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Ira Raja

## No Time to Die: Illness, Ageing, and Death in Three Short Stories from India

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**Abstract** While the narrative turn has opened up new areas for research and intervention in social gerontology, it also raises some important questions. What, for instance, is the place of the ageing body in the preoccupation with narrative? And how do we begin to think and theorize the body without allowing it to stand in for what it means to be old? This chapter examines the interplay between the materiality of the ageing body and its cultural constructions, with reference to three short stories from India. The ageing character in these stories resists being conscripted to the task of ventriloquizing a cultural narrative about the journey of life as leading inexorably towards death, of ageing as being inseparable from decline, of young lives as being more valuable than old, of equating loss of memory with a loss of selfhood, and so on. Crucially, the stories achieve this not through the deployment of heroic narratives of individual agency and activism. Discursive accounts of human subjectivity are instead interrupted in this fiction through the narrativizing of a body whose meaning is clearly not exhausted by the paradigms of power, language, and knowledge. Furthermore, while each of the three stories foregrounds the material body as being central to the meaning of growing old, this material body is not the unreconstructed body of medical discourse whose x-ray vision presumes to render it reassuringly transparent. It is rather a body that vies with the mind, as it were, to claim its full share of complexity, its unplumbed depths.

**Keywords** narrative, mind/body, memory, dementia, teleology

## The Cultural Argument

Early approaches to gerontology typically assumed that art was an imitation of life and that high art, especially literature, was to be valued for its deep insights into the experience of human ageing (Deats and Lenker 1999, 2–3). The assumption that art mimicked reality, however, was powerfully challenged by the poststructuralist thrust of the 1980s that interrogated the belief that literature granted any kind of unmediated access to reality. Literature and life, it was now argued, shared a dynamic relationship in which the former did not just reflect reality, but also helped shape it. Knowledge came to be recognized as being neither objective nor autonomous, leading literary critics to become less interested in asking whether stereotypes of ageing were positive or negative, and more in unmasking the dynamics of power that lay behind them. In contrast to the traditional biomedical and physiological approaches which tended to view ageing as contiguous with the body, the new approach informing gerontological research focused on the ageing body as “a social text, something that is both formed and given meaning within culture” (Hepworth 2000, 46–48; Twigg 2004, 60).

The scope of the cultural argument was seemingly contained in the subsequent turn in gerontological theory towards using narrative, particularly the insights of literature, as a means of understanding the dynamics of biological ageing. Narrative gerontologists focused on what Randall and McKim call “textistence,” a reference to the process of turning “the stuff of our life [existence] into the stories of our life [text]” (Randall and McKim 2004, 241). In arguing that people not only *have* a life story, but on some level *are* stories, that is to say, “they think, perceive, and act on the basis of stories” (Randall and McKim 2004, 236; Kenyon et al. 1999, 41), narrative gerontologists seemed to make greater room for individual agency than was conceivable within the social-constructionist approach. To draw on Hannah Zeilig, the concept of textistence invites us to ponder the critical difference between “what is and what is possible,” because scrutinizing the way a story is constructed, as Zeilig explains, also invites us to entertain the possibility that it may have turned out differently (Zeilig 2011, 10). Indeed, the optimism of Zeilig’s assertion is reinforced by the related concept of “restorying lives,” which focuses on how a creative manipulation of symbols can enable individuals to retell their life stories, giving them new meanings (Kenyon and Randall 1997).

There are of course limits beyond which a story and a life are not subject to “restorying.” In fact, in conceding the presence of “the outside aspects of the stories we are,” i.e., external circumstances, which impinge on personal narratives and overwhelm their open-endedness symbolically to liberate us, narrative gerontologists may be seen to return us to the question of culture (Kenyon et al. 1999, 41). As Julian Rappaport observes, for those who lack social, political, or economic power, the emancipatory potential of personal narratives may be truncated by the community, neighbourhood, or cultural narratives that are negative and narrow (Rappaport 1995, 796,

quoted in Medeiros 2013, 96). The redemptive possibilities of trying to read one's life as a particular kind of narrative, that is to say, are likely to collide, in the case of such individuals, with pre-established cultural plots, master narratives, frames, and scripts, which are so widely circulated that their author may be legitimately identified as a larger collective entity rather than a specific individual (Phelan 2005, 8).

