

"Some Days I'm Myself, and Some Days My Head Really Isn't Right, and My Balance Is Really Disgusting.": 4000 Miles, the Conditions of Ageing and Generation Gap

"บางวันฉันก็เป็นตัวเองและบางวันหัวฉันก็เป็นอื่น แล้วก็ทรงตัวไม่ได้ด้วย น่ารังเกียจเสียจริง": 4,000 Miles สภาวะสูงวัยกับช่องว่างระหว่างวัย

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Received 26-09-2025

Revised 11-12-2025

Accepted 13-12-2025

Doi: 10.69598/artssu.2026.5798.

How to Cite:

Tongsukkaeng, C. (2026). "Some Days I'm Myself, and Some Days My Head Really Isn't Right, and My Balance Is Really Disgusting.": 4000 Miles, the Conditions of Ageing and Generation Gap. *Journal of Arts and Thai Studies*, 48(1), E5798 (1-16).

Keywords: ageing, dementia, literary gerontology, generation gap, decline narrative

คำสำคัญ: ภาวะสูงวัย, ภาวะสมองเสื่อม, การศึกษาภาวะสูงวัยกับวรรณกรรม, ช่องว่างระหว่างวัย, เรื่องเล่าแห่งความเสื่อมถอย

Abstract

Background and Objectives: As ageing becomes an urgent issue in contemporary society, authors and playwrights explore its complexities through literary representations, which reflect social transformations and cultural values. This article aims to explore Amy Herzog's play *4000 Miles* (2011) which engages with the concept of growing old by questioning stereotypes and biases through the portrayal of an old, frail, yet defiant female protagonist, with a binary opposition of the depiction of the young grandson, who cycles from Seattle across the US to visit his grandmother in New York. In this regard, the author examines the redefinition of cultural constructions while also revealing the complexity of old age, elderly care within society, and the nuanced differences of ageing, particularly as expressed through language and performance.

Methods: As qualitative research, this paper, with literary gerontology—the study of literature and ageing—analyses how *4,000 Miles* represents ageing in, as Gullette (2004) noted, a "decline narrative," including dementia, hearing impairment, and other signs of physical decay, which constitutes generation divides, communication problems, differences in political beliefs and social values.

Results: The dramatization of old age can critically draw on its cultural meanings related to gender, politics, personal and social memory, death, and attitudes toward the technologically oriented world. First, the play reveals the stereotype of ageing by highlighting the physical declines and vividly represents old age and its troubling conditions via the character 'Vera'. Moreover, with the focus on the old character's past, the playwright draws on the power of personal and social memory in the recount of her active political activities for socialism. By depicting an elderly female character living alone in an urban context, *4,000 Miles* significantly comments on the ethics of care for the elderly and the significant role of society or the community in supporting the welfare of this group. Ultimately, the generational gap has become a key issue in family relationships, offering insights into ageing as a condition that poses challenges in many societies, in which older adults must confront, overcome, or negotiate such circumstances.

Application of this study: This critical discussion may shed light on how age studies and literature can deepen our understanding of old age, foster empathy, and promote an ethic of care for older adults across society as a whole.

Conclusions: The study of *4,000 Miles* has provided a critical discussion of ageing conditions which unravels the meanings of old age and how our culture has reshaped and questioned its complexity. By combining age studies and literary studies, this article highlights how dramatization of old age can unsettle our stereotypes and the playwright's imagination of the old woman adjusting herself to the changing contexts culminates in reconciliation between different generations. This play also emphasizes an ethic of care, through which the author invites the audience to reflect on social and cultural values that require deeper understanding and further studies.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: ในขณะที่ภาวะสูงวัยกลายเป็นประเด็นเร่งด่วนในสังคมร่วมสมัย นักเขียนและนักประพันธ์บทละครได้สำรวจความซับซ้อนของภาวะสูงวัยผ่านการนำเสนอทางวรรณกรรมอันสะท้อนการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคมและคุณค่าทางวัฒนธรรม บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาบทละครเรื่อง *4,000 Miles* (2011) ของ Amy Herzog ซึ่งเกี่ยวข้องกับแนวคิดความชราโดยตั้งคำถามกับภาพเหมารวมและอคติผ่านการฉายภาพตัวละครเอกหญิงผู้สูงวัยที่ร่างกายเปราะบางแต่จิตใจ

ไม่สยบยอมภาวะดังกล่าว ผู้เขียนสร้างภาพชัดตรงข้ามโดยการนำเสนอตัวละครหลานชายหนุ่มผู้ปั่นจักรยานจากเมืองซีแอตเทิลข้ามสหรัฐอเมริกาเพื่อไปเยี่ยมคุณยายยังเมืองนิวยอร์ก ในการนี้ ผู้เขียนศึกษาการประกอบสร้างทางวัฒนธรรมที่มีการให้นิยามใหม่ ตลอดจนเผยให้เห็นความซับซ้อนของวัยชรา การดูแลผู้สูงวัยในสังคม และรายละเอียดความแตกต่างของภาวะสูงวัยโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งผ่านภาษาและการแสดง

วิธีการศึกษา: บทความนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่ใช้กรอบแนวคิดการศึกษาภาวะสูงวัยในงานวรรณกรรม (literary gerontology) เพื่อวิเคราะห์บทละครเรื่อง *4,000 Miles* ซึ่งนำเสนอภาวะสูงวัย ดังที่ Gullette (2004) กล่าวว่าไว้วางใจแนวคิดนี้เป็น “เรื่องเล่าแห่งความเสื่อมถอย” ประกอบไปด้วย ภาวะการสูญเสียความทรงจำ การได้ยินบกพร่อง และสัญญาณอื่นๆ ที่แสดงถึงความเสื่อมของร่างกายซึ่งก่อให้เกิดความแตกต่างของช่วงวัย ปัญหาการสื่อสาร ความแตกต่างของความเชื่อทางการเมืองและค่านิยมทางสังคม

