

FEMALE AGEING: REVISING *REIFUNGSROMAN* IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK AND LOVE, AGAIN*

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Abstract: The ageing process is usually perceived as a time of loss and decline, especially for women. The first signs of ageing are shown in the external body. In Western societies, wrinkles, white hair, impending falling jaws and limbs are seen, both by ageing women themselves and by their communities, as a straight and unstoppable road into invisibility that will end up in social exclusion. This is the first reaction the main female characters in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *Love, Again* (1996) experience when they scrutinise their faces and bodies in front of the mirror and fail to recognise them as their real ones, the ones that defined them in their youth, just a few years ago. Parting from Barbara Frey Waxman's concept of *Reifungsroman* (1988), this paper intends to analyse how the female protagonists in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* and *Love, Again* perceive the changes going on inside them as their bodies are increasingly losing the virtues of youth and entering into middle age and old age respectively; and how they come to terms with these changes and succeed in undermining cultural conceptions of ageing in women.

Keywords: female ageing; contemporary British fiction; the ageing body; *Reifungsroman*; middle age; old age.

Título en español: "Envejecimiento femenino: Revisando *Reifungsroman* en *The Summer Before the Dark* and *Love, Again* en Doris Lessing".

Resumen: El proceso de envejecimiento se suele percibir como una etapa de pérdida y declive, especialmente en las mujeres. Los primeros signos de envejecimiento se muestran exteriormente. En las sociedades occidentales, tanto las mujeres que envejecen como las comunidades en las que viven, consideran las arrugas, el pelo blanco, la flacidez de la piel como el inicio del fin de un proceso de declive que acabará en la exclusión social. Esta es la primera reacción que tienen las protagonistas femeninas de las novelas *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) y *Love, Again* (1996) de Doris Lessing cuando examinan sus caras y sus cuerpos delante del espejo y no se acaban de reconocer en ellos; por el contrario, consideran que sus caras y cuerpos reales son los de su juventud. Partiendo del concepto de *Reifungsroman* que estableció Barbara Frey Waxman en 1988, este artículo pretende analizar como las protagonistas femeninas de las novelas de Doris Lessing antes citadas perciben los cambios que sufren sus cuerpos a medida que entran en la mediana edad y en la vejez respectivamente; y como asumen estos cambios a la vez que cuestionan concepciones culturales que restringen el papel de la mujer mayor en una sociedad que está envejeciendo.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento femenino; ficción inglesa contemporánea; el cuerpo que envejece; *Reifungsroman*; mediana edad; vejez.

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1. THE AGEING BODY: FEMALE AGEING

Fiction containing ageing characters has become increasingly prominent over the last few decades. The global trends on population ageing, especially in Western countries, and the contradictions emerging between a rapidly ageing population and a society still lured by youth and the maintenance of a youthful body, has begun to be reflected in fiction over the last decades. Despite youth being a brief period in one's life, the maintenance of a vigorous and young body is considered a virtue, reflecting the value of a person. This is the result of a social and cultural structure inherited from the industrial revolution, in which the body is valued according to its productive worth, and the present consumer culture which bombards us with messages of body maintenance. In *Surviving Middle Age* (1982), sociologists, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, argue that the physical signs of ageing are, in many cases, the first factors that inform ourselves as well as others that we are ageing. In this sense, they contend that we are inserted into a cultural context in which "any tendency to accept the visible signs of ageing [...] runs the danger of being interpreted as an outer reflection of an unworthy self, signs of low self-esteem and even moral weakness" (1982: 6). Featherstone and Hepworth acknowledge the prominence of the physical body over experience and personality to the point that old age is equated to loss and decline since the appearance of biological signs of ageing on a body are unstoppable.

Bill Bytheway (1995), who has also researched meanings attached to the ageing body, goes one step further and concludes that "body indicators of age in adulthood are comparable with symptoms of illness" (1995: 13). This suggests an almost direct association between an ageing body and disease. Andrew Blaikie, the author of *Old Age and Popular Culture* (1999), contends that "the constant quest for youth" (1999: 109) enhanced by the media and consumer culture contributes to the stigmatisation of the elderly as "human failures" (1999: 109). Instead, Blaikie as well as Hepworth, Featherstone and Bytheway, highlight the need to approach the process of ageing from a different perspective so that the external appearance of ageing is not related to negative connotations, such as illness and vice.

