

Colm Tóibín's "The Empty Family" and Yiyun Li's "Kindness" The Tyranny of Time: A Study of the Problem of Aging

Colm Tóibín'in *The Empty Family* ve Yiyun Li'nin *Kindness* eserlerinde Zamanın Zorbalığı: Yaşlanma Sorununun İncelenmesi

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of ageing in Colm Tóibín's *The Empty Family* and Yiyun Li's *Kindness*, highlighting the novels' exploration of both the physical and psychological consequences of ageing as an existential reality. Through a close reading of the novels' reflections on the protagonists' views on ageing, it is concluded that ageing is not simply a medical and biological condition but a complex interaction involving individual background, social frameworks, and cultural narratives. Drawing on gerontological literary criticism and Andrew Blaikie's sociological framework, the paper argues that the selected novels portray ageing not only as a decline in physical health but also within broader social and historical contexts that influence available narratives and ways of assigning meaning. By framing the narratives within the broader literary tradition of ageing, the analysis highlights the novels' role in shaping cultural perceptions of old age and mortality.

Keywords: Colm Tóibín, Yiyun Li, *The Empty Family*, *Kindness*, ageing

Öz

Bu makale, Colm Tóibín'in *The Empty Family* ve Yiyun Li'nin *Kindness* adlı eserlerinde yaşlanmanın temsiliyi inceleyerek romanların yaşlanmanın hem fiziksel hem de psikolojik sonuçlarını varoluşsal bir gerçeklik olarak ele alışını vurgulamaktadır. Romanların, başkahramanların yaşlanmaya dair görüşleri üzerine düşüncelerinin yakından okunmasıyla, yaşlanmanın yalnızca tıbbi ve biyolojik bir durum değil, bireysel geçmiş, toplumsal çerçeveler ve kültürel anlatıları içeren karmaşık bir etkileşim olduğu sonucuna varılmaktadır. Gerontolojik edebiyat eleştirisi ve Andrew Blaikie'nin sosyolojik çerçevesinden yararlanan çalışma, seçilen romanların yaşlanmayı yalnızca fiziksel sağlıkta bir düşünüş olarak değil, aynı zamanda mevcut anlatıları ve anlamlandırma biçimlerini etkileyen daha geniş toplumsal ve tarihsel bağlamlar içinde de tasvir ettiğini savunmaktadır. Anlatıları daha geniş bir edebi yaşlanma geleneği çerçevesinde konumlandıran analiz, romanların yaşlılık ve ölümlülüğe dair kültürel algıları şekillendirmedeki rolünü vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Colm Tóibín, Yiyun Li, *The Empty Family*, *Kindness*, yaşlanma



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Introduction

A recurring topic in literature across civilizations and ages has been the unrelenting march of time and its impact on human experience. Transforming social structures and cultural narratives about aging, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) estimates in "World Population Ageing 2020" that the worldwide population of people aged 65 and older will double to 1.5 billion by 2050 (p. 3). Increased academic and literary focus on the subjective experience of aging has accompanied this demographic change. Modern literature provides especially rich ground for investigating aging not only as biological decline but as a complicated existential condition that changes one's relationship with time, memory, identity, and social belonging.

Two short stories, Colm Tóibín's "The Empty Family" and Yiyun Li's "Kindness," which come from different cultural backgrounds—Irish and Chinese American, respectively—reveal remarkable parallels in their treatment of aging as a process of negotiation with personal and cultural history. This essay investigates the literary depiction of aging in both stories. Both stories feature protagonists in later life stages (Tóibín's anonymous narrator is an old man, while Li's female narrator, Moyan, is in her middle age) who must reconcile their current situation with their past choices, so showing what Jan Baars (2012) refers to as "the double relationship with time that characterizes human aging: aging as living in time and aging as being confronted with finitude" (p. 157). This work contends that both Tóibín and Li view aging as a condition defined by temporal disorientation, social marginalization, and the paradoxical experience of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of identity by means of close textual analysis and interaction with gerontological and literary theory.

