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The complexities of female aging: Four women protagonists in Penelope Lively's novels

Maricel Oró-Piqueras *

Department of English and Linguistics, Universitat de Lleida, Catalunya, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Penelope Lively is a well-known contemporary British author who has published a good number of novels and short stories since she started her literary career in her late thirties. In her novels, Lively looks at the lives of contemporary characters moulded by specific historical as well as cultural circumstances. Four of her novels, published from 1987 to 2004, present middle-aged and older women as their main protagonists. Through the voices and thoughts of these female characters, the reader is presented with a multiplicity of realities in which women find themselves after their mid-fifties within a contemporary context. Being a woman and entering into old age is a double-sided jeopardy which has increasingly been present in contemporary fiction. Scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Susan Sontag (1972) were among the first to point out a "double standard of aging" when they assured that women were punished when showing external signs of aging much sooner than men. In Lively's four novels, the aging protagonists present their own stories and, through them, as well as through the voices of those around them, the reader is invited to go beyond the aging appearance of the female protagonists while challenging the limiting conceptions attached to the old body and, by extension, to the social and cultural overtones associated with old age.

Introduction

Being a woman and entering into old age is a double-sided jeopardy which has increasingly been present in contemporary fiction. Feminist scholars Simone de Beauvoir (1997) and Susan Sontag (1972) pointed out a "double standard of aging" when they condemned the punishment of women for showing signs of aging much earlier than men. More recently, Kathleen Woodward (1999) and Jeannette King (2012), among others, have investigated the limiting options still present for women as they age by analysing representations of older women both in fiction and art. In *Figuring Age*: *Women*, *Bodies*, *Generations* and *Discourses of Aging in Fiction and Feminism*: *The Invisible Woman*, Woodward and King, respectively, agree on pointing out that women after their fertile years still occupy an invisible position. They either conform to the traditional roles within the domestic space or they are presented as rebels unable to achieve happiness outside the domestic space. Moreover, they are largely expected to act according to the way they look; in other words, their wrinkles, white hair and sagging skin seem to make them inadequate in most public contexts, unless they conform to a motherly and/or grandmotherly role. As Woodward argues, "a woman's placement, her social context and thus in great part her sense of herself—can largely determine whether she is seen and sees herself as a little old woman" (1999: xii). That is the reason why feminist gerontologist scholars coincide in pointing out the need to look for plausible and creative options for women entering and in old age in a time in which the worldwide population is aging exponentially.

Although contemporary British writer Penelope Lively has never defined herself as a feminist, most of the female protagonists she has depicted in her novels since she started her writing career more than forty years ago, when she was almost in her forties, defy traditional images of the submissive, domestic-enclosed female character in different ways. This

* Pl. Víctor Siurana, 1. 25003, Lleida (Catalunya, Spain). Tel.: +34 973 702339.
E-mail address: maricel.oro@dal.udl.cat.

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specially applies to the aging female characters who are the protagonists of four of Lively's novels published in different periods during Lively's writing career: Booker prize-winning *Moon Tiger* (1988), *Passing On* (1990), *Spiderweb* (1999) and *The Photograph* (2004). In these four novels, the main protagonists are women from their mid-fifties to their eighties whose portrayal does not conform to the idea of perfect mothers and grandmothers, even less to perfect housewives. On the contrary, they are women who, despite being well aware of the signs of aging on their bodies and of the social expectations awaiting them after having left behind their youthful traits as well as their reproductive years, decide to explore new pathways on their own. In these four novels, a critical moment in the lives of the aging protagonists makes them confront the mirror and come to terms with the changing image they have in front of them. This confronting the mirror and their present appearances is followed by a process of introspection in which past and present come together to review their life trajectories. The protagonists revise the choices they have made in life but also the real opportunities—both in the professional and personal terrain—they have been offered within the specific social environment in which they were brought up and lived through. At the end of the day, none of the four protagonists perceive aging as having to conform to what is expected of them as women getting older in a specific time and place. As they have done in other periods of their lives, they will come to terms with their aging processes by integrating this new vital phase within their life trajectories that have always been defined by their personalities, beliefs and values. In her last memoir *Ammonites & Leaping Fish*, Penelope Lively claims that "like, I think, most people, I have not paid too much attention to old age. To individuals, yes—family, friends. But the status has not been on my radar" (2013: 5). Similar to Penelope Lively's sudden realization that she has actually become old, the four female protagonists acknowledge their aging process after a critical moment in their lives which makes them confront past and present, and their changing bodies against limited and limiting cultural and social expectations. In Lively's novels, stereotypes and limiting cultural beliefs are questioned as the reader is invited to look into the insights of her female protagonists and the complexities of their particular aging processes.

