunities that is at the root of their journey.

At a time when Britain has failed its elderly citizens with its pathetic support services, crumbling healthcare and treating late life wellness as an individual responsibility, the travellers look forward to greener pastures in the distant Indian shores. While Evelyn and the Ainsle couple look ahead to take control of their fledgling finances, Muriel hopes to be back on her feet post her hip operation, Graham impatiently awaits a reunion with his estranged lover while Norman and Madge are on a romantic quest to explore the fascinating realm of love and sex yet again. Clearly such expectations on the part of the protagonists involve not disengagement but a reengagement with life. Ageing has not brought their lives to a grinding halt rather accelerated its momentum. In their quest for newer experiences, they embody what in ageism studies has come to be known as success-

ful ageing. The discourse on gerontology visualises successful ageing as a period of continuation of youthful activities in the best physical, mental and emotional shape possible.

The most endearing member of the group Mrs. Evelyn Greenslade, (played with her characteristic poise and grace by Hollywood veteran Dame Judi Dench), is a compelling and engaging presence in the narrative. Recently widowed, Evelyn has always led a protected life. Faced with an economically uncertain future post the death of her husband, Evelyn takes the life changing decision of leaving Britain for good and travel to India to take charge of her life. A visibly upset Christopher wonders if his mother would be able to cope on her own in a distant land to which she confidently replies that he need not worry about her. A solo trip to an alien land at her age is remarkable. In doing so, she busts the stereotype of the dependent and vulnerable elderly. In taking charge of her life, she displays exemplary courage and agency. She retains her autonomy and agential capacity in making her own life choices and executing them. Once in India, it is not long before Evelyn is totally at home adjusting and adapting to her new surroundings.

Whether it be navigating the dusty lanes of the shanty town, riding a tuk tuk to reach her destination, trying to pick up a conversation with a native in English, Evelyn instantly acclimatizes to her Indian cultural milieu. Evelyn's easy adaptability to a foreign culture and space authenticates feminist Betty Freidan's observation that the sustained discontinuity that marks women's lives makes them resilient and adaptable during ageing (Freidan 112). Evelyn's attempt at the formation of a new identity removed from familiar London surroundings and former sheltered existence undercuts the stereotypical construction of old age as nothing but a wait for death. Coming out of her deceased husband's shadow, Evelyn for the first time in her life is seeking a life of independence and self-sufficiency justifying in the process the emerging belief that old age facilitates a space for the older woman to redefine and reconstruct her identity.

The film also confronts the ageist scripts that associate ageing with a corresponding decline in productivity. While there is some truth to the assertion, denying the elderly any productive or utilitarian value is taking a too short-sighted view of the matter. In a radical departure from conventional notions, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* adopts an optimistic and positive stance towards old age productivity. When a 70 something Evelyn steps into the call centre office seeking a job, ageist society is quick to brush it off as an instance of misplaced and naive enthusiasm. The Manager Jay reacts

to the bizarre request with a stereotypical look of shock and disbelief. In the dynamic and vibrant youth driven workspace, Evelyn's dreams of being hired appear ludicrous. Jay's courteous rejection of her request echoes the societal notions of the aged as misfits and redundant in the workforce. Being past their prime, they are perceived as a spent force with nothing left to offer. Not easily discouraged, Evelyn's hangs on. What follows in the next few seconds changes the course of Evelyn's life. Her meticulously worded account enriched with graphic detailing of an event as commonplace and prosaic as sipping a cup of tea leaves him spellbound.

Mesmerised and awestruck by Evelyn's eloquence and felicity of diction, Jay wastes no time in handing over the job of a cultural counsellor. In a capitalist economy where the blanket retirement age comes with the mortifying reminders of a loss of productivity, efficiency and competence, Evelyn's recruitment in a youth dominated workplace may appear too far-fetched and unrealistic. Yet, it does hold out the prospect of new possibilities. In her new role as a blogger and cultural counsellor, Evelyn challenges the disassociation of age and productivity inherent in ageist discourse. In the same way, Muriel's last-minute intervention to save the Residential Hotel from being auctioned off by volunteering to take charge of the accounting and financial aspects of management also is a cinematic criticism of old age as lacking in utilitarian value. Evelyn and Muriel's transition into professional women in late life also reinforces the belief that ageing successfully also involves participation in the state economy through productive contribution.