Theoretical Structure: Narrative Identity and Literary Gerontology

The theoretical framework that will be used to interpret these literary works must be established before moving on to textual analysis. Literary gerontology, an interdisciplinary field that analyzes literary depictions of aging while taking into account ideas from social gerontology, psychology, and philosophy, is the main source of inspiration for this essay. In order to create a dynamic interpretive approach that acknowledges the constructed nature of aging narratives as well as their relationship to lived experience, literary gerontology uses literature to understand aging.

The idea of narrative identity, which holds that people create their sense of self by the stories they tell about their lives, is fundamental to this analysis. According to William L. Randall (2013), "aging itself is storied... we not only have a life story, we are a life story" (p. 12). Because the protagonists in both Tóibín's and Li's works actively recall and reinterpret their past experiences, this viewpoint is especially pertinent to their works. Additionally, a helpful lens for comprehending how both authors depict their characters' relationships with their aging bodies and shifting social positions is Margaret Gullette's (2004) conceptualization of aging as "a narrative... organized by the fear of decline" (p. 13).

Robert N. Butler's (1963) idea of the "life review," which refers to the impromptu process of reevaluating and contemplating one's past that frequently takes place in later life, will also be used to inform the analysis. According to Butler, this process has an adaptive purpose by enabling older people to integrate and settle unresolved disputes (p. 66). Versions of this life review are performed by Li's protagonist and Tóibín's narrator, albeit with varying levels of acceptance and resolution. Based on gerontological literary criticism and Andrew Blaikie's sociological framework, this paper explores how "The Empty Family" and "Kindness" depict aging, which is not limited to its depiction as a deterioration of health but also as a slow process shaped socially, culturally, historically, and individually.

Temporal Disorientation and Aging in Tóibín's "The Empty Family"

The anonymous narrator of Tóibín's "The Empty Family" returns to Ireland after years away and is faced with the reality of his aging body as well as the landscape of his youth. A strong sense of temporal disorientation—a disturbance of linear time that results in a lingering tension between the past and present—defines the narrator's experience of aging. "This space I walk in now has been my dream space; the mild sound of the wind on days like this has been my dream sound" he notes (Tóibín, 2010). The sense that one's life contains discontinuities that must somehow be integrated into a coherent narrative identity is what Paul Ricoeur (1984) refers to as the "temporal fracture" that frequently characterizes aging narratives (p. 104).

Being a returnee to his native country further complicates the narrator's relationship with time, resulting in a complex interplay between temporal and spatial displacement. According to Susan Sontag (1972), "Aging is

not merely a physical process; it is also a condition of marginality—of existing at the boundaries of multiple temporal and social worlds" (p. 72). The narrator lives at these exact intersections, torn between his years spent overseas, his Irish past, and his uncertain future. According to his observation that "this is what the world is, and our time in it, all lifted possibility, all complexity and rushing fervour, to end in nothing on a small strand" (Tóibín, 2010), aging disrupts traditional temporality, resulting in what gerontologist Jan Baars (2012) refers to as "lived time" (p. 143), which is in contrast to chronological time.

Throughout the story, Tóibín employs the telescope motif as a metaphor for aging as well as a literal device. He is interested in the telescope. He can see Rosslare Harbour, Tuskar Rock or Raven Point and is enchanted by the sight: b "But what he showed me first had amazed me. The sight of the waves miles out, their dutiful and frenetic solitude, their dull indifference to their fate, made me want to cry out" (Tóibín, 2010). According to this picture, growing older causes a type of perceptual distance, which is a mediation of experience that deprives a person of instant sensory engagement. "The aging body often becomes an instrument through which experience is filtered and distanced, creating a phenomenological gap between perception and sensation," as Woodward (2006) contends (p. 39). This gap is symbolized by the telescope, which gives the narrator a privileged yet alienating perspective on life.

Empirical research on subjective aging experiences is consistent with this sense of temporal and perceptual dislocation. In its report "Addressing Age-Based Discrimination," the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019) observes that "older individuals often report experiencing time differently than younger populations, with a tendency toward increased reminiscence and prospective memory challenges" (p. 42). Tóibín's narrator's contemplative posture and fixation on memory perfectly capture this changed sense of temporality.

