



مسرحة الشيخوخة في مسرحية "المحاولة" للكاتبة جوانا ميكلياند كلاس

أ.م. د. مروة غازي محمد

جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية للبنات / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

marwa_grery@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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المستخلص:

تعد الشيخوخة مرحلة عمرية لا بد منها في حياة الانسان، الا ان التغيرات التي تصاحب الشيخوخة لا تكون مرضية دائما. يؤثر التدهور في القوى البدنية على الجوانب النفسية و الاجتماعية في حياة الفرد، اضافة الى تأثير فكلاة اقتراب الموت عليه. ان الكاتبة المسرحية الكندية الولاة جوانا ميكلياند كلاس واحدة من كتاب المسرح التي عكست تعقيدات و تحديات للشيخوخة و ذلك بتجسيد تأثير مرور الوقت على شخصياتها. تتناول مسرحياتها العمر و التطور العمري للشيخوخة كبناء حضاري يعكس الافكار الاجتماعية. تجسد مسرحية "المحاولة" التأثيرات المتنوعة للشيخوخة على رجل مسن الذي ساعده عمله مع سكرتيرته الشابة على تبني مفهوم افضل لتقدم العمر و الذي حل محل مشاعر الغضب و اليأس التي كانت تصاحبه في بداية المسرحية. استطاع هذا الرجل المسن من الوصول الى تقبل فكرة الموت بسلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المحاولة، التقدم في العمر، الشيخوخة، ارذل، الانعزال، التحديات.



Dramatization of Old Age in Joanna McClelland Glass' *Trying*

Asst. Prof Marwa Ghazi Mohammed, PhD

Department of English/ College of Education for Women

University of Baghdad

marwa_grery@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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Abstract

Old age is an inevitable stage in man's course of life; however, the changes that occur because of aging are not always pleasant. The decline in the physical powers affect the social and the psychological sides of the individual's life, in addition to the knowledge of the approaching death. The Canadian born playwright, Joanna McClelland Glass, is one of the dramatists who reflects the complexities and challenges of old age in her plays as she portrays the effect of the passage of time on her characters. Her works examine age and aging as cultural constructs to show different social ideologies. *Trying* depicts the various effects of old age on an old man whose work with his young secretary helps him in having adoptive and successful attitude towards aging which has replaced the anguish feeling and the state of depression that he had at the beginning. He is able to approach death gracefully.

Keywords: *Trying*, growing old, old age, decline, isolation, challenges



Introduction:

Age and death are fundamentals of life course. In order to know what the definition of age is, one needs to understand that it is complicated because age has interdisciplinary meanings. Definitions of age are categorized by chronology, biology, psychology, and culture. Chronological age refers to the time or the years that have passed from birth to the given date. Biological old age refers to the gradual decline of various cells and tissues of the body. It is different from chronological age because there are other factors besides time which affect the process of aging such as genetics, lifestyle, nutrition, and diseases ('Chronological Aging and Biological Aging'). Social age refers to the attitude of society towards old people and the old's tendency to disengaged socially ('Old Age', Encyclopedia Britannica). Psychological age refers to the state of mind and how the old feel about their age because some feel younger than their real age while some feel the opposite (Symons, 2011). Melissa M. Franks (2001) pointed to the fact that for many people the decline in the mental and physical abilities by getting old is a terrifying experience which affects the old's psychology badly causing a state of constant anger and depression. However, successful aging is a term used to refer to the old who are able to be contented and coped with the changes of old age (p.144.)

Theatre creates meanings of aging and old age through staging plays which deal with this course of life. Joanna McClelland Glass (1936–) is a contemporary playwright who dramatizes complexities of age in many of her plays. Her plays have been produced across North America, England, Australia, Ireland and Germany (Bessai, 1999). Her works associate the physical experience of old age with the psychological interpretations of it. Her portrayal of old age displays the extent to which old individuals and their self-conceptions are controlled by the social and cultural circumstances that may be or construct their possibilities of growing old (Gual, 2015 .(

Trying

Trying (2004) is an autobiography of real life experience set in 1967–68, McClelland Glass reflects her personal experience of working as a secretary to the brilliant Judge Francis



Biddle, former Attorney General of the United States and Chief Justice for the Nuremberg Trials. The play opens in November 1967 with Judge Biddle, who is eighty-one and his health is not strong as before, he meets Sarah Schorr, a young and inexperienced lady. She attends the meeting to work as a secretary with him in his small office over the garage of his retirement home in Washington D.C. Sarah comes to work after a series of secretaries who have failed to tolerate the work with Judge Biddle's bad temper. Biddle has impressed Sarah by his memory of his experiences in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Her origins in small town Saskatchewan juxtaposes his ancestry and his position in the centres of the American power. However, Sarah manages his rigidity and unfair bullying by standing for herself as she eventually becomes a respected and valuable secretary. Sarah's success in managing her marriage and impending motherhood helps her efficiently to bring order of chaos in Judge Biddle's deteriorating life. The play ends by his gratitude for having his last station working with someone like her .

