

Children’s Literature and Ageism: A Reading of Ranjit Lal’s *Our Nana Was a Nutcase*

Sonika

Assistant Professor in English
D.N. Postgraduate College, Hisar

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ABSTRACT

*Storybooks are powerful tools for teaching young children about the complexities of growing older and aging. Through narratives, children discover the richness and diversity of older adults and understand aging as an important part of the life cycle. These books are also invaluable for introducing children to serious age related diseases, which they might otherwise find difficult to grapple with. The stereotypic representations of old age in children’s literature can lead to the development of ageist attitudes among them. Where as meaningful, and realistic characterization of older people can help promote positive attitudes towards aging and older people. “Literature written for children becomes even more important than that written for adults in terms of shaping attitudes toward aging and elders because it affects attitudes during the early formative years” (Palmore 95). This paper attempts to assess the portrayal of aging and dementia in Ranjit Lal’s *Our Nana Was a Nutcase*.*

Keywords: *aging, dementia, children’s literature, care-giving, stereotypes*

Negative stereotypes about aging and old people are deeply ingrained in our culture and can easily creep into children’s literature. Anselmo in his research on ageism in children’s literature found that children’s literature remains almost void of older people. They are rarely given a major role in a story. Older characters are “underrepresented and stereotyped” (McGuire 68). Some of the stereotypic portrayals are as the doddering old man, wicked old witches, and ‘rocking chair’ sitters. “The cumulative portrayals of older people showed them as unimportant, unexciting, inarticulate, flat, unidimensional, unimaginative, noncreative, and boring” (68). Even the school textbooks contain no substantial information on aging-related issues. Even if they do, they tend to equate aging with illness, dependency, disability or death. Although ageism is often not an intentional message of the author, the message is there.

Ranjit Lal is sensitive in the characterization of “nutcase Nana” as healthy, physically active, friendly, caring, and humorous. He has been successful in giving an accurate and realistic portrayal of the old man. The main characters in this children’s novel are not the children, but their Nana. He is a military surgeon who takes an early retirement to be able to look after his grandchildren. The parents being in the Foreign Service were being transferred to different corners of the world and thus left their children, one by one, with their Nana. He wakes up his grandchildren with a Colonel Bogey March in the morning, wearing his military uniform and playing his golden trumpet. He engages with the children in all their activities: pre-school inspection, makes them look at the mountains before leaving for school, drops them to school, and checks their homework. He works on an honorary basis at the local pediatric hospital. The boys from nearby boarding schools invite him to umpire their cricket matches and to accompany them on treks. Apart from that, he is occupied with restoring and maintaining his vintage cars. Nana’s character in the novel is fully developed and well represented. It becomes important to note here that the attitudes of the grandchildren are positive towards their own Nana. But, they respond negatively towards old people in general. When they visit the hospital with their Nana, they refer to other old people as ‘loonies’ and ‘crackpots’.

Conventional stereotypes would insist on making us believe that aging brings with it rigidity and conservatism in social and political attitudes. These common assumptions are refuted in the text. “When change does occur with aging, it is neither necessarily nor invariably in a conservative direction. If societal attitudes are changing in a liberal direction, older cohorts participate in those shifts,” (Cutler and Danigelis 65). Shabnam aunty, Nana’s partner decides to move into Shadow House to live with the children and their Nana. Harshita, the granddaughter mimics the manner in which her mother would react to this decision: “Living in Sin! At their age! . . . Just what will everyone say? Our good name will be mud. What are they thinking?” (Lal 45). Just because Shabnam aunty and Nana are old, his daughter thinks that living together would be inappropriate for them. They are expected to behave in a particular manner because of their old age. Shabnam aunty and Nana are more liberal and open-minded, as compared to the daughter. They do not

make their decisions based on their age. Infact, after growing old they are able to do what they couldn't do many years ago. Their old age enlarges their choices rather than constraining them.

Dementia

The initial signs of dementia start appearing when one day while dropping the kids to school, Nana takes a wrong turn and a few days later, he gives the salary twice to the domestic helpers. Along with giving the twins, Niharika and Nihal, their monthly allowance twice in the same month. He starts forgetting about his meals, he has had lunch but can't remember it and wants to have it again. Things start getting worse, when he forgets having given a tetanus injection to a girl at the hospital and, tries to give it to her again. At first, Nana tries to continue maintaining the identity he had before the onset of memory problems. He avoids those situations where his memory lapses might become evident to others. For instance, he gives Avantika, his eldest granddaughter a map of the school route to guide him.

Dementia is viewed differently across cultures. When the authors of the book, *Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities* were describing the theme of their work to a woman who grew up in Taiwan. She said, "I did not realize until I got to medical school that my grandfather had Alzheimer's. He changed as he got older, but to us, he was still just grandfather" (McFadden and McFadden 186-7). The disease doesn't define his identity. Similarly, when the grandchildren are constantly trying to understand the behavioral changes in their Nana, they want to name the disease. Is it dementia or Alzheimer's? But they are not allowed to do that. Labeling leads to disempowerment of people who have disabilities. It "places a person in a category of expected behaviors and capacities together with the expected and socially sanctioned repertoire of ways of responding and reacting to them" (MacKinlay 19). The most important instruction given to them is to "carry on with him as usual."