ผลการศึกษา: การละครของภาวะสูงวัยอาจเชื่อมโยงความหมายทางวัฒนธรรมเชิงวิพากษ์ซึ่งเกี่ยวข้องกับเพศสภาพ การเมือง ความทรงจำส่วนบุคคลและสังคม ความตาย และทัศนคติต่อโลกที่ขับเคลื่อนด้วยเทคโนโลยี ประการแรก บทละครนี้เปิดเผยภาพเหมารวมของภาวะสูงวัย โดยเน้นความเสื่อมทางกายภาพที่นำเสนอความชราและสภาวะที่เป็นปัญหาผ่านตัวละครวีรา (Vera) นอกจากนี้ ผู้เขียนบทละครให้ความสำคัญกับอดีตของตัวละครเอกสูงวัยซึ่งตั้งเอาพลังของความทรงจำส่วนบุคคลและสังคมในเรื่องเล่าของตัวละครที่มีบทบาทในกิจกรรมการเมืองของฝ่ายสังคมนิยม บทละคร *4,000 Miles* นำเสนอตัวละครหญิงสูงวัยที่อาศัยอยู่เพียงลำพังในเมืองใหญ่เพื่อวิพากษ์จริยธรรมการดูแลผู้สูงอายุและบทบาทของสังคมหรือชุมชนในการสนับสนุนสวัสดิการของคนกลุ่มน้อยอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ ท้ายที่สุด ช่องว่างระหว่างวัยกลายเป็นประเด็นสำคัญในความสัมพันธ์ครอบครัวที่ทำให้เข้าใจความชราซึ่งกำลังสร้างความท้าทายในหลายสังคมซึ่งผู้สูงวัยต้องเผชิญหน้า เอาชนะหรือประนีประนอมกับสภาวะดังกล่าว

การประยุกต์ใช้: การอภิปรายเชิงวิพากษ์ในบทความนี้อาจสะท้อนให้เห็นว่าการศึกษาระดับสูงวัยกับวรรณกรรมสามารถสร้างความเข้าใจอันลึกซึ้งเกี่ยวกับความแก่ชรา ก่อให้เกิดความเห็นอกเห็นใจ ตลอดจนส่งเสริมจริยธรรมการดูแลเอาใจใส่ต่อผู้สูงวัยในสังคมวงกว้าง

บทสรุป: การศึกษานี้บทละคร *4,000 Miles* แสดงให้เห็นการอภิปรายสภาพการณ์ของภาวะสูงวัยซึ่งเผยให้เห็นความหมายและบทบาทของวัฒนธรรมในการประกอบสร้างใหม่และตั้งคำถามกับความซับซ้อนของประเด็นนี้ ด้วยการผสานการศึกษาด้านวัยและวรรณกรรมศึกษา บทความนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าการละครของความชราสามารถสะท้อนภาพเหมารวมและผู้เขียนจินตนาการภาพของหญิงสูงวัยที่ปรับตัวเข้ากับบริบทที่เปลี่ยนแปลงจะนำไปสู่การประนีประนอมระหว่างผู้อยู่ในวัยที่แตกต่างกัน บทละครนี้ยังให้ความสำคัญกับจริยธรรมการดูแลซึ่งผู้แต่งเชื้อเชิญให้อ่านพิจารณาคุณค่าทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมที่ต้องอาศัยความเข้าใจที่ลึกซึ้งและการศึกษาในระดับต่อไป

Introduction

4,000 Miles by Amy Herzog, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013, captivates the audience by challenging the cultural conception of old age and the ethics of care through an interaction between an active 21-year-old grandson and a feisty 91-year-old grandmother. The quote in the title “Some days I’m myself, and some days my head really isn’t right, and my balance is really disgusting.” (Herzog, 2010 : 13) reveals the conditions of old age through the old character’s viewpoint, which invites the reader to examine our meanings of age in literary representations. The speaker’s statement signifies anxiety and discomfort from physical decline and memory loss, which can lead to a complicated intergenerational relationship. The playwright deals with themes such as grief and healing, as well as family and identity issues (Gale, 2018). Through literary gerontology, this article suggests that *4,000 Miles* can unsettle the meanings of old age associated with identity, gender, and generational time, and the play could build an ethical dialogue between caregivers of the elderly and the general public to better understand the challenges of ageing.

Research Objectives

1. To explore ageing in literary representation in order to understand the complexity of old age in culture.
2. To examine how Herzog's play *4,000 Miles* unsettles the stereotypes of old age and aging.

Literature Review

1. Literary Gerontology: Merging Ageing Studies and the Humanities against Prejudice

Reading literature by focusing on old characters often reveals cultural meanings that a society defines them at a late stage of life. For instance, some writers portray the elderly as evil characters who test the young characters as they grow to maturity, while others depict the caring and supportive seniors who provide wisdom and experiences for the young ones. In this way, literature represents the binary opposition, and its meanings are shaped by our culture. To what extent can the literary world contribute to the cultural meanings and social paradigm of age studies? It is important to consider ageing not only from the biological transformations of an individual or the social phenomenon, but also from the cultural conceptions and the social studies of human life, which can be investigated in *literary gerontology*.

Literary gerontology is an exploration of literary works with a critical examination of old age and ageing (cited in Maginess, 2023 : 41; Gilleard, Barry & Skagen, 2021; Wallace, 2011; Zeilig, 2012; Kantos, 2003). It delves into the complex depictions of old characters or examines the styles of works written by writers who reach their old age. Literary gerontology was established in the 1970s and became institutionalized in the 1990s when scholars integrated biological sciences with the social studies of old age. Cole (1992 : xi) pointed out that "Mainstream gerontology—with its highly technical and instrumental, avowedly objective, value-neutral and specialized discourse—lacks an appropriate language for addressing basic moral and spiritual issues in our aging society" The humanistic discussions will "reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope and reason" (Cole, 1992 : xviii) To study age in a humanistic way, we can further our inquiries : "What does it mean to grow old. [...] Is old age the fulfillment of life or a second childishness? [...] What are the vices and virtues of the elderly? What kinds of support and care does society "owe" its old? What are the obligations of the old?" (Cole, 1992 : xvi) These questions can address the cultural complexity of being old, and examine integrated dynamism between social sciences and humanities, especially through literary imagination (Chiver, 2003; Sako & Falcus, 2022; Wallace, 2011).