Dramatization of Old Age in *Trying*

Trying is an embodiment of the human experience of aging as it displays the frustrations of old age which are caused by failing mental and physical powers and the knowledge that death is approaching. It is set in the last year of Judge Biddle's life who was a Harvard-educated lawyer, later he worked as Attorney General under Roosevelt, and then he was appointed by Truman to be Chief Judge of the Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. The play depicts Biddle's sense of pride in trying to master the deterioration of mental and physical powers. Generational clash is exposed to display the love and respect resulted in the successful attempt to overcome the clash .

Biddle's decline of physical and intellectual powers causes the feeling of anger inside him as he compares this decline with his sense of pride for his achievements and heritage. He says: "I'm always ill. I am ill unrelievedly. I've got a list of ailments from here to Mt. Rushmore" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 11). McClelland Glass talks about her experience of working as a secretary with him, he was preoccupied in the last year of his life by the loss of his young son



and his father's early death when he was only six. He did not have the chance to know him well. She describes his sense of pride in having her knowledge of how difficult it was to make a phone call, climbing the stairs to the office everyday with all the pain in his legs and the lapse in his memory. He hated to admit the loss of his power. Glass describes the anger and frustration Biddle felt whenever he forgot whom he was calling; he felt humiliated because of his old age, it was hard to admit losing the control his memory which was fading (Levy, 2017). Thus, the weak body of the old becomes a prison because of lacking the ability to function and move easily (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995, p. 11). Biddle describes to Sarah the challenges of being old which she does not have an experience of: "Do you think I find these initiation morning easy, It's all very easy for you, at twenty-five, breezing in here both eager and early. But you can imagine how stressful the hiring process is for an old man?" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.20.)

The structure of the play depicts the process of growing old that is based on the generational clash :

Biddle: I was fifty-six when you were born. If I were you, I wouldn't be quite so confident of your staying powers. We can't help but find each other extremely trying.

Sarah: I made a promise. I promised Mrs. Biddle that I'd try. (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.17.)

The fifty-six-year age difference that separated them puts them in one situation in which each one of them has to try. Generational clash as well as cultural clash are employed to examine old age in a realistic way. The play depicts Biddle's anguish whenever his young secretary corrects mistakes he has made in his personal checkbox or when it is clear that his memory lapses cause his delayed correspondence. Biddle mentions "once upon a time I had a mind like a steel trap" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.25) that is now compared to the way his mind "excuses itself, without asking [his] permission" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 31.)

Aging is not a biological process only; it is also a cultural reality as well as it which is affected by the social and cultural factors of the individual's life. It is an individual experience that contains whole life. Therefore, it is important to understand the structure of the culture and its function in one's everyday life (Gunnarsson, 2018, p.90). Judge Biddle comes from an old,



wealthy, and well-established family in Philadelphia. Thus, his origin and his achievement contribute to the construction of his identity. The playwright portrays the old man's identity that is constructed by sorrow, loss, and regret; he describes himself as "old and ailing and cranky" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 17). His life story is revealed through the vivid narrative of his autobiography and his growing old process is brought to view through his working relationship with his secretary. At the beginning, Biddle refuses any kind of assistance from Sarah who suggests that she can massage the knuckles with Ben Gay to remove the pain in his hands as she used to do with her grandmother, he gets angry telling her that he is not her grandmother. However, in act Act two Two, which points to the passage of the months of Sarah's working with Biddle, he accepts as he lets her massage his knuckles with Ben Gay. His refusal and anger at the beginning is connected to gender issue. (Gual, 2014, p.71). Jeff Hearn (1995) examined the relationship between gender and age to comprehend the character of the old man as he proposes that manhood and ageism are inseparable. The age of man is usually associated with "the generalized power of men, and men's power over descendants and dependents" (p.100). For men, this association between power and age gets complicated because age becomes a marker of power. The power of young men is signified by physical strength, body shape, cultural image, and sexual virility. The power of men in middle age is marked through formal, organizational statuses, and physical work-power in addition to patriarchal power. Older age's power is signified through the historical carry over of generational and patriarchal power. Moreover, it is marked through mental labour power and the accumulation of resources (p.102).

