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Discussing Poetics of Aging: Link between Literature and Life in the Light of the Short Story, “An Hour with Abuelo” by Judith Ortiz Cofer

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Abstract:

There lies a very intrinsic and indispensable bond between literature and our life. On one hand, literature turns out to be a significant source, not only for gaining knowledge about different aspects of life, but also as a medium of understanding the ways of the world, which ultimately enlightens us from within. It opens for us the new windows of learning and experience. On the other hand, literature is woven out of the real life itself. It reflects the different aspect of our lives such as social, cultural, psychological and emotional as well. The only difference lies in the fact that, a literary scholar, no doubt takes up the main content from the real life itself, but at the same time he embellishes it with his creative and imaginative skills, and thus renders it quite unique, which ultimately entitles us to have magnificent experience. So, in one sense, we can argue that ‘literature is the heart and soul of our lives.’ In this paper, I aim at discussing the notion of Social Gerontology, a scientific study of aging that examines the biological, psychological and sociological factors associated with the old age. In terms of biological factors, we consider genetic background and physical health; the psychological well being include the mental health and general well being; and sociological factors range from personal relationships to varied cultures and customs that constitute a society. This concept can be further explored by means of taking into consideration the short story titled, “An Hour with Abuelo” by Judith Ortiz Cofer.

Keywords: Gerontology, lived texts and literary texts, growing older and getting older, poetics of aging, restoring in gerontology.

Introduction

Life is a journey, where people move from one stage to another, and thereby encounter changes in their lives. In order to understand and provide a meaning to their life, people usually tell their life stories. In fact the tradition of storytelling holds a great significance in our culture. Usually, the older adults share their experiences and the lessons that they have learnt in their lives so far. They tell the stories of their success, which they still cherish and derive strength in order to deal with the difficult times in their lives. They also tell the stories about their failure and sufferings, and how they faced challenges in their lives. In short, life can be seen as a metaphor for story, as it is the journey and saga of an individual who cherishes success, and at the same time, faces atrocities with a sense of courage, optimism and hope. In the words of William Bridges, “each person’s life is a story that he is telling itself in the living.” This statement can be further analyzed in this short story by Judith Ortiz Cofer.

Lived Texts and Literary Texts

Moreover, examining the parallel between the lived texts and literary texts is known as poetics of aging. Just as a writer writes a story of a novel (literary text), similarly, when we narrate or write our life story, we tend to deduce the meaning and essence of our identity in the course of our life story (lived text). Hannah Zeilig states that “The act of reading lives is similar to the act of reading novels or fictions. Both endeavours rely upon our interpretative abilities and are full of subjectivity.” In order to understand the concept of poetics of aging, it is very crucial to make an understanding of the term *poesis*. It is a Greek term ‘*poesis*’ which means an act of making or creating. In literal sense, it means actively engaged in the aging process. Moreover, aging is a vital phase in our life span, so on account of conjunction between aging and life, one can argue that, to speak about poetics of aging is to speak about the poetics of life itself.

Restoring in context of Gerontology

Narrative analysis is a popular way of approaching experiences through the examination of personal stories and storytelling. Stories are not always just a mechanical way of narrating the various events that have already happened in the past in a chronological manner. Rather, stories are the means and the ways by means of which the older adults revisit their past memories in order to provide a meaning, coherence and unity to their present life. In other words, narrative therapy enables the individuals to refashion, to reform, to rewrite, their life story in more synchronized, holistic and integrated manner than it was in the past. In the context of narrative gerontology, this process is known as re-storing (on account of re-telling the various events of one’s life). In this regard, Parker states that, “individuals build life stories as they age, and these stories incorporate past events into an organized sequence, giving them a personal meaning and a sense of continuity.”

Story in Brief

The story titled, “An Hour with Abuelo” by Judith Cofer, very significantly brings into light the value and significance of telling story of one’s life, in order to reaffirm one’s identity and to experience a sense of unity in the present life. It is a story set in a nursing home, called the “Golden Years.” It is a nursing home for elderly adults, who are not able to live on their own, after retirement. The main character as well as the narrator of the story is Arturo, (he is named after his grandfather). He visits his ailing (grandfather), which in Spanish means Abuelo, on the insistence of his mother. Otherwise he was more interested in preparing himself for his AP exam during the summer vacations. In the nursing home his grandfather narrates his life story to him, by revisiting his past memories. He tells him that, he always wanted to be a teacher and a writer in his life. He recounts how he stood first in his graduation; secured a job as a teacher; got married, but at same time he recollects some challenges and difficult times of his life: how due to war he lost his brothers and his job and ultimately ended up being a farmer in order to support

his parents in their old age. The story ends on a very optimistic note, where a nurse takes him to another room as he is supposed to recite a new poem to his fellow members in the nursing home.