The negative implications of the ageing body are not only more acute in women, but they also occur sooner than in men. A man who takes good care of his appearance is said to age gracefully; men with white hair, wrinkles and well-kept bodies are seen as attractive and considered to possess experience and wisdom. For women, however, white hair and wrinkles inform others as well as themselves that the ageing process is unstoppable. According to the beliefs of Western society, as aging women leave their fertility years behind their attractiveness diminishes. This thesis is supported by the arguments of two-well known feminist critics. Simone de Beauvoir in a chapter entitled "From Maturity to Old Age" within *The Second Sex* (1949) and Susan Sontag in her article "The Double Standard of Old Age" (1978) contend that women are more drastically penalised when they start showing external signs of ageing because they are interpreted as the beginning of the end of their fertile period. According to de Beauvoir, "[w]hereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is relatively young when she loses her fertility" (1997: 587). Similarly Sontag argues that, "[a] man, even an ugly man, can remain eligible well into old age. He is an acceptable mate for a young, attractive woman. Women, even good-looking women, become ineligible [...] at a much younger age"

(1978: 31). For Sontag, when a woman crosses the line of being 'very young', she faces considerable pressure to keep the signs of ageing at bay in order to still be considered an active part of society. In that sense, the body that starts showing signs of ageing may be perceived as 'the other' since there is a mismatch between what the woman feels and the role she is expected to perform in society. Kathleen Woodward (1991, 1999) refers to the pre-eminence of the visual in Western culture represented by the "surface of the body" (1999: 169) to explain why women are socially more affected by the signs of ageing on their bodies. In her introduction to *Figuring Age. Women, Bodies, Generations*, Woodward exhorts the readers to consider the need to refer to the ageing process "in terms of growth and change" (1999: xiii) rather than decline based on the negative connotations attached to the ageing body. For Woodward, changing the perspective through which female ageing is approached is the only way to go beyond the limits of the restricted social and cultural space left to ageing and old women.

2. FICTIONALISING THE AGEING PROCESS IN WOMEN: *REIFUNGSROMAN*

At the end of the 1980s, Barbara Frey Waxman introduced the concept of *Reifungsroman* to refer to the emergence of a new genre of writing. *Reifungsroman* defines a set of novels published during the seventies and eighties to the present time in which middle-aged and ageing female characters become the main protagonists of the texts. In *Reifungsroman*, ageing female characters are not presented from the prism of decline – although physical decline is indeed one of the consequences of the ageing process; on the contrary, *Reifungsroman* are novels that "reject negative cultural stereotypes of the old woman and ageing, seeking to change the society that created these stereotypes" (1990: 2). Novels with middle-aged and old female characters as the main protagonist seek to give a voice to a character that would ordinarily be pushed into the background or silenced. By narrating their stories directly to the reader, these characters are given a voice through which they express their passions and concerns, longings and resentments through a process which is experienced by all human beings, namely, growing old.

Around this period, Margaret Moganroth Gullette (1988) and Constance Rooke (1992) also acknowledge the emergence of novels in which middle-aged characters are not depicted merely through the prism of decline. Gullette states that for about a decade and a half, starting from the end of the eighties, "a number of fiction writers have been offering Anglo-American culture new heroines and heroes in their middle years" (1988: xii) who surpassed decline and moved onto recovery and development. Moreover, Rooke observes that characters entering old age have gone from being secondary characters, often marginalised, to becoming all round interesting characters with major roles. When revising the appearance of the progress narrative with its main protagonists entering old age, Anne Wyatt-Brown (1990) also describes the different theoretical frameworks through which these novels are being analysed, and acknowledges the fact that a literary approach to the ageing process contributes to enrich restricted cultural and social perceptions of ageing, especially when referring to female ageing.

Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *Love, Again* (1996) are *Reifungsromane* in which two women, Kate Brown and Sarah Durham, undergo a journey

through which they come to terms with the ageing process in a society where being an old woman is translated into loss, decline and ultimately, invisibility. Kate is in her forties whereas Sarah is in her sixties. While Kate is entering middle age and Sarah is entering old age, both female characters are revising their position as women within their contemporary societies. By facing the challenges of ageing understood as entering into a new life stage, both at a personal level as well as those triggered by a society focused on producing and consuming, Kate and Sarah confront their own fears brought about by the cultural and social beliefs that relegate old age, and specially old women, to the margins of society. In both novels, the protagonists start their journey of “ripening”, as Waxman defines it, by looking at themselves in the mirror and realising that their reflected image does not match the way they feel about themselves. Time has flown and the passage of time is inscribed on their bodies. While more fundamental change has occurred within them both, they initially feel their experiences and strength of spirit acquired over a lifetime will not be valued, as in a few years they will be viewed as merely old and unfruitful women. Their journey of ripening consists of coming to terms with all these changes, however, more importantly, the journey consists of finding a place for themselves as ageing women in a society where a person's value still very much relates to harbouring a youthful and attractive physical appearance.

