



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

Literature

**NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF AGEING AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MALAYALAM MOVIE #HOME THROUGH A SOCIO-CULTURAL LENS**

**KEY WORDS:** Ageism, intergenerational, stereotypes, terror management

**Dr Susan Alexander**

Assistant Professor & Head, Dept of English, St Cyril's College, Vadacadathucavu P.O., Adoor-691521.

**Megha U.S.**

IInd Year B.Ed, Manjappara Educational and Charitable Trust B.Ed College, Manjappara, Ayur.

**ABSTRACT**

The scientific advancements in the field of science and technology has led to an exponential rise in the ageing population all across the world. According to Abhay B. Mane, the proportion of Indians aged 60 and older will rise from 7.5% in 2010 to 11.1% in 2025. In 2010, India had more than 91.6 million elderly and the number of elderly in India is projected to reach 158.7 million in 2025. But the challenges faced by the aged has seldom been addressed in developing nations. They often become the theme for literature and films and are often forgotten with them. The Malayalam movie #Home explores the intergenerational divide and the existential threat of an ageing population. The paper "Navigating the Challenges of Ageing and Technological Change: An Analysis of the Malayalam Movie #Home through a Socio-cultural Lens" is an attempt to unmask the silent stereotypes, gender roles and the discrimination faced by the ageing population in a typical Malayalee home.

Ageism, the discrimination or stereotyping based on age, is a critical social issue, often reflected and reinforced by media portrayals. In Kerala, this phenomenon is poignantly depicted in the Malayalam movie #Home. This film not only explores ageism but also delves into the theme of isolation among the elderly. #Home effectively showcases the emotional and social disconnect between generations, highlighting how the elderly often feel marginalized and misunderstood. These narratives are particularly resonant in the post-COVID era in Kerala, where the pandemic has heightened issues of isolation and vulnerability among the elderly. The pandemic's impact has led to increased physical and emotional distance, exacerbating the challenges faced by older individuals and underscoring the urgent need to address ageism and isolation in Kerala's rapidly changing social fabric.

This heightened awareness of ageism and isolation in the context of Kerala's elderly population demands a societal response. The portrayal in #Home not only mirrors these challenges but also serves as a catalyst for conversation and change. These films encourage viewers to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours towards the older generation, urging a shift from neglect and stereotyping to empathy and inclusion. In the broader spectrum, the post-COVID landscape in Kerala presents an opportunity to reevaluate and improve how society supports its ageing population. From policy-making to community initiatives, there is a growing imperative to create environments that are more inclusive, supportive, and respectful of the elderly. This cultural shift is essential for ensuring that the dignity and well-being of older individuals are not just preserved but celebrated, transforming the narrative of ageing from one of isolation to one of integration and respect.

**Case Study**

#Home is a Malayalam film that portrays a middle-class family navigating the challenges of ageing and technological change. The story focuses on Oliver Twist, a former video cassette shop owner, his wife Kuttியമ്മ, their sons Antony and Charles, and their grandfather who is called 'appachan'. The narrative explores the impact of the shift to online modes of living, particularly on the elderly or the less tech-savvy individuals, causing societal upheaval and changing family dynamics. The film also features two other families - that of Oliver's friend Suryan and Antony's girlfriend Priya - to highlight different aspects of human relationships.

The film reflects a society deeply immersed in technology through Oliver Twist's sons, Antony and Charles, who are engrossed in social media. Oliver's efforts to connect with his

sons lead him into the unfamiliar world of technology, showcasing his struggles and his deep, innocent love for his family. This narrative aligns with the research of Brewer, Dull, and Lui on ageism, as discussed in their article "Perceptions of the elderly: Stereotypes as prototypes." and further elaborated in *Ageism Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older People*. Their work identifies three subtypes of elderly individuals: the 'grandmotherly type,' characterized as helpful and trustworthy; the 'elder statesman,' seen as intelligent and aggressive; and the 'senior citizen,' perceived as lonely and weak. These perspectives underscore the film's exploration of generational gaps and societal attitudes towards ageing.