The narrator's reflections on the sea itself serve as a metaphor for his attitude toward growing older. He notes, "The sea is not a pattern, it is a struggle" (Tóibín, 2010, p. 89), implying that growing older, like the sea, is a tumultuous negotiating with forces outside of one's control rather than a predictable progression. Randall and McKim (2008) define later life as "a hermeneutic struggle to read one's past in ways that make meaning possible" (p. 128), and this metaphor fits their definition. This hermeneutic practice—an effort to find pattern and meaning in the chaotic flow of time—is exemplified by the narrator's use of

his telescope to observe the waves.

Li's "Kindness": Acceptance, Isolation, and Memory

Though seen via another cultural prism, Li's "Kindness" exposes amazing parallels in its handling of memory, isolation, and the quest for meaning in life. In post-Cultural Revolution China, the main character, Moyan, ages alone; her life is shaped by early relationships with Teacher Shan and Lieutenant Wei. Growing older, she implies she was a teacher's student and a lieutenant's daughter. She thinks, "I know Lieutenant Wei will continue coming to me in my dreams, as Professor Shan's voice still reads to me when I sit in my flat with one of her books in hand." This remark sums up what Butler (2008) calls "the crystallization of identity in later life—the awareness that certain defining narratives have become fixed and unchangeable" (p. 67).

Moyan's experience of aging is greatly shaped by her status as a single, childless woman in Chinese society, a position with particular cultural relevance. Zhang (2019) observes that "Elderly women without children in Chinese culture often face pronounced social marginalization, as traditional family structures position older women primarily as mothers and grandmothers" (p. 104). Moyan's loneliness is made worse by this cultural dynamic, which she wants to be invisible (Li). This invisibility mirrors more general trends of social marginalization of aging people all around experience. The United Nations' "World Social Report 2023: Leaving No One Behind in an Aging World" records that "social isolation affects between 7-17% of older adults in developed countries, with higher rates among unmarried people and those without children" (United Nations, 2023, p. 89).

Li's depiction of Moyan's aging process is especially remarkable for its focus on the part literature plays in generating meaning in later life. Moyan finds both a link to her past and a framework for understanding her present situation in the English novels brought to her by Teacher Shan, which she revisits all through the story. "I truly live with Dickens, and Hardy and Lawrence,... The people who live out their lives in those books, like their creators, are not my people, and I wonder if it is this irrelevance that makes it easy for me to wander among them" (Li, 2009, p. 127). This relationship with literature shows what Randall and McKim (2008) call "literary aging"—the process by which people use literary narratives to shape and interpret their own aging experience (p. 33). Moyan's interaction with English literature turns into a kind of "reminiscence therapy," a term used by gerontologists to describe a practice proven to lower depression and enhance aging

people's well-being (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 112).

Moyan's relationship with time grows more complicated as she ages. Li shows this via a story framework that reflects the compression and expansion of subjective time in later life. While formative events from Moyan's youth get more focus, decades pass in short paragraphs. This approach captures what Cohen (2010) calls "the accordion-like quality of remembered time in later life, where distant events may feel more immediate than recent ones" (p. 149). Neuropsychological studies referenced in the United Nations' "Aging and Health Report" (2022) back this temporal distortion, which states that "older adults often experience a compression of recent temporal experience alongside heightened emotional salience of distant memories" (p. 43).

Moyan's ageing experience centers on her slow acceptance of the limits and missed chances in her life. This point of view fits Erikson's (1963) developmental theory, which holds that the main psychosocial task of later life is attaining "ego integrity" by means of acceptance of one's life as it was lived (p.268). Li, on the other hand, complicates this developmental story by implying that Moyan's acceptance is linked to ongoing regret and resignation. As Moyan reflects on her choices and acknowledges:

Sometimes I wonder if my life would have turned out differently had I not met Teacher Shan. Perhaps I would have subjected myself to her will as I had Professor Shan's, and I would have become a happier person, falling in love with a suitable man, because that is what Lieutenant Wei would have considered happiness. But what is the point of talking about the past in this haphazard way. (p. 78)

