

## **Elderly Women and the Feminist Discourse: The Issue of Gendered Ageism, Body Image and Grey Divorce in *Grace and Frankie***

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### **Abstract**

Over the Top (OTT) platforms are attributed with bringing us some amazingly innovative and creative shows and it is because of platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu amongst others that we are being introduced to stories and issues concerning various underrepresented communities. In the feminist discourse also, there are many sections who (un)knowingly remain at the margins and the section of elderly women is no exception. This research paper focuses on gendered ageism and geriatric sexuality with reference to the Netflix show *Grace and Frankie* (2015). It stresses on the issue of age in gender discourse and highlights the societal stereotypes regarding old age, especially in the Indian context. With the fast-growing elderly population, increased life expectancy and higher percentage of older women, issues concerning these women cannot be ignored. The paper attempts to prompt conversations about inclusivity, self-acceptance, and the recognition of older adults' multifaceted identities; and stresses that if these issues are ignored today, this may turn into a major social development challenge in the coming years.

**Keywords:** Gendered ageism, geriatric sexuality, menopause, OTT platforms, grey divorce

### **Introduction**

Throughout the history of the entertainment industry, profits have dictated consistent production of certain narratives especially, TV shows

and web series which in the current scenario create and recreate a single social perspective completely denying pluralities and multiculturalism. Older women have always been at the margins of society and also of feminist discourse. There are very few TV shows, movies, or literature where the female lead is over 60 years old, however, with the emergence of a large number of OTT platforms; a space for female-fronted shows has opened up. OTT platforms have made it possible for filmmakers to bring uncensored content to a wider audience and as a result, the audience is enjoying inventive and diverse stories. One such show is *Grace and Frankie* (2015), whose protagonists are women over 60, unusual for the more popular formats followed.

*Grace and Frankie*, an American comedy series, premiered on May 8, 2015 on Netflix was created by Marta Kauffman and Howard J. Morris. The show has so far delivered seven seasons and has secured its place among one of the longest-running series. Veteran actors like Jane Fonda (as Grace), Lily Tomlin (as Frankie), Martin Sheen (as Robert) and Sam Waterston (as Sol) can be seen in lead roles. The story revolves around two ageing women, Grace and Frankie, and their unlikely friendship. The show has won several accolades and appreciation from a large section of the viewing public.

The series follows the lives of Grace Hanson, a witty and intelligent, retired cosmetics mogul; Frankie Bergstein, an eccentric artist and hippie; and their respective husbands, Robert and Sol, successful divorce lawyers in California. Grace and Frankie's lives completely change when Robert and Sol announce that they are gay and in love with each other. They eventually divorce their wives and get married. The two women are very different and do not like each other, however, owing to the situation they are forced to live with each other in the same house. The show is unmatched in its contribution to onscreen representation of women over the age of 60. A show about geriatric couples made for the OTT platform which engages the younger generation is a pleasant difference and the series is bold in its themes and dialogues, and sensitive in depicting family issues, it discusses a variety of significant and delicate subjects, including gendered ageism, geriatric sexuality, homosexuality, etc. Female-oriented content is popular on mainstream web platforms but a storyline with older female leads makes *Grace and Frankie* one of its kind. Classic feminist theories consider class, gender, race as the organizing principles of power. Age has rarely been regarded

as a crucial frame of reference in the feminist discourse. By focusing on age as one of the primary causes of social inequality, *Grace and Frankie* attempts to disrupt the dynamics of feminist discourse.

### Geriatric Sexuality and Feminist Discourse

According to the report of the Secretary General in the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) of United Nations; the twentieth century has seen a shift towards ageing global population. In 1999, there were more than 575 million people worldwide over the age of 60. In developed countries, women live longer by an average age of 4 to 10 years and this margin is less in developing countries; but women outlive men in almost all countries and therefore women make up the majority of the geriatric population (UNCOSW, 1999), yet despite being in the majority, older women are almost never talked about. Some feminist scholars have touched upon the issue of age-based oppression, but it has never occupied a significant space in the mainstream discourse. As a result, feminist works become irrelevant in this sphere and intensify the oppression further.