Idea of Growing Old and Getting Old

In terms of the critical appreciation of the story, one can argue that, on one hand, it is a story of an old man, who is subjected to live and spend the rest of his life in a nursing home, after retirement. It is a story of a person, who is feeling dejected and lonely in the nursing home, so, by means of writing and narrating his life story to his grandchild, he tries to purge out his emotions of grief and sorrow, in order to experience a sense of inner stability and tranquillity. On this account one can argue that, the process of storytelling serves as healing therapy; it heals our mind, body and spirit, which ultimately motivates older adults to move towards a new psychological understanding of the self. On the other hand, it turns out to be story of the passion and unyielding will power of an old man, who still possesses the strength to fulfil his dream and desire, of becoming a writer and a teacher at this particular stage in his life as well. His optimistic attitude towards life, in itself depicts that he stands as a representative of the notion of ‘growing old’ rather than ‘getting old’.

Stage of Retirement and its Challenges

This story brings into focus one of the most important stages in the life of an older adult i.e. the stage of retirement. This phase is marked by a sense of huge transition from a stage of daily recognition and involvement to one with limited recognition and possible isolation from others, which can be emotionally and psychologically difficult. A person tend to experience a sense of inner turmoil, he feels alienated and depressed, which ultimately results in identity crisis. On one hand, the grandfather of the narrator has devoted his life to fulfil the desires of his children, to provide economic stability to his family, at the top of it all he discharged his duties as a caregiver. On the other hand, now, when he needs care and attention in his old age, he is left as a helpless being, who is subjected to spend the rest of his life in a nursing home. It is the reality of modern world and civilization, where we are becoming rich in terms of materialistic luxuries but in reality we are becoming emotionally barren, morally corrupt and completely indifferent towards the plight of our loved ones. The appalling reality of the modern society has been brought into light by the narrator himself, when he states that,

“Nobody could leave their jobs to take care of him.”

When the narrator meets his grandfather in the nursing home, he finds him sitting in his bed and writing something in a notebook. In a very light-hearted manner he asked,

“What are you doing, Abuelo, writing the story of your life?” It’s supposed to be joke, but his grandfather answered, “Sí, (yes) how did you know Arturo?”

His grandfather, was trying to purge out a sense of dejection and loneliness by means of recounting his old and happy incidents from his past, in order to provide a meaning to his present life, to experience a sense of unity and coherence, to reaffirm his identity, and at the top of it all, to experience a sense of inner contentment and solace. It is as if he is writing his autobiography, and subsequently, he is trying to fulfil his aim to become a writer. This approach towards life is what is known as 'Growing Old'.

Link between Aging and Narrative Process

In this regard, one can draw a link between aging and narrative process. As, we do not just age in terms of biological aspect, but we age in biographical ways, we age with respect to our sense of identity as well. We age with respect to our concept of "my life" in relation to particular past, present and future; in relation to our story. Our stories formulate our identity, we all at once, are the author, narrator, character, and reader of our story as a whole, and just as in this story the grandfather is adorning all these roles. Kathryn McInnis—Dittrich (2005) holds the view that, 'finding meaning in the past memories as a part of constructing meaning in present life is of vital importance.'

The grandfather recounts his life story, right from his adolescent days. He states that he was very passionate to learn, to read, and to educate himself from the very beginning.

"I love the words from the very beginning of my life."

He still remembers the significant role that his mother has played in educating and making him an independent and confident being.

"She taught us words from the newspaper...she taught us how to write on a slate." His grandfather recounts that after immense hard work and dedicated efforts he stood first in the class.

"I graduated at the top of my class!"

At the top of it all, he states that, he experienced the most wonderful and emotional incident in his life when his mother brought for him a present.

He said, "My mother brought me a beautiful, a white cotton shirt made of the finest cotton and embroidered by her own hands. I was a happy young man."

The grandfather tells the narrator that, "I always wanted to become a writer and a teacher."

