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Successful Ageing: Reconstructing Age-Identity in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*

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Abstract:

This article is directed towards the issue of how age was a determining factor in the construction of identity in the early modern England. With reference to the Foucauldian concepts of agency and subjectivity, and the term "successful ageing" used by Paul and Margaret Baltes in their book with the same title, this paper will discuss how the intergenerational tension between the elder and the younger lot of characters in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest* reflects the emerging conflict between the declining feudal values and the advancing capitalist worldview in the Elizabethan England and how the representation of old age in these two plays, through the reconfiguration of age-identity in the characters of Lear and Prospero, provide the bard with the agency that influences negotiation with his own ageing body.

Keywords: Agency, identity, representation, subjectivity, selfhood, successful ageing.

Since time immemorial, all forms of artistic expression are preoccupied with the consciousness of ageing and the anxiety of mortality associated with it. Though life expectancy and longevity rates in the early modern England were much lower than they are today, senescence was no less a disturbing concept in artistic mediums. Generational conflict and politics of representation had been at the heart of conceptions of self and identity in the Tudor England. The cross-generational collision between codes of hierarchy implemented by the conflict between the old feudal values and the emerging bourgeois ethics that dominated the socio-economic scene of the sixteenth century England, especially in the last decades of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, resulted in a double-standard reaction towards senescence. The attitude of the period towards old age was to a certain degree ambiguous. It was confused between a gerontophobic declining narrative of late life as a pernicious phase of senility and dementia and a reverence for the maturity, the "ripeness", and wisdom invested upon old age in the social and religious contexts. The resultant paradox pushed senescence towards the furthest extremes of age-identity in the politics of representation. Either the old man was the wise prophet or he was reduced to comic subversions. In short, people attaining the late phase of life were denied access to what was considered to be the normal flow of life. The overall attitude towards senescence conceptualized late life as a phase which dispossessed human beings of all forms of power and authority.

The normative structure of the society within which the subject[1] is defined operates through a network of information drawn from both biological and cultural discourses that

consider the acquired data to be the ultimate universal (if not the only available version of) truth. Based only on the explicit norms contained within the medical and chronological definitions of age, the old human body is given a peripheral subject-position with no control over the general ways of the society. In the Tudor England, the consciousness of the old self was constituted within a similar ideological structure. But towards the last decades of the Tudor era as well as of the reign of the Queen who represented an iconic and yet kinetic spectacle of age, representation of senescence went through a gradual change. The elderly Queen's victory over the young Earl of Essex over claims to the throne and her "politics of longevity"[2]presented her as a supernatural being far beyond the workings of the normative functionaries of age-identity. This strategy of the queen of representing herself as a youthful leader by promoting images of a younger-looking lady is criticised by Christopher Martin as being guided by a misogynist and gerontophobic bias towards age-identity and conception of selfhood in his book entitled *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature, from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*. But stillit cannot be denied that the ageing queen's dynamic authority over and presence in the socio-political scene negotiated a reconstitution and reconstruction of the concept of old age and introduced a form of agency towards resistance. Its immediate influence can be seen in the pastorals such as Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* and Sidney's pastoral romance *Arcadia* where the dominance of the elder generation of courtiers over their younger counterparts is metaphorically represented in the older shepherd's ability in reversing traditional narratives of withdrawal and decay into lively narrative throbbing with youthful vitality[3].

Politics around age and identity reached such a height in the Elizabethan England that the representation of old age in the literary expressions at that era exceeded the limits of biological factuality and came to be culturally constituted. Much like any other form of identity, age-identity is also not defined solely on the basis of genetic features- it is rather constructed within socio-political discourses normatively. The chronological and psycho-pathological characteristics of the human body in the later phase of life become signifiers that determine certain norms and codes of behaviour for the age-group that become the defining guidelines of old age. The peripheral position of the ageing subject dispossesses her/him from exercising the power, be it in terms of authority, or decision making, or giving opinions.

The fear of facing such a dispossessed condition or the gerontophobia played a major role in the politics of self-representation in the Elizabethan England. While the general attitude was one of withdrawal from and fear of senescence, the presence of the ageing Queen inspired reverence and awe. This paradox that defined the attitude towards senescence in the Tudor England is also evident in Shakespeare. While in the sonnets, much in the manner of the late Elizabethan verse produced by Raleigh and Donne, the theme basically revolves round the relationship between love and mortality and the gerontophobic bard is concerned with factors such as decay of the physical beauty, youth, mortal body, and Time and the ravages of old age, his plays showcase some of the most spectacular examples where aged characters reverse the conventional narrative of decline and banishment that is often associated with old age and, thereby, construct the agency that defies the imposed marginal position of the ageing subject. In *King Lear*, the protagonist is an old king who goes through

