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# AGEING, SELFHOOD AND CINEMA: GERONTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FRAME IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI FILMS

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**ABSTRACT**

Cinema functions as a powerful cultural medium through which societies interpret ethical values, emotional orientations, and the meaning of different stages of the life course. While cinematic representations of ageing have often been criticised for reinforcing decline-centred and ageist stereotypes, contemporary Hindi cinema demonstrates a gradual yet significant shift toward more nuanced and affirmative portrayals of later life. This paper employs a gerontological hermeneutic framework that brings Indian philosophical concepts of *dharma*, *ātman*, and *mokṣa* into dialogue with Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity and Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons. Through close interpretive analysis of *Mukti Bhawan* (2016), *102 Not Out* (2018), and *Uunchai* (2022), the study examines how ageing is reimagined not as biological decline but as a phase of ethical reflection, spiritual insight, relational responsibility, and narrative openness. Rather than offering plot-driven readings, the films are approached as dialogic texts in which later life becomes a site for reconciliation, vulnerability, playfulness, and moral clarity. The paper argues that these cinematic representations offer culturally rooted yet theoretically significant reconfigurations of ageing that expand the scope of cultural gerontology and challenge dominant productivity-oriented paradigms of later life.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Ageing has emerged as one of the most pressing ethical and cultural questions of the twenty-first century, not only because of demographic shifts but also because of the persistent inadequacy of the narratives through which later life is commonly understood. Dominant biomedical and productivity-oriented discourses continue to frame old age as a phase of decline, dependency, and diminishing social value, thereby reducing ageing to a problem of management rather than recognising it as a meaningful stage of human existence. In response to such reductive frameworks, scholars working in cultural and humanistic gerontology have increasingly argued that ageing must be approached as a culturally mediated, narratively constructed, and ethically significant experience, rather than as a purely biological condition (Deats and Lenker 1–3).

Cinema occupies a crucial position within this broader cultural negotiation of ageing. As a mass cultural form with considerable affective reach, film does not merely reflect prevailing social attitudes but actively participates in shaping how different stages of life are imagined and valued. Hindi cinema, in particular, has long functioned as a moral and emotional guide to contemporary life, offering symbolic frameworks through which relationships, duty, and existential choices are interpreted (Dwyer 8–10). Despite this cultural centrality, ageing has remained a relatively marginal concern within film studies, often confined to stereotypical representations of frailty, nostalgia, or comic irrelevance.

In recent years, however, a discernible shift has taken place within Indian cinema. Films such as *Mukti Bhawan*, *Uunchai*, and *102 Not Out* move away from decline-centric portrayals and instead foreground old age as a phase marked by reflection, ethical agency, relational depth, and existential meaning. These films do not simply insert elderly characters into otherwise conventional narratives; rather, they reorganise narrative focus around later life itself. Ageing becomes the primary lens through which questions of selfhood, responsibility, memory, and mortality are explored.

This paper argues that these films collectively constitute a significant cultural intervention in contemporary understandings of ageing. Employing a gerontological hermeneutic framework, the study conceptualises ageing as an interpretive and narrative process shaped by history, ethical reflection, and cultural tradition. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of understanding as a historically effected event, the films are approached as dialogic texts in which contemporary anxieties surrounding ageing encounter inherited philosophical horizons (Gadamer 278–80). Cinema thus emerges not merely as a representational medium but as a site of meaning-making.Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity further informs this inquiry by reconceptualising selfhood as something constituted through storytelling rather than as a fixed essence. For Ricœur, identity unfolds through continuous reinterpretation across time, rendering later life a privileged moment for ethical reassessment and narrative integration rather than narrative exhaustion (Ricœur 26). The films examined in this study repeatedly stage such moments, presenting ageing as a phase in which unresolved relationships,

suppressed desires, and moral ambiguities are confronted with renewed clarity.

Equally central to this analysis are Indian philosophical concepts such as *ātman*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa*, which offer culturally specific yet theoretically resonant frameworks for understanding ageing and death. Unlike Western paradigms that tend to privilege autonomy and productivity, Indian philosophical traditions have historically viewed later life as a period oriented toward moral reflection, detachment, and liberation. In the films under study, these ideas are neither abstract nor merely ornamental; rather, they shape narrative trajectories and ethical resolutions in concrete and visible ways.