At the weekly bazaar, the twins, Niharika and Nihal exploit their Nana's illness as they make him buy them a huge amount of sweets and chocolates, four times. When Shabnam aunty gets to know about this, they are made to understand the inappropriateness of their conduct. Shabnam aunty says: "Nana sometimes has problems remembering things, right? . . . That is not something you take advantage of. Got it? It's despicable to do that!" (Lal 67-68). At first the children think that Nana's forgetfulness is merely a momentary lapse and he'd soon be fine. But they are not kept under any illusions. They are made aware that Nana's situation might get worse; he might get violent and even fail to recognize them, one day. But, "you'll have to learn to accept him the way he is. You'll have to give him the love and affection you've always been giving him, but not expect anything in return" (229). The message of the book sometimes is subtly didactic. As it is a book written for children, Ranjit Lal addresses the subject of aging and dementia in such a manner that it would entertain as well as provoke thought in young children.

Caregiving: Children's role

Nana's grandchildren are a part of the entire diagnostic process. They journey along with him in this disease. Even if, they can't totally cure him. They engage in activities that might not allow dementia to progress so quickly. The twins give him memory tests every morning. "Good morning Nana, sir! . . . Can you tell me my name, rank and serial number, sir?" (114), asks Niharika. The twins gather all the information about dementia from the Internet. They remind him every morning who they are, incase he has forgotten. Also, sometimes they take him in front of a mirror and ask him, "Who is that, Nana?" (116). They have read that people with dementia even forget who they are. Earlier on their journey back from school, it was Nana who would ask them mathematical questions. After his illness, the twins ask him to subtract seven from a hundred. There is a role here, but the twins do no infantilize their Nana with their tests. They provide him an appropriate environment at home where a degree of 're-menting' can begin to take place.

The book provides us with conflicting views about old-age homes. When the children first hear about their mother's plan to shift their Nana to a home, they explosively remark: "Mama and Papa just can't dump him like that . . . they might as well just kill him outright" (140). The grandchildren here act as Ranjit Lal's spokesperson in voicing the idea that caring for one's parents by putting them in an old age home is equivalent to neglect and 'dumping.' They don't want their Nana to be left among strangers. They feel they will be able to take better care of him. Where as the mother feels that in an old-age home, Nana would get better, professional care. In "a home . . . with a pool, spa, putting green, clinic, 24-hour medical help on call, hospital, theatre, full service and so on. He would be very happy there. He'll have lots of company of his own kind" (119), is the mother's opinion. Amidst this tussle between them, both the grandchildren and their mother don't deem it necessary to ask their Nana about his opinion. They take decisions on his behalf, without consulting him even once. (this makes the children revolt by taking the nana hostage) All these conflicts are eventually resolved as their mother realizes that Nana doesn't want to leave the Shadow House and agrees to keep Nana at home surrounded with his grandchildren.

Time and Dementia

Nana's journey into dementia is linear and follows chronological time. The symptoms of the disease aggravate with time. "But that journey is also about moving from preoccupation with chronos to the immediate experience of kairos, as the person who has progressive forgetfulness becomes less oriented to calendars and schedules and more focused on living in the present moment" (McFadden and McFadden 187). Nana begins to experience his connection with Shabnam Aunty in the present moment. When it dawns upon him that he never asked her to marry him, he wants to do that now. Also, there are differences in the manner in which time is perceived by people with dementia, and their caretakers. While time becomes insignificant for Nana as he journeys into dementia. The grandchildren become highly conscious of it: "We had Nana...but for how long?, worries Avantika(89). This statement also tells us that Avantika has coupled Nana's old age and dementia with death.

Gary Kenyon writes that, "even the oldest old, although they must adjust to the limited number of years left, are still living with a present, past, and future" (Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 48). This statement doesn't hold true in the case of people with dementia. Nana can only partially remember his past life, the future is unknown; he only has a sense of the present. It also becomes important to note there that as our narrative identity is formed through our life-story. Nana begins to lose his life-story when he journeys into dementia as his capacity to remember the past and envision the future is lost. It leads to 'narrative impairment' (Randall and McKim 243).

Re-thinking Ageing

In our culture, there is so much emphasis laid on intellectual activities such as thinking, remembering and reasoning that if a person loses these abilities he is considered a non-person. On encountering dementia people lose their status as human beings. Dementia is seen as a narrative of profound loss for both the sufferers and those who care for them. But the question is can't there be another narrative that can be told about the lives of people with dementia. It is possible if one doesn't define personhood in terms of functionality. Elizabeth MacKinlay, drawing from Tom Kitwood's ideas of personhood, writes: "To be a person requires one to be in particular type of relationship with another person who is able to bestow one with recognition, respect and, trust" (MacKinlay 27). This is where the grandchildren play a crucial role. They do not increase the disability he is already experiencing, rather they enable his well-being. They value their Nana for who he is, no matter what disabilities he encounters in his daily life. Their acceptance, love, care and support enables him to become more accepting of his own disabilities. Also through his condition the grandchildren learn acceptance and compassion, patience and tolerance. For instance, when Nana tells Avantika the story of her birth, "he repeated that about thirty times for the rest of the evening – and I answered him patiently every time" (234). He is teaching them valuable life's lessons. This illustrates that age and disability need not be any less satisfying than any other stage of life.

From all the above analysis, this paper concludes that the stereotypical representations of old age are minimal in Ranjit Lal's *Our Nana Was a Nutcase*. As children carry the attitudes formed during younger days throughout their lives and it influences their behavior towards old people and aging. It is of paramount importance that writers aim toward spreading positive views about old age and disabilities associated with it. The novel will surely inspire the children reading it to associate with aged people. Ranjit Lal grapples well with the difficulties of trying to convey information about old age and dementia while simultaneously telling an absorbing story.

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