roller-coaster shifts in subject-position in terms of age-identity. Produced during the matured years of the bard himself, *The Tempest* also introduces the agency through old Prospero and the wisdom that he acquires with age. Prospero not only controls the situations and characters by manipulating systems of information and knowledge but also reverses his position back to the centre of power and authority. More than any other elderly characters of Shakespeare, Prospero is an example of what Paul and Margaret Baltes term as "successful ageing" i.e. "an opportunity to begin again, to regain control over one's life and to reacquire one's own voice" (Baltes and Baltes 4). This paper will discuss how in these two plays, concepts of gerontological subjectivity and age-identity are reconstructed and reconstituted by exercising the agency that is enabled by the social and political discourses of that period and the physical and cultural concepts of old age of Shakespeare himself with respect to his own ageing self.

Georg Lukács interprets the interpersonal and intergenerational conflicts in Shakespeare's plays, especially in his tragedies, as reflections of the contradiction between old feudal relations and new capitalist ones. He draws upon Hegel's term "collision" to represent the cross-generational conflicts that lead to the "break-up of the feudal family" (Lukács 93-4) or the old feudal patriarchal structure of social bonding. *King Lear* is a play about paternal power and its transmission that is fraught with gerontophobic stereotypes of age-identity. The play, through its two aged fathers, Lear and Gloucester, emphasizes economic concerns at the very centre of the generational politics between the aged fathers and their young children. While Lear and Gloucester stand for the old declining feudal values, Edmund embodies the emerging bourgeois underclass whose discontents with the authority of the old identifies the latter with social exclusion and mental decay. The denunciation for the "oppression of aged tyranny"(Shakespeare 182) in I.ii.49-50 of *King Lear* is evident enough of this generational conflict. Edmund's words that he puts into the mouth of Edgar to befool Gloucester in the first act of the play- ". . . sons at perfect age and fathers/ declined, the father should be as ward to the son and/ the son manage his revenue" (Shakespeare 183-84)- are evident enough of how one part of the younger generation in the play finds it fit to dispossess the aged parents the authority and power that in their consideration should belong only to younger people. The old father Lear is reduced to the status of a helpless baby that must not be allowed access to any kind of control or authority and must be kept under surveillance. Goneril's assessment of her aged father reflects the common gerontophobic stereotypes of age-identity- "Old fools are babes again and must be used/ with checks as flatteries, when they are / seen abused" (Shakespeare 191).

In her works *The Long Life* and "The Double Standard of Ageing", Helen Small points out why the ideological construction of age identity is harder to deconstruct in comparison to other forms of identity. She argues that since the bare biological body is object to the cultural and political discourses of the society, the constraints of embodiment that are deemed to be integrally related to old age are very difficult to outdo. Any attempt at reconstituting age-identity goes against the norms. She refers to Susan Sontag's view that the subjectivity of the old is determined by objective perceptions and concludes, ". . . the loss of freedoms [at old age] is an inevitable biological reality"(214). In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir also submits to this normative constitution of old age. Interestingly, while in *The Second Sex*,

Beauvoir criticises the socio-political and cultural constraints put to female subjectivity, in *The Coming of Age*, she builds up her idea of selfhood in old age mostly on the basis of similar constraints. Beauvoir sees age-identity as being historically determined and observes, ". . . whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view" (323). In the early modern period, it was this "point of view" or the gaze of the rapidly emerging younger underclass guided by bourgeois ethics that shaped the subjectivity and identity of the gradually declining old feudal class.

King Lear, a play written only two to three years after the death of the queen, reflects the duality in the period's attitude towards senescence. Martin sees the play as "both a grim antitype and an essential coda to the queen's legacy" (26). The younger generation regards the elders in *King Lear* with either violent disdain or piteous nursery. The identity of the elderly subjects at least in the first half of the play is thus fixed and stereotypically denied of agency. It is only through suffering that these elder characters gain that maturity and wisdom that allows them to have a favourable position in the Power/Knowledge hierarchy. Only through his suffering does Lear push himself back towards claiming his rightful access to the honour that he deserves as a rational human being.

Concept of madness also plays a crucial role in this respect. While Goneril and Regan accuse Lear of senility, Lear's frenzy in the storm scene provides him with an aura of prophet-like divinity and almost decides the plot's movement towards an old dispossessed Lear's coming back to the centre. Christopher Martin opposes Beauvoir's emphasis on the biological features associated with old age as the ultimate reality of age-identity. He draws our attention to the surprising kind of physical toughness of Lear that makes him survive betrayal by children and Cordelia's death. Neither to defy Goneril and Regan's condemn for old age, nor to complement Cordelia's sympathy for her aged father's "victimized weakness" (Martin 140), Lear is seen in this play to strive to "marshal his own formidable constitution against the public and private roles that the ascending generation would constitute for him" (Martin 140). Opposing Beauvoir, Martin argues that though "the 'outsider's point of view' may attempt to govern behaviour [of the subject], the individual's more intimate awareness of a bodily constitution to which she or he alone enjoys complete access provides critical recourse against such encroachment" (176). Edgar's tribute to the experience and wisdom of old age at the end of the play may signify a movement towards there construction of age-identity: "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long"(Shakespeare 392).

