



Senescence as a Paradigm of Disability in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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Abstract

*Literature is uniquely powerful. The ability to totally immerse the reader in the emotions and feelings of others is what makes literature so uniquely potent. Literature with ageing themes or protagonists can foster a better understanding of ageing. Gerontological works, be they novels, essays, or short stories, like any other literary genre, can inspire the reader and instil unexpected insights or perspectives, though creativity has a serendipitous element. Much of the literature on ageing overemphasises the losses and negative aspects of later life, while paying far less attention to the potential for growth and change. It's a recent trend that the term 'disability' is often used to label the group of biologically anomalous people, including those at their senescence, as socially unproductive. This stereotyping of age-old people is a result of their gerontological ailments and social unproductiveness, which can lead to a stereotyping of them in the name of 'ageism'. In George R. R. Martin's collection of novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, both the agonies and laurels of the age-old are described at the same pace through many characters. He brings in numerous age-old characters who are valued and devalued by society. This paper envisages the concrete possibility of subverting the notion of power in society, where, at present, the aged are treated as disabled; rather, they are the abled section of social life with their own existential peculiarities.*

Keywords: ageism, ableism, disability, gerontology, and senescence

Introduction

Literature is uniquely powerful. The caliber to navigate the mind to fully immerse the reader in the emotions and feelings of others is what makes literature so profoundly impactful. It enables the reader to enter into other people's thoughts and feelings truly. Literature with ageing themes or protagonists can offer a deeper understanding of the ageing process. Similarly, works that focus on the inclusion of major disabled characters, whether novels, essays, or short stories, like any other literary

genre, can inspire the mind and offer unexpected insights or perspectives on society and disability. It is because creativity encompasses a serendipitous element, which acts accordingly in one's life. Much of the literature on ageing or disability themes tends to overemphasize the losses and negative aspects of later life, with less focus on the potential for growth and change. However, in George R. R. Martin's collection of novels, "*A Song of Ice and Fire*," both the trials and triumphs of ageing, which result in ageism and ableism, are depicted equally across



many characters providing a complete balance for all, whether born as abled or disabled.

“For the gods alone there comes no old age, nay nor even death; but all other things are confounded by all-mastering time” (Sophocles 607). Ageing can be described as a biological companion of time that spares no organ or system, eventually affecting everything from cells to thoughts. However, the pace of ageing varies among individuals. In recent years, the study of older people in literature has contributed to a broader understanding of human ageing. The discipline of gerontology has gained momentum since the mid-twentieth century, further enriched by the exploration of ageing and older individuals in literature. The emergence of Literary Gerontology introduces a new avenue for writers to explore human emotions in the final stages of life. This paper aims to correlate the concepts of ageism and disability, synthesising the societal outcomes associated with these themes.

Discussion

George R. R. Martin is an American writer, best known for his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996). The anthology, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, comprises five novels: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1999), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005) and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). He, through his work *A Song of Ice and Fire*, has become a path-breaker in the conventional depiction of characters with disabilities. It is widely believed that ableism often intersects with senescence. That is, ageism is closely associated with ableism, which stereotypes people as disabled. This intersection can be explained by two reasons. Firstly, an individual's physical and cognitive impairments naturally increase with ageing, making this phenomenon phenomenological. Secondly, society might fail to provide support and services to mitigate these impairments, ultimately causing social disability.

In the current context, the correlation between senescence and an increased rate of disability is very clear. There are many theories that focus on ageism. For instance:

“[a]lthough ageism and ableism share common roots and consequences, inequality in older age is not the mere result of ableist biases ...

[and] ... [a]geism—the stereotyping of, and prejudice and discrimination towards, older people and older age—is a distinct

A form of oppression that affects older persons, including older persons with

disabilities”.