Oliver Twist, his wife Kuttിയമ്മ, and his father 'appachan' exemplify the 'grandmotherly' and 'senior citizen' subtypes, being kind, helpful, and trustworthy, yet also perceived as lonely and old-fashioned. This contrasts with other elder characters like Oliver's friend Suryan and Priya's father, who embody the 'elder statesman' subtype due to their intelligence, competitiveness, and aggressiveness. Interestingly, Oliver reminisces about his youth, highlighting that he and his father were once tech-savvy, owning a popular video cassette shop and being knowledgeable about typewriters and foreign literature. This background provides a unique perspective on how technology and societal roles evolve, emphasizing the film's exploration of generational shifts and the changing definitions of being 'technologically advanced' and 'elite' over time.

A recurring theme in research on youngsters' perceptions of old age focuses on physical appearance, reflecting a society where people are often evaluated based on their looks. The 'ideal gentleman' image is highly praised, influenced significantly by social media trends set by influencers whose impact transcends generations. This push towards becoming a trendsetter rather than just a follower is constant, but the underlying idea that men should aspire to be gentlemen remains steadfast. This is evident in the case of Joseph Lopez, the father of Priya and Suryan and friend of Oliver. Despite belonging to the same age group and sharing a gentlemanly appearance, their distinction lies in their use of smartphone technology, symbolizing the 'new normal cool look' for older adults in the pandemic era. Recently, this trend has been highlighted in advertising, with transformations of older adults becoming viral sensations. When older adults engage in activities associated with younger generations, they often become viral sensations, as it contradicts societal expectations. The older generation is not typically expected to be adept in the digital world; breaking these stereotypes

can lead them to being perceived as outliers or trendsetters, as they are not fully integrated into what is considered 'normal' society.

The common fear among children regarding ageing centers around sickness and mortality. When children describe older adults, they often mention characteristics like baldness, wrinkles, poor vision, diminished hearing, and general feebleness, portraying a decline in both physical and cognitive abilities. This decline is a stark reminder of the vulnerability and inevitability of death, a concept known as the 'threat of animality.' This fear is part of a broader hypothesis suggesting that the physical aspects of the body remind us of our mortality. Human efforts to alleviate death anxiety through cultural beliefs and standards are often undermined by the awareness of our physical, animal nature. This awareness can lead to discomfort or even disgust, as it underscores our vulnerability and the certainty of death.

Recent research on ageism and social perceptions of older people reveal both negative and positive stereotypes. While older individuals are often seen as sadder, lonelier, and duller than younger people, they are also viewed as unaggressive, kind, polite, friendly, good, and wise. A portrayal of this can be seen in the character Oliver Twist from the film *#Home*, who despite experiencing loneliness and neglect, exhibits care and love towards his children and acquaintances. For instance, Oliver's misunderstanding about Antony seeking a smartphone for him, which was actually for Priya's father, leads to a profound sense of disappointment and hurt. Self-esteem, particularly significant in buffering death-related anxiety, becomes a critical issue for the elderly. Oliver's experience of negative attitudes from Antony plunges him into deep depression. The Terror Management Theory suggests that the loss of physical and cognitive abilities in old age is a significant source of fear for both the elderly and the young. For the elderly, it's a fear of losing self-esteem, while for the young, it's a reminder of the transient nature of these attributes.

Antony's request for Oliver to write an apology letter, which he does without hesitation, again results in neglect from his son, underscoring the generational divide and lack of appreciation. Oliver is a true representation of the current older generation, eager to connect with their children yet often facing indifference and neglect. The contrast is evident with Priya's father, whose tech savvy nature earns him respect and acceptance, highlighting that, aside from this aspect, he shares many similarities with Oliver and Suryan.