This ambivalent acceptance differs from more triumphalist stories of "successful aging" that have dominated gerontological discourse since the 1990s. Critical gerontologists like Katz (2013) have contended that these stories sometimes overlook the structural elements influencing ageing experiences and the legitimacy of more complicated emotional reactions to ageing (p. 18). Li's nuanced depiction of Moyan's later life fits what Liang and Luo (2012) call "harmonious aging"—a concept derived from Chinese philosophical traditions that acknowledges contradictions and limitations as natural to the aging process (p. 329). Global aging policy increasingly reflects this viewpoint; the United Nations' "Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging" (2002, updated 2022) now stresses the need of cultural diversity in comprehending aging

experiences, stating that "Western models of successful aging may not be universally applicable or desirable" (p. 47).

Points of Intersection and Divergence: A Comparative Perspective

Though Tóibín's "The Empty Family" and Li's "Kindness" come from different cultural backgrounds and storytelling techniques, they both show aging as an existential state with notable similarities. Both stories show aging as a journey of coming to terms with the finiteness of time and facing unfulfilled potential. Tóibín's narrator ends his relationship with his partner and leaves Ireland. Moyan, likewise, considers the life she could have led, saying, "I have never married, never had children, never traveled beyond the provincial capital.". These show what Sontag (1972) calls "the tyranny of the irreversible" (p. 72), the awareness that some possibilities have permanently gone, some knowledge that grows sharper with age.

This confrontation with lost possibilities mirrors more general sociological trends. According to the United Nations' "World Population Aging" report (2020), "later life often involves a reconciliation with life choices and their consequences, particularly for generations that faced more constrained options due to historical, economic, or cultural factors" (p. 118). Both protagonists belong to such generations—Tóibín's narrator having come of age as a man having left his partner in conservative Ireland, and Moyan having lived through the Cultural Revolution in China—and their aging experiences are shaped by these historical limitations.

Both writers use narrative strategies that reflect the cognitive and emotional processes linked with aging. Tóibín's use of long, meditative passages reflects what gerontologists call "life review"—the tendency of older people to engage in sustained reflection on their past experiences. McLeod (2016) notes that "Tóibín's prose often slows to match the reflective pace of his aging protagonists, creating a narrative rhythm that mimics the experience of remembering" (p. 56). Li likewise employs a cyclical narrative technique, with Moyan constantly revisiting important memories, so showing how aging can be the ongoing rethinking of important life events. This approach fits Butler's (1963) definition of the life review as "a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (p. 66).

Each piece emphasizes various physical signs of aging differently, reflecting personal and cultural differences in the experience of bodily aging. *Tóibín's* narrator suggests an estrangement from one's physical self that comes with aging by acknowledging bodily changes quietly and saying, "My eye, solitary, filled with its own history, is desperate to evade, erase, forget; it is watching now, watching fiercely, like a scientist looking for a cure, deciding for some days to forget about words, to know at last that the words for colours, the blue-grey-green of the sea, the whiteness of the waves, will not work against the fullness of watching the rich chaos they yield and carry." (*Tóibín*). Gilleard and Higgs (2018) point out that this understated strategy is typical of Western literature, which views the aging body as "a site of alienation—something that is simultaneously one's self and not one's self" (p. 43). Reflecting cultural differences in the value linked to bodily aging, Li, meanwhile, emphasizes social marginalization over physical decline. Many East Asian societies, the United Nations' "Aging in Asia and the Pacific" report (2017) observes, "In many East Asian cultures, the social dimensions of aging—particularly changes in family role and social status—often take precedence over concerns about physical appearance in narratives about growing older" (p. 76).

Though they reach different conclusions, both stories also investigate the link between aging and social connection. By the story's conclusion, *Tóibín's* narrator feels great loneliness yet makes hesitant steps toward reconnection. "I was going home to my own forgiving sea, a softer, more domesticated beach, and my own lighthouse, less dramatic and less long-suffering," he says, implying the chance of renewed social involvement. By contrast, Moyan appears to embrace her isolation as final and mostly relates to others via literature and memory. This disparity reflects what the World Health Organization's "Global Report on Ageism" (2021) calls "culturally variable patterns of social integration in later life, with some societies facilitating continued community involvement and others expecting a degree of withdrawal" (p. 82).