Both novels start with the female protagonists reflecting on the process of growing old. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate realises she has not been herself over the last weeks. She has been feeling depressed and cannot not understand why; however, she has some awareness of the fact that things will change for her: “[i]t was going to turn out for Kate that that summer would be such a shortened, heightened, concentrated time. What was she going to experience? Nothing much more than, simply, she grew old: that successor and repetition of the act of growing up” (Lessing, 1983: 9). That summer, Kate is left alone in her home for the first time in twenty-five years. Her husband and her four children are spending the summer abroad, which means she has complete freedom over her time. This realisation triggers conflicting feelings within Kate in relation to her past and present life, and her future life as an ageing woman. As the narrator explains, “For now that she had so much time – she felt as if she was doing nothing, or very little; her days were emptier than they had been for years – she was conscious of her emotional apparatus working away in a vacuum” (Lessing, 1983: 36). Kate's journey of ripening is not only psychological; she actually spends the summer travelling from one place to another, experiencing many different things with people she barely knows. As a result of following the course of her most intrinsic wishes at each moment, Kate is open to new experiences that enable her to break with her own image of the perfect wife and mother, namely a woman who is always neat and trim, and enter a new stage in her life.

On the contrary, Sarah in *Love, Again* is quite content with her present life. In fact, “She found herself at sixty-five telling younger friends that there was nothing to getting old, quite pleasurable really” (Lessing, 1997: 8). At the beginning of the novel, Sarah is immersed in the production of a play named *Julie Vairon*, a project she has been working on for one year. This will be her last project as she feels it is time to enjoy a quiet life and to rest. The whole company is spending a few weeks together in order to rehearse as well as arrange the launch of the performance. Over those few weeks, Sarah falls in love with younger men; not once, but twice, and realises that she has internalised the expectations society has placed

on her as a widow and an old woman, although she feels young and vital inside. Despite Kate being in her forties and Sarah in her sixties, both female protagonists find themselves in a position in which the exploration of new roads cannot be eluded. The exploration is executed by examining their bodies in front of the mirrors as well as mirroring themselves in those who they find along their journey. By exposing their bodies to their own gaze as well as the gaze of others, Kate and Sarah dispose themselves of those constraining social and cultural beliefs that leave them on the outskirts of their communities.

3. THE MIRRORING PROCESS: CONFRONTING BODY, SELF AND OTHERS

A constant theme present in both novels is the protagonists confronting and coming to terms with their mirror images. Mike Hepworth describes this constant looking into the mirror as “an interactive process through which connections are made between the personal subjective self of the viewer and the external world of other people” (2000: 46). According to Hepworth, the connection established between the mirror, the self and the perception others may have of us is constructed symbolically through meaning. Indeed, both fictional texts exploit this symbolic meaning when conveying the relationship the ageing female protagonists establish with their mirrors. At the beginning of both novels, the female protagonists feel quite comfortable with their reflected images because they conform to the expectations of those around them as women of a certain age. Just after Kate’s family leaves for the summer, she decides to buy a few dresses and realises that “[a] woman stood in front of large mirrors in many shops, looking with a cool, not entirely friendly curiosity at a woman in her early forties who was still the same shape she had been all her adult life [...], who had pretty chestnut hair – tinted of course, because the grey was coming in fast” (Lessing, 1983: 36). However, when looking closely, Kate can already see the “first cousin to that so very undermining ‘humorous’ grimace [...] Undermining because it seemed to nullify her official or daylight view of herself” (Lessing, 1983: 36). She needs to maintain control if she intends to be seen and treated as the same Kate she is at the present moment. Conversely, Sarah feels happy with the way she is ageing. When “[s]he came to a stop in front of the mirror. She looked at a handsome apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body” (Lessing, 1997: 6). During the first stage of their journey, the female protagonists acknowledge the ageing process in front of the mirror. The mirror starts showing marks of ageing, however, this is accepted both by the women and their societies.