Research indicates that the relationship between younger individuals and their attitudes towards the elderly is influenced by economic backgrounds. Studies suggest that children from families emphasizing intergenerational support tend to view older adults more positively. However, findings on the impact of economic background are mixed. Some research points out that children from higher economic backgrounds may have more positive attitudes towards the elderly, whereas those from lower economic backgrounds might harbor negative perceptions. Urban upbringing is also thought to foster more positive attitudes than rural environments, but these relationships are not fully understood. The 1992 study by Slaughter-Defoe, Kuehne, and Straker highlights the need for further research to clarify these class-related differences. In the movie *#Home*, these dynamics are explored through Antony and Priya. Priya hails from an affluent family, and Antony, from a middle-class background, admires her father's success and technological knowledge, unfavorably comparing him to his own father. This leads to Antony's rude and arrogant behavior towards his family, preferring to acknowledge Joseph with a birthday gift and disparaging his father's attempt to write an autobiography. Oliver's emotional outburst to his friend Suryan reveals his deep longing for recognition and respect

from his sons, showcasing the often-overlooked emotional depth of the elderly and the tendency of the younger generation to dismiss their feelings.

In the film, Sooryan reminds Oliver of their extraordinary youthful deed: saving a child and his mother on a stormy night, braving a river and a forest full of wild animals. Oliver shares this story with Antony, describing how he risked his life for the mother and child, but Antony dismisses it as fiction and walks away. Towards the film's end, Antony learns the truth at Joseph's book launch, where Annama, Joseph's mother, recounts the same story, revealing Oliver and Sooryan as the heroes who saved her and Joseph, who had been poisoned. Unlike the social media-obsessed generation that seeks recognition for every act, Oliver and Sooryan never sought acknowledgment for their bravery. Annamma sees Oliver as a savior, a stark contrast to the showy, superficial nature of today's technology-driven society, exemplified by Charles and his social media antics. The film reflects on the loss of privacy and the obsession with publicizing personal life, a trend sharply contrasted by characters like Oliver, Kuttijamma, and Appachan, who value private life away from the public eye.

Oliver's life, though perceived as ordinary by his son, is far from it. He was a well-known video library owner at a time when this was prestigious, and his father was a respected English-Malayalam translator. Their intellectual pursuits are evident in Oliver's naming and his fondness for quoting Charles Dickens. In contrast, Antony's lack of respect for his parents, despite their accomplishments, starkly differs from Priya's attitude. Priya, from a modern, tech-savvy family, shows respect and concern for Antony's parents. This divergence in attitudes towards the elderly stems from their different upbringings. The film's psychologist Franklin points out that Oliver could have been extraordinary, but he chose the life of a family man over riskier pursuits. Antony fails to see his father's true potential, often belittling him, highlighting the film's message that a person's lifestyle significantly influences their attitudes towards aging and respect for the elderly.

The portrayal of Antony's behavior towards his parents, particularly his father Oliver, aligns with the research by Kogan, Stephens, and Shelton (1961), which found stronger negative judgments by children against older adults, especially women. However, the film diverges from this finding as Antony directs his disrespect and bullying primarily at his father, not his mother. This difference in attitude based on gender is evident throughout the film. While Kuttijamma, portrayed as a typical mother, stands up for Oliver when he is belittled, Antony continues to target his father, reflecting a societal bias where the male elderly are more susceptible to disrespect and bullying. Antony's actions are influenced by his concern for societal image, given his status as an award-winning film director, leading him to view his father's lack of tech-savviness as a potential threat to his reputation.

The film also addresses the issue of age-related physical changes and their impact on children's perceptions of the elderly, as discussed in research by Zawn Villines. The elderly characters in *#Home* are depicted with common age-related physical features such as baldness, grey hair, and wrinkles, which contribute to the negative impressions held by younger characters. Despite their education and wisdom, these physical attributes and their lack of familiarity with modern technology overshadow their societal value. Director Rojin Thomas drew inspiration for the film from his own experiences during the pandemic lockdown, a time when routines were disrupted and the elderly struggled to adapt to new technologies like online shopping and digital payments. This struggle is poignantly captured in the character of Oliver, who, unlike his son, shows enthusiasm and pride in learning

new digital skills to connect with his family and the modern world.

