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Comparative Literary Gerontology: Portrayals of Aging and Care Giving in Japanese and Hindi Literature

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Abstract: This study investigates literary representations of aging in Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* and Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* through a comparative narratological framework based on the concept of the *petit récit* (Little narratives). As global demographic shifts, aging is perceived as a crucial social issue and literature provides insight into its emotional and existential dimensions. Kawakami's novel explores late-life intimacy through a quiet, introspective narrative shaped by seasonal temporality and an aesthetic of impermanence. However, Sobti presents a dialogic and philosophically rich portrayal of aging that emboldens feminist autonomy and resistance. Through close textual analysis, this study explores how both authors challenge cultural master narratives that perceive old age as resignation or decline. Instead, they depict it as a dynamic process of self-discovery and relational renewal. By reading these works as *petits récits*, the paper argues that they function as counter-narratives that humanize aging and reshape its cultural meanings in Japan and India (Hindi literature). The comparative approach highlights shared ethical concerns as well as culturally distinct ways of representing emotional life in later years.

Introduction

“Old age should not be accepted as a passive decline but confronted as a phase of life with its own authenticity and meaning” (Beauvoir, 1972). Simon De Beauvoir's critique of the cultural marginalization of the elderly resonates even today as global populations witness unexpected phase of demographic change. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects (2022) by the year 2050 one out of every six people will be above sixty-five. Japan has already crossed the threshold into what demographers call a “super-aged society,” as it has nearly twenty-nine percent of its citizens above that age. India, although still demographically a young nation, is undergoing rapid demographic aging. Its elderly population recorded at 8.6% in 2011, is projected to rise approximately 19-20% by mid-century. These numbers not only simply describe population structure, they also reflect social realities that challenge conventional perceptions of care, autonomy, and the meaning of later life.

On one hand, demographic and sociological research show quantitative data into this shift, on the other hand, literature provides a more intimate description into the experience of aging. Literary narratives show inner negotiations of later life and experiences that number is incapable of incapsulating. Stories not only reflect aging; they interpret it, delves deeper into social anxieties, cultural expectations, and emotional turmoil in the form of narratives. Japan and India, two societies have evolved by deep-rooted ethical traditions and presently they are undergoing rapid modernization. In this context, literary narrations of aging portray the conflict between convention and change. The erosion of joint families, the tendency of

individualism, and developing ideas of dignity, desire, and relevance in later life are reflected.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of two major works that portray aging through close narrative forms. Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* (2001), translated as *Strange Weather in Tokyo* by Allison Markin Powell in 2013, and Hindi author Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* (2000). Despite their distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, both texts place aging at the center of their narrative worlds. Kawakami portrays the subtle development of a relationship between Tsukiko, an unmarried woman in her late thirties, and her retired former teacher, Sensei. Sobti portrays the relationship between Aranya, a seventy-year-old unmarried woman, and Ishan, a widower, as they try to overcome the solitude and sociocultural expectations of later life in urban India. These works resemble each other in their intentions of reflecting aging not as a static biological process but as a dynamic process of emotional rediscovery and ethical negotiation. Lyotard (1979)'s idea of *petit récit* or, "little narratives" challenge the "grand narratives" which claim the totalizing truth. Instead of universal accounts of human experience, *petits récit* lays emphasis on situated, embodied, and local truths. From this perspective, both *Strange Weather in Tokyo* and *Samay Sargam* function as *petits récit* of aging. It challenges universal models of decline and instead puts forth localized, emotionally situated stories that emphasize aging as an ongoing struggle to redefine identity, intimacy, and social meaning.

Depicting Old Age in Japanese and Indian Literary Traditions

Japanese literary studies increasingly represent aging and caregiving through *kaigo bungaku* and *rōkyō bungaku*, subfields within *rōjin bungaku*. As Ueno (2003) notes, these narratives offer a multidimensional view of late life, highlighting the emotional, social, and structural realities of aging and care. Together, they reveal how contemporary literature critically reimagines old age beyond sentimental or single sided portrayals. With these categories, a large part of literary scholars study how modern Japanese literature represents aging through the lenses of solitude, impermanence, and interpersonal restraint.

Allison (2013) outlines how demographic decline, economic instability, and the breakdown of traditional family systems have recreated ideas of care and dependency in contemporary Japan. Literary portrayals of elderly characters often described as the "social anxieties of late modernity," in which older adults must negotiate loneliness, marginality, and the emotional demands of intergenerational bonds. To this line, Traphagan (2005) observes that a notable sense of disconnection from younger generations is commonly reported by older adults, including those residing in multi-generational homes.