Studies of age and literature emerge from an awareness of prejudice against old age, which is socially and culturally constructed. Misunderstanding and bias between generations may contribute to the so-called generation gap, and such prejudice can be understood as ageism. Robert Butler defined ageism as "prejudice by one age group against another age group" (as cited in Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018 : 2). Like racism and sexism, ageism operates as a system of discrimination and disempowerment. Some elderly people become a minority group as they are excluded from the majority of the younger generation, who focus on youth and productivity. In addition, certain stereotypes, such as an old person may drive slowly and cause accidents, can create misconceptions and lead to mistreatment.

Prejudice or the stigma of ageing is a product of a cultural construct, for old age is perceived as the last stage of life toward death. This conception is challenged by contemporary scholars and writers who question such thoughts and values placed on old age. Based on anxiety of physical deterioration and death, in literature "old people are portrayed stereotypically, as miserly, cranky, obsessed with sex but sexless, incompetent, drunken, bitter, childish, demented, and worthless because they may soon die" (Cruikshank, 2017 : 3). In particular, old women are subject to bias due to the expectation of caregiving and maternal responsibilities, while old men interested in sexual relationships are considered dirty old men. This stigmatization results from the beliefs and biased assumptions about being old.

In addition to biases against ageing, the younger generation tends to fear growing old since it signifies inability, decline, dependency, and even death, the end of life. Ayalon & Tesch-Römer (2018 : 4) argued that "According to terror management theory, older adults serve as a constant reminder of one's mortality and vulnerability. In order to manage

the anxiety that their presence produces, individuals unconsciously sustain faith in cultural worldviews that offer literal or symbolic immortality". The fear of death and anxiety from ageing make people conscious of physical and mental decline. Gullette (1997, 2004) argued that prejudice against old age is culturally ingrained in our childhood, until the end of life. He further commented that "Ageism can be more vicious than racism or sexism because it has no righteously belligerent community vocally resenting it" (cited in Gullette, 2015 : 23). For instance, the impact of the ageist bias is seen in the media, where older people are compared to a "burden" for their economy and healthcare. This structural ageism brings about anxiety to the old as much as the midlife individuals who are approaching old age. Thus, it is important to unravel this fear and the misconceptions through cultural representations.

Literary gerontology can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's *Old Age* (1972), which explores the portrayals of ageing in literary memoirs, biographies, and novels. For her, it is not only about the images of old characters but also "the construction and reconstruction of knowledge, and the critical interweaving of this knowledge in literary and gerontological discourses" (as cited in Gilleard, Barry & Skagen, 2021 : 7). Beauvoir exemplifies the cultural representation of old age as limited and it should be promoted more critically. She said "It is true that if an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect, he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for; as far as he is concerned it is all over and death already dwells within, so nothing that can happen to him is of any importance" (Beauvoir, 1972 : 210). It is not just the old character that Beauvoir views with no hope and development in the plot, but also the reality of ageing conditions and meanings or even stereotypes against old age in our society.

Kohn, Donley, and Wear (1992 : xvi) wrote that literature and ageing can "express the hopes and fears of people struggling with retirement, with failing health, with recognitions of their own mortality. The voices complain of prejudice against the elderly, they celebrate the closeness of family and friends, they grieve over losses of loved people and places". The study of literature and old age will promote better interactions between the elderly, the healthcare providers or physicians and even family and friends, because "[i]t allows us to anticipate in their [the elderly's] experiences, to see through their eyes instead of looking at them from a distance, to recognize that what we may have thought about them is not necessarily the truth as they know it." (Kohn, Donley, & Wear, 1992 : xvi) Thus, reading literature will enable us to understand the vulnerability of old age and to instigate ethical care and empathy for those who struggle with their lives. Nevertheless, as many cultural representations show, some people still have misconceptions about old age due to their bias or stereotypes, which distorts the reality of ageing.

With literary narrative, Gullette (2004 : 10) further investigates how we perceive old age in negative meanings of physical, cognitive, and mental decline. She believes that humans are "Aged by Culture" (as her book title suggests) and posits that a "narrative of ageing" or "decline narrative" should be critically demystified. Since we conceptualize ageing in the narrative of old age, we need to deconstruct the dichotomy of decline and progress since ageing is a human process through a life course. It should be more inclusive, not be trapped by decline narratives in gerontology. Gullette emphasized that:

In reconceptualized age studies, "aging" will no longer be either a euphemism for old age or a process that begins at an undecidable period in middle age. The very term will acquire qualifiers, like "aging-into-the-middle-years" or "aging-into-adulthood" [...] and these terms will not refer to a fixed chronology but to cultural pressures that destabilize age ideology or engineer its novelties." (Gullette, 2004 : 106-107)

In this study, following Gullette's age narratives as a cultural or social construction will widen our understanding of age not just as being old, but progressing in life to fulfil its course.