## Whither Body?

While the narrative turn has opened up new areas for research and intervention in social gerontology, it also raises some important questions. What, for instance, is the place of the ageing body, in this preoccupation with narrative? And how do we begin to think and theorise the body without allowing it to stand in for what it means to be old? This chapter will examine the interplay between the materiality of the ageing body vis a vis its cultural constructions, with reference to three short stories from India. I will begin with a brief description of a powerful cultural narrative, that of the classical Hindu textual formulation of the *ashramadharma* (see also Michaels, in this volume), followed by close readings of the three stories for accounts of how this narrative may be contested via an invocation of the material body.

Addressed primarily to the upper caste Hindu male, the brahmanical doctrine of the *ashramadharma* posits that the human life-course be divided into four ideal life stages, namely, of the student, the married householder, the disengaged forest dweller, and the wandering ascetic (Vatuk 1990, 70). While contemporary Hindus may not subscribe to the idealized, four-stage life cycle in literal detail, they are nonetheless guided by the belief that life is made up of distinct developmental stages, each with its own normative code of conduct (Vatuk 1990, 70; Vatuk 1980, 135). Thus, old age is widely cued as a time for people to renounce sensual pursuits in favour of spiritual ones, and to withdraw from active involvement with household affairs—all in the expectation and anticipation of “a good death,” which is characterised as one that takes place at home and amongst kin, and is followed by the appropriate rites. The good death is also said to follow “a fulfilled life and occurs for a man when he has seen his children married; and for a woman, when she has seen this and dies before her husband” (Pocock 2010, 364). It is not premature and it does not come suddenly. Indeed, its unfolding must leave room for leave-taking, confession and atonement, acts of piety, and so on (Pocock 2010, 366).

Although the precise manner in which people express and interpret a cultural narrative can differ significantly from textual formulations, such narratives can nonetheless wield enormous influence on how individuals tell their stories to each other, and what they tell. And older people who deviate from the narrative norm in any conspicuous way, who are seen to not act their age, may attract opprobrium from others. If, as Mary Russo contends, the pressure on old people to act their age must at some point

mean their having to die, then, what is most forcefully challenged in the three stories discussed in this chapter, is the cultural narrative of a good death more than the normative ideal of the *ashramadharmā* as a whole. While the ageing protagonist in each of these stories comes under this kind of pressure, in each case, the literal body of the ageing protagonist upsets the calculations of chronology by refusing to die, and in turn, forcing the reader to rethink the overwhelming focus on discursivity when it comes to understanding the experiences of growing old.

Each of the three stories, from Tamil, Oriya, and English, enlists the ageing body as an ally in the project of disentangling the process of ageing from its contiguity with the body. It is the ageing body that digs in its heels, as it were, and refuses to go along with the cultural narrative of a good death which is defined as the end point of the journey of life, which takes place in the presence of the whole family, and before an inevitable loss of bodily function and the consequent loss of dignity, which comes at the end of a long life, and only after one's last wishes have been fulfilled. By visualising and/or verbalising age, not as a series of inevitable stages, but as "a state into which one may enter, languish, exist, or reverse regardless of chronological age" (Charise 2012, 927), the three stories may be read as attempts to subvert notions of chronological progression. Deploying the broad theme of the opaqueness of the human body, and more particularly of regeneration, of looking or feeling at odds with one's age, or through figures of ill and aged children, the stories confound cultural understandings of what it means to grow old. In the process, they recast old age as a comparatively open condition of being, one more permeable to "the influence of medicine, philosophy, and economics than was the ages/stages model" (Charise 2012, 928). The ageing character in these stories is seen to resist being conscripted to the task of enunciating pre-articulated cultural scripts about how the journey of life leads inexorably towards death, how ageing is inseparable from ill health and decline, how young lives matter more than those at an advanced age, how loss of memory may be equated with a loss of selfhood, and so on. Crucially, it does this not through the deployment of heroic narratives of individual agency and activism so much as by interrupting discursive accounts of human subjectivity through recourse to the body, whose meaning is clearly not exhausted by the paradigms of power, language, and knowledge.