Germaine Greer in her work *The Change* (1991) has tried to highlight the myths regarding health issues of older women. She has tried to demystify the taboo surrounding menopause by exposing the billion-dollar industry that feeds on obfuscations arising from both misinformation and lack of information. Greer (1991) says, "Though information about menopause abounds, nearly all of it is unverifiable, and most of it is wrong." (p. 9). She talks about how the narratives regarding old age have taken a secondary position in literature. She gives the example of Virginia Woolf who discussed menstruation and menopause in her famous work *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), but this particular part was edited by the publishers. The omission of this very important phenomenon from Woolf's novel says a lot about society that refrains from discussing and creating awareness about old age and hence menopause still remains an 'undescribed non-event' (Greer, 1991, p. 9). Greer takes many examples of the articles published on the topic and shows how these texts are written by men for the eyes of other men. She also discusses how Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is eventually introduced as a panacea after scaring older women with misinformation about their deteriorating health and as a result, today the pharmaceutical industry is not only surviving, but thriving. Women over the years have become

the perfect guinea pigs for the medications given for the treatment of the symptoms of menopause and they are “irradiated, electrocauterised, electroconvulsed, dosed with animal extracts, hysterectomised, dunked in cold water or given placebo” (Greer, p. 16). Greer discusses memoirs and biographies of famous female authors and notices the sheer lack of texts pertaining to the experiences of the aged. To her, the invisibility of middle aged and older women in English literary culture is baffling. The half-truth about the health and psyche of older women is so widespread that even authors like Simone de Beauvoir saw her subjective experience of going through anxiety and panic attacks at 50 as universal, which she has discussed in her work *Force of Circumstance* published in 1968. De Beauvoir suffered from panic attacks all her life, but in her work, she specifically relates her deteriorating mental condition with old age. It is commonly believed that an ageing woman after menopause experiences bouts of anxiety and depression. In his *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases Peculiar to Women* (1855), Samuel Ashwell declared that menopause causes derangement of brain and nervous system. The research was unsatisfactory but was still backed by many psychiatrists. But in 1951, John C. Donovan of the University of Rochester conducted an experiment on 110 women and rubbished the previous claims that menopausal women are prone to depression or anxiety. He concluded that women of all ages suffered mental health issues with no significant peak at the time of menopause; and if the menopause has no catastrophic emotional meaning for a woman, she will experience the menopause without undue difficulty (Greer, 1991, p. 263). But even today, women get HRT to get relief from their symptoms and the side-effects of HRT can be known through a simple Google search.

For Greer, the reason for mental decline in older women can be attributed to society’s patriarchal structure. Women’s rights are typically disregarded in patriarchal societies, a problem that only grows worse as women age. Many older women have limited resources for independent living due to poor education, limited employment opportunities and lack of awareness of their rights. Owing to a longer lifespan than men, many women tend to live as widows for a greater part of their lives where they live at the mercy of others (relatives, children, etc.) and as a result, they suffer negligence and isolation. According to a news report by Indranil Panigrahi and Krishnayan Sasmal in the *Times of India* (2001), there are more women in old age homes than men and the ratio

of women to men in such homes is 7:3 (para. 1). Common issues cited are widowhood, spinsterhood, conflicts in the family, feuds over wealth and property, etc.

Along with these claims, the major narrative about ageing is that menopause marks the end of a woman as a sexual being; and whatever a woman is given during puberty is taken back after menopause. The claim is biologically deterministic since women past menopause are still sexual beings. With women being at the forefront in many areas of society, these claims are now rubbished by women themselves, who claim to be sexually active even after 60. Grace in the show talks about her insecurities regarding sex with her new boyfriend Nick openly, shattering the myth that women over 60 do not want to engage in sex. She is not passive regarding her sexual needs and reminds Nick that, "it (sex) is an essential relationship metric" (Kauffman & Morris, 2020, 17:15).