(Guterman, 243)

Literature with ageing themes or disabled protagonists can enrich readers' perspectives by expanding the horizons of their thought processes. A novel, an essay, or any other literary genre can take one out of their usual world and inspire unexpected insights or perspectives. This is because the creativity of literature has a serendipitous element to human thought. For instance, best-selling authors such as Oliver Sacks, Stephen Jay Gould, and Lewis Thomas bring a humanistic perspective to their science and share their eclectic interests. Thus, they emphasise the importance of linking knowledge across multiple disciplines (Whittington 1055). In recent years, the study of older people in literature has contributed to an overall understanding of ageing. Age is an accumulation of years that brings with it all its experiences. The revision of such experiences usually becomes more frequent when people enter their second childhood. Old age is a period of life in which one is confronted with a review of one's life as a whole. One could say that senility is entirely a personal affair. Each individual is unique, and therefore their attitude towards ageing and their perceptions of old age differ from one person to another. The most notable fact is that this phase of life makes many able-bodied people dependent on others. With old age, most of humanity endures a phase of inability, which in turn leads to being recognised as disabled. Thus, old age puts one at a disadvantageous position of disability.

George R.R. Martin, in his masterpiece *A Song of Ice and Fire*, portrays many characters who are the harbingers of senescence. The finest part of his writing is that these portrayals are both subtle and assertive, in a way that outrightly challenges the existing stereotypes about ageing. He created age-old characters who are not merely shadows of their former younger selves but advocates of the wisdom they have attained through their life experiences. Martin's very old characters play an essential part in boosting the development of the narrative.



Maester Aemon and Old Nan, among the oldest characters across the novels, embody profound wisdom, and their knowledge of history and human nature is essential to the narrative's development. Furthermore, Martin decisively rejects the notion that age equates to powerlessness through certain characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. In a world which despises the old, Martin penned a character who continues to enjoy the supremacy of power, commanding respect and entitled to certain political power, though aged. So in a world that devalued the one in senescence, Tywin Lannister, irrespective of being old, advocates for some supreme power. Martin portrayed and acknowledged the realities of ageing and disability. He vehemently put forth the harsh realities of ageism and ableism by making his characters vulnerable, mortal, and subject to illness, which, in a way, helps the reader delve deeper into the plot. Ageing helps those characters reflect on their past choices, errors, and legacies. Through this, Martin is keen on the idea that ageing is not merely a decline in physical prowess but a transformative process that transcends their identity. For Martin, his characters, though young or old, dwell in their own complexity and moral ambiguities throughout their lives. This approach by Martin helps readers visualise a very positive, multifaceted reality of ageing. By dismantling age-old, disability-related stereotypes, it guides readers to engage with the complex realities of life at every stage. Martin achieves this complexity by contrasting the wisdom and authority that come with age against the physical decline associated with it, and by showing that older characters are often the primary drivers of political machination, folly, and even redemption.

The concept of 'ageism' has been attributed to Butler. He defined ageism as 'prejudice by one age group toward other age groups' (Butler, 243). In this paper, he already combines ageism with disability when discussing ageism towards older people: "Ageism reflects a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged - a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, "uselessness," and death" (Butler, Reference Butler 1969: 243). In this context, one may think that ageism is a kind of social disability.

Following Butler's definition, several others have proposed additional definitions of ageism. For example, Azulai defines ageism as "a multi-dimensional concept, which incorporates ageist stereotypes (both positive and negative beliefs), prejudicial and stigmatising attitudes, and age-based discrimination." In the novel, *A Game of Thrones*, not only the aged but also the very young are subject to stigmatisation and stereotyping. Discrimination and prejudice are evident as well. Many inferences from the text support this. In the novel's social context, knowledge is held by the experienced, while younger characters like Robb Stark and King Joffrey, despite exercising power, are influenced by age-based bias. Often, Robb's mother, Catelyn, juxtaposes Robb, the Warden of the North, with his son, who is too boyish and young.

In the case of Jon Arryn, though he was a faithful leader and Hand of the King, the second most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms, after his demise, the title, according to their custom, goes to his successor. But in this case, the King is disposed to deny the title to the son, as he is a mere boy of six years. This can be a perfect example of the start of ageism. Due to the biological phenomenon of ageing, Robert Arryn, Jon Arryn's son, is denied his birth right and title. According to the King, Robert cannot hold the east, and, being a six-year-old boy, he is not a war leader.