Disability, aging, and corporeal vulnerability

The relationship between aging and disability—a link that shows differently for each protagonist but exposes the complicated interaction between growing older and embodied vulnerability—is a vital aspect of the aging process shown in both stories. With 46% of adults over 60 experiencing at least one functional limitation that could be classified as a disability, the World Health Organization's "World Report on Disability and Aging" (2021) observes, "The boundary between normal aging and disability

becomes increasingly blurred in later life" (p. 37). This junction produces what disability scholar Alison Kafer (2013) calls "the double marginalization of aging with disability," whereby older people have to negotiate both ageism and ableism at the same time (p. 84).

Tóibín's "The Empty Family" explores the narrator's relationship with his body, which captures this rich ground between aging and impairment. He points to subtle physical changes that, although not clearly framed as disabilities, suggest what disability theorist Tobin Siebers (2008) calls "the gradual slippage between normative and non-normative embodiment that characterizes the aging process" (p. 59). More telling is the narrator's relationship with the telescope which he plans to buy. It is both an assistive device boosting vision that may have faded with age and a tool for aesthetic appreciation. So, he could see much more clearly through the lens than with his naked eye. His plan implicitly acknowledges what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2017) calls "the prosthetic relationship with technology that becomes increasingly common in later life" (p. 112).

On the other hand, Moyan exhibits a form of psychosocial disablement—not in the clinical sense, but as a metaphorical or existential condition that limits her capacity to engage meaningfully with the world and others (Li, 2009, p. 140). This description fits what the United Nations' "Rights of Older Persons with Disabilities" report (2021) calls "the progressive disablement often associated with advanced age—a process that calls for continuous adaptation and resilience" (p. 43). Moyan's story shows what disability theorist Susan Wendell (1996) calls "the temporality of disability in aging—how impairments fluctuate, accumulate, and become integrated into one's sense of self over time" (p. 76). While Moyan is not elderly, her emotional development, or rather the stagnation of it, parallels this process. She experiences a slow erosion of her capacity to connect, express, and act—a kind of psychosocial aging that mimics the decline associated with physical aging. Rather than resilience, Moyan demonstrates quiet endurance. Her coping mechanism is withdrawal, not adaptation. This divergence from the expected narrative of resilience suggests a subtle critique of societal expectations imposed on those who live with invisible or progressive impairments

The World Health Organization's "Global Report on Healthy Aging" (2020) states that "mild cognitive impairment and sensory limitations are among the most common disability experiences in later life, affecting approximately 38% of adults over 70 globally" (p. 52).

Moyan's world is filtered through a lens of flattened affect and interpretive uncertainty. Her recollections are emotionally muted, fragmented, and presented with a delayed sense of awareness—signs often associated with cognitive slowing. She struggles to interpret or assign meaning to events as they happen, choosing instead to reflect with an almost clinical detachment years later. Tóibín's narrator whose inner life is haunted by past intimacy, yet whose present seems unmoored—defined by sensory detachment, memory fog, and existential drift. The narrator frequently engages in acts of watching or remembering, yet these reflections are clouded by an inability to fully grasp or relive the emotion that once accompanied them. This dissociation borders on sensory alienation

Particularly important in both stories is how the experience of bodily vulnerability becomes part of the protagonists' aging identity. Though neither defines themselves mostly by their physical constraints, these ones shape their interaction with the world in significant ways. Drawing on Christine Overall's (2006) assertion that "the integration of disability into aging identity represents neither total acceptance nor continuous struggle, but rather an ongoing negotiation between capability and limitation," (p. 127) we can see how the protagonists in "Kindness" and "The Empty Family" embody this negotiated subjectivity in profoundly literary terms. Their interior lives—subtly fractured, emotionally muted, and temporally dislocated—function as narrative expressions of this negotiation, not just in terms of age, but in how their evolving limitations become central to their self-perception.