This reconstruction of the boundaries of the concept of old age reaches its peak in the last phase of the bard's creative period. As he reconsiders and negotiates with his own ageing body, Shakespeare portrays elder characters as having direct access to authority and control. All four of his last plays deal with a generational conflict that is in one way emblematic of the bard's consciousness of his own mortality. The present concern of this paper is limited to *The Tempest* only, because, of the four romances, reconstitution of age- identity is best represented in this one. The other three plays deal more with the process of growing old and the relationship between the elder and the younger generations than with the process of reversing the ideological stand regarding old age. In *The Tempest*, Prospero, the banished

Duke of Milan develops within himself a more capable political ruler in the island as he matures in years. Shakespeare portrays the character of Prospero as a master of his own will. Far from being a dispossessed affectionate father-figure hovering at the borderlines of the tale, he manipulates the incidents and situations to suit his ends. Prospero is given full access to the discourses of Power/Knowledge. He exploits situations and characters according to his purpose by manipulating information. Be it the misrepresentation and cultural manipulation of Caliban's heritage and the cult of Setebos, or the information provided to Ferdinand through Aeriel's song about Alonso's death, Prospero is at full control over every situation. His final words in the play that are generally seen as a camouflage for Shakespeare himself preparing the audience before leaving his vocation may also be seen the other way. It can be viewed as an instance of how the character manipulates even the creator himself and controls the ending according to his own purpose. Even the tragicomic form of the play seems less a structural feature than a tool at the hands of Prospero that he utilizes as a fitful genre to serve his purpose. The ageing Prospero is not at all a dispossessed paternal figure- he is the grand patriarch in full control over the characters. Prospero reconstructs and reconceptualises ageing through the agency of knowledge and wisdom.

By giving Prospero back his dukedom, Shakespeare asserts a victory of feudal values over bourgeois ethics and also shows attempts of coping up with his own ageing body. The Marxist playwright Edward Bond's 1973 meta-textual venture*Bingo*[4] focuses on this clash of values and throws light upon the crisis of growing old that is clearly evident in Shakespeare's last plays. In this play, an aged Shakespeare is seen surrendering to moral passivity and brooding over his failure as an artist and an intellectual as he does nothing to resist the capitalist advances of the local landowners in their attempt to enclose the land against the rights of the poorer farmers. Bond's play as a meta-text is a very crucial commentary on the age's generational crisis that flows under the surface magical charms in the *The Tempest*. Gonzalo's idea of the Commonwealth that is very much alike in spirit with the Marxist idea of the ideal socialist state pinpoints the drawbacks of the usurping capitalist values presented through Antonio. The aged Prospero at full possession of his power and belongings is a window for the bard to adapt to the rapidly changing worldview.

The paradoxical attitude towards the ageing subject that is still found in *King Lear* goes through a complete change as the bard himself experiences the process of ageing upon his own physical body. The dispossession and marginalization of the aged subject that problematizes conceptions of ageing in *King Lear* is completely absent in the making of Prospero. Through his final words in the play that Shakespeare uses as a farewell to his creative world, Prospero becomes an alter ego of the bard voicing on behalf of the poet. The reconstruction of the age-identity transcends the pages and becomes the poet's own device to cope up with his ageing self.

Notes:

1. In this article, the word subject is used in the Foucauldian sense of the term.
2. In his 2012 book *Constituting Old Age in Early Modern English Literature from Queen Elizabeth to King Lear*, Christopher Martin claims that the last phase of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, especially the period consisting of the last twenty years, is emblematic of the ageing queen's "politics of longevity" i.e. a strategy of self-representation adopted by the queen to overcome the political turbulences triggered by the socio-cultural confusions regarding her own ageing body. Martin argues that during these last two decades of her reign, the queen developed a strategy of representing herself as a noble youthful leader by promoting younger portraits of her. Critics like Martin and Margaret Easton argue that though thestrategy bore political benefits for the queen, was characteristic of a certain gerontophobia that was characteristic of that period.
3. Though Martin criticises Queen Elizabeth I's politics of self-representation as being guided by a certain gerontophobic misogynist bias, he also recognizes its influence in reconstituting old age in the contemporary pastorals in the second chapter of his book.
4. Edward Bond's another meta-text on Shakespeare, *Lear,* also shows the generational conflict of the play in terms of clashes between political values.

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