Lastly, the film's makeup artist, Ronex, plays a significant role in reinforcing societal stereotypes about the elderly. By giving Oliver, Kuttியamma, and Appachan less attractive looks that include bald heads, grey hair, and faded clothes, the film visually anchors these characters in the typical imagery of old age. This portrayal resonates with the audience's pre-existing notions about the elderly, making the characters relatable and authentic. Kuttியamma's character, in particular, embodies the traits of a typical mother, including her love for gossip, further grounding the film in the reality of middle-class family dynamics. The film skillfully weaves these elements to present a realistic and touching narrative that reflects the complexities of aging and familial relationships in contemporary society.

Muscarella and Cunningham's 1996 study, rooted in ecological and evolutionary perspectives, suggests that baldness in men symbolizes social maturity and a non-threatening form of dominance, often associated with wisdom and nurturance. This research indicates a correlation between the loss of cranial hair and increased perceptions of age, intelligence, social status, and tenderness in men, coupled with a decrease in perceived aggressiveness and increased perceived kindness. However, the representation of ageing men often includes negative stereotypes, such as baldness and diminished physical vitality, leading to what is known as over-generalization effects. These effects encompass two types: emotional over-generalization, where older adults are perceived as sad, lonely, and depressed, as seen in the characters of Oliver, Kuttியamma, and Appachan; and babyishness over-generalization, where older faces are seen as weaker, gentler, and more vulnerable.

In the film, Oliver's lecture about capillary action in a scene with an electric gadgets shop owner exemplifies the rich knowledge and effective communication skills of older adults. This generation, often raised in joint family systems, possesses practical knowledge and experience in various fields, from home remedies to basic electrical and plumbing work. They acquired this knowledge not through the internet but through hands-on experience and observation, contributing to stronger family bonds and a harmonious living environment. In contrast, the current generation, growing up in nuclear families and immersed in the digital world, often lacks these skills and the deep family connections of previous generations. The film highlights the downside of the smartphone era, portraying it as a trap set by global companies, leading to a loss of privacy, diminished face-to-face interactions, and a generation engulfed in their devices, often at the expense of productive time and personal connections.

The pandemic increased the reliance on electronic gadgets, forcing a shift to digital platforms for everyday tasks, creating challenges especially for the older generation. The film "#Home" approaches this subject empathetically, contrasting the humorous and often derogatory portrayal of the elderly's struggles with technology in popular media. It underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the elderly, who have been thrust into a rapidly changing technological landscape, struggling to adapt to the new norm of digital payments and online interactions. This empathetic approach not only highlights the challenges faced by the older generation but also serves as a critique of the society's growing dependence on smartphones and the internet, urging a more balanced and respectful understanding of the elderly's experiences in the digital age.

**CONCLUSION**

To conclude, the film #Home presents a nuanced portrayal of the generational divide in attitudes towards aging and

technology. Through the character of Oliver, it highlights the stereotypes and challenges faced by the elderly, as illustrated by studies such as those by Muscarella and Cunningham in 1996. These studies reflect the over-generalization of age-related traits, often leading to negative perceptions of older adults. The film contrasts the rich knowledge and experience of older generations, evident in their practical skills and effective communication, against the digital immersion of younger generations, emphasizing the loss of deep interpersonal connections and privacy. Moreover, the pandemic's acceleration of technology reliance underscores the struggles of the elderly in adapting to new digital norms. "#Home" thus serves as a poignant reminder of the need for empathy and understanding towards the aging population in the rapidly evolving digital era, challenging the audience to reconsider their perceptions and interactions with older generations.

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