The mirror will be their main witness throughout their journey of ripening. As the female protagonists live through different experiences and they begin to question their role and position within the social entanglement of ageing, they return to the mirror once and again to scrutinise their bodies and understand that the ageing process is not just a matter of physical decline. During a journey to Spain with a younger man she had just met, Kate starts to care less about her appearance; she decides to spend less time on her hair and begins dressing more casually, even a bit scruffily. Kate goes from being a middle-aged woman who dresses and tints her hair according to social and family expectations, to a woman zealously trying to find herself again. By lessening her attachment to her physical appearance, Kate intends to free herself from all the constraints she adopted as a young woman. As Kate starts recovering from her illness of self-acknowledgement, she realises that she has used

mirrors to make sure she was liked and accepted by others, especially by her husband: "For years Kate, who spent the requisite amount of time in front of many different mirrors, had been able to see exactly what *he* was seeing, when his face was close above hers. Oh, it was all so wearying, so humiliating... Had she really spent so many years of her life [...] in front of the looking-glass?" (Lessing, 1983: 153). From that moment onwards, mirrors take on a role in Kate's life. She uses them to make sure her reflection shows she lives her life fully. After acknowledging the need to break with social and family expectations, Kate looks at herself in the mirror; she grimaces into "the handglass, trying on different expressions, like an actress – there were hundreds she had never thought of using! She had been limiting herself to a frightfully small range, most of them, of course, creditable to her, and pleasing, or non-abrasive to others" (Lessing, 1983: 153). The mirror is a key element in Kate's transformation from a woman who tries to conform to society's expectations to a woman who embraces the ageing process as a period in which to express her individuality.

Sarah's constant excursions to the mirror start when feelings she thought were past her age flourish once again, during her sixty-fifth year of life. After a few days spent with the crew of the play, Sarah realises she is in love with Bill, a twenty-six-year-old actor who is part of the cast of *Julie Vairon*. When Sarah accepts that she is affected by Bill's furtive looks and attention, and that she has actually fallen in love, Sarah "went to the mirror several times during the course of this excursion around and about her room, for an inspection that deserved to be called scientific" (Lessing, 1997: 191). In her mind, love and lust are the terrain of the young and attractive. As her body shows signs of ageing she is not entitled to feel passion or be attracted to a young man. When Sarah finds out that she had misinterpreted Bill's attentions, since he was actually seeing a younger woman, she falls in love again, this time with Henry, the director of the play; a middle-aged man. Despite the fact that Sarah does not start an affair with any of these men, her intense feelings of passion and love make her revise her position as an ageing woman in a community which grants them little space. In her multiple excursions to the mirror, Sarah remembers her younger self and how she had been a sexually desired woman in her youth. However, she cannot find that sexual attractiveness when seeing her reflection in the mirror; consequently, she cannot imagine herself naked in front of a younger man, despite her incontrollable feelings. As she observes herself in the mirror, she admits that "[s]he could sincerely say that one of the strata, or several, did not care about his ageing carcass, but there was another as vulnerable as the flesh of roses" (Lessing, 1997: 235). In *Stories of Ageing*, Mike Hepworth interprets Sarah's close examinations of her face and body as looking at "two kinds of evidence: internal and external" (2000: 37). According to Hepworth, Sarah's examinations of her external body in search of signs of ageing are a way of coming to terms with a more fluid image of her self. Her body is undeniably changing whereas her feelings are similar to the ones she felt in her youth; thus, she looks at herself in the mirror to understand why her feelings do not match the meanings attached to her ageing body. Sarah actually realises that her most passionate feelings have not been tamed by the supposed quietness in which she has lived on her own, as a widow, for many years. Throughout her journey, Sarah discovers that there is a human dimension, namely feelings, and more specifically, love, which remain unaffected by age.

