

THE LIFE IS “SOLITARY, POOR, NASTY, BRUTISH”, BUT NOT SHORT: THE DESERTED OLD IN THE EXTREME REALITY

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Abstract

Aging is an inevitable reality of human lives, and hundreds of thousands of studies address the questions of what makes people old. However, the underlying fact behind the question of what makes us old is the apprehension to face the grim reality of the life in the old age. Like other social sciences, a range of debates rises over the years that make the question more complex by bringing it to the theoretical realm where empirical examples often given less focus, and sometimes completely ignored. The paper presents some well-known cases, published in the daily newspaper (the Daily Star, Dhaka, Bangladesh) about the people in the old age, mostly living in the old home, and intends to interpret them with a purpose to outline the factors that change the plot of lives. The study concludes that people in the old become disengaged from the society primarily after three events, first, the death of the spouse, second, the marriage of the children, and third children left the home country and staying abroad. In addition, there is also the case that simply tells us disengagements do not imply the end of life, contrarily people can re-engage to a different form of lives after disengaging from the life they know.

Keywords: aging, disengagement, case studies, old home.

Introduction

Aging is the indubitable reality of the human existence, and for thousands of years, scholars are addressing the questions like what makes people old. Undeniably the biological process of the organic being makes the body less functional after achieving certain phase of life, say, decreasing sensory capacities and losing physical stamina (Lindenberger & Baltes, 1994). However, for certain, some people grow old faster than others, and there are several perspectives to address the question of why some of us get old quicker than the rest. Some suggested that our genetical code carry the information of our dying (Kirkwood, 2002), while others may indicate the aging heavily depends on how we are living our lives, and on what level we are taking care of our biological body (Loue, Sajatovic, & Koroukian, 2008). However, none of these perspectives is widely accepted by all academicians (Lewis & Tarrant, 1972). Some social aspects also contribute to the factors of aging, such as active involvement in the social events, or withdrawal from the social interests makes people feel old (Loue et al., 2008). In this regard, Governmental policy referring to the 'retirement age' is a pivotal factor (Estes, Swan, & Gerard, 1982).

The good news is now we have a separate discipline, in the name of "Social Gerontology", widely studied worldwide, to address not only issues as such, but also focuses on what can be done to makes things better (Solomon, Hooyman, & Kiyak, 1995). Unfortunately, like other social sciences, a bunch of debate rises over the years that make the questions more complex by bringing it to the theoretical realm where empirical examples often given less focus, and sometimes completely ignored. The pivotal point of the later

argument, that is from the social point of view (known as disengagement theory of aging) (Streib, Cumming, Henry, & Parsons, 1962), the social context, where the social interaction takes place, is an important consideration to the equation of explaining 'Aging' of the human being. However, the underlying fact behind the question of what makes us old is the apprehension to face the grim reality of the life in the old age. Once, Simone de Beauvoir said, "Society turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species. That is why the whole question is buried in a conspiracy of silence. Old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization". This paper presents some well-known cases of people in the old age, mostly living in the old home, and intends to interpret them with a purpose to outline the factors that change the plot of lives.

Discussions

Methodologically speaking, while survey, experiment, ethnography or interview are the rigorous tools to research such issues, analysing the contents of the daily newspapers can also provide information that helps to construct the context of the affair. After all, a piece of reality that can be presented, as the case studies, is evidently the element of the newspaper that makes news credible in the eyes of people (Eisenhardt, 1989). The cases of Rani Bala, Aayat Banu, Tuni and Salma were published in *The Daily Star* (May 13, 2018), under the title, "Mother's day today: The forgotten ones" (Devnath, 2018). The cases of Tafazzal Hossain, Abdul Hamid, and Soleman Gazi were published in *The Daily Star* (July 10, 2016), under the title "No Eid joy for old home residents" (Siddique, 2016) and the case of Mr. Mofiz was published in *The Daily Star* (March 26, 2013), under the title "Living alone in old age" (Mahboob, 2013). There are few more cases mentioned in those articles, but the present paper narrows its focuses to the ones that cover the base reality of the elderly lives. These cases are the 'Social Facts' that tell the stories, implying "the life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish" but not short.

