



**Remembrance of Things Past: Feminisation of Narrative in  
Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters***

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**Abstract**

Human beings are inherently story telling creatures. Whatever they do, think, speculate, speak, or even dream, does follow a narrative – a pattern which essentially tells a story. Coherence in storytelling is probably a naturalized phenomenon, necessarily inbuilt. Interestingly, the ability of narration and gaining wisdom both are something which happen throughout one's lifetime. It has been observed time and again that gerontologists have shown intertwining dimensions of ageing and these therefore in turn attach increasing importance to the study of gerontology –they include 'temporal', 'spiritual' and 'poetical' aspects of growing. Arriving at the human tendency of storytelling, it can be stated that the narrative of any story is something which human beings use to understand the 'temporality' of life, one with which they attribute meaning and logic and hence add coherence to their life, overtly or otherwise. Thus, the purpose of this essay obviously would be to question the 'claims' of this 'age' and 'ageing' narrative of many gerontologists which in turn can be substantiated by fictional characters like Hagar Shipley from Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and also Nariman Vakeel from Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* and also question how certain age-old attributes of ageing can be questioned through these literary texts.

**Keywords:** Story-telling, Narration, Gerontology, Canadian, Prairie, Parsi, "Ageing," Feminisation.

Human beings are inherently story telling creatures. Whatever they do, think, speculate, speak, or even dream, does follow a narrative – a pattern which essentially tells a story. Coherence in storytelling is probably a naturalized phenomenon, necessarily inbuilt. They follow a specific pattern from the moment of their being to the climactic zenith through multiple levels of crisis. In fact, the span of life of an individual is similar to any work of fiction – there is congruity in the midst of chaos. Growing old is a phenomenon, a process which leads the individual towards wisdom, and one might as well be aware of this growth of wisdom. Although some critics do ignore the possibility of any distinction between "growing old" and "getting old", yet "growing old" hinges upon diverse possibilities, among them, of

course to grow wiser with age and add coherence to an otherwise meaningless and chaotic life. Interestingly, this is something which happens throughout one's lifetime.

It has been observed time and again that gerontologists have shown intertwining dimensions of aging and these, therefore, in turn attach increasing importance to the study of gerontology—they include 'temporal,' 'spiritual' and 'poetical' aspects of growing. Arriving at the human tendency of storytelling, it can be stated that the narrative of any story is something which human beings use to understand the 'temporality' of life, one with which they attribute meaning and logic and hence add coherence to their life, overtly or otherwise. This temporality is also associated with a movement, any movement either backwards or forward. So emerging fields of study such as critical gerontology and the likes has been important in asking thought-provoking questions about the connection between literary narrative the stories of aging "when allied to perspectives of critical gerontology" (7) as Hannah Zielig would put in her essay "The Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology." Therefore, the article will make an attempt to read two literary texts in this light written by two Canadian writers, with different histories of ancestry. The texts concerned here are Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) and Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel* (1964). The purpose of this essay obviously would also be to question the 'claims' of this 'age' and 'ageing' narrative of many gerontologists which in turn can be substantiated by characters like Hagar Shipley from Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and also Nariman Vakeel from Mistry's *Family Matters* and also in turn suggest that the technique of story-telling or the narrative of the "aged" irrespective of gender are far more free flowing like Helene Cixous suggests in her "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) about the narratives of women writers. Unlike the structured masculine writing, in the masculine symbolic world, women as she suggested, should also try to engage with their "otherness" in order to reaffirm their understanding of themselves/ their social roles. Likewise, the present article will also try to draw upon this ideological grounding and try to also draw a parallel about how like the feminine writers/writing, aged individuals, irrespective of gender, their methods/techniques of story-telling are also free-flowing in which experience precedes language unlike the traditional masculine modes of writing. She suggests,

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— (Cixous 875).

The present article will try to address the same by stating that narratives of aged individuals have been 'feminised' despite the gender of the individual and how these narratives have

been either in lines with the narrative pattern sometimes which are circumlocutory) or made to appear so owing to the forced association of “weakness” culturally associated with women since time immemorial.