I need good men about me. Men like Jon Arryn. He served as Lord of the Eyrie, as Warden of the East, as the Hand of the King. He will not be easy to replace." "His son . . ." Ned began. "His son will succeed to the Eyrie and all its incomes," Robert said brusquely. "No more." That took Ned by surprise. He stopped, startled, and turned to look at his king. The words came unbidden. "The Arryns have always been Wardens of the East. The title goes with the domain." "Perhaps when he comes of age, the honor can be restored to him," Robert said. "I have this year to think of, and next. A six-year-old boy is no war leader, Ned." "In peace, the title is only an honor. Let the boy keep it. For his father's sake if not his own. Surely you owe Jon that much for his service." The king was not pleased. He took his arm from around Ned's shoulders. "Jon's service was the duty he owed his liege lord. I am not ungrateful, Ned. You



of all men ought to know that. But the son is not the father. A mere boy cannot hold the east.” (A Game of Thrones, 43)

Martin attempts to portray a balance between the characters’ ages and ageism in his writings. Some individuals are fortunate enough to enjoy their rights because of their experience, while many older characters are condemned for their age. For example, Tywin Lannister, Lord Mormont, and Lord Frey belong to the privileged group, whereas Sir Barristan, a sworn knight, was passed over solely because of his old age. Since ancient times, there has been a general belief that older workers are more reliable and experienced. Ageist stereotypes also include the idea that they are less competent, with limited physical or mental capacity, a decreased willingness to participate in training, technological incompetence, and less flexibility. As a result, the challenge lies in defining ageism precisely, as it can be described too broadly, leaving unclear how it operates and how it should be addressed. One approach is to distinguish ageism from ableism, thereby narrowing its scope. This may help us redefine ageism in relation to disability.

Ageism could be defined using the ‘social relational approach’, following Thomas’s (Thomas, 1999) definition of disablism.

Ageism would then be an unequal social relationship between various age groups in society and could be, like disability and patriarchy, a form of social oppression. This unequal social relationship would manifest through exclusionary and oppressive practices ... at the interpersonal, organizational, cultural and socio-structural levels in particular societal contexts’ (Thomas, 40).

Ageism, at its simplest, is the unequal treatment of individuals based solely on their age. It is a social construct rather than an intrinsic personal trait. Similarly, disablism is the primary outcome of social interactions and the existing societal structures. It is not an intrinsic characteristic of a person. Ageism distinguishes itself by defining differential treatment based on age, not on disabilities, while disablism pertains to discrimination against disabled individuals because of their impairments. The term ableism describes discrimination based

on impairments, whether real or perceived. For instance, some research indicates that bias in providing psychological services may relate more to stereotypes about individuals in poorer physical health than to age discrimination itself (Nelson, 2005). Consequently, some treatment differences may result from impairments that are more common among older adults, rather than from age alone. In this framework, such cases are classified as ableism, not ageism. In contemporary Western culture, being disabled is to be at a disadvantage regardless of individual success. This is the general implication of applying the term “disability” and its related words to describe the group of biologically atypical people we consider disabled. Even those in old age can be viewed as disabled. Alongside their gerontological issues, these individuals may be seen as socially unproductive, reinforcing age-old stereotypes.

George R. R. Martin, in his novel *A Game of Thrones*, introduces numerous age-old characters who are both valued and devalued by society. In the prologue, the first character, named *Gared*, is an elderly man. He is depicted as an old man wise enough to recognise the dangers before him. As a hunter, he embodies patience, a trait shaped by his life experiences. He is described as a vulnerable person as the author notes that he was wounded after being mocked by the commander, despite his long service. Furthermore, he was enthralled by a nervous tension akin to fear. Although a brother of the Night’s Watch, in old age, he was afraid of something, highlighting a perennial susceptibility associated with age. To substantiate:

“Will could see the tightness around *Gared*’s mouth, the barely suppressed anger in his eyes under the thick black hood of his cloak. *Gared* had spent forty years in the Night’s Watch, man and boy, and he was not accustomed to being made light of. Yet it was more than that. Under the wounded pride, Will could sense something else in the older man. You could taste it; a nervous tension that came perilous close to fear”. (A Game of Thrones, 2)

And the most exciting part about *Gared* is that he suffered frostbite. And Master Aemon cut his fingers to save his life. So *Gared* is a disabled old man who still serves the realm as a member of the



Night's Watch, which is not meant for the weak but requires immense courage and perseverance. So, through his character Gared, who is both a victim of ageism and ableism, Martin puts him at the zenith of his excellence, like any able-bodied young character.

On the contrary, Martin portrays Master Aemon as a blind old man, a tiny, wrinkled, hairless figure. Despite his age, the Lord Commander still had the strength of a bear. He has a high regard for another disabled character, Tyrion, a nobleman but a victim of dwarfism. This part of the plot suggests that the elderly and disabled Aemon is considerate of the young and disabled Tyrion. Though they have a severe discrepancy because of age or birth, they complement each other: a blind old hag praising the young dwarf.

"Oh, I think that Lord Tyrion is quite a large man," Maester Aemon said from the far end of the table. He spoke softly, yet the high officers of the Night's Watch all fell quiet, the better to hear what the ancient had to say. "I think he is a giant come among us, here at the end of the world." Tyrion answered gently, "I've been called many things, my lord, but giant is seldom one of them." "Nonetheless," Maester Aemon said as his clouded, milk-white eyes moved to Tyrion's face, "I think it is true." For once, Tyrion Lannister found himself at a loss for words. He could only bow his head politely and say, "You are too kind, Maester Aemon." (A Game of Thrones, 199)

Tyrion's compassion for the old one is praise worthy, especially given that he is disabled. Here, Tyrion Lannister is welcomed and cherished by the blind Aemon, irrespective of impairments, age difference, or status. Throughout the novel, only a few admire Tyrion, the dwarf, and Master Aemon in the Night's Watch, who respect him outright. It has been said that when Aemon spoke, all the mighty ones in the Night's Watch fell silent so they could hear what the ancient had to say. This shows how an old blind man was respected among the most notorious group, the Night's Watch. The Night's Watch has become an army of gloomy boys and exhausted old men. People say it's the only place where someone like Tyrion, a dwarf, would be found. It's such a terrible place that no one wants to

be there. Men got there as part of the punishment. And even those Men were able to hold a place for the blind and the aged Aemon, whereas many other people in Westeros couldn't.

However, Martin presents a more realistic view of ageism through his other character, Bran, who is disabled. Bran, who once loved the stories of Old Nan, now finds it very difficult to enjoy them, as he now considers them stupid. This may be because Bran is no longer the old boy who climbs very high buildings, but a paraplegic. The broken Bran considers her an ugly, toothless old woman. For him, she is the oldest person in Winterfall. She is older than he had realised. Apart from the physical lacunae caused by gerontological issues, which the writer reveres, she is the one left behind to care for Bran, watch over him, clean him, and prevent him from feeling lonely. Hodor, her kin, helps Bran with locomotion. All the morphological characteristics attributed to Old Nan suit an elderly character experiencing physical and mental ailments, such as dementia, in their senescence. There are many instances that prove this, such as in A Game of Thrones. Even the dependent Bran is irritated by her gerontological flaws. Bran, once fond of the stories narrated by the old nanny, no longer is, as he has grown older-almost a man. This represents the childhood innocence that accepted everyone, and now, disabled, he takes out his anger on the old nanny. To him, she was an ugly old woman who watched over Bran day and night, cleaning him and was supposed to be a close confidante. But her stories made him sick, and even worse. So he despised her and was even ready to scream at her.

She was a very ugly old woman, Bran thought spitefully; shrunken and wrinkled, almost blind, too weak to climb stairs, with only a few wisps of white hair left to cover a mottled pink scalp. No one really knew how old she was, but his father said she'd been called Old Nan even when he was a boy. She was the oldest person in Winterfall for certain, maybe the oldest person in the Seven Kingdoms. (A Game of Thrones 231)

But the wisdom of a person lies in old age; the Old Nanny was very compassionate toward Bran. She smiled at him toothlessly and was ready to narrate any story while she worked on her needlework.