From the wrinkles on the face and glimmering eyes, the age of Rani Bala appears to be no less than 70 years old. She can hardly remember about her life, and cannot tell where actually from was her husband. Only she can remember is she had a daughter who got married to a Muslim and had a son but absolutely no idea where he would be. Ms. Bala stayed for sometimes with her married daughter to the in-laws' residence, however, being a Hindu, the in-laws' family raised objections of her presence in the Muslim house. While returning to her paralyzed son for staying there, he refused to accept her in his family as she had lived with the Muslims for months. While homelessly wandering in the streets of *Shanir Akhra* of the city for a couple of years, Syeda Shalina Shally, a human rights activist and the founder of the *Aapan Nibash*, a shelter for the old at *Abdullahpur* in the Dhaka city, found her and brought her to the old home. Afterward, she is staying there with some glimpse of sad memories of her children.

Aayat Banu, an above 90 years old woman, throughout her life worked as domestic servant. She had not a piece of memory of her family and children. She was found unconscious at *Lalmatia*, the place of Dhaka city; she is an appropriate example of what happens when the domestic servants lose their ability to work in the household. Similarly, Tuni, though only 55 and intellectually-disabled, has the ability for the household chores, is living in the Old home because she is no longer required in the society. In her last workplace, her responsibilities were to take care of the elderly parents whose children were mostly staying abroad. When the parents died, she was no longer required. Tuni was fortunate that she was brought by her relatives to the *Aapan Nibash* with few additional clothes. Quite a similar fate has suffered Johura, a 120-year-old widow, whose granddaughter left her because the husband didn't want her in their house. Incidents like children and grandchildren leaving

their elderly mothers and grandmothers are not uncommon. But not all are as lucky as Tuni or Johura. When Salma was found, as Syeda Shalina Shally mentions, "she was lying by the side of a drain [in *Narayanganj*], with urine and feces all over her body.... I got water from a roadside shop, washed her, wrapped a new sari around her and then brought her on a bus."

Tafazzal Hossain lives in a rehabilitation center at *Bishya Kuribati* in *Gazipur* sadar upazila. He has a son, daughter and grandchildren, but none come to visit him even if it was the most celebrated event like Eid. Tafazzal's son, a ready-made garment worker left him here after the death of Tafazzal's wife, saying that there was no one there to look after his father at home. A similar fate is suffered by Abdul Hamid, an 85-year-old homeopathy doctor, who has been living at the centre since his wife's death. The 85-year-old Soleman Gazi has the same reason for living in the centre. Although in most cases the scenario is as pathetic as such, however, it has been seen that many of the elderly people, over the time, found to master their sense of solitude by setting up working schedules themselves, engaged in cleaning, knitting, cooking and reading. They often form walking groups and enjoy their small talks together. Sometimes, to escape their harsh reality, they immerse in spiritual devotion. There are some inspiring cases as well. For example, Mr. Mofiz, a 70-year-old ex-civil servant enjoys learning Russian along with his few friends. He lives alone as his wife is not alive, and his only daughter lives abroad with her husband. Many of Mr. Mofiz's friends have taken up teaching in elementary schools as their professions. Walking together in the park, having tea and discussing present political affairs are pertinent daily activities for them. They find interests learning to use microwave ovens, ATMs and amazed to discover the mysteries found on the Internet. Some of them are even active users of Social Media. With a regular physical exercise, a routine social gathering, and a belief in their ability to contribute something to the society make them feel that their lives have lots of things left to offer them.

Conclusions

While life has its own path, moves back and forth, offer sufferings and glimpse of happiness, nonetheless history mentions that human can alter the course of life by outlining the social forces or communal events behind the course of their existence. The cases mentioned above indicate that people in the old become disengaged from the society, vis-a-vis the link with the society cuts off. The cases imply three pivotal factors that cut the link; first, the death of the spouse, second, the marriage of the children, and third, the children leaving home-country and staying abroad. However, there is also the case that simply tells us disengagements do not imply the end of life. People can re-engage to a different form of life after disengaging from the life they know. Once, an eminent sociologist, Emile Durkheim, said: "Each new generation is reared by its predecessor; the latter must, therefore, improve in order to improve its successor." The way to improve the social condition is to make the way for the old to re-engage with the society.

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