Soon, he becomes successful enough in securing a job as a teacher. He expresses his sense of satisfaction in these words:

"I taught my students how to read poetry, plays, and how to write them...It was beautiful time for me." Thus, all in all, at this stage, he was at the apex of his career and was bearing the fruits of his hard work.

He further recounts the turning point in his life, which ultimately resulted in shattering away of his professional career and familial life. In his own words, he recounts the catastrophic event in his life. "Then the war came, and the American President said that all Puerto Rican men would be drafted...I wrote to governor and explained that, I was the only teacher in the mountain village. The governor did not answer my letter...the sergeant gave me a job of cleaning latrines."

Ultimately he ended up being a farmer, and got busy in discharging his duties as a dutiful son, who is supposed to take care of his sick parents in their old age. Finally, he ends his story, by putting down the notebook on his lap, and in a very low tone he said, "*Así es la vida*" which means, "That's the way life is." In one sense, he is bringing into light the precariousness of human life as a whole.

Unique idea of Textistence (turning existence into text)

By means of conscious efforts we transform our lives into stories of our lives. In terms of Bruner and Weisser (1991) – we turn existence into text i.e. into *textistence*, as in the context of the story, the grandfather is transforming his lived text into literary one, or into *textistence* by means of writing his life story in that notebook. In a way his notebook has become a metaphor for his life, and it turns out to be a philosophical sermon on life for the narrator. In this context, Randall holds the view that, "Narrative is not only essential to life, or to make meaning in life, but ...it is in stories and through stories that we live our lives at every level."

The story ends on a very optimistic note, where a nurse takes him to another room as he is supposed to recite a new poem to his fellow members in the nursing home. She said,

"Yoo-hoo, Arturo, remember what day is this? Its poetry reading day...you promised us you'd read your new one today." He asks the narrator to pass him a notebook titled, "*Poemas De Arturo*."

It reflects the very fact that, even at this particular stage, he possesses the zeal, courage and enthusiasm to accomplish his aim to be a teacher and a writer. In fact in order to live his dream of becoming a writer he has written his own life story titled, "That's the way life is" and a book of poems as well. It is also a reflection of the very fact that, he believes in 'growing old' rather than 'getting old'. His outlook towards life is very optimistic and therefore by means of recounting all his past memories he is trying to provide a meaning to his present life, and to experience a sense of wholeness and completeness in his life.

Storytelling as a Medium of undergoing Therapeutic Process

By means of writing and narrating his life story to his grandchild, he is unconsciously undergoing a therapeutic process: which enables a person to cleanse one’s heart and soul, from a sense of defeat and loss, and to find meaning in one’s accomplishments. Moreover, storytelling is a powerful medium and a vital social process that engages both; storytellers and story listeners. It provides an opportunity to the older adults to revisit their past memories, and then provide a meaning and identity to themselves in the present life. At the same time, it also helps the young learners to learn the lessons of life, by listening to the experiences of their grandparents, which is then imparted from the one generation to another. Thus, on this account, one can argue that, telling and listening stories is a very dynamic process.

It contributes in terms of establishing a complementary relationship between the two individuals. Firstly, the person who is telling his life story, is undergoing a healing process (psychologically satisfying experience), which further contributes in terms of providing him with an opportunity to come to terms with his own self and life as well. Secondly, the person who is listening to that life story will embark on a journey to have a sermon or a philosophical understanding of the various aspects of the life itself. As in this case, Arturo is expected to become even more sensitive and emphatic towards the old aged people, on account of learning about the various difficulties and hardships being endured by his grandfather. Moreover, in a broader sense his grandfather has turned out to be a role model for him, who has taught him one of the most significant lessons of life, i.e; to continue to work hard and chase your dreams till the last breath of your life.

This story clearly justifies the views of McAdams (2009), who states that, “A life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future in order to provide a life with a sense of unity and purpose.” Looking more closely at his definition, we see that a life story is first of all internalized. It is the “inside story” of experience that we continually fashion from the “outside story” of existence. Moreover, it is ever evolving and changes with time. The self story is constantly being created as it is lived. Berman, Polkinghorne (1988) states that “Our horizon of self understanding is continually shifting and with it our sense of the relation between not only past, and future, but also part and whole...” It means intermingling of all three modes or modalities of human time (past--present—future). I would like to conclude my discussion on ‘poetics of aging’ by stating the views of Bianchi (2005, p.321)—“The stories are integral to our sense of self—is a quest for personal meaning at deeper level.”

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