Fictionalizing the aging female body

In an interview published in *The Guardian online* in 2013, Penelope Lively stated that "old age is forever stereotyped" (2013: 1). In Western culture, the external appearance of the body has been and is associated with immediate stereotyping. A body showing the signs of aging is read as the emblem of loss and decline; especially so in women, since, as Beauvoir and Sontag pointed out, aging comes sooner to women than to men with the menopause perceived as a most feared marker. Drawing on Glenda Laws' (1994) article "Understanding Ageism: Lessons from Feminism and Postmodernism", Woodward asserts the need to understand ageism "as a set of social practices with the aging body as its target" (1999: xiii). For Woodward, avoiding the "essentializing of the aging body" is a first step to understand the life course as a continuum rather than as set and limiting stages with strict cultural norms and, as a consequence, abandon "models of age-appropriate behaviour and experience" (1999: xiv). In her *Learning to be Old*: *Gender*, *Culture and Aging*, published in 2002, Margaret Cruinkshank (2002) supports the idea that ageism is very much related to the cultural conceptions attached to the aging of the body. As she states, "learning to be old means fully experiencing the physical, bodily changes that accompany aging while at the same time recognizing that those changes occur in a particular social setting, influenced by our ethnicity, class, gender, political and economic climate" (2002: 1). Actually, Cruickshank compares the situation of old women to those of colonized people, namely, "thought less intelligent, judged solely by appearance, encouraged to imitate the dominant group, figures of fun, scapegoated, internaliz[ing] messages of inferiority" (2002: 4).

In the 1990s, feminist scholars Germaine Greer (1992) and Betty Friedan (1993) published two books in which they question the limiting conceptions related to women once they have gone through their fertile years and present post-menopause as a stage in which women can truly liberate themselves from social subjugations and become what they really are and want to be. However, the images of women in their mid and late fifties onwards in literature and art, even more in media, are still far from this reality. Within fictional texts, there has been a proliferation of novels with female protagonists entering and in old age who have questioned the restricted stereotypical image of the older woman and who have problematized the limited options left to women once youth has disappeared from their bodies. To give an example, Doris Lessing's novels *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984) and *Love*, *Again* (1996), present women in their late fifties and well into their eighties who fight to keep their independence, in terms of agency, but they also try to distance themselves from the social and cultural undertones attached to an aging body.

By the end of the 1980s and entering the 1990s, Margaret Moganroth Gullette (1988) and Barbara Frey Waxman (1997) theorize about a new tendency: the appearance of novels in which the aging female protagonists are not set in a narrative of decline but are open to find new routes for themselves, as aging women at the end of the twentieth century. Whereas Gullette referred to these novels as "midlife progress narratives" (1988: xiv), Barbara Frey Waxman named the genre "*Reifungsroman*" or "novels of ripening" (1990: 2). These novels neither show a "rosy picture of old age" (1990: 16), as Waxman contends, nor portray "heroines or heroes in a classical way" (1988: xiv), to use Gullete's words; however, in these novels, there is an opening up of life after weaknesses have been overcome and some kind of resistance has been achieved. Gullette and Waxman coincide in considering fiction a powerful source to resist set stereotypes in relation to young and old, appearance and personality due to the fact that these narratives allow the reader to go into the realm of aging female protagonists and those who surround them. To use Waxman's words, "intimate narration, realistic characterisations, strongly evocative descriptions of mental and physical baggage by the old and interior views of their treatment by younger characters all blur the boundaries between young and old, reality and fantasy, belonging and Otherness, integrity and fragmentation, rationality and senility" (1990: 17). Both Woodward, in *Figuring Age*: *Women*, *Bodies Generations*, and Gullette, in *Declining to Decline* (1997) and *Aged by Culture (2004)*, have claimed the power of narrative, personal narrative as well as fictionalized narrative, to change social attitudes towards old age and old women.