Thus witnessing such an enthusiast, Bran was lost in her stories and was even reluctant to receive a visitor. And it is with the old nanny's intellectual intervention that he agreed to meet the visitor, who was Tyrion Lannister. So Old Nan's attitude to Bran, the disabled, was noteworthy. Despite her old age and physical lacunae, she was compassionate and served him dutifully. Thus, Martin through her character Old Nan, brings in a change in the dependent Bran.

George R. R. Martin doesn't portray every old person in his novels as grotesque. He, in a way, pictures certain fortunate people in a very profound way. For example, it's through the narrative of Tyrion, a dwarf who is highborn, that the reader comes across the character, Tywin, who despises Tyrion more than anyone, irrespective of the fact that he fathered him. Tywin, in his mid-fifties, is portrayed as a very strong character with a strong social position and power. Even the most confident Tyrion becomes conscious when his father is around. "He (Tyrion) crossed the room to their table, acutely conscious of the way his stunted legs made him waddle with every step. Whenever his father's eyes were on him, he became uncomfortably aware of all his deformities and shortcomings." (A Game of Thrones ,590) One could blindly say that no other characters who are old are given such a noteworthy introduction. It may be because, though very old by physical standards, Tywin plays a key role in the plot structure. He, despite his old age, despises his younger son, Tyrion, because of his deformities. He simply hated Tyrion, irrespective of his wisdom or knowledge.

Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, was in his middle fifties, yet hard as a man of twenty. Even seated, he was tall, with long legs, broad shoulders, a flat stomach. His thin arms were corded with muscle. When his once-thick golden hair had begun to recede, he had commanded his barber to shave his head; Lord Tywin did not believe in half measures. He razored his lip and chin as well, but kept his side-whiskers, two great thickets of wiry golden hair that covered most of his cheeks from ear to jaw. His eyes were a pale green, flecked with gold. A fool more foolish than

most had once jested that even Lord Tywin's shit was flecked with gold.

(A Game of Thrones ,591)

Despite the character's all-powerful and majestic grandeur, the savages whom Tyrion brought to King's Landing announced that "They are both Old Men" at their first meeting with Sir Kevan Lannister and Tywin.

In the subsequent chapter, Martin again relentlessly exposes the unscrupulous plight of old age. Any reader is confronted by the plight of the aged. At this juncture, one may even think that getting old is a kind of disability. Through the eyes of another character, Sansa, Martin pens the adverse effects of ageism. The victim here is another knight, Ser Barristan. Impairments among older persons are often perceived as a "natural aspect of ageing," leading to barriers to participation being seen as a "normal fact of life" rather than a social construct that needs correction. Low expectations regarding ageing with a disability lead to the assumption that it is not worthwhile to support their participation. The incidence of impairment and disability increases significantly as people get older, due to the increased prevalence of chronic diseases and physical and cognitive impairments. Crucially, ageist attitudes transform these physical impairments into social disabilities. Ser Barristan, who was a sworn knight, was asked to dispose of his knighthood due to his age. Similarly, the King removed Master Aemon from his authority due to his age by simply pronouncing "You ought take more Care" (A Clash of Kings, 21)

There are instances in the novel in which the age-old characters lament their cognitive decline due to ageing. In Westeros, everyone is ruled out by Power. And the character themselves, at times out of despair, do plead to consider their impairments as the natural aspect of ageing. And the barriers they encounter, too, should be seen as a normal fact of life. Thus, Martin points out that the social construct of ageing should be corrected. The Grand Maester Pycelle explains that he must be forgiven for his "foolish meanderings" because he is an old man. He states that old minds are like swords that "go to rust". This reminisces the ageist stereotype that cognitive function inevitably declines with age, a form of ableism that subverts the contributions of older



people. “Pycelle’s eyes were so heavily lidded that he looked half-asleep. “My pardons, Lord Eddard. You did not come to hear foolish meanderings of a summer forgotten before your father was born. Forgive an old man his wanderings, if you would. Minds are like swords, I do fear. The old ones go to rust”. (A Game of Thrones, 243)

George R. R. Martin, through his novels, brings to life many age-old characters who reflect ageist stereotypes, and the cognitive functions of the human body are gradually impaired as the individual undergoes the natural process of ageing. Many characters demonstrate age-related impairments that restrict their functioning.

