

A study of Ageism in Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*: Narrative and
Body Foregrounding the (old) self

Hiba Ahmed

Research Scholar

University of Delhi

Delhi, India

ahmedhiba93@gmail.com

Sheena Lama

English Literature

Delhi University

Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper looks at the (re)presentation of ageing in Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*. In an attempt to unmask society's ageist attitudes towards its elderly, the research attempts to analyse ageing through the prism of gender as surely ageing is worse for women than it is for men. The research sheds light on how the old person is viewed just as an old body which is also genderless and therefore expected to be devoid of any carnal desires. As the novel revolves around a narrative within the novel's narrative, the paper also sees how Daisy, the ageing protagonist, loses her self behind her narrative. Her self is also in perpetual submersion due to her hyper-visible ageing body.

Her sagging skin and wrinkles are the only assertions that the world registers from her side while her selfhood and identity are either erased or ignored. The novel's story follows Daisy through her tumultuous life but this paper attempts to live it with her. So while Daisy composes her life story, her life composes her story which eventually begins to foreground her to the extent that she is completely submerged in her story and ultimately dies in a nursing home in Florida. Her death bringing relief to her family is the peak of ageism that the story throws in our faces. She lived as an association—a mother, a grandmother, an aunty, a wife, a widow; and died as an old woman and nothing more.

Keywords: Ageism, gender, sexuality, narrativity, old-age

Paper

The Stone Diaries, a narrative about Daisy, is a journey through a seemingly ordinary life of a seemingly ordinary woman. This is perhaps why it so successfully dismantles so many issues in its wake, that it is almost difficult to keep count. The novel does not present Daisy as a heroine transcending any limits, but in fact shows that the limits do not exist. The narrativity of a life is at the centre of Daisy's autography/biography. This narrativity begins right at the moment Daisy is born but does not end even at her death. Carol Shields makes clear how an individual's life narrative is not just her own, it is revised, re-revised, told and re-told by each person that the narrative touches in its passing. No matter how Inevitable, Shields wants us to beware of the limitations that such narrativising poses for an individual. How, more often than not, the narrative of an individual foregrounds the individual. How closely the identity of an individual is associated with it. J Brook Bouson in her book *Shame and the Aging Woman* writes,

The fact that the larger stories that we are embedded in can destroy us is evident in the life of Carol Shields's elderly character Daisy Goodwill Flett in the 1993 novel *The Stone Diaries*. But if Daisy is shaped by the larger stories of her sociocultural circumstances, she

is also like a novelist composing her life as she engaged in the life review process by telling and re-telling multiple versions of her storied life. (92)

Shieldss said in an interview that the *Stone Diaries* is “an autobiography of a woman who is, in fact erased from her own life. (She) was defined through others, whose obituary would read, “wife of, grandmother of” and so on. There are no letters from her, there are a lot of letters in this book that Daisy received but none that she wrote. No one saved her letters” (Rehm *Interview With Carol Shields*).

To write about Daisy, Shields gas travelled to a “foreign country” as old age was defined by Author Sarton in 1793. Waxman observes that today “there is a growing clientele for this foreign travel.” Shields admitted to being unsure about writing from the point of view of a woman older than herself, but the *Stone Diaries* appears to be a successful attempt at that, it slowly but surely dismantles several ageist ideas that have plagued and still plague our society.

Daisy’s obituary identifies her as a “grandmother” first and foremost, and then as a woman “predeceased by her husband”. What follows is a more individualistic description of her husband Barker Flett as “a respected Canadian authority on hybrid grains.” It continues with an extended list of the names of her children and her children’s children. What is Daisy but an association, a relation, whose life is dissected after her death and a narrative of it created by others. Her daughter Alice, calls her death “A blessing”, not out of any malice, but purely out of the embedded ageism in our society. Death is often accepted as an ailing, failing, old body.

This brings us to the significant question of an ageing body and pushes us to ask if an ageing body is separate from the ageing person. Is an ageing person viewed as just an ageing body? This question is necessary to ask as most of our ageism stems from ceasing to recognise an ageing person as an individual. They are either invisible or hyper-visible with their wrinkles and sagging skin. “Suddenly her body is all that matters”. Daisy views herself as separate from her body, it is her person residing in an ageing body that frustrates her. She thinks, “how fundamentally lonely it is to live inside a body year after year and carry it always in a forward direction, and how there is

never any relief from the weight of it, even when sleeping . . .” (123). She looks at her ageing body as an outsider, as also she looks at her story.