Biddle has conservative views about male and female roles. Empowerment and independence are associated with masculinity of the patriarchal model of gender which Biddle sustains. In his office, Sarah is supposed to perform her traditional feminine job of subordinate secretary. She is supposed to depend on him and not the opposite. However, the evolution of their relationship displays Biddle's growing old dependence on his young secretary as it consequently reveals his sense of disempowerment of old age. The exchange in roles of empowerment and dependence between them depicts the construction of manhood in old age which tends to a feminization of the older male as he becomes totally dependent and



disempowered with a sense of appreciation of the visible signs of growing old (Gual, 2014, p.71). The playwright shows the gradual change in Biddle psychological acceptance of old age as he refuses angrily Sarah's attempt in helping him to wear his coat; "Do not touch me! I may be an invalid but I'm not yet entirely in-valid" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.37). He does not accept to sit in her chair as a sign of their roles. Yet However, act Act two shows change in Biddle's dependence on Sarah who helps him in wearing his coat and she is allowed to sit in his chair while he is sitting in hers. Moreover, the place of his office is not inside his house where the "seats of domesticity" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 13) are placed by his wife, he chooses his office to be out of the house as a place of his own manhood. Later, he accepts his wife's and secretary's suggestion to stay at home because the pain in his legs increases; it displays his adoptive attitude of dependence. McClelland Glass employs time and stage direction to show the gradual change in Biddle's acceptance as she adopts to the reality of old age. Act one One shows the resistance of Biddle's to the idea of change because of old age while act Act two Two sets the gradual change towards holding an adoptive view of old age.

The playwright refers to the social old age beside the biological and psychological side. The social old age occurs when the old tend to have social isolation. According to the disengagement theory, old age is a time of social disengagement (Cumming & Hensel, 1961). Biddle receives public and private recognition, yet he chooses to isolate himself socially in the last year of his life as he keeps repeating that it is his last year in this world; he says: "I'm in the process of leaving this life. The exist sign is flashing over the door and the door is ajar" (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 58). The extent of isolation which Biddle seeks in his old age is dramatized by the contradiction between his public profile which he maintains, represented by the attention he receives from historians, journalists, and publishers, and his organized isolate office where he cocoons himself from the world's noise as he revises and dictate periods of his life (Gual, 2015, p.115). He refuses to deal directly with the historians and publishers who constantly ask to meet him to have information about his biography. Moreover, the design and the place of Biddle's office is employed to depict his private isolation. The office is placed over a double garage, which is not attached to his house and has fourteen stairs which connect it to the



lower level. Biddle has to climb these fourteen stairs everyday despite the pain in his legs; “limping across the year” (McClelland Glass, 2005, p. 9), to prove that he still has control of his physical powers and daily routine. This is a strategy followed by old people to show that they keep going on (Gunnarsson, 2011, p.97).

The complexities and the challenges of old age are depicted by the playwright who puts an emphasis on the biomarkers of old age together with the psychological and social signs. In the last year of his life, Biddle invests in his misgivings in the narrative of his life. In one of his autobiographical dictations to Sarah, He contends, in one of his autobiographical dictations to Sarah that “any man who goes to his grave without regrets is a man who has failed to comprehend his life” (p.54). Biddle regrets the internment of 125,000 Japanese American citizens in the second Second world World war War as he eventually approved of when he was Attorney General .

As he approaches death, Biddle realizes that “when we’re born, we’re just visiting the world for a little while” (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.77). The epiphany of his short existence in the world is displayed in the final scene when he describes to Sarah his afternoon walk as “it was the time to say goodbye “to his own ”shadow” (McClelland Glass, 2005, 71). However, Biddle’s realization of his approaching death has not affected his persistence to have accurate correction of important historical episodes that he witnessed as he is enquired by publishers and historians. Biddle continues engaging in little and significant aspects of his life. Thus, his constant language correction continues even in the last recording which is played by Sarah after his death in which he has given a piece of advice to Billy Biddle, a young cousin, on how to differentiate between the verb “lay” and “lie” in the written language (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.82).

The journey of life and its continuity are summarized in the Canadian piece of advice that Biddle mocked at the beginning and later he accepts and return it as an expression of final evaluation of his young secretary as she listens to Biddle’s recorded voice saying: “Sarah? I doubt that I’ll see you again: “to know that I applaud your journey thus for, my dear Lace the



stakes, and hit the ice, and stay the course” (McClelland Glass, 2005, p.82). appreciating Appreciating this piece of advice shows Biddle’s growing old towards successful aging. Thus, old age depicted by McClelland Glass as a period of ongoing development in which the notion of progress points to the ability to maintain and resist the challenges that affects the character’s later years (Gual, 2015, 117).

In an interview Glass describes Trying as “almost a little epiphany about old age” (Levy, 2017) in which she has succeeded to deconstruct the negative stereotype of old age by presenting the challenges of growing older. The little of the play and the recurrent use of the word ‘trying’ emphasize the complexity of aging and the challenges of it (Gual, 2014, p.73). The play ends in June by Biddle’s death which shows that the playwright’s intention to break the usual association of winter to old age as Biddle has died in summer. It brings the view that old age is part of life course which must be lived and accepted like the other stages.

Conclusion:

Trying deals with the human experience of being old in a truthful and dignified way. McClelland Glass depicts the challenges of old age in association to the psychological, cultural, generational, and social perspectives. She visualizes the generational clash of the old judge in comparison to his 25 years secretary to portray the process of growing old gracefully. The physical power failings conflict with the pride to master them. Moreover, the play deals with the need to come in terms with mistakes of the past as death approaches .

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