Socioeconomic Dimensions of Ageing

Although Tóibín and Li mostly emphasize the subjective experience of aging, their stories also subtly address the socioeconomic aspects of getting older. Tóibín's narrator seems to have financial security, which lets him buy a house by the sea and go back to Ireland. This financial stability emphasizes what economists call "the disconnect between financial and psychological well-being in later life" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 137) as it contrasts sharply with the emotional precarity he endures. By contrast, Moyan lives simply in post-reform China, her situation reflecting the economic vulnerability felt by many older women worldwide. According to the United Nations' "World Social Report" (2023), "older women are 20% more likely than older men to live in poverty globally, with single, childless women facing especially elevated risk" (p. 93).

These financial facts affect how both heroes perceive aging. Chris Phillipson (2013) contends, "Material resources fundamentally condition the possibilities for agency in later life, determining whether aging is experienced as a period of continued development or increased constraint" (p. 78). Though he battles emotions, Tóibín's narrator keeps some autonomy that many older people would lack. Moyan's more constrained situation reflects larger trends of inequality in aging experiences. Emphasizing that "socioeconomic inequalities are often amplified in later life, as disadvantages accumulate across the life course," the World Health Organization's "Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health" (2017-2030) underlines the idea of cumulative disadvantage.

Though neither story directly addresses policy concerns about aging populations, both imply problems crucial to modern aging policies. Tóibín's depiction of his narrator's loneliness in spite of material comfort emphasizes the World Health Organization's focus on "the need of social connection and community integration for healthy aging" (WHO, 2021, p. 42). Li's portrayal of Moyan's lonely existence in a fast-changing China raises questions about what the United Nations calls "the need for culturally appropriate support systems as traditional family structures evolve" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 156).

Aging and Gender: Different Experiences

The gendered aspects of aging stand out as yet another important point of comparison between the two stories. Aging reflects more general gender difference in later life for Tóibín's male narrator and Li's female protagonist. Feminist gerontologist Toni Calasanti (2010) notes, "Men and women not only age differently because of biological reasons but also confront different social expectations and structural conditions in later life" (p. 723).

Aging as a gay guy, Tóibín's narrator adds another depth to his experience. His thoughts on past relationships are tinged with personal regret as well as the historical background of being gay in late 20th-century Ireland. The narrator's reminiscences about Bill are imbued with a sense of loss and nostalgia, highlighting the enduring impact of their relationship on his life. Tóibín's subtle and nuanced storytelling allows readers to glean the depth of the narrator's feelings and the significance of his bond with Bill, even as he navigates solitude and reflection upon returning to Ireland. This comment draws attention to what Heaphy (2007) calls "the intersection of aging, sexuality, and social change—how changing social attitudes alter the aging

experience for sexual minorities" (p. 192). "Older LGBTQ+ people sometimes face particular difficulties, including historical trauma from discrimination and complicated ties with communities of origin," says the United Nations' "Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Older Persons" report (2018).

Moyan's experience as an aging woman in China reflects various but equally strong social limitations. Her status as single and childless places her outside conventional expectations for female aging in Chinese society, which has historically stressed the role of grandmotherhood and family caretaking. Sometimes, she says, "People look at me with curiosity, wondering what flaw made me unfit for marriage" (Li, 2009, p. 137). And Professor Shan's advice influenced her much. She told her "When you desire nothing, nothing will defeat you." This social positioning reflects what Jieyu Liu (2014) calls "the double marginalization experienced by older, unmarried women in Chinese society—excluded from both youth-centric mainstream culture and traditional family-based models of feminine aging" (p. 84). "Aging in the Twenty-First Century" (2021) from the United Nations Population Fund corroborates this trend worldwide, pointing out that "older women without children face particular social challenges in societies where female elder status is primarily derived from maternal and grandmaternal roles" (p. 108).