To situate this analysis within existing scholarship, the study draws upon cultural gerontology, narrative gerontology, hermeneutic philosophy, and film studies. Humanistic gerontology challenges decline-centric models by foregrounding identity, dignity, and ethical agency in later life (Deats and Lenker 15–16), while narrative gerontology conceptualises ageing as an ongoing story rather than a point of closure, critiquing what Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall describe as "narrative foreclosure" (xvii). Hermeneutic philosophy provides interpretive tools for understanding how meaning emerges through dialogue, memory, and finitude (Gadamer 305–07), and film studies situate cinema as a powerful cultural imaginary that shapes social understanding (Dwyer 31–34). Together, these perspectives establish the conceptual foundation for a sustained gerontological reading of contemporary Hindi cinema, which the following sections develop in detail.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly study of ageing has traditionally been dominated by biomedical, demographic, and policy-oriented paradigms that conceptualise later life primarily in terms of decline, dependency, and loss of function. While such approaches have generated valuable insights into health, longevity, and social care, they have also produced reductionist narratives that marginalise the experiential, ethical, and cultural dimensions of ageing. In response to these limitations, scholars in the humanities and cultural gerontology have increasingly argued that ageing must be understood not merely as a biological process but as a culturally mediated and narratively constructed phase of life imbued with meaning (Deats and Lenker 1–3).

Humanistic gerontology marks a decisive shift away from deficit-based models of ageing. As Deats and Lenker observe, dominant cultural representations have long framed old age through stereotypes of invisibility, rigidity, and irrelevance, thereby reinforcing ageist assumptions at both social and institutional levels (15–16). By contrast, the humanities foreground identity, ethical agency, memory, and relationality, offering alternative narratives in which later life is understood as complex, heterogeneous, and ethically significant. This perspective is particularly relevant to cinema, a cultural form that circulates widely and shapes public imagination through affective and symbolic means.Closely aligned with this humanistic turn is the field of narrative gerontology, which conceptualises ageing as an ongoing process of storytelling rather than as a phase of narrative closure. Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall argue that human life is

fundamentally "storied" and that later life remains a crucial site of narrative construction and reinterpretation (xiii–xv). One of the field's most influential concepts is that of narrative foreclosure, which refers to the internalisation of cultural scripts suggesting that meaningful life possibilities are exhausted in old age (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall xvii). Such foreclosure not only shapes social attitudes toward ageing but also affects how ageing individuals understand themselves, often leading to resignation, withdrawal, and a diminished sense of purpose.

Narrative gerontology's emphasis on meaning, memory, and ethical reflection places it firmly within interpretive and hermeneutic traditions. Rather than privileging empirical indicators of "successful ageing," it attends to how individuals narrate their lives, negotiate continuity and change, and make sense of finitude (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall xiv). This orientation provides a crucial methodological foundation for analysing cinema, where ageing is frequently articulated through narrative arcs, symbolic imagery, and relational dynamics rather than through explicit sociological commentary.

Hermeneutic philosophy, particularly as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, further deepens this interpretive framework. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer reconceptualises understanding as a historically effected event (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), in which meaning emerges through dialogue between the interpreter's present horizon and the traditions embodied in the text (278–80). Understanding, in this sense, is neither purely subjective nor purely objective but dialogical, shaped by history, language, and lived experience. This insight is especially relevant to the study of ageing, as later life itself constitutes a horizon shaped by memory, anticipation, and ethical reflection. Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons is particularly productive for gerontological inquiry. Ageing can be understood as a site where personal biography intersects with cultural inheritance, allowing new meanings to emerge through reflection on finitude and continuity (Gadamer 305–07). When applied to cinema, this framework treats films not as static representations of ageing but as events of understanding that invite viewers into a dialogic engagement with later life. Slow pacing, silence, and symbolic imagery, features common to the films analysed in this study, encourage precisely the kind of contemplative interpretation that Gadamer associates with genuine understanding.

Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity complements Gadamer's hermeneutics by offering a nuanced account of selfhood across time. In *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricœur challenges essentialist notions of identity and argues that the self becomes intelligible only through narrative configuration (26). Identity, in this view, is not a fixed substance but a dynamic process sustained through the ongoing reinterpretation of one's life story. For gerontological analysis, this insight is particularly significant, as later life often becomes a phase of retrospective meaning-making in which past actions, relationships, and choices are ethically reassessed.