Ageism and the resulting ableist assumptions limit the professional prospects of older characters in A Song of Ice and Fire. When the position of Lord Commander is being chosen, Ser Denys Mallister faces opposition because he is deemed “too bloody old for the job,” and his rival suggests they would be back in a year, choosing someone else.

In broader society, the concept of “successful ageing” is criticised because its criteria emphasise the avoidance of disease and disability, thereby disqualifying the majority of the population who inevitably experience some form of chronic illness or impairment as they age. This narrative is considered inherently ageist and ableist, as it focuses resources on finding cures rather than on fixing the malicious environments that often challenge disabled people. Ageism functions as a systemic impediment, converting the physical impairments associated with ageing into functional disabilities by confining access to social participation, employment, and healthcare. It reflects the social model of disability, in which the environment, rather than the impairment itself, disables the person. Many theorists believe that ageing often intersects with ableism. Ageing is a natural phenomenon which usually leads an individual to a disabled position, which in a way evokes the sense of discrimination in others. Evidently, these discriminations faced by the age-old ones from society can be explicitly rooted in and intersect with ableism. But the truth is, ageing cannot be regarded as a disability; instead, it leads to specific impairment, which results in disability through societal perspectives. Each individual, throughout

their life experiences, faces disability in one way or another. Even the second childhood of human beings puts people in various disabled positions, as growing old invariably implies becoming impaired. So it’s important to acknowledge the interconnection of senescence and disability. Disability Studies proponents vehemently differentiated the concept of disability and the conditions of impairment. Impairment is a medical term that refers to a physical or mental limitation, or to the loss of a function or an alteration in body structure. Disability, on the other hand, is the result of impairment. The social exclusion or restriction of an impaired person due to societal barriers can be considered a disability. So it can be inferred that senescence paves the way to the advancement of impairments, such as loss of physical or cognitive function, which results in experiencing disability as a function of the environment and social context.

George R. R. Martin explores the reality of senescence through his characters, who are victims of ageism. Many characters, such as Old Nan, Grand Master Pycelle, Lord Walder Frey, and Master Aemon, are depicted. However, rather than confining them to their disabled roles, Martin endows them with unique responsibilities in advancing the plot. Nonetheless, they experience all those artefacts of social exclusion, declining respect, and loss of status, often due to the institutional belief that age correlates with diminished ability, which fits the definition of structural ableism. Martin’s approach aligns with the literary Gerontological aim of broadening perspectives by enabling the reader to “enter fully into other people’s thoughts and feelings” at every stage of life, and by rendering the ageing process “rich and multifaceted”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire does not portray old age as a disability in itself; the narrative structure and plot envisage that senescence imposes physical and cognitive impairments on characters, which, in the social and political context of Westeros, immediately subject them to ableist positions, vulnerability, dismissal, loss of authority, and reduced societal participation. George R. R. Martin, through his writing style,



boldly assigns character attributes irrespective of age. All his characters exhibit complexity and moral ambiguity, whether young or old. Through the portrayal of powerful, age-old characters, George R. R. Martin dismantles the stereotypes surrounding ageism and ableism. Most of his characters, like Tywin Lannister and Mormont, undergo an intense, multifaceted journey of ageing. He negates the physical limitations of senescence, so that the wisdom and life experiences that come with ageing rule over everything rather than physical prowess. He, through his depiction, makes the age-old characters the pioneers of political machination, en route to redemption and not folly. Nevertheless, he also introduces age-old characters who are politically cunning and cruel, which adds to their complexity and moral ambiguity.

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