Apart from their close relationship with the mirror, both female protagonists mirror themselves in those around them, either by comparing themselves to others or by discerning

the reactions others have in relation to their ageing bodies. That summer is the first time Kate travels alone after many years of living with her family life. After her husband and children leave, she accepts a job as a translator for an important convention in Istanbul where she will spend a couple of weeks. Once at the convention, she realises that she is twenty years older than the majority of the other female participants. However, Kate successfully manages to conceal her real age and several men invite her out for a drink on the first day of the event. However, Kate does not take care of her appearance in order to conceal the first signs of ageing in a conscious way; this is something she is supposed to do as a respectable wife and mother with a certain social status. Kate begins to question this assumption as she becomes increasingly aware of it. As the narrator explains,

Yet this woman, to whom so many men made their way, was twenty years older than some of the girls. This meant that she did not at first sight (across a room and so much coming and going of people in between) look her forty-odd years. She was in that state of eternal youth, to which such a large part of the time and effort of womanhood is directed. (Or rather – as she was thinking more and more often, was becoming obsessed by – the womanhood of the well-off nations of the world, who did not look old at thirty.) (Lessing, 1983: 43).

Once Kate decides not to take care of her appearance after her long illness of self-acknowledgement, invisibility is indeed the word that defines her. After having been enclosed in her inner world for such a long time, Kate decides to go for a walk without wearing make-up or concealing her white hair. As she passes a group of young men, she observes that “[n]o one took any notice. She received indifferent glances, which turned off her at once, in search of stimulus. Again, she might have been invisible” (Lessing, 1983: 170). Once again, Kate corroborates that she had been socially programmed to attract attention. As she becomes aware of her invisibility to that group of men, “Kate felt light, floating, without ballast; her head was chaotic, her feelings numbed with confusion” (Lessing, 1983: 170). After the first shock, Kate realises that she cannot be defined neither by the male nor the ageist gaze. Despite her incipient ageing process, Kate is determined to exist for herself and be defined according to her own standards.

In contrast, Sarah compares herself to the young actresses in the play, believing that in a few years, her body will be old and forgotten both by herself and those around her: “She had been attractive and, like Julie, always had people in love with her. *Basta*. She could not afford this new feeling of loss, of anguish. She glanced at her forearm, bare because of the heat, shapely still but drying out, seeing it simultaneously as it was now and as it had been then” (Lessing, 1997: 94). By looking at herself in the mirror and comparing her ageing body to the younger ones around her, Sarah sees herself as composed of different levels; she feels superposed to the young Sarah, the real one, the one who manifests herself through a revival of passionate feelings. The levels are the signs of ageing on her body but they are also the demeaning social and cultural interpretations regarding the value of an aging person which she has undoubtedly internalised. As Sarah explains, “[t]his body of hers in which she was living comfortably enough, seemed accompanied by another, her young body, shaped in a kind of ectoplasm” (Lessing, 1997: 94).

Sarah wonders what made Bill and Henry admire her and she realises that it was probably not her body but her senior position within the group. Thus, Bill and Henry had felt

admiration for her, whereas she had felt love and sexual desire for them. When attending one of the parties organised by the crew of the play and observing those around her, Sarah realises that her ageing body has actually brought her to another category:

the fate of us all, to get old, or even to grow older, is one so cruel that while we spend every energy in trying to avert or postpone it, we in fact seldom allow the realization to strike home sharp and cold; from being *this* – and she looked around at the young people – one becomes this, a husk without colour, above all without the lustre, the shine. And I, Sarah Durham, sitting here tonight surrounded mostly by the young (or people who seem young to me), am in exactly the same situation as the innumerable people of the world who are ugly, deformed, crippled, or who have horrible skin diseases (Lessing, 1997: 136).

At the beginning of the novel, Sarah is quite happy with her body and with her life. However, when she experiences love again, she becomes aware that many doors are closing behind her as she moves into old age. As Zoe Brennan contends, the word “love” of the title is not the peaceful emotion that dominant discourse would suggest appropriate to someone past the stage of menopause, but is overridingly linked to sexuality” (2005: 80). Whereas Sarah is invaded by these passionate feelings which she can neither control nor satisfy, Kate becomes aware of the extent to which she had been subjugated to her physical appearance. In the novels, and through the motif of the mirror, the voices of the two women are heard as Sarah expresses her uncontrollable feelings and Kate experiments with her own body and her own reactions openly.

