

Successful Ageing, Love and Renewal in *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *this Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*

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Abstract

Ageism refers to institutional and personal discrimination against people solely on the basis of their age. This is being done through language, media representations, workplace structures and even internalized self-perception. This paper attempts to examine the representation of ageing through the select works Ashton Applewhite's *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Both these narratives challenge the internalized beliefs perpetuated about old age as a period of decline, dependency and diminished value. Socially constructed ideas regarding old age are being challenged through Ashton Applewhite's *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism*. *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez challenges the notion that love and passion are emotions that belong exclusively to youth. The works selected for discussion present ageing as a period of renewal and growth. Decline-based models of ageing are challenged through these narratives and they encourage readers to view ageing not as a period of erosion but as evolution. Transformative potential of old age is being highlighted through the narratives selected for discussion.

Keywords: Ageism, Stereotypes, Transformative Potential, Renewal, Growth

World Health Organization defines ageism as “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age.” The concept of ageism is all pervasive. It can affect anyone as an internalization of stereotypical perceptions occur from early childhood onwards. This internalization orients the emotions and behaviour of individuals towards society.

Ageism is discernible everywhere. Age- related beliefs are detrimental in directing ageism towards positive or negative feelings. Those who possess a negative approach towards getting older can result in developing high stress that can often lead to diseases. Such people show a tendency towards restricting themselves from engaging in healthy practices like doing exercises or taking medications. On the other hand, developing positive mindset towards ageing can promote successful ageing thereby reducing the chance to get affected by high-risk diseases. Thus, as stated by World Health Organization, “Ageism can change how we view ourselves, can erode solidarity between generations, can devalue or limit our ability to benefit from what younger and older populations can contribute, and can impact our health, longevity and well-being, while also having far-reaching consequences.” Ageism can thus affect the physical and mental well-being of people.

Ageism is not always associated with instilling negative perceptions. Becca Levy in her work, *Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long and Well You Live* states, “In every case, I found information that not only contradicted the negative stereotype but also highlighted a strength that comes with aging” (143). Positive insights and creativity can also be emerged from ageism. Productivity can be enhanced through ageism by highlighting generational strengths. To reduce the perpetuation of negative feelings about ageism, there is a need to revoke the cultures and systems that spread ageism. The concept of productive ageing must be developed. Ageing should be accepted as a period of role transition rather than a period of succumbing to decline.

The institutional and personal discrimination done on the basis of age is an attempt to stereotype old people as physically and mentally vulnerable. It is a general tendency to categorize old people as those with less cognitive ability and energy, slower to learn new things. Ashton Applewhite's socio-cultural manifesto *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism*, is an example of fostering successful and productive ageing. Ashton Applewhite is a writer and activist and a co-founder of Old School Hub. United Nations in 2022 recognized Applewhite as one among the fifty leaders shaping a more age-inclusive world. This work challenges cultural assumptions about ageing as a phase of decline. According to her aging is not a problem to be solved or a disease to be cured. It is a natural, powerful and lifelong process. There are many things that society associates with aging. Some of them are cognitive deterioration, less productivity and resistance to change. Applewhite argues that such discourses are socially constructed like racism or sexism. She urges for deconstructing such constructions and calls for a narrative reframing.

Ashton Applewhite remarks that old age is often associated with a deterioration in health and independence. This will ultimately result in "diapers, decrepitude and death" (Batchelor 00:14:32). It is an urgent necessity to overcome such stereotypical messages and to discuss why there is not enough representation of aged people in media, movies and TV as sexual beings. *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism* calls for a movement to achieve age equality. Aging should be celebrated according to Applewhite. This is because aging is a phase in a person's life when he/she gets freed from societal pressures like appearance, competition and social conformity. Once they get liberated from such pressures, they get a chance to experience psychological renewal. Those people who give more emphasis to their appearances tend to develop negative perceptions about aging. They constantly worry about their appearance and often become a victim to strategies that claim to reverse aging. Applewhite states it is not about how we look, but how people in power assign meaning to how we look.

She asks people to adopt ‘agefulness’ that can help people to become less self-conscious and also to give priority to oneself.

Ashton Applewhite views aging as a period of growth and not decline. There are many harmful myths surrounding aging. There is a general tendency to portray old people as burdens to society. According to Applewhite, negative perceptions regarding ageing affect our minds and bodies. She also talks about studies that state that people with positive attitude towards aging live seven and a half years longer than people with negative approach towards aging.

Applewhite advocates for an all-age friendly world. She calls for a pro-ageing movement that embraces ageing as a positive life stage. Appleton’s emphasis on successful ageing is deeply rooted in the ideas of Social Psychology. There is a close interplay between individuals and society. This interplay is reciprocal as individuals actively construct their social world according to their perceptions, experiences and circumstances. Social Psychology gives priority to self and individuals are motivated to maintain a positive self-awareness. This can be inculcated at any stage of life. Social psychology acts as a catalyst to identify and challenge stereotypes about ageing. It can promote successful ageing by supporting healthy behaviours, reducing age-related discrimination and improving social support. Such positive environments can help old people to embrace successful ageing.