### No story, no self?

The first story I discuss is by T. Janakiraman (1921–1983), widely regarded as one of the major figures of twentieth century Tamil literature, with almost a hundred short stories and a dozen novels to his credit. In the story "The Puppet," Janakiraman offers a powerful challenge to the master narrative of a good death. The story's ageing protagonist Venu has been very ill, and his large, extended family has travelled great distances to be present at his deathbed. Miraculously, however, he gets better, creating for the whole

family an unexpected crisis: were this situation to repeat itself in a couple of months, would they all be able to come together again in time to be by the old man's side? As one of Venu's daughters says, in confidence, to the narrator: "Couldn't God have taken this old Appa? See how He tests us. Can I come from Chandigarh as and when I want to? It takes me three whole days to get here" (Janakiraman 2010, 189). In other words, would it not have been better for Venu to have taken leave of this world, surrounded by his loved ones, and embrace a good death while it was still within his reach?

An old man, who suffers from acute short-term memory loss, Venu seems ripe for death in more ways than one. A highly successful lawyer of his time, he was always known for his sharp memory. It was, as it were, what made him who he was: "There was a time when I could quote from anywhere in the *Bhagavatham*.<sup>1</sup> Could recount the judgments of the previous forty years even when woken up suddenly from sleep. Now, everything is a blank" (Janakiraman 2010, 187). As Venu's younger sister makes clear, more than his advanced age, it is Venu's loss of memory and his subsequent dependency that attenuate his claim on life:

"That's the kind of man he was!" she exclaims, reminiscing about the past. "And today he asks his own daughter who she is. Sometimes he even asks me who I am. Shouldn't God have taken him away when his strength failed him? He doesn't even realize when his clothes fall away from his body! He can't recognize the face in front of him" (Janakiraman 2010, 191).

Even as Venu is denied subjectivity, his family is granted the same in what amounts to an "exchange of symptoms" between his ageing body and that of its caretakers (Cohen 1998, 51). As the younger sister says, while drawing attention to how Venu's condition has affected his carers: "Look at the people around him and how much they have to suffer! And I am not talking about physical suffering" (Janakiraman 2010, 191). But the family that denies selfhood to Venu does so less from a sense of fatigue at having to care for him and more because of its investment in the kind of person it perceives Venu to be. The centrality of memory to the process of becoming a more complete and self-directed individual as such draws on powerful traditions within Enlightenment thought (Biggs 1999, 114). As Simon Biggs points out, for the Enlightenment Philosopher John Locke, it was "the loss of memories beyond the possibility of retrieving them" that became a criterion for the non-attribution of personal responsibility and the discontinuity of personhood. In other words, if one cannot remember, how far can one be thought of as the same and accountable person? (Biggs 1999, 114). It is hardly a surprise then that the question of memory arises so powerfully in the context of Venu rather than any other character type: Memory is a significant factor in his

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1 A reference to one of Hinduism's eighteen great *Puranas* (*Mahapuranas*, great histories).

case not because the loss of memory *per se* is an index of personhood, but more because it is an index of being “a certain kind of person,” a practitioner of law who should by rights be the master of reason (see Cohen 1998, 142).

Nor is it just family members who would deny the old man subjectivity. As the gerontologist Jerome Bruner observes, citing Kierkegaard, since “we live life forward but understand it backward, it is in that backtracking that we impose dramatic structure.” For Bruner, this backward glance, so to speak, constitutes “the very process by which we construct Self, the central figure in this work of art (Bruner 1999, 8). For gerontologists like Bruner who profess a strong investment in the idea of narrative as the basis of identity (“No story, no self”), Venu likewise is a non-person, his failing memory leaving him incapable of constructing any kind of plotted narrative invested with a past and a future. Several events and exchanges in the story, between Venu and other members of his extended family, however, offer a powerful rebuttal of this perception. In one notable episode, Venu, on being teased by young children from the family for his inability to recall the word for a pencil, offers to tell them what it is used for: “It’s what you write with?” And he is puzzled when his young interlocutors insist that he supply them with the actual word: “Who needs a name? I’ve told you what it is used for.” And again: “What name shame! To go beyond all names and forms is wisdom, isn’t it?” (Janakiraman 2010, 188). While the narrator interprets this as no more than a sheepish attempt on Venu’s part to disguise the fact that his memory is failing him, Venu’s response in fact goes to the heart of an alternative conceptualization of personhood in old age being articulated in this story. As Venu insists, he may have lost the language for naming a pencil, but he still “understands” its uses. If the word pencil here may be read as standing in for what Charlotte Delbo calls “an ‘external’ memory, socially constructed, skating along the surface of words and engaging the intellect,” Venu’s intuitive apprehension of its uses stands for a “sense memory” located in the body (Culbertson 1995, 170). The story plays off the cultural narrative of privileging reason, which may be traced all the way back to the Enlightenment, against another cultural narrative which may be formulated in the timeless vocabulary of Hindu scriptures, but which at the same time also recalls current critiques of language-centred analyses of subjectivity, to finally draw attention to the limitations of the former. This is underscored in yet another episode from the story, where Venu overhears his younger sister recounting to the narrator a particular incident from the past, when Venu’s ailing wife was still alive. In the sister’s retelling of this particular incident, Venu himself, while clearly getting on in years, still seemed to have his memory intact, although there were other ways in which the sister thought he had begun to betray his age, viz. his disregard for social norms:

It was only after she [Venu’s wife] died that he became like this, wandering around, sometimes inside the house, going to the Pillayar temple, the Perumal temple, to the front, to the back. While she was

there he would never leave her side. There was absolutely no need for vigilance like this then. We were all embarrassed by the way he would stroke her, massage her legs. One day the son of the younger grandson came in and shouted, "Great grandfather is caressing great grandmother. He keeps bending down and kissing her." How many films these youngsters see everyday—must he kiss in front of the children—he had become so mad, you see [...] (Janakiraman 2010, 192).

The sister is still speaking when Venu suddenly appears from nowhere to interrupt her with his rather distraught question: "Then who should I kiss?" As he goes on to explain, he was married at the age of seventeen, and his wife had been with him for exactly sixty-six years. "We weren't apart for even one day. She quarrelled with my father-in-law. She didn't return to her natal home even for her first confinement. Who else will I kiss?" (Janakiraman 2010, 193).

As his intuitive bodily memory of the uses of pencil, his memory of his ailing wife whom he had started to caress, unmindful of societal norms that tend to frown upon such public display of spousal intimacy in traditional families in India even today, and finally his spirited defense of past gestures of spousal love shows, Venu may have lost his social memory, but he has clearly not lost the memory located in the body (Culbertson 1995, 170). The point is not whether the story offers an accurate account of dementia. The point rather is that the responses of Venu's extended family described here go on to show how only a certain kind of external, socially constructed memory located in the intellect is counted as legitimate, while the other memory located in the body, deemed expendable, is not allowed to underwrite his claims to a continuous selfhood.

In foregrounding Venu's failure to die on his supposed deathbed, "The Puppet" not only challenges the notion that old people who do not have the kind of memory and language necessary for narrative are people without a self, and who are therefore without a real claim on life, but also seeks to restore the humanity of the person diagnosed with dementia. The story reaffirms Kitwood and Bredin's contention that dementing illness need not automatically dismantle the person's subjective lived self. In their prescription for dementia care, Kitwood and Bredin locate "the problem" outside the person with dementia: it arises from a "damaged, derailed and deficient inter-subjectivity" (Kitwood and Bredin 1992, 273, quoted in Herkovits 1995, 156–157), accounted for in this story through the figures of the protagonist's third daughter and his younger sister, as also the more sympathetic narrator, who nonetheless repeatedly refers to Venu as "a body" rather than a person. Indeed, through accounts of characters such as the third daughter and the younger sister, the story underscores what Kitwood and Bredin describe as the hypocrisy, competitiveness and crass materiality characteristic of everyday life, that seems more pathological than a neurologically impaired elderly man such as Venu, who, by contrast, comes across as more

authentic, honest, and healthier in his (inter)dependence on others (Kitwood and Bredin 1992, 273, quoted in Herkovits, 157). Given his propensity to live and to take pleasure in the simple joys of the present, as evidenced in his ability to “laugh for the joy of laughing,” Venu presents a striking contrast to his carers who may be more mentally alert than him, but who are so locked into the calculus of profit and loss as to have become incapable of taking pleasure in patently profitless activities (as the narrator notes, wryly, “No one laughs without a reason these days” [Janakiraman 2010, 187]).