Societal perceptions of old age are intertwined with the narrative of decline and stagnation. Ageing is perceived as a state of psychological stagnation that forecloses all possibilities of change and growth. *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* subtly critiques such a reductionist understanding of old age by foregrounding the steady evolution and growth of one of its prominent protagonists, Muriel Spark. Even age and her physical disability have failed to mellow her down. Her racial disgust for the Indians has only intensified over the years. However, she cannot help but travel to India to undergo a hip operation, fast and affordable. Her varied experiences, as she recuperates in the Residential Hotel confined to her wheelchair initiates a journey of self-discovery. From her Dalit maid Anokhi who religiously takes care of Muriel's every single need to the Indian doctors whose medical care and attention helps her back on her feet, Muriel learns the power of compassion and sympathy. Her earlier bitterness gives way to empathy and love. Muriel rises above her racial prejudices and misplaced sense of colonial superiority to accept people for their es-

sential goodness and treat them humanely. From the introductory scene which sees her ranting about the Indians as uncultured to her visit to her maid's house overwhelmed by feelings of heartfelt gratitude, Muriel exhibits a transition that is both fascinating and compelling. No more the snobbish racist bigot, Muriel is finally released from the false trappings of racial privilege. So much so that she has no plans of moving back to Britain whatsoever. In *Identity, Culture and the Post Modern World*, Sarup contends that individual identities are neither homogeneous nor static but perpetually mobile in their subjectivity. As 'processual subjects', their identities are not entirely determined (Sarup 61). Muriel's steady growth and changing outlook marks her out as a processual subject. Noting the usefulness of the processual subject in narratives, Brennan observes that "It allows the readers to accept and notice the subtle changes that characters undergo during the course of the narrative, countering any thoughts about life stopping after a certain age" (Brennan 12).

Another myth that has acquired the status of a truism is that old age is a period of asexuality. Old Age is viewed as a phase that marks the slow death of all sexual desires and fantasies. Especially for the older woman, ageing involves "a humiliating process of sexual disqualification" (Sontag 20). This is an extremely misconstrued notion of Senescence sexuality. Following this stereotypical belief, artistic representations of old age sexuality are caught up in the politics of either under representation or misrepresentation. Contrary to the official discourse on old age sexuality, ageing female desire continues till late life and challenges the expectation that with "age a woman becomes degendered and content with a more cerebral or spiritual existence" (King 155). In this respect, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* comes as a revelation in centralizing the sexual adventurousness of its principal protagonists. Madge Hardcastle, a sassy grandma, in the movie defies the cultural erasure of ageing sexuality. With five failed marriages behind her, Madge craves for a sexually and emotionally satisfying relationship and refuses to be tied down to social expectations of a caring and nurturing grandma. Not ready to squander away her remnant years babysitting her grandkids, Madge undertakes the trip to India lured by the prospect of a sexual adventure and possibility of meeting an Indian Maharaja to settle down with.

As a woman in her late 60s, Madge is sexualised from the word go in contrast to her counterparts -the sedate Evelyn or frail Muriel. Though engaging in phone sex to obtain tickets sounds bizarre for a woman of her age, yet it hints at her assured sense of confidence in her sexuality. She is the true embodiment of the post-feminist woman, who colludes in her own