An individual should also need the support of the system to adopt successful ageing. Caregiving is an inevitable part of this process. Providing affordable healthcare and caregiving, along with the support of a team of dedicated social workers can contribute to this process. *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism* is “a call to wake up to the ageism in and around us, embrace a more nuanced and accurate view of growing older, cheer up and push back.” (Applewhite 7).

Ashton Applewhite’s criticism regarding the non- representation of aged people as romantic and sexual beings gets countered through the work of the Latin American novelist

Gabriel Garcia Marquez titled *Love in the Time of Cholera*. “Set between the years 1875 and 1935, *Love in the Time of Cholera* follows the odyssey of seventy-six-year-old Florentino Ariza, who seeks to reunite with seventy-two-year-old Fermina Daza, providing the reader with a privileged look at gender relationships in a bygone era.... The story of Florentino Ariza’s equally interminable wait to re-unite with the love of his youth enables Garcia Marquez to examine the condition of aging and societal marginalization” (Jackson 25). This novel celebrates passion among elderly people Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza who get reunited after a period of fifty-one years, nine months and four days. “The love of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza in their old age is based on a newspaper story about the death of two Americans of about eighty years of age who were staying with their respective families and yet would meet every year in Acapulco, keeping their extra marital relationship in secret. During one such secret meeting the couple was out in a boat and the boatman murdered the two aged persons with his oars. And because of the murder the romance of the two aged persons came to the lime light, evoking discourses on the possibility of love in old age” (Haldar 119).

Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza associate their aging bodies not as a metaphor for loss but as the period to reclaim the thing that they have waited for. The novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera* emphasizes the idea that “love is ageless, in the sense that lovers do not have to be young to fall in love (Pelayo). Florentino Ariza uses the funeral of Dr Juvenal Urbino as an opportunity to reconcile with his widow Fermina Daza and proclaims, “I have waited for the opportunity for more than half a century, to repeat to you once again my vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love” (Marquez 64). Fermina Daza remembers how her father Lorenzo Daza wanted her to get married to a person of high nobility. Initially, she was not ready to forsake her love for Florentino Ariza. But later she became ready to move on by announcing that what she felt for Florentino was only illusion. She misinterpreted it as love.

Even though Fermina was not ready to accept the proposal of Florentino initially, she later changed her mind and went with him for tea. This was followed by their riverboat voyage together. Thus, they reclaimed their lost relationship and found peace in the fulfilment of their romance. When they reach the last port, Fermina came across people whom she knew and became scared of scandals. Florentino asked the captain of the ship to raise the yellow flag of cholera, to avoid other passengers from entering the ship. The Captain found that Ariza “was overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limits” (348). No port allowed them to dock because of the fear of cholera outbreak. When the Captain asked Florentino “how long they could keep up that coming and going and his answer was forever” (Haldar 135). Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza were thus forever exiled to continue their relationship in ship. It was a voyage “free of trunks, free of social commitments: voyage of love” (Marquez 345).

The reunion of Florentino and Fermina challenges conventional narratives that identify the youthful phase as the best period for the culmination of romantic desires. Through this novel, Gabriel Garcia Marquez urges the readers to identify old age not as a period of emotional exhaustion, but as a period of rediscovery. This idea closely associates with Ashton Applewhite’s notion of successful ageing. Old age is not a period of ending but a period of renewed beginning.

It is quite difficult to challenge the internalized ageist assumptions. In the novel, Fermina Daza became successful in overcoming the negative stereotypes associated with ageing. Florentino Ariza was not able to do it as he was more concerned about his public appearance. He tried various means to reduce the effects of ageing on his body. He was worried more about ageing because it was closely related to social dignity. He “spent a great deal of money, ingenuity, and will power to disguise the seventy- six years he had completed in March” (Marquez 48). He was worried about baldness and he “tried one hundred seventy-two”

solutions for it. But none of them proved futile and he “accepted his baldness with all his heart, he attributed it to the masculine virtues that he had heard about and scorned as nothing but the fantasies of bald men. Later he took refuge in the new custom of combing long hairs from his part on the right all the way across his head, and this he never abandoned” (Marquez 262-63). He tried all these measures to remain sexually attractive to women. He was not successful to escape from the internalized ageist assumptions and “his false teeth and broken ankle, hair loss reminds him of his increasing frailty and age” (Marquez 55). He tried to overcome from such negative feelings by wearing sexually attractive clothing.

Florentino was not only conscious about his dressing to resist his ageing phase. He also utilized every opportunity to indulge in sex. He preferred widows to have sex because he realized “that the world was full of happy widows...” especially, “after the death of their husbands” (Marquez 202-203). He tried to woo older widows because he relished the fact that he could feel younger by loving old women. Fermina Daza, on the other hand, was not anxious about the public perception of her body. She was bothered about her private and intimate spaces. She accepted ageing as a natural phase in every person’s life. She always found ways to address the anxieties of her ageing in her own ways.

Both the narratives selected for discussion reject the dominant narratives on ageing. Individuals should adopt a mindset to resist internalized ageist assumptions. Old age is not a period to remain passive. It is a transformative phase in an individual’s life. Ageing is a universal principle and therefore the concerns raised through both these narratives address the society in its entirety.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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