Scholarly research on dementia suggests that the responsibility for maintaining the afflicted individual's sense of self should be passed on from the patient to those around him/her (see Kitwood and Bredin 1992). While this may be a more enabling way of framing the interaction between care-giver and care-receiver, “The Puppet” locates agency within the victim of dementia by focusing on the non-verbal symbolic interaction between people as a means of constructing the self—a mode that does not privilege narrative so prominently. While language-centred analyses of subjectivity insist on the linguistic conditions of creating a self, where “self” is understood to mainly involve a process of social perception based on verbal language (Konecki 2005, 68), “The Puppet” asks us to also consider non-linguistic possibilities of constructing both interactions and self. It does this by drawing attention to the significance of corporeality, including non-verbal communication such as gestures, touching, embracing, and looking. Considering that more and more people in the world live on to an advanced old age, when the body is bereft of language and we have reached the limits of discourse, locating the self exclusively or even primarily in narrative is to risk a paradoxical situation where the body has been made invisible in narratives of ageing. As Shabahangi et al. point out, “people with forgetfulness can teach us about life and living,” but the desire to learn from forgetful people “demands a willingness to live in the question, to appreciate the mystery that envelops us” (Shabahangi et al. 2009, 45). It also requires us to recognize that not everything in life, like death, is possible, or even desirable, to be “read like a book.”

### Time for the fruit to fall?

A different kind of challenge to discursive constructions of the ageing body is posed by the well-known Oriya writer and linguist Bijay Prasad Mahapatra (1938–2015?). Mahapatra's short story “Unseasonal Pineapple” depicts the predicament of an old woman under tremendous moral pressure to surrender her will to live so that her ailing granddaughter may receive her kidney in an organ transplant procedure that could potentially save her life. The belief that it's only after the last wish of a dying person has been fulfilled that she may take leave of this world, leads the old lady's son and daughter-in-law, with whom she lives, to keep plying her with slices of pineapple she had happened to once mention she was



craving. But days seem to pass with no perceptible deterioration in the old lady's condition, while in the next room, the eighteen-year-old Mithi, who, in her mother's words "should be in the full bloom of youth," lay "shrivelled up like a sick kitten" (Mahapatra 2010, 219). Although nothing was said within earshot of the old lady, she was by no means oblivious to what was expected of her. As her son and daughter-in-law put it, "Everything was in her hands. If she earnestly desired she could pass away that very moment, and Mithi would be up the next, hale and hearty, very much the eldest daughter of the family whose every footstep had once put the blooming lotus to shame" (Mahapatra 2010, 221). Younger children of the family too had taken to repeating the parental message. Thus every morning they would say: "Granny, pray to God to put an early end to your suffering!" (Mahapatra 2010, 218). Contrary to appearances, there is nothing particularly crass about these expressions and expectations of the old woman. As Purushottam Bilimoria (1992) observes, the discussion of death, especially self-willed death, amongst the Hindus, invariably took into consideration the specific context and circumstance of the event. The Sanskrit terms for "suicide" by and large signify the act of "giving up one's life-breath," usually for the sake of some higher good or end. One may, he notes, sacrifice his or her life to save another life considered to be of greater value or worth than one's own. Indeed, the old lady is eager to relinquish her life, and she is filled with remorse, each morning when she opens her eyes and realizes that she is still alive:

She looked at them with a twinge of guilt. Why hadn't she passed away during the night? Why did she have to wake up alive this morning? She had had her slice of pineapple, she had had everything she craved. Why wasn't she dead? Maybe tomorrow the children would ask her the reason. What answer would she give them (Mahapatra 2010, 221)?

Then one morning, the old lady, all of a sudden, asks to be carried over to the next room so she could see Mithi. After a brief meeting in which they exchange a smile, she returns to her room and asks her son to bring her a palm fruit kernel. In the hope that this was the last wish, the fulfilment of which would cause the proverbial drop of water to fall from the yam leaf, the son rushes home with the fruit, only to discover that his mother had already passed away.