Though they differ, both protagonists go through what Kathleen Woodward describes as the paradox of visibility and invisibility that characterizes aging—becoming both more visible as representations of age and less visible as people with desires and agency (p. 42). To Woodward "the hypervisible body will disappear into the invisibility of middle age. First you see it, then you don't" (2006, 183). Tóibín's narrator returns to Ireland after years abroad, carrying with him memories of lost lovers, particularly Bill in California. There is no stable community or partner waiting for him; he exists on the periphery of society. His return to Ireland is marked not by reintegration but by displacement, reinforcing his lack of visible social anchors—no spouse, no family, no homecoming rituals. As he says: "I have come back here... 'I have come back here... I can sit on this old high chair... and watch the calmness of the sea against the misting sky.'"

Moyan observes in a similar vein as being unmarried and without children. And the people around remind her of the cruel fact: She says "When I reached marriageable age, people began to press me, subtly at first and later less so, saying that a young woman's best years were brief, saying that I was becoming less desirable by the day, like a fresh

lychee that had not found a buyer in time". These results correspond to those of the "World Values Survey" (2022), which shows "perceptions of social invisibility increase significantly after age 65, with 72% of respondents over 70 reporting feeling 'unseen' in public spaces" (p. 43).

Aging as Existential Condition and Cultural Construct: Conclusion

Tóibín's "The Empty Family" and Li's "Kindness" provide deep understanding of aging as a culturally mediated experience as well as an existential condition. Both writers acknowledge the real losses and limits that come with growing older and, by their complex depictions of protagonists negotiating later life, they refute simplistic stories of aging as only decline. Their works show how literary depictions of aging can enhance empirical research by capturing the subjective aspects of experience that only statistics cannot express.

A comparison of these stories shows that, although their cultural background and narrative style differ, both writers see aging as a complicated negotiation with time, memory, and identity. Both show aging as producing a specific relationship with time—one marked by nonlinearity, more reflection, and a heightened awareness of finitude. The United Nations' "World Population Aging" report (2020) recognizes, "The subjective experience of aging involves complex psychological adaptations to changing temporal horizons that extend beyond the physiological processes typically emphasized in medical literature" (p. 128).

Both stories also address what sociologist Andrew Blaikie (1999) calls "the cultural contradictions of aging in late modernity"—the conflict between cultural devaluation of older people and the rising longevity that makes later life a more important part of the life course (p. 22). Tóibín and Li show how personal aging experiences fit inside larger social and historical settings that influence available stories and options for meaning-making. Literary and cultural depictions of aging are, as the World Health Organization's "Global Report on Ageism" (2021) contends, "crucial" in either supporting or contesting ageist preconceptions" (p. 53). Both writers help to broaden cultural perceptions of later life by means of their intricate, non-stereotypical depictions of aging heroes.

Ultimately, the issue of aging in both works is defined by a tension between continuity and rupture—between the persistence of identity across time and the changes that make one's younger self appear like "someone else,". this tension is called the basic existential challenge of aging (p.

38). Still, both pieces imply that although challenging, this struggle offers opportunities for new knowledge. Moyan muses in the last pages of the story, "Kindness binds one to the past as obstinately as love does, and no matter what you think of Professor Shan or Lieutenant Wei, it is their kindness that makes me indebted to them.

Literary investigations of aging experiences acquire particular relevance in an age of unmatched worldwide population aging, with the United Nations (2020) projecting that "by 2050, one in six people worldwide will be over 65, compared to one in eleven in 2019" (p. 5). Tóibín's and Li's stories provide insightful views on the subjective aspects of aging as society change demographic structure. Aging is a basic part of human experience, one that exposes the intricate interaction between biological processes, personal history, social structures, and cultural narratives; it is not only a demographic challenge or a medical condition.

Portrayed in these stories, the tyranny of time is its unrelenting nature and its ability to change both body and mind. Still, both writers contend that this tyranny is not total; within the limits of aging, there are still opportunities for meaning, connection, and fresh knowledge. This balanced viewpoint fits modern gerontological theories that, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), "seek to acknowledge both the real challenges and the potential opportunities associated with increased longevity" (p. 187). By means of their subtle literary investigations of aging, Tóibín and Li help to create this equilibrium by revealing the multifaceted reality of aging in ways that enhance and support empirical studies.

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