Apart from narratives from elderly's perspective, there are major notable works which focus on the perspective of caregiver for elderly. In this context, Ariyoshi Sawako's *Kōkotsu no hito* (1972) is one of the earliest major works on caregiving (*kaigo bungaku*) that portrays the emotional and ethical dilemmas of caring for elderly parents in modern Japan. The novel brought public attention to the burdens

of caregiving, including *rōrō kaigo*, the phenomenon of the elderly caring for the elderly.

Indian literature on aging, as HONGEKAR (2018) observes, has expanded in response to demographic and social transformation. In Hindi literature, the discourse on aging (*vridhdha vimarsh*) has gained prominence, depicting themes of familial decline, loss of dignity, autonomy, loneliness, and identity reconstruction. Modern Hindi narratives increasingly portray elderly individuals as autonomous subjects rather than passive dependents.

Traditional Hindu frameworks, such as the *āśrama dharma* (four stages of life), conceptualize old age (*Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa*) as periods of withdrawal and spiritual focus. However, contemporary literary works challenge these expectations, claiming personal agency and emotional vitality in later life. SHARMA (2023) emphasizes that due to rapid social change, such as family fragmentation and rising materialism, Hindi literature is re-examining the lived realities of older adults.

Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban*: A Petit Récit of Emotional Awakening

Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* originally published in 2001, examines aging through understated scenes of companionship between Tsukiko and her retired former teacher. The narrative unfolds through meetings at a small bar, shared meals, seasonal walks, and quiet exchanges, moments that together form a *petit récit* of emotional rediscovery in later life.

Kawakami bases the novel around seasonal transitions i.e., cherry blossoms, humid summers, autumn mushrooms, winter snow. This cyclical temporality structures the narrative with Japanese aesthetic traditions, particularly *mono no aware*, the bittersweet awareness of impermanence. Aging is depicted not as linear decline but as part of a natural rhythm, suggesting continuity between human life and ecological cycles. While the *chronos* (sequential time) of seasonal time anchors the narrative, the emotional turning points follow *kairos* (moments of heightened meaning). This resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the chronotope, where time-space configurations shape lived experience.

Kawakami's narrative style is minimalist with sparse dialogues and emotional restraint. The story employs introspective narration where Tsukiko's voice invites us inward. Their love takes shape through memory, season, and occasional silence or *ma*. Yet this minimalism is precisely what allows the novel to function as a *petit récit*. Lyotard (1984) argues *petits récits* gain their force through the specificity of lived experience rather than universal claims. Kawakami refuses grand declarations about aging, love, or purpose. Instead, she explores meaning through small gestures. Sensei adjusting umbrella with Tsukiko, sharing warm sake on a cold evening, walking silently through a market are some of examples of the non-dialogic explorations of meaning. A seemingly ordinary moment such as touching the worn leather of the teacher's bag triggers reflection on life's impermanence, capturing a sense *mono no aware*.

These micro-moments provide the novel a *ma* (space) in which the characters come to understand themselves and one another. The absence of grand narrative resolution such as dramatic confession, marriage or social recognition, underscores

Lyotard's insistence that truth resides in local, embodied experience. Even the emotional climax, Sensei's quiet admission of affection unfolds not as spectacle but as modest vulnerability. Kawakami expresses aging from the inside, not by focussing on wrinkles or illness. We see aging through Tsukiko's feelings and observations. Sensei's stiff movements, polite behaviour and love for old traditions show he is getting older. But the narrative does not reduce it to an "older body." Instead, it shows aging is revealed through how the characters notice and care for each other.

Sensei's gradual willingness to express affection is a form of late-life emotional growth that challenges Japanese cultural expectations of elderly stoicism or *inkyō* (retirement and seclusion). "You're much older than she is but still, you're all cozy together. It's perverted, really. Act your age!" Sensei nodded magnanimously, as if to say, "ah, yes", and looked straight before him." (Kawakami, 2013). This encounter with a young drunk boy in a bar and his comments on Sensei and Tsukiko hint on the grand narratives that dictate how the elderly should behave. Sensei's calm dismissal of this remark reflects his quiet resistance to conventional societal expectations of *inkyō*.

In this cyclical temporality, Kawakami underlines certain moments as "Kairos". The most striking description is the moment when sensei quietly holds Tsukiko's hand. Nothing dramatic happens, yet time seems to deepen and pause, becoming a *kairotic* moment of emotional truth that changes their relationship. This temporality constructs *Sensei no kaban* work as a *petit récit* of quiet resilience. "Sensei, even if you were to die very soon, it would be all right for me. I could handle it." (Kawakami, 2013, p.166). The narrator's confession captures a *kairotic* instant in which acceptance of mortality becomes an act of profound emotional clarity.

In Kawakami's world, *kairos* outweighs *chronos*, as these moments redefine aging not through the accumulation of years but through emotionally transformative instants.