Old age is also understood as a gender-less age where women and men are nothing more than just being old and therefore any signs of sexuality or desires in an old person shock us. Also, not surprisingly, this happens more in the case of women than men. Barbara Macdonald also highlights this issue when she says that women’s movements refuse to think of women above sixty years of age as part of their “sisterhood” (6). She says, “those of you who are younger, see us as men see us— as women who used to be women but aren’t anymore.” And as Daisy herself remarks in the novel, “the real troubles in the world tend to settle on the miss alignment between men and women” (48).

Daisy is viewed as a mother, a grandmother, and an aunt by the people around her and these constructions are concretised as she ages. Macdonald traces this kind of ageism to the patriarchal family. She talks about the myth of motherhood as a white American phenomenon. She says, ““Mother. Grandmother. Aunt. . . it is no surprise that ageism has its roots in the patriarchal family.’ ‘The reason you see older women as their to serve you, her child. That serving you is her purpose in life. This is not woman’s definition of motherhood, it is a man’s definition, a male myth enforced in family, to your peril and mine. It infantilises you and erases me”” (156). And later infantilises the old mother and highlights the grown up child. Before these pillars of her identity Daisy was a young widow whose husband committed suicide on their honeymoon. She is expected and accepted as a woman with the sorrow of losing her husband. Even before this, Daisy is identified as the child whose mother died during childbirth. “. . . wherever she goes, her story marches ahead of her. Announces her. Declares and cancels her true self” (188). Daisy is forever foregrounded by the narratives surrounding her and later by her ageing body. Shields highlights this issue of the submersions of an individual by their narrative when she remarks in the interview,

I think women get oppressed by the(ir) stories. They get stigmatised by them. They become so attached to them that they can’t be separated from there. Oh there goes the woman who

gave birth to that rather precocious boy. There goes the woman whose husband fell out of the window on her honeymoon. So that they become, I suppose, stitched to their stories.

(Rehm *Interview With Carol Shields*)

The narratives that surround Daisy are deconstructed in the course of the novel; their falsity is brought to the surface either by Daisy or the omniscient narrator. Daisy heard her husband's head crashing like a watermelon and yet "she remembers that she lay flat on the bed for at least a minute before she got up to investigate" (129). After this episode Daisy moves back with her father and the narrator tells us that her "honeymoon tragedy" has not left her grief-stricken, in fact, "if truth be told, (her life) is quite agreeable and not at all different from the next person's" (134). Yet this one instance is unanimously accepted by everyone else as a turning and defining point in her life, which her children are sure she must have never forgotten. The children analyse how her not telling them about it is a silence hiding her sorrows. They assume that she was "probably, . . . broken up by it" and that "she must have been reminded every year, on the anniversary of his death"(174). The obsession of all these people at defining Daisy and her life and their confidence in their assumptions is funny and foolish, to say the least.

Old age is either romanticised or infantilised, it is understood as a blank space which only constitutes this sole process, that of ageing. In the hospital the nurses calls Daisy a "sweetie-pie". Daisy, the old woman, is viewed as a child who is incapable of taking the best decisions for herself and hence when she refuses to see the chaplain in clear and intelligible terms, "No, I won't see the chaplain today, she says with dignity, with what she believes is dignity", the caretaker shuts her up with "whad'ya know, here's Reverend Rick now" (196).

That Daisy is separate from her body is clear from the fact that though her body is physically failing, her individual self is still thriving. Though memory and Angusage are escaping hr grasp, she is still of what needs to be said when. To the Reverend Daisy says, "make yourself,

...” and panics a little while the word “comfortable” evades her.¹ Daisy is in her senses and yet she is misunderstood; the Reverend first refuses to acknowledge what Daisy said or might have mumbled and later when she repeats it on his request, “I said, it’s so good of you to come”., the Reverend instead of responding to her courtesy, says “Is Mrs Flett shouting?” And the nurse, in her condescending sympathy reply, “No, it only seems that way; she’s really whispering, poor thing” (203).

Daisy is exceptionally well-aware of her surroundings and manners, she is very much in control of herself and speaks only her filtered thoughts. The novel showcases this beautifully by flitting between the inside and outside of her brain. While inside her head she wants the Reverend to “Go away”, that very minute, outside she politely says, “it’s so good of you to come.” This display of “exquisite manners” by an elderly person also surprises the Reverend. For him Daisy is courteous and mannerly despite her old age and ailing body, as he remarks, “Amazing considering all this, that she can remember the appropriate phrase, amazing and also chilling. . .” (209). His wonder and awe at old Daisy’s words is similar to how one reacts when a child says his first words or learns new words.

The Stone Diaries successfully establishes ageing as an active process rather than a passive blank space that only allows for memory and nostalgia. Old age, in this story, is a continued narrative and not a winding up of an already written tale.

¹ the panic is not induced because Daisy feels the end of language would be the end of her, but merely because of the necessity of language to communicate yourself to the world

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