4. THE JOURNEY COMPLETED

In both novels, Kate and Sarah mirror themselves in two figures that can be described as their alter egos throughout their journeys. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Sarah dreams about a seal, which is representative of her journey of self-discovery and recovery. The seal repeatedly appears in Kate’s dreams and helps Kate determine the right path when she feels lost. While the seal is injured and lacks adequate food and water at the beginning of the novel, by the end of the novel, the seal breaks free. In her analysis of the text, Gayle Greene considers that the seal is just “a kind of triumph” (2005: 125) because Kate finally decides to return home to her family. However, Kate returns home a changed person. The journey enabled Kate to confront herself beyond the cocoon she had been living in for a long time. She manages to rid herself of the cultural constraints that dictate her value as a person: youth, attractiveness and her roles as wife and mother; her rebellion is symbolized by her decision to stop dyeing her hair. As she returns home, Kate admits that “her discoveries, her self-definition, what she hoped were now strengths – were concentrated here: here she would walk into her home with her hair undressed” (Lessing, 1983: 230).

In *Love, Again*, the main protagonist of the play in which Sarah is involved becomes her alter ego. Julie Vairon was a woman from Martinique who lived through the beginning of the twentieth-century. Despite her humble upbringing, Julie had been well educated. Julie decided to live by herself within a community who punished her beauty, love affairs and independence. Julie Vairon “drew self-portraits all her life, not because she had no other model, but because she was engaged in discovering her real, her hidden nature” (Lessing,

1997: 17), just as Sarah and Kate go back to the mirror several times during their journey of self-discovery as ageing women. Sadly, Julie committed suicide just before marrying a well-off man who respected her and as the community was beginning to accept her. While Sarah looks at Julie's self-portraits, she realises there was a painting of Julie as an old woman, a stage through which she never lived: "The old woman is only an old woman. There is no individuality there, as if Julie could not imagine herself old or did not care enough to think herself into being old" (Lessing, 1997: 27). Julie's suicide could be read from two, interrelated perspectives. On the one hand, having been an independent and active woman all her life, she was content but not at all fulfilled by her wife-to-be life in which she was expected to dedicate herself to her home and her husband. On the other hand, the future awaiting her as an ageing woman would be even darker because, eventually, she would have become invisible and relegated to the corner of a room.

Sarah has been an independent and active woman all her life and she would like to continue as such. By looking at herself in the mirror as well as mirroring herself in others, she realises that an alternative path for ageing and older women does not exist. Moreover, an alternative path did not exist in Julie's time. Once *Julie Vairon* ends, Sarah returns home and does away with all the junk in her home and paints her walls white. She also vows never to die her hair again: "her hair, which for so long remained like a smooth dulled metal, now has grey bands across the front" (Lessing, 1997: 337). Much like Kate, Sarah has returned to her home and old routine, however, she decides to no longer hide or deny the ageing process; on the contrary, she is determined to rewrite the story and history of ageing women on those white blazing walls. After removing all the junk from her life and her flat, Sarah "felt as if a weight had been lifted away out of her rooms, leaving her lighter and freer too" (Lessing, 1983: 337). Sarah is ready to accept her ageing process by disposing herself of all the limiting constraints of being a woman in old age.

In conclusion, the journey of ripening that both protagonists undergo, provokes an internal rather than external revolution. As they question their positions as ageing women by recording the changes taking place in their bodies as well as how those around them perceive those changes, the ageing protagonists dispose of the intrinsic implications they had acquired as women moving towards middle age and old age. Their bodies are ageing and becoming invisible by contemporary standards; however, through their journey of ripening they choose not to be defined by such constraining cultural beliefs. As Nancy K. Miller explains in her article "The Marks of Time", "[i]f learning to see oneself – as a woman – ageing, can't be separated from how we've learned to see ourselves as women in the first place, part of how to find new ways of perceiving ourselves as ageing bodies and faces is to construct a narrative in which these images can be read, otherwise" (1999: 12). In this respect, both Kate and Sarah set the foundations to start anew from a different narrative; one in which the older woman, and the younger before, are not solely defined by sexual attractiveness.

Despite not breaking with their families and communities in a radical way, Kate and Sarah take the first steps to design their own narratives. A good place to start is admitting that being invisible to the male gaze is actually a source of freedom from which a woman can distance herself and take some perspective. In an interview that took place in London in 2003, Doris Lessing assures that she actually enjoys being invisible because "you're

not continually on show” and, thus “you can notice much more...you're much more free” (Gray, 2004: 88). Kate and Sarah Durham actually start writing their own ageing life stories the moment they decide to be aware and acknowledge the contradictions existing between their ageing female bodies and themselves and question what is expected from women as they grow old in an increasingly ageing society.

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