2. Approaches to Literary Gerontology: Intergeneration, Personhood, and the Body

The study of literature about ageing is still limited, so Wyatt-Brown (1992 : 332) suggested five points for the framework of this area of study: 1) the literary attitudes toward ageing 2) humanistic approaches to literature and ageing 3) psychoanalyses of ageing in literature and authors 4) applications of gerontological theories about autobiography, life review, and midlife transitions, and 5) psychoanalytically informed studies of the creative process. To clarify attitudes toward ageing, Barbara & Akkab Lefcowitz (1984) examined aged characters in literature that can be described in four models: 1) stoical elders with impressive powers of endurance, 2) admirable elders who are contrasted favorably to greedy youths, 3) elders whose plight demonstrates the inadequacy of society's response to ageing, and 4) elders whose behavior mirrors social values (as cited in Wyatt-Brown, 1992 : 333-334). Regarding psychoanalysis, the explorations of the writer's psyche will demonstrate the development or changes of a writer's writing styles, known as *late style* in many writers who reach old age. These changes result from the writers' experiences (illness, death of partners, traumas, political activism, etc.), which contribute to their specific subjects and styles of literary creativity. In line with Wyatt-Brown, Henneberg (2006 : 107) suggested that we examine the age-related subtexts and backgrounds of literature that seem to focus on other identity categories and consider age as an integral part of a writer's or character's identity. Moreover, we should develop age studies by looking at literary texts that deal with age to advance our understanding of aging. Both approaches will be a model for this research.

Based on the narrative structure, Constance Rooke (1992 : 245) coined the term *Vollendungsroman* to define a fiction of old age as completion or "winding up" in response to the *Bildungsroman*, the fiction of youth and growth. As *Vollendungsroman* represents the last phase of life involving leaving social stages and disengagement, it can offer the deconstruction of ego and coming to terms with self-actualization (See the related term *Reifungsroman*, the novel of ripening in Schrage-Früh & O'Neill, 2023). The storyline of *Vollendungsroman* might follow the old characters in their final stage of life and their interactions/ disengagements from society, which is opposite to the *Bildungsroman*. The old characters' resistance to the social norms can become a challenge, and the turning point of the plot may reveal the complexity of being old, personhood, and its relativity with individuals or society. Rooke also critiques the cultural construction of biases against old people, both in the literature and in real life:

The invisibility or marginalization of old people, their reduction to stereotype, their occupation of a zone behind the mask – all of this may provide special impetus to one of the writer's most crucial drives, which is to see other human being clearly. The indignities suffered by the elderly—their bodies betray them, as memory fails, as social power is stripped away and condescension mounts—may also stimulate the writer's need to proffer dignity through art.
(Rooke, 1992 : 249)

At this point, Rooke (1992 : 253) highlights the theme of life review in which "The protagonist is located within a present time frame, a few days or months perhaps of that character's old age; and then through memory the character is transported into past time, often through a narrative voice that assesses past experience in a new light". Thus, memory is important for an individual's identity because it is shaped by the character in the present.

Regarding the challenges of being old, conflicts between generations seem to pose another dimension of *Vollendungsroman* as Rooke summarizes:

Intergenerational conflicts, societal change, disengagement, the life review, poverty, loneliness, sexuality, body image, frailty, memory loss, illness, loss of independence, loss of friends and family, stereotypical reduction and marginalization, the motivation and behavior of caregivers, the terrors and possible benefits of institutionalization, attitudes toward religion and death—all of this is powerful fiction material. (Rooke, 1992 : 254)

In this light, we might approach those imaginative works by considering the personal identity of an old character or of the author, which consists of gender, race, class, and even disability. If the study of ageing signifies the cultural turn concerning identity or personhood and subjectivity of old age, how can we reflect ourselves by reevaluating the meanings of ageing and "how social representations constitute and remake what they represent"? (Twigg & Martin, 2015 : 355). At this point, cultural representations such as literary works, films, theater productions, and other forms of arts can change how we understand, embody, and perform them.

Woodward (1991 : 7-10) focused on psychoanalysis and the ageing body by emphasizing that Western culture represents ageing in terms of splitting; it is the polar opposite of youth and age that stimulates fear and anxiety. She proposes that ageist ideology is conceptualized from the decline narrative (as Guellette noted) because "old age is one of the discontents in our civilization." In this way, the physical decline is a dominant signifier of old age and ultimately, the literary representations might exemplify "the body as a container and its contents" (Woodward, 1992 : 11). Therefore, the old character's body becomes a site of negative meanings based on his or her chronological time even though the narratives in literature might be presented otherwise. Some old characters might even defy these assumptions as seen in the protagonist in the selected text.

By approaching literary texts of old age, Woodward (1991 : 13) suggested that "the act of reading can help us exercise our psychic imagination of prospective time", which refers to the possibility of ageing experiences that all of us will face as a part of our future state. More importantly, the cultural imagination and fear of old age, because of its association with death, is the prominent cause of our anxiety. Thus, the interconnection between the body and old age is critically highlighted by Woodward here:

We cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attached to old age. The inevitable and literal association of advanced old age with increasing frailty and ultimately death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go. The body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death. The facticity of the mortal vulnerability of the body in old age, and the meanings we attach to it, cannot be explained away by insisting that an ideology of youth, with its corresponding semiotics, is responsible for negative representations of old age. (Woodward, 1991 : 18-19)

The advanced physical frailty suggests the closeness to death, the end of human identity, which draws us to the loss of personhood. This makes people frustrated to get old, and thus medical advancement later brings solutions of anti-aging products to slow down the natural process of ageing. Apart from this, gender manifests its challenges in old age since it is politically associated with social and cultural paradigms, for instance, a woman and procreativity. To demystify these traditional concepts of ageing, the acceptance and denial of old age should be critically discussed regarding youth culture.

Prejudice against old age and how the female body is underrepresented in the visual mass culture reflect the value of youth. It is the result of "the youthful structure of the look", which culturally intends "to degrade and reduce an older

person to the prejudicial category of old age". (Woodward, 2006 : 164) Often, the absence or the invisibility of the old female body from cultural representations is due to the pervasion of ageism (see also Falcus, 2012). For example, some older females are represented with limitations due to their physical decline. Therefore, the body becomes a site of cultural criticism as seen in artistic performance of age and female sexuality, which heavily values youth. Ultimately, the characterization in literature and how directors or dramatists transfer it onto screens and stages will contribute to the conceptualization of old age.

