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The Final Act: Aging Characters and The Meaning of Life in Modern Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the literary representation of aging as the “final act” of human existence and examines how modern literature redefines the meaning of life through elderly characters who confront physical decline, psychological vulnerability, and social marginalization. Drawing upon a gerontological framework, the study analyzes select works of Tennessee Williams, Girish Karnad, and Upamanyu Chatterjee to investigate how old age becomes a crucial site for questioning identity, dignity, memory, and mortality. These writers portray aging not merely as biological deterioration but as a profound existential stage marked by reflection, resistance, and the search for purpose in the face of inevitable death. The paper argues that aging characters function as moral and philosophical centers within their narratives, revealing tensions between past and present, desire and resignation, autonomy and dependency. In the works of Williams, elderly figures often embody emotional fragility and the fear of abandonment, exposing the cruelty of youth-centered social values. Karnad’s dramatic vision situates old age within myth and history, presenting aging as both a burden and a source of wisdom that challenges linear notions of progress. Chatterjee, through satire and realism, depicts aging individuals caught between social invisibility and personal agency, thereby critiquing contemporary attitudes toward usefulness and productivity. Through comparative textual analysis, this study demonstrates that modern literature transforms the experience of senescence into a meaningful narrative of self-evaluation and ethical inquiry. The “final act” is shown not as a passive surrender but as an active engagement with life’s ultimate questions—What remains of identity when power fades? How does one negotiate dignity amid decline? What constitutes a meaningful life at its end? By foregrounding aging characters as central consciousnesses rather than marginal figures, these authors challenge stereotypes of old age and propose a more humane and complex understanding of later life. The paper concludes that modern literary representations of aging serve as a powerful medium for reimagining the value of human existence beyond youth, productivity, and physical strength, thereby offering a deeper insight into the universal human condition.