The series has tried to break the taboo of geriatric sexuality. Several authors have tried to demystify the stereotypes regarding female sexuality, but no one has mapped the issues related to the sexuality of older women. In the show, Grace and Frankie start a business of sexual healthcare products for women like natural lubricants, vibrators etc. for sexually active post-menopausal women and when they invite other women of their age group to try and rate the products, they back off. The women storm out, clearly uncomfortable, echoing the reaction of society to the sexual desires of elderly women. Anyone who hears their business idea shames them but nonetheless, the two successfully launch the business. *Grace and Frankie's* open portrayal of geriatric sexuality is novel because sex between older adults on screen is always treated as a joke or met with unwarranted disgust. "Oh, grow up. Older women masturbate too" (Kauffman & Morris, 2016, 24:55), says Grace in an episode. The characters talk about many hitherto taboo topics surrounding old age without any judgment. Even though the children of both women are shown as liberal millennials, they have their own mindset about the issue. In a scene, Grace's daughter Mallory asks her, "How do I explain to my children that their grandma makes sex toys for other grandmas?" to which Grace responds, "I'll tell you what you can tell them, honey. We are making things for people like us. Because we are tired of being dismissed by people like you" (Kauffman & Morris, 2016, 24:40)

The show talks about female sexual health extensively and clears various falsehoods. After menopause, women find sex painful due to decreased

estrogen levels as this hormone normally stimulates the release of natural lubricants and helps replenish vaginal lining. Without estrogen, the vaginal lining thins and dries out. The show talks openly about organic lubricants for elderly women to help sex be more comfortable and pleasurable. Society will discuss sexuality of older women once it is willing to accept that older women too have sexual desires and thereby clearing the stereotypes. Therefore, as gender is performative (Butler, 1990, p. 185) in the same way, taboos around ageing can also be seen as a social construct. Women after a certain age are seen as caregivers, passive and almost invisible in society. They are restricted to certain set of social roles and expected to behave accordingly. The utilitarian society shoves them on the periphery of the social order.

In *Women on the Market*, a chapter in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), Luce Irigaray, talks about the commodification of women in society and begins her essay with a statement that, "our own culture is based upon the exchange of women" (p. 799). This exchange value is due to lesser number of women in the society who are essential to the survival of the group. Since there are more elderly women than men, this commodification is limited to women till a particular age. Men have always been at the centre of our society and therefore they can only participate in exchange and cannot be exchanged like women. In Marx's own words, men are 'producer-subjects' and women are 'commodity-subjects' having a passive role in the exchange process. Furthermore, Irigaray divides women into three categories, assigning them a particular exchange value, namely, 'Virgin', 'Mother' and 'Prostitute'. According to Irigaray, virgins have pure exchange value; after marriage the woman has utility value as a mother and is removed from exchange. Finally, the prostitute has both use and exchange value. In all these roles, women are the subjects of men's desires and have no independent value of their own. In this division of women being assigned a particular fetishized value, elderly women are not even considered because they cannot reproduce or please men sexually. They are removed from the exchange process because of their 'barrenness' after a certain age and hence, elderly women have little to no value in our patriarchal society.

### **Grey Divorce**

Nowadays, divorce among older couples is also on the rise which are popularly known as 'grey divorce' or 'silver divorce'. According to

Pew Research Center while divorce for younger adults is becoming less common, 'grey divorce' is on the rise. The report also mentions that in USA, the divorce rate for adults over 50 has roughly doubled in the past 25 years and 66 per cent of these divorces are initiated by women (Stepler, March 7, 2017). In this generation, a good marriage is defined by questions such as, "Is this marriage making us happy?", "Is my marriage fulfilling?", furthermore, women are financially more independent these days and leaving an unhappy marriage is easier than before. But how does one build one's life again after living with someone for decades is an issue depicted in the show. Divorce is already devastating for younger people, so when it comes to older women who are already on the margins of society, divorce is debilitating. Along with the emotional toll on men and women both, grey divorce is financially devastating, particularly for women, who often take longer breaks from career to care for their families. In countries like India, the whole life of a woman revolves around taking care of the husband and family and being pushed to margins at older age breaks her emotionally.