In terms of body and ageing, Falcus (2012 : 1384) further argued that "The interplay of the cultural and corporeal aspects forces the reader to acknowledge the complexities of ageing, unsettling any easy assumptions about ageing subject" These aspects include the *invisibility* of the old people because they are marginalized and not given a voice in society and this constitutes the generational divide or conflicts. Regarding physical decay, some old people isolate themselves from social activities and the representations of them are connected to the spaces, e.g., dilapidated houses. With a focus on old age and its conditions, cognitive degeneration causes prejudice and misconceptions about ageing as much as the physical decline. For example, memory loss becomes an increasingly visible condition of old people who suffer from dementia, which will be discussed in the following section.

3. Representation of Dementia in Old Age

One dominant characteristic of old age frequently represented in literature is memory loss or dementia. Cognitive impairment indicates old age, which involves a personal identity or personhood. In particular, Alzheimer's disease, a specific type of cognitive decline or dementia, has become a major challenge for senior people who suffer from it and they need care from family, society and even the national policies at large. According to the World Health Organization (2017), "In 2021, 57 million people had dementia worldwide". Alzheimer's disease has been widely recognized since the late 1970s (by Dr. Alois Alzheimer), which made it a primary focus of medical research and public discourse (Bitence, 2020 : 8). The pathologization of memory loss and linguistic decline contributes to the socially constructed meanings of dementia, particularly in relation to subjectivity and personhood, and raises ethical questions about our responsibilities toward people with dementia and older adults. This rise of dementia brings about fear, which results from its threatening effect to the core values in Western culture, such as "youth, productivity, autonomy, capability, and rationality" (Bitence, 2020 : 10). In this way, older adults with memory loss may be dehumanized, stigmatized, or devalued, as they are perceived to lose their sense of self, and consequently their subjectivity, identity, or personhood.

With its effects on individuals, family members, carers, and society, dementia becomes visible and reveals social values in many cultural representations. This is evident in Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* (2007), a novel that gained popularity due to its characterization of a protagonist suffering from early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Meanwhile, memoirs of demented authors and novels about the symptoms have become widely studied to examine our medical knowledge and the socio-cultural implications. Vassilas (2003 : 444) explored the representations of dementia in literary texts, both fiction and memoirs or biography, and highlights the nature of dementia narratives in different genres. The common themes are the nature and loss of identity and of care guilt, which become a form of cultural production that calls for our empathy, care, and responsibility.

In some literary works, dementia "symptoms are described, but are not portrayed as a specific illness in medical diagnosis" (Volk, 2017 : 56). For instance, Shakespeare's *King Lear* is impulsive and makes irrational decisions when he reaches his old age (also see Wallace, 2011 : 391). Lear becomes childish and gradually aggressive, which marginalizes him from his daughters through dementia experiences. Volk argues that implicit dementia might not be defined by the modern medical profession, but "they view them more as just a natural phenomenon of old age—or, in rather more

undifferentiated manner, simply as madness" (2017 : 61). By this virtue, we can examine dementia literature (both implicit and explicit) to understand and conceptualize how society shapes its complicated meanings.

To connect literary representations with ethics, Falcus & Sako (2019 : 6) examined dementia narratives to contest that there are two possible dimensions in the representations and study of dementia and old age. Their concern in dementia narrative lies in two folds: "the ethical needs *for* the representation of dementia and the ethical dangers *of* such representations" (italic by authors). On one hand, the portrayal and discussion of dementia in our culture might deepen our understanding and the body of knowledge and even instigate the policy of social welfare of demented patients. On the other hand, the representations of people with memory loss might reinforce a stereotyped perception or stigmatization in the public (5). Gravagne (2013) proposed that narratives are "part of a cultural struggle over meanings that are never fixed nor natural" and "part of contested practices of representation and creation" (as cited in Falcus & Sako, 2019 : 4). Therefore, exploring the literary representations of dementia will allow the reader to carefully consider personhood or a personal identity to promote the ethics of care.

Research Methods

Through literary gerontology, this paper examines the primary text, *4,000 Miles* by Amy Herzog to conceptualize old age and ageing which are redefined and reevaluated through literary representations. Thus, textual analysis will reveal the philosophical complexity and social and cultural paradigms which integrate age studies with literary studies.

Research Results and Discussion

1. Manifestations of Ageing in *4,000 Miles*: An Analysis

1.1 Physical Decline and Loss of Communication

The conditions of old age are explicitly depicted in the "decline narrative"; the protagonist's communication problems and memory loss reveal how culture shapes its meanings in *4000 Miles*. Vera, who is a 91-year-old woman, after being alarmed to see her grandson showing up at her apartment in the middle of the night, is depicted with her slow movement, disoriented responses, and limited ability to understand. In the opening scene, after a cross-country bike journey from Seattle to New York, Leo, a 21-year-old, visits his grandmother, who welcomes him with surprise. Herzog illustrates a disturbing description of Vera's old age in comparison to Leo's youth and agility: "Vera, 91, tiny and frail but not without fortitude, is in her nightgown. Her eyes have not adjusted to the light. She covers her mouth because she hasn't put her teeth in. Her speech is altered for the same reason. She is quite disoriented. A pause in which he grins and she is uncomprehending." (Herzog, 2010 : 2) Vera's loss of her teeth not only suggests her difficulty in having food but also the loss of a woman's physical beauty. She could not balance herself well nor hear properly, and this caused problematic communication with Leo (though she later put on her hearing aids). Besides losing her teeth, hearing impairment leads to an inability to communicate effectively. When Vera kindly does the laundry for Leo, she tries not to disturb his sleep which suggests a sense of motherly care, but at the same time it shows her low self-esteem when Leo observes her hearing problem: "Leo: Hey. (She continues to fold) Vera. She looks up with the startled look of half-deaf people who aren't sure whether they heard something, and want to cover if they did, and sees Leo." (Herzog, 2010 : 10–11) Vera's awareness of her hearing problem shows the increasing loss of self-confidence and frustration ("look of half-deaf people").