The movement is two-fold because even though we try umpteenth number of times to concentrate on living in the present, yet it is our past which dawns upon as our future, so one mode of time is incomplete without the other and ceases to exist independently. Any critical way of reading into life and its insight entails “questioning” and that too of some established normative beliefs. And it is true that such critical insight leads one to unmask certain possibilities which otherwise remains in flux as an undercurrent. Critical gerontology therefore is one such attempt of critically examining at certain levels, the meaning of ageing, what it means to be coming of age and the ability to embrace and accept rather than elide the complexities of later life. The relevance of gerontological studies at present of course comes from its pedagogical implications particularly talking about its narrative and critical aspects. Most often we find that human beings falter because, old age is associated with “feminisation” in general and senility which disables an individual’s swiftness is also associated with femininity (being a sign of weakness). Even Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* talks at length about older women as being “other” because they are rejected as their “youth” is spent. Irrespective of such possibilities and happenings we do find that ‘youth’ is often discarded considering the fact that it is often taken to be a symbol of “superficiality and decadence” as is seen by Kastenbaum in his interpretation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Through the portrayal of the character of ‘Dorian Gray’ though our confusion seems to multiply because we do not find any harmony between Wilde’s (in the author in general) persona and his creation.

Therefore, the relevance and contribution of Literature in the study of gerontology as a science is, more often than not, contested, though there are grandiose generalised claims that tend to establish insights of literature equally contributing to the larger aspects of understanding. Just as youth is “decontextualized,” similarly in Mistry’s *Family Matters* through Nariman Vakeel’s character, age has been infantilised and ageing has thus become a metaphor of retardation. Hagar Shipley’s character has been represented as a symbol of virility, youth and also simultaneously of age whereas Nariman Vakeel on the other hand is both judgemental, possessed with a spirit deference to ageing and senility that it brings along. But one thing that is common is that they both deny the “weakness” that is associated with ageing. Hagar had always disliked her mother’s sickly nature, trying to emulate her father, who was a tyrant. Thus “weakness” and “femininity” which has always been synonymous

almost, has also now covertly been associated with ageing. The social taboos that rests along with them also marginalise. 'Age' and 'ageing' also has certain notions which are collectively ingrained in human psyche. Mistry and Laurence both try to question these margins through these characters and also tries to establish the fissures through which society operates to perpetuate this arrangement. In a normal situation, most individuals resort to beliefs such as infantilisation of the aged as discussed earlier. So in these circumstances when it is difficult to theorise these experiences particularly through disciplines such as critical gerontology, Literature plays an important role in identifying these fissures. Zielig states referring to Jeanette King's article "Fiction as a Gerontological Resource: Norah Hoult's *There Were No Windows*" while talking about the critical trends in both Literary discourses and psychoanalytic discourses the developments that took place since the late 1940s especially when gendered beliefs on the "ageing" woman in a fictional work is not surprising. This should particularly be thought looking at the possibilities of whether or how much access the doctors had to these professional discourses. King states in her article that,

It is useful to consider what professional discourses were available to a doctor during the 1940s by which to describe a woman in Claire's condition Since the psychiatry of old age was still in its infancy during the 1940s, the absence of a gendered discourse of ageing is unsurprising (King 302-03).

These discourses at least give us a scope to analyse the fact that a certain kind of behaviour is expected from "ageing" individuals and that these behaviours are also to a large extent constructed. Any deviation from the normative code draws attention and is sometimes tagged as "different" as if this difference is tantamount to some kind of a disability. However, as Zielig opines, it is also very important to keep in mind that there is an interaction during the "story-telling" process (in the sense of 'narration' or narrating a story for instance in this case story of "ageing"). She states,

Insights from literature are truly insightful then, where the author and her/his work are contextualised properly, when their depiction and representations of age are interrogated rather than accepted and when they are understood as one in a number of cultural discourses. Understanding the historicity of old age and therefore recognising that it is a not a simple point of definition should be central to any mutual reading of literature and gerontology. Equally, the ability to separate "age" from cultural constructs such as "late-style" and allied to this, not using it as a facile explanation for any given story is essential (29).