objectification to have her way. The post-feminist obsession with an ideal body shape and appearance as a means of gaining control and power is demonstrated in the mirror scene where Madge subjects herself to intense bodily scrutiny. Gazing in the mirror is a ubiquitous trope in the image repertoire of age (Woodward 168). She is visibly impressed and satisfied at her reflection in the mirror before heading off on yet another of her many sexual exploits. Dressed stylishly and always made up, Madge tries to play up to the male gaze in the hope of coming across her elusive life partner. The sexualised characterisation of Madge conforms to what has come to be known as ‘the mask of ageing’ in ageist discourse. The mask of ageing suggests that external ageing appearance actually hides a more youthful inner self. The proponents of this theory Featherstone and Hepworth believe that the mask “alerts us to the possibility that a distance or tension exists between the external appearance of the face and body and their functional capacities, and the internal or subjective sense or experience of personal identity which is likely to become prominent in our consciousness as we grow older” (Featherstone and Hepworth 382). The trope of the mirror image in narratives of ageing also highlights the discrepancy between how one feels and how one appears in the mirror image.

Further, Jean Ainsle’s growing attraction for Graham also exposes the misleading claims of a non-existent ageing female sexuality. Extremely nagging and domineering, it is her romantic inclination towards Graham that humanises Jean. Trapped in a loveless marriage beset with marital discord and conflict, Jean Ainsle is desperate to break free from what she feels the claustrophobic confines of the Residential Hotel. With her excessive pride and arrogance, she refuses to engage with Indian culture or its people preferring instead to remain holed up in her room. Her new found romantic interest in Graham is the sole diversion that makes her stay at the hotel less oppressive and bearable. From stalking Graham to forcing him for a lunch date, Jean almost confesses her feelings for Graham. However, this short-lived one-sided romance comes to a screeching halt with the shocking disclosure of Graham’s sexual orientation. Graham’s homosexual preferences leave Jean aghast. Ashamed and embarrassed beyond measure at having made a fool of herself, Jean is left too shocked to react.

Even as Jean’s romantic interest in Graham strengthens the claims of heterosexual romance in late life, its comic resolution comes as a cautionary message against the risks and dangers of late life sexuality. Ageing female sexuality is a source of social anxiety that threatens to disrupt the neatly defined boundaries of heterosexual romance. Anything that transgresses the normative association of youth and romance is deemed deviant, ab-

normal and inappropriate. The disruptive potential of late life sexuality is carefully managed and contained by presenting it as transgressions, in need of correction. Therefore, such figures become the butt of crude jokes and derisive humour. In this respect, Russo's contention that 'not acting one's age....is not only inappropriate, but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially to ridicule, contempt, pity and scorn-the scandal of anachronism" sounds true of cinematic representations too (Russo 21). The comic intent behind the construction of Jean's character also results from the staunch refusal to normalise late life sexuality. However, despite the perils involved Russo reiterates that "Risking the scandal of anachronism is necessary and inevitable as a sign of life". Carole S.Vance's assertion that the sexuality of "the socially marginalized groups are represented in mainstream culture either rarely or inaccurately through caricature or other distortion" also stems from the societal need to demean old age sexuality (Vance 13)

The traditional association of romance with youth and beauty excludes the idea of romantic involvement in late life. Conventional depictions of ageing are predisposed to the spiritual and philosophical aspects of the ageing journey. However, exploding such rigid notions of ageing, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* places the romantic narrative at the front and centre. Trapped in a loveless marriage with Jean, Douglas needs an emotional outlet. Recovering from the tragic loss of her husband, Evelyn too is bereft of an emotional anchor and support. The mutual admiration and respect of the two for each other draw them closer setting the stage for a love story with a difference. It is a more a relationship based on companionship than physical intimacy. In choosing to be together at the twilight hours of their lives, Evelyn and Douglas evince a zest and celebration of their remnant years rather than meekly surrendering to its debilitating effects.

Unlike the comic treatment of Madge and Jean's romantic interludes, the heterosexual romance narrative involving Douglas and Evelyn is accorded due recognition and rewarded. One of the reasons behind the differential treatment appears to be the nature of the relationship. Madge and Jean's romantic longings are frivolous and lack in seriousness, while Douglas and Evelyn romantic relationship is more life sustaining and affirming. In doing so, they subvert the conventional scripts of ageing and optimistically look forward to an exciting phase of their lives. The iconic shot of Douglas and Evelyn whizzing past in their motorbike dressed in floral casuals like young teenagers in love makes a bold statement that love recognises no age restricted boundaries.