In addition to hearing problems and anxiety, memory loss is a part of old age that causes difficulties in her life. Vera cannot distinguish people's names (Joe Joseph, her late husband and Leo's father's name). When Leo talks to Vera, she tries to find the right words that she might have missed in their conversation. By repeatedly asking him "whatddayacallit", she is frustrated due to speech loss, and that leads to an uncomfortable moment when Leo harshly shouts at her. The repetition of "whatddayacallit" not only reveals behavioral changes but also her poor problem-solving, as Falcus & Sako (2019 : 9) argued, dementia is characterized by "the absence of activity, agency and meaning. This leads to the climate of fear and crisis since dementia leads to the loss of subjectivity as a result of cognitive impairment". Vera's absence of family connection might leave her with an inactive lifestyle, less communication, and cognitive deterioration. However, Vera is still independent and finds meaning in her life in an urban community, as the play later shows that she has regular meetings with her octogenarians. Thus, memory plays a crucial role in forming her personhood in relation to family and community.

Vera's memory loss is evident in her speech when talking about her political beliefs and identity. With Leo's explanation of communication technology, Vera is disgusted with herself for being unable to explain political ideas, despite the fact that she used to be active in left-wing politics. Vera encounters anxiety and even anger in her tone when she cannot find words:

You know, there are a lot of bad things about getting old, but the worst one is not being able to find my words. I just hate not being able to find my words. I feel like an idiot half the time."
(Herzog, 2010 : 17)

In this regard, speech becomes important to express her ideas and ultimately her identity connected to political ideology, Marxism in the 1920s. As a result, Vera's low self-esteem and loss for words means losing contact with her grandson, which eventually becomes the generation gap.

In association with the decline narrative, death is culturally conceptualized with negativity as the end of personhood. The younger generation is alarmed by old age and death, which provokes anxiety, fear, and disgust. In scene 6, Leo takes Amanda, a Chinese American girl, into Vera's apartment in the middle of the night for a casual intimate relationship, and then Vera accidentally walks into the living room while they are kissing and touching in the darkness as described in the stage directions:

A long pause. She grabs his face. They kissed passionately. Vera enters disoriented. She doesn't have teeth in so her lips curl her gums. They didn't hear her and continue, with hands moving all over each other. She sees what's going on, startles lightly and then realizes what she's looking at. She turns to go, but Amanda, in a moment of pulling away and opening her eyes sees her and screams. They separate. (Herzog, 2010 : 56)

This shocking moment reveals the youth value in the young woman who sees the old woman in an unpleasant and unprepared manner. Amanda even says that, "She looked like a little white-haired old lady ghost!" (Herzog, 2010 : 56) and that alarmed her. This scene signifies ageing as a stage of physical decline, not functional in a representable condition, especially without her false teeth. Amanda feels extremely disgusted at Vera's ugliness, presumably, as much as the old woman might feel for herself in the future. Amanda said, "I don't want to get old and lose all my teeth, that shit is so fucked" (Herzog, 2010 : 57) At the end of the scene, they lost their mood for sexual intimacy, and Leo is desperate when

Amanda leaves the apartment. Amanda's anxiety about growing old reflects the younger generation's limited understanding of the physical decline and her fear of death suggests a denial of old age.

As stated in the introduction, our contemporary visual culture tends to erase the female body of old age from view. It is "the youthful structure of the look" which tends to degrade and reduce the old female body because of prejudice (Woodward, 2006 : 164). We value youth over old age, and the unpleasant female appearance is thus eliminated or limited for view. Amanda's feeling disgusted at Vera's look as "a little white-haired old lady ghost" (Herzog, 2010 : 56) reveals our cultural meaning of getting old, and a woman's appearance is tied to youth and beauty, which we want to maintain.

1.2 Loss of Personal Identity and Social Memory

Herzog, in retrospect to her real grandmother's life, recreates Vera's social memory with her neighbor Ginny. To begin with, both Vera and Ginny shared the same political ideology in the 1920s, when socialism was widely adopted and believed to bring equality and well-being to societies worldwide. Vera refers to Cuba and her political stance in the "pro-peace" movement when talking about Ginny, and this brings back the crucial time when she was active in politics. Hence, her social memory defines her identity as a communist activist when she was young.¹ In the previous section, Vera's political stance is challenged by Amanda's opposition to communism, the evil political regime, after her family moved from China to follow the American Dream. This conflict of personal identity and social memory is represented in the protagonist's ageing conditions, which eventually contributes to the young characters' possible bias against Vera.

Kohn, Donley, and Wear (1992) argued that "Our sense of who we are as individuals depends on our ability to remember our personal history and the people and places that contributed to that history" (4). Herzog explores old age and a personal identity by digging the protagonist's memory in connection with the political history. Vera's political interest can be noticed in Marxism, the ideals of social progress and equality. Discussing the widespread availability of information in the modern era of technology, Leo praises the advantages of a computer and the internet and how they can help benefit communication via email and other interactive platforms such as live chat. At that point, Vera brings back her ideas about social changes via communist propaganda, while Leo sees the accessibility of the internet and information as part of democracy or liberalism. In this scene, we can see the generation divide, even though both Vera and Leo similarly see the power of technology, information, and social changes:

Vera: I know you don't, I've been hearing about that a lot lately. (brief pause) I guess what they say is all this, whatsit, technology is good for...from the standpoint of the people, or the—that you can get the propaganda to the people, the Marxist—I can't find the words, but in terms of Africa, and South America, and places where—that from the standpoint of being progressive and so on and so forth it can be a good thing. (brief pause) You know, there are a lot of bad things about getting old, but the worst one is not being able to find my words. I just hate not being able to find my words. I feel like an idiot half the time. (Herzog, 2010 : 17)

For Vera, the media is a tool to spread information like political propaganda for social changes, where there were revolutions against authoritarianism. However, for Leo, the accessibility to information through the internet is beneficial for

¹ In her interview, Leepie Joseph, Amy Herzog's biological grandmother retold a journalist that in her prime she was active in political demonstration; it can be seen in her participation in the Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011. See the article, "The Playwright and the Radical" by Alexis Soloski (2012).

the majority of people as conceptualized in the democratic principle—equality, freedom of expression, and the overflow of information. For both, information technology seems to connect them. Nevertheless, for Leo's mother, politics can be a controversial topic that Vera was not happy to talk about since Jane supports the Democrats, but Vera presumably goes for the opposition. That can be regarded as a family faction based on different political beliefs. As a result, Vera's identity is associated with her past political beliefs and activism.