In *The Stone Angel* we find that Hagar, who had always been fastidious enough, so as not to condescend to even a stranger, turns to into an infantile condition when she could barely even walk without Doris' (her daughter-in-law) assistance. She had to eat what others' cooked for

her. Coming back to Hagar's retrospections and introspections about her life, it can be felt that her life like any other woman's, was so much intertwined in all modes of time that her past and present, both immediate and remote, simultaneously seemed to the readers as vantage points, from where things could be understood better. With this concept of aging being a process, which generates puerility, also "depersonalises the adult world" (Hepworth 437). In Mistry's fiction *Family Matters* we get to see Nariman Vakeel, even though it is not a story which attests his narration, it is the narration of his grandson Jehangir Chenoy. Nariman Vakeel is a seventy-nine year old Parsi widower who is/used to be the the patriarch of his family, living in a huge, once-elegant apartment in Mumbai called Chateau Felicity, populated by his step-daughter Coomy and step-son Jal. Troubled by his Parkinson's disease, Nariman cocoons to the limits of immobility and is almost vegetative. Ignorance and intolerance from Jal and Coomy after Nariman's accident and their disregard for his pain forces him to move to Roxana's two-roomed apartment, Pleasant Villa. Jehangir's memory of their growing years, the love-hate relationship his father Yezad Chenoy and grandfather shared is present in him. He was also witness to the mutual love and respect that both his parents shared and felt as if that this was the soul in his otherwise defeated father's life. *Family Matters* is not a novel as Laurence's *The Stone Angel* seems to be. It is a recapitulation of past days of an old mind expressed through a young one, days which were painful because of economic crisis but love also prevailed. Sadly, the grown-up adolescent Jehangir at present cannot perhaps find that fun-loving protective father in Yezad anymore. His reminiscences include,

We sat on the sand for a while, looking out to the horizon, where the sun was slowly slipping into water. We sat in silence, Daddy with his secret burdens and me with my countless questions locked up in my head. I wanted to tell him I still loved him, but couldn't understand the new person he had become, I much preferred the father who made jokes, who could be funny and sarcastic, who could be angry one minute and laughing the next, as loving as he was headstrong, and able to stand up without clutching to religiousness for support. (Mistry 492).

His father had turned out to be a "non-stop praying stranger". The narrative of the novel, like Mistry's other texts includes multiple narrators, characters who read into their individual lives. In *Family Matters* an impersonated voice talks about Nariman's introspections about his relationship between him and the Christian woman Lucy, how his family's hatred and religious dogmas stifled their relationship's fruition which ultimately led to Lucy's traumatic accidental demise. Nariman's marriage with Yasmin Contractor, a widow with two children Jal and Coomy was never fulfilling and probably this growing distance was unacceptable for

Coomy. Coomy's memory, as a girl going through puberty, about Nariman was that of some 'phoney' cheat, an infidel husband who hardly bothered about anyone except Roxana (his own daughter). Coomy's bitterness for Nariman was something which she never could recover nor forget. After Nariman's accident in which he badly hurt his ankle and even broke it, this bitterness gives way to physical distance as well. It is understood in normal circumstances how age and gender interact and that can well be dissected from Nariman's situation. Nariman could not avoid comfortable chronological delimitations that are connected with "old age". Moreover, his physical and to some extent his psychological dependence, and weakness certainly, in a much-gendered way though, gets associated with femininity. Frequently, meanwhile, we get to see Jehangir's experiences of hearing his grandfather cry and deliver deliriums about the woman of his life Lucy. Her death, the incident and the circumstances were something which he could never accept. Having being forced to see Lucy working as a governess in the same building and staring at Nariman's window compelled Nariman to a sense of guilt, a guilt of feeling responsible for Lucy's lot. His sense of guilt reached to a climactic moment when Lucy's accidental death happened in front of him, Yasmin and his step-children. This was a shock which he could never recover nor accept. Even as Nariman is delirious in his sleep, and his sense of guilt is heard by Jehangir, there is a strange uncanniness which haunts their lives, of Nariman and Jehangir, as he could not then grapple the problem that frequently surfaced between his grandpa and Coomy aunty. Nariman was trapped inside the triad of memory, trauma and guilt. Both Hagar and Nariman try to reminisce about their past, their perspectives about their lives and how senile and dependent they have become. The building Chateau Felicity was an embodiment of grief and unfulfillment, as if jittering its jaws of remorse and death, mingling in the lives of those who had ever been a resident in the apartment. Before the death of Coomy and subsequently of Nariman, and before Jehangir and his family shifted their base from Pleasant Villa to Chateau Felicity, the relationship between Roxana and Yezad was never so soured. There was something ominous in the house Nariman felt, or some unforeseen power that circumscribed men's lives in Chateau Felicity. This never let any couple in the house remain happy. It happened to Nariman and Lucy, Nariman and Yasmin and of course completes a full circle as Yezad is later distanced by virtue of his dogmatic narrowness, strangely though, from his most beloved wife Roxana. Roxana even admits Jehangir that Nariman had warned her of this,

My mother grieves by herself about the ceaseless quarrelling and bitterness that has taken hold. She confides in me that Grandpa, during those last days at Pleasant Villa,

had tried to warn her not to move to Chateau Felicity, into his house of unhappiness. She is sure of it now, certain that that was what Grandpa had tried to tell her, and she did not heed him. (Mistry 494).

