

AGING AND AILING PARENTS: A BURDEN OR RESPONSIBILITY? : A STUDY OF BROOKNER'S *THE DEBUT*

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Abstract: *The importance of family rises with the advancement of age as elderly need more support and help in their later life. If the aging people suffer from ailments, the situation becomes more challenging. The family members are expected to do the better portion of the care-work. If there is a single person in the family to take care of the ailing persons, it becomes difficult to work for the aging and ailing persons. The attendants have to make a lot of compromises. As a result, their illness and the old age, sometimes, is taken as a burden. The rise of Old People's Home is the outcome of this kind of attitude. The paper attempts to focus the situation of the aging and ailing parents and the responsibilities undertaken by the protagonist with courage and patience, in *The Debut* by Anita Brookner.*

Keywords: *Advancement of age, ailments, care-taking, responsibilities etc.*

In *The Debut*, the central character, Dr. Ruth Weiss lives with her parents, including her mother, father and granny. At the beginning of the novel, she is seen reflecting on her bitter sweet childhood spent in the company of her hectic parents and the sensible granny. Her mother is Helen who is a demi-actress and her father, a seller of books. Her mother manages to keep herself fit for the theatre by taking intermittent exercise. Her attraction for the profession and the glamour is explicit in her efforts. Ruth is brought up under the attention of her parents, principally, her father, George, who supplies her best books to comprehend all through her infancy existence. Brookner puts this furnishing of books, in apt words, "from Grimm and Hans Andresen, she graduated to the works of Charles Dickens" (18). Ruth has affection for her father who cares for her. She estimates, "He was a good son, a tender father, but against their admirable sentiments he was passionately in love with his wife" (15).

Ruth, however, is quite associated to her granny. She receives the sole support, care, love and affection of her granny who is her guide, friend, philosopher, thinker and supporter. Throughout the novel there are unswerving references showing that the granny is the dear and the near person to her. Her granny looks after the abode ingeniously. She demonstrates Ruth how one can shoulder the family responsibilities.

It is known that a single person do more than his/her share of long term care. That's what Ursula Henz found when she looked at the responses of a nationally representative sample of more than 9000 British adults by asking them questions related to care taking. The result of the study shows that single had done so more often than married people. The same is true in case of Ruth.

She nostalgically recalls the particular day when her granny fails to give response to her call, following her coming back from school. She crosses the threshold of the kitchen to see her granny lying on the flooring. Following this incident, her granny is seen confined to bed due to the sickness. Ruth would sit by her bed every hours of daylight. A nurse is held in reserve to attend the granny. One day the nurse reports to Ruth about the demise of her dear granny. She goes to her and, "took her grandmother's hand and kissed it, then raised the book to her cheek and hold it there for little while, as if for comfort" (19). The event discloses granny's passion of reading novels. The occurrence illustrates how Ruth is affectionate to her granny. She would have taken care of her granny but the death of granny was sudden. Yet, the affection

between them displays that her old age or ailments would not have been a burden on Ruth.

Servitude to aging parents and the death, particularly of a mother, are persistent in the story of Brookner. And it is only because of the indirect lessons given by granny that Ruth also became a responsible girl. She became aware of her duties and responsibilities. The lessons gave her strength to shoulder the responsibility of her ailing parents, keeping aside her personal interests.

Ruth was in Paris taking higher education. She gets the companionship of man as she was in need of one. She acquires it but it lasts for short while. It is indicated when her journey to her homeland materializes in the form a phone call from her mother who suffers from chest pains and she needs go back to London. She has to come back to solve the complexities at home. Without making any arguments, she comes back to look after her mother as it was her responsibility.

Due to the indifferent treatment given to George, he has drawn towards Mrs. Sally Jacobes, an assistant to him, in the book shop. After the detection of the sly love affair of her husband, Helen refuses to live under the same roof. Ruth's takes her mother to her friend Molly for the time being, so that the situation may improve. But her attempt proves deadly. Hardly had she reached there, the news of George's suffering from stroke is received, and she has to retrace to manage the ailment of her father. While coming back to George; she has to face another mishap. The physical condition of her mother is worsened. The event at the Victoria station tests her patience. She recalls, "At Victoria, things began to go wrong" (177). Ruth's mental state is exposed when the taxi fails to come as she wants to take her mother to a hospital. Her mother succumbs to death on the station. The emotion of loss surfaces and distresses her.

Ruth has to return to London, sacrificing her study. She assumes the role of a dutiful daughter and look after her ailing father. She gets a job of teaching in a local college. As George is taken to Oakwood Court after the discharge from the hospital, the departure of Sally is bound to be there. George had a love affair with Sally and when he does not notice Sally around him, he is seen impatient. He would expect her to visit him. Death of Helen and departure of Sally make him regressive. In addition, he receives a stroke that makes him bedridden, resulting in his loneliness. Because of the timely hospitalization of Sally and Roddy, he survives. Sally senses his lonely state after the death of his wife. He desperately seems to miss both Helen and Sally. Ruth is seen taking great care of him. It is difficult to judge her mental landscape at this stage of her life.

Ruth marries Roddy for support and comfort he displayed during the illness of George but he succumbs to a car accident, leaving Ruth lonely and assuming the role of the caregiver in the family that has been delineated by her since the death of her German-born granny.

To conclude, the protagonist, being single, is seen making a lot of compromises. She has to leave her educating incomplete and keep her personal interests aside in order to take care of her parents. She takes a step back and reestablishes her bond with her father. It helped her continue the caregiving in a positive way. This kind of attitude can improve one's relations with the aging and ailing parents. It can help to improve their mental and emotional health. It is better for the family and society.

Works cited:

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