The question of selfhood and personal memory can be examined with a life review and reminiscence. When Leo's ex-girlfriend Bec visits him in Vera's apartment, the ageing hostess tries to make the visitor less anxious in their unstable relationship by recounting her past marriages. Vera reminisces about her relationships with her first husband, Arthur, who cheated on her and her late husband, Joseph, but Bec feels uncomfortable since she thinks that Vera convinces her to remain with Leo despite his purposelessness in life. Vera is over 90 years old and can give Bec wise words from her experiences, and that suggests the old's wisdom for the young. However, from Bec's perspective, her fallout with Leo results from his loss of self, both from his best friend Mica's death and his familial issues with his mother and stepsister, leading to his dropout from college. Here, life review is important because an individual's life course can define his/her identity. As mentioned earlier, *Vollendungsroman* offers an interpretation of old age as life review, which ultimately constitutes self-actualization. Thus, Vera's married life with her first and second husbands suggests how she becomes a self-reliant woman as her identity. Being herself means being resolute to choose her own life and hold on to her political beliefs.

Polly R. Edelstein (2014) read *4,000 Miles* through the lens of liberal feminism and argued that Herzog dramatizes an experienced matriarch who defies the patriarchal tradition and discrimination of old age. Vera does not follow the societal norms and contests the prejudice against ageing in her interactions with Leo and his girlfriend. She is an epitome of a feminist matriarch whose independent life proves her strength and even wisdom when she gives life lessons to Leo and Bec. The younger generation's bias results from a sense of fear and otherness against old age. As Calasanti and Slevin (2001) pointed out, ageism is "the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Ageism allows people to see the old different, as other, as not like them, thereby making it easier to see the old as not humans" (as cited in Edelstein, 2014 : 2). Despite her frail physical conditions and symptoms of dementia, Vera is never afraid to speak her mind and to express her political beliefs.

1.3 Old Age, Living Conditions, and the Ethics of Care

4,000 Miles represents the pressing issue of an ageing society in which an old individual might suffer from loneliness and isolation. Living in New York alone for a long time, Vera develops a small community where only a few neighbors care for one another. It is unavoidable that living in a city can lead old people to isolation from socializing. Kohn, Donley, and Wear argued that even though the city allows the individual more privacy, the environment can be radically isolating, and the old people might be ignored, resulting in loneliness and anxiety or other mental health problems. Ultimately, old people "become abstract generalities rather than real individual people" (1992 : 295). In the play, Vera and her neighbor, Ginny choose to take care of themselves alone.

Herzog addresses the conditions of old age and care ethics in contemporary society, which can be observed in Vera's centenarian community and Ginny's funeral. Returning from one of her old friends' funerals, Vera told Leo about her community of old people who are gradually dying. This scene shows a sense of anxiety and how to face aging with dignity as she said that:

There were seven of us, octogenarians, and we had dinner once a month for a lot of years and we were all lefties and there were a lot of memories and laughs and the last one just died, besides me. (Herzog, 2010 : 26)

Even though Vera is a feisty and self-sufficient feminist, this shows her frustration with the approaching death. In Western society, some elderly people have to face loneliness and isolation; therefore, the community center becomes a place where old people can meet and participate in activities organized by state agencies as part of their health care promotion. With Leo's short stay, Vera becomes engaged with his lifestyle, and their shared worldviews illustrate empathy between the two generations.

Care in this play is clearly seen between family members, and it is also extended to Vera's neighbor. At the end of the play, Leo brings dying Ginny to a hospital and later accompanies Vera to her funeral. Without her immediate family members present, Leo reads the speech about Ginny's life; unfortunately, the limited information about her background (being a Broadway actress, working as a secretary, and getting married to a man who was killed in the Korean War) reveals the condition of old age in the west where individualism is prioritized. This scene reveals the pressing issue of an ageing society where many old people live alone, lack care, and unfortunately rely on their neighbors or acquaintances for organizing the funeral. Herzog creates a dark humor in Leo's speech when he confesses that he barely knows and has never met Ginny before; her biography is retrieved from a Google search and Vera's words. Hence, Leo's speech can be regarded as care for the lone diseased, whose friendship with Vera has drawn her grandson into the circle of community care.

Ginny, despite her past fame in the theater industry, can be regarded as, what Khon, Donley, and Wear called, "abstract generalities" since she has no relatives or friends who know her identity well. In contrast, Leo's short stay with Vera reveals her identity in relation to social and political backgrounds and his developed sense of empathy for his old grandmother and Ginny. This scene also invokes companionship or bonding between family members, which implies love and care. If the beginning of the play shows Leo's reliance on Vera, infantilized because of his loss of self, it is his reversed role of a carer for her in the second half. Here, Vera, as an old character, is not infantilized or generally invisible in age studies, but she is so visible as a matriarch and caregiver to the grandson and as a close friend to the diseased Ginny.

1.4 Generation Gap and Reconciliation

Finally, in *4,000 Miles*, Herzog addresses the generation divide between the old grandmother and her grandson with different beliefs and worldviews. A few conflicts lead to reconciliation, including the issue of trust, technology, and personal life. After the conflict with his mother Jane, Leo loses trust in her and thus turns to Vera for comfort. Vera sees Leo as a man who needs parental guidance and should maintain the bond with his family despite his resistance to her persuasion and attempt to establish a boundary between them. With the serious mistake that Leo made to his stepsister back home (kissing), their conversation cannot be resolved since Leo cannot change what he did as a taboo to Lily, who was later sent for medical treatment after being shocked by the situation.