Ricœur's distinction between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood) allows ageing to be understood as a period of narrative reconfiguration rather than identity erosion. While physical capacities may diminish, narrative selfhood can remain dynamic

through ethical commitment and interpretive openness. Ricœur further emphasises the symbolic depth of narrative, noting that meaning often unfolds through metaphor, ritual, and silence rather than direct explanation (62–63). This symbolic dimension is central to cinema, where visual and auditory elements frequently convey existential meaning beyond dialogue. Film-focused scholarship on ageing has increasingly drawn on these narrative and hermeneutic insights. Abreu and Casotti's analysis of films starring elderly protagonists demonstrates how cinematic narratives often employ journeys, travel, and movement as symbolic devices through which ageing characters renegotiate identity and existential meaning (18–19). Importantly, they note that such films frequently begin by reproducing ageist stereotypes, frailty, loneliness, and dependency, only to dismantle them through relational encounters and ethical action (20–21). Cinema thus emerges as a space in which dominant cultural scripts about ageing can be contested and reimagined.

Within the Indian context, Rachel Dwyer's work provides an essential bridge between film studies and cultural analysis. In *Bollywood's India*, Dwyer argues that Hindi cinema functions as a cultural imaginary through which audiences negotiate values, emotions, and life stages (8–10). Rather than treating films as escapist fantasy, she situates them within longer traditions of myth, melodrama, and ethical exempla. This perspective legitimises the study of ageing in Hindi cinema as a serious cultural inquiry, particularly given the genre's emphasis on emotion and moral resolution over empirical realism (Dwyer 31–34). Critical reception further supports the relevance of cinematic texts for gerontological inquiry. Reviews of contemporary Hindi films centred on elderly protagonists increasingly frame old age as a site of dignity, relational depth, and ethical meaning rather than decline. While journalistic in form, such reception discourse reflects shifting cultural attitudes toward ageing and offers insight into how cinematic narratives are publicly interpreted.

Indian philosophical traditions provide an additional and crucial horizon for understanding ageing. Concepts such as *ātman*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa* situate later life within a moral and spiritual trajectory oriented toward reflection, detachment, and liberation. Unlike Western paradigms that privilege autonomy and productivity, these traditions often conceptualise ageing as a period of ethical clarification and spiritual readiness. When approached hermeneutically, these concepts function not as static doctrines but as living cultural horizons that shape contemporary narratives of ageing. The integration of these philosophical ideas with hermeneutics and narrative gerontology enables a culturally grounded yet theoretically rigorous framework for analysing ageing in cinema. Rather than imposing philosophy onto film texts, this approach allows meaning to emerge dialogically from the interaction between cinematic narratives and cultural traditions. Taken together, cultural gerontology, narrative identity theory, hermeneutic philosophy, and Indian philosophical thought provide a robust framework for interpreting ageing as an interpretive, ethical, and narrative process. This integrated framework underpins the close readings that follow, allowing *Mukti Bhawan*, *Uunchai*, and *102 Not Out* to be analysed not as isolated cultural

artefacts but as dialogic texts that collectively expand the horizon of how ageing can be imagined and lived.

**_MUKTI BHAWAN_: AGEING, SPIRITUAL INSIGHT, AND NARRATIVE COMPLETION**

*Mukti Bhawan* presents ageing not as a period of decline but as a phase of ontological and ethical realisation. The film situates later life within a philosophical horizon shaped by Indian metaphysical understandings of selfhood and liberation, allowing ageing to emerge as a moment of interpretive clarity rather than loss. Dayaram's reflection on the self, after listening to Mishra ji's description of soul "ātmā ko lagtā hai vo ek lehar hai… phir achānak use mahsūs hotā hai vo lehar nahĩ, ek samundar hai", captures a non-dual conception of selfhood in which individuality expands into relational and cosmic awareness. Old age, here, becomes the moment when an ego-bound sense of identity gives way to a broader, more reflective understanding of being, resonating with Ricœur's view of later life as a privileged phase for narrative reconfiguration (Ricœur 26).

The gerontological significance of the film lies in its sustained attention to ethical reckoning. Dayaram's late-life apology to his son,"tum kitnī masūm kavitāẽ likhte the… maaf kar denā mujhe… tu achchhā beta, main burā bāp", does not function as a narrative device aimed at emotional closure or reconciliation in any instrumental sense. Instead, it restores narrative coherence by acknowledging moral failure without seeking compensation or redemption. Such moments underscore how ageing enables retrospective ethical reflection, reinforcing humanistic gerontology's insistence that later life constitutes a moral phase rather than a merely functional one (Deats and Lenker 15–16).

