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Book Review

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The 13 chapters of *Cultures of Ageing and Ageism in India* fill a necessary gap in understanding what it means to age in the most populous country in the world during the 21st century. Probing deep into the "dispensability of the elderly" (2) amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, the book's editors, Paromita Chakravarti and Kaustav Bakshi, who share a background in English Literature and Gender Studies, insist on not viewing aging as a problem. Instead—through a queer-feminist method—they bring together chapters that bring to the fore nuanced cultures and politics of aging and examine its representations in various creative genres, all the while situating aging within the discourses of the nation, gender, sexuality, and temporality.

The editors contextualize the book's relevance within India's intergenerational subservience to the elders, wherein care needs have become central to the culture of aging in India. Care-giving in India is manifestly gendered: it is largely undertaken by women, whether by those within the family or those that are hired. In her chapter "From Maintenance to Care-ing: The Aged in Times of Changing Familial Geographies," sociologist Rukmini Sen writes about watching her parents age. She narrates how her father went from being the "dominant patriarch" to becoming the "recipient of care" (34). This, she argues, in many ways raises critical questions about care in a predominantly patriarchal and gerontocratic society. The study of aging thus includes reflection on India's queer aged practices, and the possibility of care networks developed through affective bonds rather than blood ties. One of the authors, queer-feminist Ranjita Biswas, was often asked by natal family members "*Bayas hole ke dekhbe toke*" ("Who will look after you in your old age?"), thus doubting her ability to care for herself. She writes that for herself as well as her activist friends, it was certain that their future years would be spent largely among like-minded people. The larger issue that they discussed was, "Do we buy care or do we build care?" (88), a question that guides the contours of this chapter, as well as many others.

In parts historical, ethnographic, and literary analysis, other sections of the anthology look at aging through the lens of literature, performing arts like theatre, classical dance and cinema, as well as in light of the respectability that comes with age for bodybuilders and wrestlers. Some of the chapters are distinct in their scope, as well as their ability to transcend the academic tendency to use heavy jargon. In his chapter "Queering Chrononormativity in India: Challenges and Possibilities" Kaustav Bakshi—also one of the anthology's editors—systematically details the historical invisibility of queer populations in India, and their attempts to find community through letters to peer-to-peer support groups as well as to support columns in newspapers. With snippets from some of those letters written in the 1990s, Bakshi shows us the hunger for community among queer people even in small towns in India.

Wondering about the age of those who sent in letters and their invisibility, Bakshi also shares the frustration among those who were suddenly in the spotlight because of LGBTQ+ activism, as it brought to the surface "newer challenges of negotiating one's existence in a predominantly heteronormative nation-state, leaning towards recognizing the queer as a troubled and traumatized population in want of protection under international pressure" (54). The chapter thus asserts that for many older queer people who lived their lives away from the gaze of their sexualities, the new gaze of being seen as 'queer' is unwelcoming.

On the other hand, the representations of aging in the creative arts like literature and theatre are far more nuanced and diverse. In "More Than Memories: Aging and the Attachment to Material Objects in Three Indian Short Stories" professor and researcher Ira Raja finds how attachment to everyday-material possessions are attempts to keep alive the strands with the past, while going against the grain of dominant calls in Hindu texts for detachment from material possessions upon aging. In the chapter "Actor as A Time Traveller: Politics of Performing Age Onstage" theatre actor Mansi Grover is written as a conversation between several actors who hold different perspectives on playing roles of different ages, with the help of their respective emotional memories. For the performance arts, there is also the concern that in the absence of dance philanthropists in India, older dancers fade away in the face of ageist attitudes. However, the aesthetics of the male body of the wrestler becomes central to the idea of a popular spectacle, even as physical strength and muscle control play important roles. This is best depicted in the photograph of wrestler Biswanath Datta, well into his 80s, that is found on page 112--which is also the cover image of the book.

In the chapter "Power of Vulnerability: Age, Activism, and the 'Daadis,'" the book's editor Paromita Chakravarti details the ways in which hitherto homebound *daadis* or grandmothers in India's capital protested on the streets in 2019-2020, along with younger people in a national movement to guarantee the right of equal citizenship. Chakravarti writes that they "radicalized the notion of power and agency by marshalling their vulnerability into an idiom of resistance through a collaborative, co-dependent intergenerational collectivizing" (15). Thus, their aging bodies are no longer markers of frailty but of collective power enabled through their age and wisdom, as they naturally command respect in the community.

In the final chapter, "Second Childishness and Mere Oblivion: Indian Films on Dementia and the Idea of Ageing Differently," the author, Nilanjana Deb, looks at the ways in which the depiction of persons with dementia in Indian movies bears an upper-caste and upper-class bias. Deb details how movies depict the forgetting of classical texts by older erudite men as a symbol of their memory loss.

The anthology presents several new perspectives on aging—from the agency experienced and expressed by the *daadis* protesting in Delhi, the possibilities for intergenerational learnings, new ideas of maintaining one's queer identity while aging, and the multidisciplinary ways of viewing the aging body in different spaces. In the final essay, whose lyrical flow brings in the rawness of fragile bodies beyond academic theorizing Trina Nileena Banerjee asks us, "but what exactly are the limits of care work? Is sitting beside someone on a park bench care? Does it constitute work?" (243). How, then, must we view time if all of it is meant to be productive, and hence for our lives to have value?

A small part of my own research has been delayed as I have had to care for my Indian mother when she was unwell for several days. The caregiving entailed simply sitting with her, reading out jokes to her from social media memes, when she did not want to strain her eyes by turning on her phone. Trina Nileena Banerjee implores us to recognize care in all its manifestations as work. While the essays within the anthology give a nearly wholesome view of aging in India—even as it misses perspectives from

rural India, or of those who are active online (Borpujari 2024)—they also touch upon the layered texture of care work as something beyond work as I experience it sitting beside my feisty and temporarily ailing mother. I write this book review while simultaneously watching my own mother spend her time on the phone on social media. As a result, I realize that this aspect of aging—spending time in new and different pursuits (Tripathi and Samanta 2022)—is missing from the anthology. Digitally-mediated forms of caregiving, aging with digital technology, as well as despite it, are growing areas of research within gerontology globally, for the digitized lives across different socio-economic classes and cultures. This otherwise-well-rounded anthology could have included a chapter or two on this.

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