The issue of trust between the elderly and the younger ones becomes complicated when ageing conditions like Vera's loss of memory undermine her trust in Leo. As the play progresses, Leo feels more comfortable staying with Vera, but she seems otherwise in his presence due to her growing dementia. Namely, Vera loses trust in her grandson and blames him for locking the front door and damaging her faucet in the toilet without telling her. More importantly, she is very disappointed that her money disappears, so she suspects Leo and that ignites the conflict. Herzog dramatizes this issue of trust as Leo indignantly responds to her false accusation:

Leo: I didn't take it! I didn't take it I didn't take it I didn't take it. Yesterday you lost your keys, there were three days you couldn't find your hearing aids, there was the priceless morning your teeth went missing, you think I took those too? I didn't take your fucking checkbook. God.
(Herzog, 2010 : 65)

For this instance, Leo's needs for financial assistance becomes a factor that undermines their trust, besides Vera's growing dementia. Leo's harsh reactions to Vera illustrate his limited understanding of his frail grandmother's cognitive impairment, and this leads to a wider generation gap. The generation divide between Vera and Leo is so distinct due to their differences in social and economic backgrounds. Howes states that:

Vera is from the Greatest Generation, those who were born between 1901 and 1924. The term "greatest" comes not only from them surviving the Great Depression, but was also coined by Tom Brokaw, a journalist, in his book *Greatest Generation*. People like Vera came of age in a time of great economic build and collapse; they also witnessed two world wars and saw the United States brought into the modern era of the 40s and 50s when their children, the baby boomers, were being born.

Leo's generation, called the millennials, is comprised of people born between the years of 1982 to 1996, though some scholars put the dates anywhere from 1980 to the mid-2000s. They are the largest generation since the baby boomers and are often called "digital natives" who are defined by the technological culture with which they're familiar. Millennials grew up in a post-9/11 world with a level of diversity that past generations have not known. (Howes, 2014 : 20)

Leo's conditions, including being a dropout from college, being unemployed, and having a conflict with his mother, become the factors that reflect different thoughts and values in life. Meanwhile, Vera's belief in political stability, social progress, and conservative mindset becomes a stark contrast with Leo's.

Toward the end, the reconciliation between the main characters signifies how they adjust their worldviews and embrace generational differences. At first, Vera is disappointed in Leo's childish behavior, but she then forgives him with her love and care. For Leo's mother and Vera, both female characters, notably represent different generations, but their family roles allow them to interact with Leo differently. Jane might be regarded as a baby boomer who shows her political interest in the Democratic Party and demands a different mindset and responsibility from Leo, who does not have a clear purpose in life. From Leo's viewpoint, Jane fails to accept his lifestyle and decision to leave school or run away from her, whereas Vera tries to embrace him despite his loss of self. Arguably, Leo inherited those rebellious traits from Vera, and their discussion about politics enriches this old character's identity.

In their reconciliation, Herzog's representation of death can be observed with the ethics of care; Leo's traumatic recount of Micah's tragedy reflects his grandmother's care. In scene 8, Leo recounts the loss of his beloved friend Micah during the bike trip (a truck crash); this scene highlights death and grief in the conversation as if the deep talk were a therapy for Leo. Despite his memorable adventure with Micah, the play deals with trauma and a sense of guilt in Leo regarding his absence from Micah's funeral, which signifies his unacceptance of death. With only silence and long pauses during Leo's recount, Vera functions as a good listener who consoles Leo for his grief and provides him with moral support.

Finally, Vera's conflicts with Leo are reconciled due to care and empathy. In the later scene, Vera gets cross because of distrust in him and Leo becomes sarcastic to her: "Leo: Well, let's hope this interview goes well, because it's clear you don't trust me and it would be better for both of us if I got out of here. / Vera: Maybe that's true." (Herzog, 2010 : 65) In scene 10, Vera finally finds her checkbook and apologizes to Leo for the false accusation. He, with a better understanding of her dementia, accepts her apology and promises to return the money he borrowed from her. Finally, Vera feels surprised to hear that Leo is going for a job interview to work in the Rocky Mountains as a youth camp counsellor. After he tells her that the job will not start until next summer, Vera is relieved because she will have more time with him. She even tries to convince him to stay in the city, but Leo knows what he wants, and he sees city life as a "concrete prison" (Herzog, 2010 : 64). Due to their generation gap and Vera's independence, it might be hard for her to stay with the grandson resulting from their different worldviews, especially when her physical decline and cognitive impairment manifest themselves.

Conclusion

This article has critically demonstrated the decline narrative through the dramatic depiction of the old but feisty matriarch whose independence and strength defy the societal norm and cultural meanings of old age. With the generation gap between the old and the young, it is notable that in *4,000 Miles*, Herzog addresses the cultural meanings of old age not only in the portrayal of physical and mental deterioration, but also in Vera's regaining of wisdom and self-actualization. As Edelstein (2014 : 5) stated:

Vera stands strong against a societal construct of what people think when they think of old people and shines as a beacon of what people aspire to be as an independent matriarch worthy of respect, even if it is only for her seemingly insignificant day to day victories she achieves as an independent octogenarian woman.

Reading *4,000 Miles* with the literary gerontology allows us to see the complexity of human experiences and how our culture has shaped and represented old age in different and complicated dimensions. If the protagonist's dementia causes any discomfort in other characters, such as anxiety toward physical decline or death, it is a reminder that our empathy and care for the old people can become a reconciliation between them and the younger generation since prejudice against ageing, though sometimes not so implicit, can lead to generational conflicts. In this way, age studies and literature can bridge the gap between those approaching this challenging stage of life and health care providers, family members, and the general public, to embrace people of all ages.

Acknowledgments

This research was financially supported by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University.

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