Coming to Chateau felicity was probably one of the worse wrong assumptions ever made by Roxana. It somehow gradually soured her interaction with Yezad, and strangely on Murad and his beloved Anjali, who were cast out of the family just in the very same way as Lucy was from Nariman's life. But both Hagar and Nariman somehow are represented as beings who act according to the social conditions that they have been subjected to, and yet their aberrations (as read by the society they are surrounded by/ other characters) are interpreted "childish" or sometimes "otherised" even in terms of gender attributes. Their behavioural changes are either infantilised or feminised. Zielig maintains,

Images of older people in a specific form of fiction are therefore examined through the lenses of age and "used" within a wider proposition: concerning the normally derogatory notion that older people are trapped in a state of childishness (24).

Literature or art in general do not necessarily have a purpose for its existence. It exists for its own being and is complete in itself. Similarly, gerontological literature does not always conform to the need of constantly informing the readers about the fallout of old age. But like other aspects of Literature, it helps in interpreting or excavating insightful "gaps" in discourse should also be kept in mind,

This pull that literature has on our imaginations should make literary gerontology an especially insightful means of considering ageing. However, often those interested in ageing have naively excavated literature for insight into both the subjectivities and universalities of ageing. Literature has been used both heuristically and hermeneutically for ageing but its epistemological status has rarely been questioned. Just as gerontological theorising was once described as dominated by "stories about theories" (Marshall 1999); so there has always been a danger within literary gerontology of getting lost amidst stories about stories of ageing. The tendency to find "catch all" solutions within the humanities is evidenced in the work of some of those who first looked to literature to expand gerontological knowledge (Zielig 22).

In Laurence's *The Stone Angel* Hagar's narration oscillates with sudden ruptures between past and present. In Hagar's revelation and insight of her own life, three dimensional changes individually affect her life. As she begins to understand the nuances, she accepts the temporal and spiritual elevation that had taken place within her, over time. A kind of psychological elevation takes place from her "Currie" self to "Shipley" which though is transformative but she remained critically distant sometimes particularly to not to adopt certain attributes of the "Shipleys," which according to her were outright uncouth, often to the level of perversion. Ultimately, she levitates to almost a poetical Hagar who develops the power to accept things,

accept human follies / lacunae and though late, experiences a moment of epiphany when a hymn is sung by Mr. Troy in the Silverthreads. Hers was, as if, a regeneration from the dead ashes of the past like a mythical phoenix that remains awestruck at its own capacity. Throughout the entire conversation between her and Murray Lees (her listener), we find certain strange dualisms of Hagar's self. Hagar was a resident of the Prairies in Canada, Manawaka, which was mostly an untraded virgin territory back in the time, before Mr. Currie established his empire. Prairies, geographically and climactically entail certain lunatic extremities. The contours of its landscape and soil have uncanniness within themselves. This uncanniness very strangely enters into the psychological part of Hagar's temperament. Freud talks about uncanniness in his essay, "The Uncanny" stating that it is a state of mind when it is both familiar and distant to a certain event, place or individual. The moment one feels attracted to and repelled by at the same time, the repelled object becomes a threat for the victim. It is oftentimes believed that, as Freud says, once something that we are familiar with undergoes change, and appears to be estranged from its original meaning or contexts, that is when we are afraid, or at least wary of it.