Sobti's *Samay Sargam*: Dialogic Construction of the Aging Experience

Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* (2000) provides a polyphonic narrative of aging in modern Hindi literature. The story is set on intellectual and existential lives of elderly individuals within an urban Indian context. In contrast to Kawakami's quiet minimalism, Sobti uses bold prose and dialogic structure to articulate the autonomy and vitality of later life. The protagonist asserts a bold feminist interrogation of cultural norms. Sobti constructs the narrative through conversations that bridge memory and present, interiority and social reality. This dialogism finds its resonance in Bakhtin's (1981) idea that meaning arises through the interaction of multiple voices, not through monologic authority. Aging, therefore, becomes a process of interpretive and relational negotiation rather than passive endurance.

Aranya's declaration to Ishan; "You have scriptures; we have weapons." (Sobti, 2000), is a bold statement of her resistance to patriarchal moralizing. Here, Sobti uses wordplay between *shastra* (scripture) and *shastra* (weapon) to critique the cultural tendency to use scriptural authority to check women's desires, especially in later life. Aranya's statement asserts agency as a weapon of interpretation,

destabilizing patriarchal control over the emotional lives of elderly women.

The recurring line “Time is both outside of us and beyond. Seize the moment that is yours” (Sobti, 2000) presents time as both *chronos* (external, inevitable, fear-inducing) and *kairos* (an opportunity for action, meaning, and agency). This dual temporal vision reframes aging as a site of philosophical and emotional decision-making. Ishan, for example, reads Jiddu Krishnamurti and brings philosophical insights into their conversations. On the other hand, Aranya engages with the world through sensory experience, irony, and emotional clarity. Their contrasting modes of engagement create a rhythm of intellectual exchange that underscores the novel’s vision of aging as dialogic self-renewal.

Through voices, Aranya and Ishan resist cultural expectations that older people should retreat into silence or spiritual withdrawal. Their conversations restore intellectual agency and self-fashioning to late life. Mohanty (1989, cited in Siva Raju, 2011) notes, older adults often confront social isolation, loss of status, and generational gaps in India. In this context, the novel portrays debates and philosophical reflection as tools for navigating these challenges.

Their relationship serves as a microcosm of the broader ethical issues surrounding aging in India. Sobti’s narrative presents companionship not as a deviation from social norms, but as an ethical right. She informs the society for human need for emotional connection as a form of dignity. Especially, in a society which is witnessing the erosion of the joint family system and rising urban isolation among the elderly.

Convergences and Divergences: Two Narratives of Aging

Kawakami’s *Sensei no kaban* and Sobti’s *Samay Sargam* contrasting narrative styles, but converge thematically in their reimagining of aging. Kawakami employs quiet, introspective internal focalization, emphasizing cyclical time and impermanence. She reflects emotional subtlety and attunement to natural rhythms. Sobti employs polyphonic dialogue to place relationality, intellectual vigor, and resistance to marginalization.

Despite stylistic and cultural differences, both works reclaim aging as a meaningful, embodied, and narratively rich experience that challenge universalized notions of decline. Both novels converge in representing aging not as withdrawal but as a space for discovering new dimensions of life. In *Sensei no kaban*, aging becomes a *ma* (space) of emotional rediscovery, attuned to the sensibility of *mono no aware*, while in *Samay Sargam*, Aranya and Ishan find companionship, philosophical insight, and self-affirmation. In each case, aging acts as a catalyst for relational and existential exploration.

These portrayals demonstrate the power of the *petit récit*. By focusing on small, everyday moments such as a shared cup of sake, balcony conversations, seasonal walks, or philosophical debates, the novels throw light on the ethical significance of recognizing aging as an active process of becoming. As Kumar (2022, p. 450) notes in his readings on Indian literature, literary representations of aging create space for the “personal” experience of later life, allowing older characters to creatively define their existence rather than merely adhering to traditional norms.

Together, Kawakami and Sobti show that the stories we tell about aging shape the dignity, autonomy, and emotional possibilities available to older adults. Their novels remind us that the elderly, whether in Tokyo or Delhi, continue to search, feel, desire, and interpret their worlds with curiosity and vulnerability.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* and Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* shows how little, mundane stories can question the usual ways aging is understood in Japan and India. Both authors use intimate, personal moments to portray later life not as decline, but as a time filled with reflection and continued growth. Kawakami's narrative draws attention to gentle emotional nuances and the sensibility of impermanence, whereas Sobti's work emphasizes bold self-expression, dialogic strength, and reflective independence. Together, their works reveal how aging can look very different across cultures yet remain deeply human everywhere. Drawing on Lyotard's idea of *petits récits*, the study highlights how these simple, personal narratives give space to older characters who think, feel, and make choices. They call upon us that empathy, dignity, and thoughtful representation are essential for understanding the realities of older adulthood.

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