

# GLOBAL NORTH / WESTERN PERSPECTIVES



Queen's University Belfast & University  
of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature:  
Global South and Global North  
Perspectives"

## THE CONTEXT IN SCHOLARSHIP

- The emergence of gerontology, ageing studies and interdisciplinary scholarship, e.g. Medical Humanities, evinces a **welcome debate on how we regard older people**.
- There has been, specifically, a great **expansion of literary representations of ageing** from memoir and autobiography to poetry and fiction.
- There are basically **four kinds of theoretical lenses** (Maginess, 2023).
  - The **decline narrative** (most common in popular culture and political discourse, an internalised anxiety among older people and in poets like Eavan Boland).
  - The **successful ageing narrative** (Swinnen, 2018; Gulette, 2017 and poets like Maya Angelou).
  - The **geotranscendent perspective** (Tornstam, McMullan and Smiles). This often focus on how the ageing artist/writer reflects upon his own predicament and addresses, sometimes, late creativity and changes in style and content.
  - An **ambiguous view of age which recognises decline but also growth** (this is seen very clearly in Yeats and Heaney and also in poets like Billy Collins).

And, following the sociologists, we need to be alert to how **ageing is intersectoral**:

- We need also to consider the often **gendered nature of ageing** (Swinnen on the poetry of Bourgeois, cited by Maginess, 2023, p.44),
- And dimensions also of **race and ethnicity** (Swinnen on the poetry of Lucile Clifton, cited by Maginess, 2023, p.444),
- And, with other writers, the effect of **poverty**.

## THE COMMON REALITY

- While such representations often foreground positive perspectives and challenge the 'decline narrative', in the West and global North the shrinking of State support for care and support of older people has intensified **popular images of the old as a burden, as 'other', as non-productive** and of tropes characterizing the growing aging population as a tsunami, an epidemic. (Zeilig (2014))
- Older people are, thus 'constructed' as **negative consumers of scarce resources** (Foucault, 1977, 1982).
- This is not new; the Anglo-Irish writer, Jonathan Swift (1726; 2008, pp. 226-228), in his depiction of old people who cannot die, who would 'engross the civil power. . . [which] must end in the ruin of the public'.

- Western/global North societies have also changed profoundly. Many **women** – traditional suppliers of what Prof Kathleen Lynch has called **‘Love labour’** – are **now working outside the home**.
- One consequence is that older people, are increasingly **‘warehoused’ in residential homes**, ironically, staffed increasingly by young **women from the global South**.
- Influential thinkers like Segal (2013) have advocated **intergenerational solidarity** and a recognition of **interdependency**.

There are **challenges to this perspective** on older people and of ageing as, inevitably, a narrative of decline, loss and tragedy:

- Van Gennip et al (2016), argue that **caregiving** should not confine attention to health-related issues but should pay attention to the **'personhood'** of the older person – this is an important consideration, especially for Anita Desai' story.
- Yet, there is also a **rise in caregiver narratives** – a perspective not before much thought of. We now know more about the once silent voices of caregivers and the challenges they face (Varela et al 2011, Vernooij-Dassen and Moniz Cook, 2016).
- And there is more literature now too about the **gifts as well as deficits** (Spohr, Bayley, 1999; Maginess, 2012).

- We also have seen the **emergence of ‘patient narratives’** and a more **rights-based approach**.
- Branelly (2016) and Lanoix (2007) argue that being a citizen, being part of your neighbourhood or community, is based on **being relational and human to others**, rather than conditional on independence and ‘productivity’. This is very relevant for Anita Desai’ story.

# BUT WHY STUDY LITERATURE THAT DEALS WITH AGEING?

- For young people, poems, stories and plays about ageing allow a **glimpse into an 'otherworld'** and will, hopefully **foster understanding and compassion** in relation to the challenges and liberations of later life.
- For older people, literature **valorises and pays tribute to their experience** – so often overlooked.
- We can see literature on aging as forming a natural strand in **interdisciplinary fields** like Medical Humanities and Literary Gerontology where we learn not just about the science of conditions but the *lived experience*.
- And for this course, we have a chance to **exchange knowledge and experience between young and older people**
- And to **explore how ageing is represented** – both similarities and contrasts – in literature from **global South and global North**.
- Hopefully, that will contribute to **cultural understanding** – as we 'inter-read' each others' cultures and learn, also, how writers have revealed the reality of ageing in such complex and profound words.