Such concepts of parallel acceptance and rejection creates a dissonance and hence there emerges a possibility for the formation of subcultures, and also warrants the possibility of rejection of the uncanny object or notion. It also initiates the process of formation of counter-cultures. Those who embrace uncanniness as opposed to the dominant society which rejects uncanniness from the standards of normal traits, are supposedly different and are at times unacceptable and a threat to society. Uncanniness therefore oftentimes becomes its own culture. For Hagar Shipley, uncanniness was not only inherent to her nature but also her life because she from the beginning was sceptical and suspicious about certain primordial human attributes such as human weakness; love; womanly virtues. Her life gave a start with the story of her mother's death during her birth, with which any other normal child, would have associated grief, loss and pain. But for her it was always a question of victory –victory because it was she, a tender soul, who transcended all signs of weakness whereas her mother succumbed to death. It was her strange disposition of loving her mother and overtly hating her for being so weak, because for her, weakness was crime. This came as a consequence to years of conditioned behaviour she imitated from her father. The image of "mother" for Hagar was symbolic of weakness, lack of strength and virility, hence attesting their tangibility. Whereas when she mothered or was in a position to mother or even during the course of time when Doris "mothered" her later, she disdained every act, detested Doris.



Cathy.N. Davidson in her essay “Past and Perspective in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*” maintains,

There are those whom she likens to herself. They are the strong ones, the survivors. There are those like her dead mother who can be summarily dismissed as weak and thus unworthy of attention. (62-63).

This was something passed on to her by Hagar’s father Mr. Jason Currie, irrespective of his numerous scolds, felt that Hagar supposedly is to be considered his real successor,

I wouldn’t let him see me cry, I was so enraged. He used a foot ruler, and when I jerked my smarting palms back, he made me hold them out again. He looked at my dry eyes in a kind of fury, as though he’d failed unless he drew water from them.... “You take after me”, he said, as though that made everything clear. “You’ve got backbone, I’ll give you that.” (Laurence 9-10).

These psychological moorings of both father and daughter can be owed to the contours of the landscape of Prairies. The Curries are highlanders. The Prairies strangely gives a sense of uncanniness. Hagar’s uncanniness grew from her ambivalence of love and hatred simultaneously. In her initial years she was haunted by the idea of being called weak and hence she started withdrawing her emotions. So much so that she could hardly “bend enough”, even in a dire situation when her brother Dan was at deathbed. Her withdrawal of herself apparently draws detest and disgust in her readers at one go, but when delved deeper we do start sympathising her. It was a kind of resistance to her father and also a strange reflection of her father’s self. Though she was “...resplendent, haughty, hoity-toity, Jason Currie’s black-haired daughter” (6), yet she was a woman, and a very tender hearted (though unaware) inside. Somehow, she could never reciprocate her proper feelings, to Matt her brother, for Dan, to her husband Bram, whom she loved tremendously and not even to John, her son. Later in her recapitulation she regrets, “Oh, my lost men.” (Laurence 6).

Both Mistry and Laurence try to delineate the vagaries of old age through these characters and depict in individual ways how these individuals are pushed to the margins, Nariman and Hagar through their infantilisation, due to old age. Also, to be taken into consideration are the nuances that come along with the interaction between gender and age. “Old women” and “old age” both are believed to entail idiosyncrasies of femininity and weakness and hence are marginal/ “others” in the categories of age and gender. Thus, the narrative of these texts become somewhat feminised. In the beginning of the essay, it is mentioned that growth is believed to take place in three dimensions—the ‘temporal,’ the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘poetical’. Though life has thrown up stymied confusion to Hagar, her spiritual sublimity is not attenuated even though her moment of revelation in life comes much later. It was all along,

her guilt, or her trying to ‘appear’ fearless and her ultimate acceptance of her weaknesses which allowed her to face death more easily. Her epiphany (even Nariman Vakeel’s lifelong realisation) reminds us of a temporal rise, a “Messiahnic Time” in Walter Benjamin’s concept, that will help them anticipate redemption from their past “karmas” and elevate them to a “poetic” self which is unaffected by external anxieties. This will render, especially Hagar, free from her social stigmas of being a “femme fatale”, a threat who counters anything dominant, creates a counter-culture, as a reaction against her uncanny self, a malevolent, life-denying sinister image. Both their realisations and recollections of their past, their swinging between ability and disability to cope are all interpreted as signs of “weakness” but literary gerontology or literary texts for that matter seek to address these issues by identifying silences and providing ways of redemption. And this they do through tools of narration, though this narration itself is sometimes construed as “feminised” owing to the inherent “weakness” it may represent. Thus, the present attempts to identify these gaps of “story-telling” about ageing, the taboos associated with ageing (feminisations for instance) and literary texts or fictional characters make an attempt to unravel these nuances.

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