Cinematic engagements with the issue of homosexuality are characterised by a lack of creative interest. And when it involves old age homosexuality, the invisibility is compounded even more. Against this near absence of same sex relationship on screen, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* comes as a surprise with its frank and unapologetic treatment of the same. An ageing lawyer, Graham has lived a dual life all his life guarding his homosexual orientation from public eye. His relationship with his Indian lover Manoj meets an abrupt end when his parents learn about it. Manoj is dismissed from service while Graham's family too leaves India for good. However, Graham carries the burden of this guilt of having betrayed Manoj and seeks to make amends by meeting him one last time. The purpose of his visit to India forty years later is driven by this very desire. Graham no more cares about societal rejection and censure of his deviant sexuality. That one night when he unburdens the truth of his sexual identity to Evelyn seems like a cathartic release. Graham is no more secretive about his sexual preferences and proudly and openly flaunts his homosexual identity.

His search finally pays off when he discovers a much married and grey bearded Manoj in the latter's ramshackle hut. Both sink into each other's arms unable to control their emotions. This one scene which visualises Graham and Manoj locked in an intimate embrace constitutes one of the unforgettable moments on cinematic screen as it fiercely tears apart the veil of silence on old age homosexuality. Further, the political potential of this scene cannot be underestimated. On the one hand, it demolishes the normative construction of heterosexual romance and on the other subverts the existing theories of old age asexuality. Hollywood's belated interest in cinematically exploring such forbidden terrains of sexuality is indeed laudable.

To conclude, it may be safely affirmed that Ageing narratives on Hollywood screen are no more a rarity. With its immense potential to turn around the conventional scripts of ageing, the experience of ageing needs to be re imagined. While stereotypes will be around for a while, the scope of creating newer versions of Senescence is not limited. Within the conventional framework of the decline narrative, different facets of ageing experience can be explored. A positive visualisation will strip ageing of much of its dread and horror and redefine it as a fruitful journey to be enjoyed and celebrated. Madden subverts many of the clichés associated with ageing such as a loss of independence, autonomy, control, sexuality through the individual stories that make up the movie. Even though such constructions look fanciful and utopian, they are achievable given

a shift in societal attitudes. By initiating an unconventional take on the subject of ageing within the cinematic canvas of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Madden shatters the myth of old age as a metaphysical void and black hole of nothingness. On the contrary, it carries with it the vision of a future bearing the promise of rebirth and renewal; new awakenings and self-discoveries.

Works Cited:

- Brennan, Zoe. *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. London. 2005. Print.
- Bryski, Liz. "Getting Noticed: Images of Older woman in Australian Popular Culture", *Australian Studies* 2. 2010. Print.
- Cumming, E. and Henry, W. *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*. New York: Basic Books. 1961. Print.
- Featherstone, Mike and Mike Hepworth. "The Mask of Ageing and the Post Modern Life Course" in *The Body Social Process and Cultural Theory*. eds. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner. London. Sage. 1991. Print
- Freidan, Betty. *The Fountain of Age* London. Vintage. 1994. Print.
- King, Jeanette. *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. Print.
- Russo, Mary. "The Scandal of anachronism" in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Edited by Kathleen Woodward, 20-33, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1999. Print.
- Sarup, Madan. *Identity Culture and the Post Modern World* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1996. Print
- Sontag, Susan. "The Double standard of Ageing" in *The Other within us: Feminist Explorations of women and Ageing* ed. Marilyn Pearsall: Colorado. Westview Press. 1997. Print.
- Vance, Carole S. "Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality", in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring female Sexuality*, ed Carole S. Vance. London. Routledge. 1984. Print.
- Woodward, Katherine. *Performing Age. Performing Gender*(162-189) *NWSA Journal*. Vol 18 No.1 John Hopkins University Press. 2006. Print.