But regardless of the above-mentioned issues, older people are divorcing their partners at an alarming rate. Vandana Shah, the Mumbai-based editor of India's divorce magazine *Ex Files* says, "Divorce at a later stage is here to stay. This is a phase that India will have to go through" (Ingber, June 2, 2011). One major reason for this (as shown in the show) is the anagnorisis of the constraints that conventional marriage puts on women. In the series, having been granted a new lease on love at 80, Grace remarries a younger, handsome man Nick and she soon realizes she is reentering an institution (marriage) whose cost is too high. Although Grace's second marriage comes without the burden of producing and raising children or a lion's share of domestic duties, being Nick's wife immediately requires her to perform the role of a wife in the same way as she had to in her first marriage. With Nick, she gained a husband but lost parts of herself which she was finally able to access after eight decades on earth. Watching Grace grappling with her two marriages is intriguing. She married her first husband out of societal pressure but the second time she chose to marry a man who really swept her off her feet. But now she wants to be put back down on solid ground, to go back living freely. The series quite successfully conveys the message that we are too often conditioned to believe that self-discovery happens when we are young, and that all the fun of life is meant to occur before

one turns 40. But with the show, the audience is offered a window into a world in which the most important journey starts after one is older. In exchange for their emotional labour and time taken from advancing their own careers to care for children and housework, marriage promises a husband's pension, security and a home in old age hence making marriage a better financial decision for many women. However, within marriage are also women who feel that the cost of such an exchange as too high. Now that divorce is no longer a taboo, they have chosen not to wait for death to free them from their marital contracts. Grace in an episode says to Nick, "I wanted to leave the marriage but not necessarily you. I was hoping we could find a way to redefine our relationship." (Kauffman & Morris, 2021, 12:40)

### The Indian Context

In the Indian context the discrimination based on age is even more severe. Owing to the large population of our country and poverty, marginalized people are affected more. According to a report from *The Print* (2021), India's elderly population has already crossed the 130 million mark in 2021, with 67 million males and 71 million females. Major concerns for elderly women in our country are destitution, alienation, and isolation. Besides, even older women, who live with their families, face emotional isolation. Due to changing lifestyles and fast-paced modern life, the younger generation hardly interacts with their elderly family members and an increasing preference for the nuclear family system has crushed the traditional bond between grandchildren and grandmothers. Elderly women often face financial difficulties because of lack of knowledge, awareness, and a general lack of control over the family's financial matters. With increasing age, the role of women in the family greatly decreases, and they are usually sidelined. Moreover, in a country like India, where even the basic needs of women are not met, there is no debate or discussion on geriatric sexuality and body image.

In Indian films too, elderly women are often portrayed as less sexually active than men. Bollywood has produced few movies with plots advocating the rights of elderly people but the topic of geriatric sexuality in the Indian context is still largely unexplored. The two famous movies focusing on geriatric issues are *Baghban* (2003) and *Piku* (2015) and both are sentimental movies relying on the audience's emotional response to the pathetic condition of elderly parents under the care of their modern



children. The movies talk about the relationship and responsibilities children have towards their ageing parents. The necessity for an emotional companion in old life is emphasized in some of the films that address the problem of finding a mate at an advanced age. However, these do not touch the topic of elderly sexuality at all. Certain movies do highlight that even older people have romantic desires but are often limited to perceived greater sexual desire in males. The movie *Badhaai Ho* (2018) is being applauded for its handling of the taboo subject of elderly sexuality. The director, Amit Ravindernath Sharma plots the story of a nearly 50-year-old woman, already a mother of two getting pregnant to show a nuanced array of reactions from neighbours, relatives, family and even her own children. And while the film focuses on the pregnancy, what actually makes it progressive is that the pregnancy wasn't planned. The movie asks us to view people as sexual beings irrespective of their age. Indian movies have advanced so much that we get to see unconventional movies like *Badhaai Ho* but are still waiting to see a movie with an elderly female lead discussing geriatric sexuality openly.

### Conclusion

Ageism is seen covertly in unspoken assumptions, myths, stereotypes, popular imagery, iconography and societal expectations and renders ageing an inferior deteriorating value. The show *Grace and Frankie* can be seen as a whistleblower initiating a nuanced discussion and attracting our attention to the needs of elderly women. The show was initially judged and got mixed reviews. It took some time for society to digest older women talking about lubricants and vibrators, but now the series has a huge fan base and is critically appreciated. It is surprising and heartbreaking to see that even feminist scholars who have given their lives advocating for women's rights have never put elderly women at the centre of the discussion. With the changing demographics of the world, the issues pertaining to this population should also be modified and discussed.

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