"Unseasonal Pineapple" foregrounds a crucial concern in ageing studies: to what extent we are aged by culture and where culture might run up against the materiality of the ageing body. Thus, although great external pressure is brought to bear upon the older woman to surrender her hold on life, and she herself strongly appears to want to adhere to the cultural expectation, her body simply refuses to cooperate. It is only after she has seen Mithi that something shifts. The old lady expresses a fresh craving for a new fruit, but this time her wish signals that she may be getting ready to

take leave after all. Is this then her belated concession to the cultural script in which a young life is valued over that of an older one? I wouldn't say so. By timing the moment of death as taking place before the desired palm fruit kernel actually arrives, the text seems to undermine the moral economy of the master narrative in which a young life is valued over an older one—a narrative of which the old woman's fruit-bearing son and daughter-in-law are pitched as the true custodians. The old lady, by willing her death to arrive before her son has had a chance to fulfil her last wish, however, writes herself into a position of agency in her own right. In the end, when she finally dies, it is not because her obliging children have fulfilled all her food cravings, it is not because the full weight of the cultural script has been brought to bear upon her. Her final decision to give up the ghost, as it were, is driven not by the belief that a young life is of greater value than an old one, it is not underwritten by the Hindu master narrative that sanctions a self-willed death to preserve one deemed higher in value. Rather, her final decision, for it is her decision, is predicated on considerations of an altogether more personal nature. The older woman finally embraces death out of love for her young granddaughter, in what is presented as a pact between the two women, sealed in an exchange of smiles from across the room. The story invites us to distinguish between two kinds of deaths—the one that has been culturally pre-articulated for the older woman and which she declines, and the other that she gladly embraces as an act of personal choice. The ageing body that refuses to be commanded by the cultural script responds to the command of the old woman's heart. It is a visceral response not intelligible in terms of language, power, and knowledge, but only as the non-verbal language of love uttered in and through the body.

## Dying the good death

The final story I discuss in this chapter is by Chaman Nahal (1927–2013), a former Professor of English at the University of Delhi, best known for his work *Azadi*, an English novel about the Independence of India, set against the backdrop of the Partition of 1947. Ram Prashad, the ninety-one-year-old protagonist of Nahal's English short story "The Womb," is once again under tremendous pressure to die. This time, however, there is no alibi—the old man does not suffer from dementia, and there is no life he could save by giving up his own. Ram Prashad needs to die simply because he has "lived too long" already (Nahal 2010, 128). Much like the two stories discussed earlier, "The Womb" attempts to disrupt a linear view of life as a series of inevitable stages to be gone through before one finally reaches the end point of death—by offering not closure but aperture—or openness—where even death fails to usher in the sense of an ending (Randall and Kenyon 2004, 334).

The narrative revolves around one of the most powerful symbols across all times and cultures around which entire life stories may be constructed, i.e. home. Typically, homes are built for one's children and grandchildren,

and to die well is to die “at home,” surrounded by them all, in the full knowledge of the continuity of the family line. Ram Prashad’s home is all this and more. The story begins by underscoring an intense identification between the two. Together, Ram Prashad and his ancestral home, the *haveli*,<sup>2</sup> present a vivid picture of neglect and marginalization: “This illness struck Lala Ram Prashad almost every winter. In spite of modernization, the *haveli* was too damp. It needed a new coat of paint. It needed some better ventilation, it needed a general cleaning up, and the family did not have the money for vast scale repairs” (Nahal 2010, 129). The discovery that his sons were planning to demolish the *haveli* after his death and construct high-rise apartments in its place fills the old man’s eyes with tears. “His demise would mean the demise of many old values in the *haveli*, he was certain, but that it would mean the demise of the *haveli* itself he had not for a second thought of.” The realization “[tears] a hole through [Ram Prashad’s] emaciated skeleton of a body” (Nahal 2010, 132), reaffirming Mike Hepworth’s sociological argument about the way bodies and spaces get interlinked in ageing, with decaying houses often standing in for decaying people (Falcus 2012, 1387). Nor is it the physical structure of the *haveli* alone that recalls for the reader Ram Prashad’s physical being. The *haveli* is also a reflection of his personality. Slowly and carefully, and always with good taste, the *haveli* has accommodated the signs of modernity: “The electric bulbs were lowered into the candle stand chandeliers. The phones were hidden behind niches. The TVs were firmly encased in heavy mahogany frames” (Nahal 2010, 126). But eventually the pace of change overtakes them both. The *haveli* needs to make way for new development, just as Ram Prashad is called to make way for the new generation to take its own decisions. If Margaret Gullette is right to claim that the master narrative of ageing is one of decline (Charise 2012, 927), then Ram Prashad and his *haveli* seem truly in its grip. And Ram Prashad feels this only too keenly: “He indeed was very old, a great-grandfather, who should have by now vanished from the scene.” And yet, the logic of old age leading seamlessly to death is less than obvious to the old man. “But why *should* he have? Why this imperative? He would go, anyone who is born has to die one day, that’s the very law of life. Only why this hurry? This *unseemly* hurry?” (Nahal 2010, 128). Afraid that the *haveli* might be pulled down after his death, he seeks to arrest that fate by somehow outwitting his sons:

[H]e could still show them a trick or two. He would simply cut them out of his will. Pass all the property and the other savings on to his grandchildren. When that seemed too protracted, he thought of adding a line to the existing will that for the next fifty years the *haveli* was not to be rebuilt or sold or mortgaged or changed in any form whatsoever (Nahal 2010, 133).

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2 A *haveli* is generic term for a traditional mansion in the Indian subcontinent, usually one with historical and architectural significance.

But then comes a twist in the tale. Ram Prashad's initial anxiety about the fate of the *haveli* starts to dissipate. Rejecting the normative definition of home as identity, he now seems completely disinterested in its future: "Why bother? Let them pull it down, if they so desire it" (Nahal 2010, 136).

In his description of the characteristics that shape the bourgeois, Paul Davies observes that the insistence on enclosing oneself, the accretion of material surroundings, disproportionate obsession with offspring and posterity achievements—traits that speak rather eloquently of Lala Ram Prashad's personality—are all signs of the fearful resistance to death (Davies 2000, 127). Indeed, the *haveli* has been the centrepiece of Ram Prashad's identity, a marker of social status, wealth, pride in self-reliance. It is through the figure of the *haveli*, which Ram Prashad hopes will outlive him, that he has sought to keep thoughts of mortality at bay. By writing his sons out of his will he had hoped to exercise control beyond death. All this changes, though, once he dissociates himself from the *haveli* as a narrative of identity and selfhood: "Lala Ram Prashad was gripped with tremendous fear. He wanted someone strong near him, someone to hold him as he entered the hereafter, to soothe him and comfort him" (Nahal 2010, 137). Ram Prashad has taken the risk of facing the unknown shorn of all the marks of social identity with which he had surrounded himself. This risk is different only in scale, not spirit, from the risks he is known to have taken before, such as the time when desperately sick and unable to stand on his feet, "[p]ersistently, when no one was around, in the middle of the night, he would try and get up. He would totter for a few seconds and then—fall flat, either on the bed or on the ground" (Nahal 2010, 130). To his sons this constant pushing at the limits of the body, risking fall, is not the sign of someone who is acting his age. And yet, the story has already undermined any fixed understanding of what it might mean to act one's age—after all, his sons are sicker than he is: in his ninety years Ram Prashad has not once been to the hospital. His vital organs still functioned smoothly inside him, whereas one of his sons suffered from a bad kidney while the other had high blood pressure. "Why don't they worry about their own mortality?" he asks angrily (Nahal 2010, 130–131), rejecting any easy relation between ill health and old age, not to mention old age and a notion of "wisdom" that excludes the tendency to court risk. If Mary Russo is right to claim that "risk is also a condition of possibility, a kind of error in calculating normality," and that "[u]ltimately it is a sign of life" (Russo 1999, 27), the manner in which Ram Prashad embraces death resonates with such irony as to force readers to rethink some of their deepest assumptions about death and dying in old age.

There are also other levels at which Ram Prashad's manner of approaching death dismantles the oppositions that govern our understanding of the life course. As we see, what emerges in place of his investment in the *haveli* as a sign of selfhood is Ram Prashad's intense interest in the *haveli* as a place in which he first arrived into the world as an infant: "In what room was he perchance born—where had the whole drama begun?"

(Nahal 2010, 136). On his orders, each day he is carried on a stretcher, through the narrow passages of the *haveli*, searching for the right room. He finally dies holding in his hands the photograph of a woman he has been told is his mother:

His mother. A bedecked and bejewelled beauty—as she always was. So infinitely precious. Such a pillar of strength. She had conceived him in her womb and shielded him until he was ready to face things on his own. Now that he seemed to falter, she offered him the protection of her womb again (Nahal 2010, 139).

As Kate Medeiros observes, the master narrative of ageing as the end of one's journey then values the past at the expense of the present or future. It finally underwrites the assumption that everything worthwhile is achieved in one's youth, and that old age is merely a time to reminisce about the past. "The Womb," by contrast, opens up an alternative view of time so that it progresses not in a linear but circular fashion: past and present fuse with each other as Ram Prashad seizes the image of the journey of life and turns it around so that the end of the journey brings him full circle to where he had in fact set out from. No longer looking to extend himself through his house and children, no longer seeking the provisional immortality these can grant him, Ram Prashad embraces death as a return to the womb, for which the *haveli* now stands. From being a structure in need of his protection when he was young, to one that promised him a life beyond death in his later years, the *haveli* eventually becomes for Ram Prashada place of refuge from a linear narrative of development and a progressive modernity in which old and decaying objects such as himself and his *haveli* are mere impediments to be overcome.

While traditionally, the house metaphor codes the body as finite, subject to loss, decay, and depletion, Chaman Nahal's short story reveals the body to be at the same time a site of continuity and connection. Thus, even though the story shows repeatedly how his ageing body interferes with his attempts to communicate with others, Ram Prashad never berates his body. More an accomplice than antagonist, it allows him to keep his unpleasant family at bay even as its dysfunctionality becomes a pretext for him to bond with his beloved four-year-old great-granddaughter Priya, who is then invited to intercede on his behalf with the rest of the family. Far from being trapped in the memories of the past, he trains his watery eyes towards the future, beyond life, in which he may be carried by none other than his own dear mother, decrying any attempts to accommodate his desire within existing discourses of religion and spirituality. The old man does not look to "return home" to an idealized past located in an image of "the happy joint family" in which all the relationships are hierarchically arranged. Instead, the model of happiness is founded on dismantling the binaries of past and present, life and death, youth and age as testified by the intergenerational friendship between Ram Prashad and young Priya.

## Conclusion

These three stories challenge the narrative privileging of order and form, as well as of teleology—of beginnings and ends. As Russo notes, the experience of ageing is often normalised into fixed patterns of tasks and challenges. While this may be useful in preparing individuals for what is to come with thick descriptions of advanced age, like other forms of normalisation, it also serves to keep old people in their place. To deviate from these fixed patterns is akin to taking risks, which Russo defines as “a condition of possibility, a kind of error in calculating normality.” By the same token, acting one’s age may be understood as a caution against taking risk, so that with the advancement of chronological age the stakes become higher and higher until finally acting one’s age means to die (Russo 1999, 26–27). Russo’s comments underscore the power of cultural narratives. Indeed, the ageing characters in all the three stories discussed in this chapter are shown to be at the mercy of cultural constructions. At the same time, though, the texts also insist on the centrality of the body, forcefully reminding us of the limits of cultural ageing (Falcus 2012, 1382).

But perhaps the most enabling aspect of the three stories is their dismantling of the time-honoured binary between body and mind, where the body stands for what is knowable while the mind stands for something far more tenuous and opaque. In their failure to die at a given time, the ageing protagonists of all three stories reveal the body to be less knowable than is typically assumed. This binary is undercut especially well in the last story, which draws on the familiar metaphor of body as house. If a metaphor is a means of trying to understand the unknown through what is familiar, “The Womb” attests to the singular failure of this move. Ram Prashad’s *haveli*, characterized as it is in terms of the human body—its long and narrow passages standing in for the birth canal, up which the old man is carried on a stretcher in search of the room where he was born—turns out to be no more familiar than the actual body it is meant to make more accessible through its deployment as metaphor: *Ram Prashad never finds the room he was looking for*. The *haveli* is finally no more accessible than the body for which it is offered as metaphor.

The three stories I have discussed in this chapter point to the limitations of a gerontological approach focused primarily on cultural constructions of the ageing body at the same time as they foreground the material body as being central to the experience of growing old. This material body however is not the unreconstructed body of medical discourse whose x-ray vision presumes to render it reassuringly transparent. It is rather a body that vies with the mind, as it were, to claim its full share of complexity, its unplumbed depths, its place on the cusp of heart, mind and materiality.

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