Intergenerational tension is depicted with comparable restraint. Rajiv's dream of suffocating his father articulates the unspoken strain of caregiving and responsibility, refusing idealised or sentimental representations of filial duty. Yet reconciliation, where it occurs, emerges through vulnerability rather than sacrifice. Dayaram's declaration, "itne sālõ bād tum mujhe phir apne se lagne lage ho… ab main taiyār hũ", marks a moment in which readiness for death is achieved only after relational and ethical resolution. Read hermeneutically, mortality here is situated within the framework of *mokṣa*, understood not as annihilation but as release from unresolved attachment. Through its use of stillness, silence, and waiting, *Mukti Bhawan* resists the temporal acceleration of modern life and invites a contemplative mode of engagement. The film thus exemplifies Gadamer's understanding of meaning as an event rather than an explanation, one that unfolds through reflection rather than narrative propulsion (Gadamer 278–80). Ageing, in this context, is reimagined as narrative completion grounded in ethical clarity and spiritual openness.

**_UUNCHAI_: ETHICAL ENDURANCE, FRIENDSHIP, AND VULNERABLE AGENCY**

While *Mukti Bhawan* turns inward toward spiritual reflection, *Uunchai* stages ageing as an outwardly oriented ethical practice enacted through friendship, commitment, and endurance. The decision of three men in their mid-sixties to undertake a trek to Everest Base Camp resists narrative foreclosure by affirming later life as a site of continued moral action (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall xvii). Ageism is

confronted explicitly when the trek guide remarks, "apnī age dekhkar āp sabko ghar hi baiṭhnā chāhiye thā." Amit's response, "hum aged hain isliye ghar pe baiṭhe rahẽ?… nahĩ baiṭhenge", transforms the moment into a critique of cultural scripts that equate ageing with withdrawal and passivity. Each protagonist embodies a distinct gerontological tension. Om's encounter with his dilapidated ancestral home mirrors his confrontation with emotional stasis, prompting reflection on transience and loss, "sabkuch badal kyũ jātā hai." Javed's narrative foregrounds relational ageing, culminating in his recognition that intimacy must coexist with autonomy: "hamẽ ek dūsre ke binā jīnā sīkhna chāhiye." These moments depict ageing as a process of relational relearning rather than emotional closure or withdrawal.

Amit's trajectory offers the film's most sustained engagement with narrative identity. His Alzheimer's diagnosis, initially concealed, becomes the catalyst for radical honesty. His confession, "sabse āge rahne kī hod mẽ… main apnī ḍhaltī nazar, ye bīmārī… sab chhupātā rahā", marks a rejection of performative success in favour of narrative truth. Illness, here, does not negate agency; instead, it intensifies ethical clarity, exemplifying Ricœur's insistence that selfhood persists through narrative truthfulness rather than physical integrity alone (Ricœur 26).

By integrating vulnerability with agency, *Uunchai* challenges both decline narratives and idealised models of "active ageing." Dependence is reframed as relational trust rather than humiliation, and endurance replaces conquest as the measure of meaning. Ageing thus emerges as a form of ethical ascent grounded in responsibility, honesty, and shared vulnerability rather than heroic achievement.

### *102 NOT OUT*: PLAYFULNESS, MEMORY, AND NARRATIVE RENEWAL

*102 Not Out* completes the triad by foregrounding playfulness as a mode of gerontological resistance. The contrast between Dattatreya's exuberance and Babulal's anxiety stages two competing narratives of ageing. Babulal's assertion, "is umr mẽ mujhe kuch discover nahĩ karnā… main budhāpā sweekār kar chukā hũ", reveals acceptance as resignation, exemplifying narrative foreclosure. Dattatreya's response, "thakela-fakela log cigarette se bhī zyada khatarnaak hote hain", functions as a philosophical provocation, locating decline not in age but in fear and emotional stagnation. Symbolic interventions repeatedly disrupt Babulal's stagnant narrative. His attachment to an old bedsheet becomes a metaphor for confinement within memory, prompting Dattatreya's observation, "budhāpe kī pehlī nishānī… purānī cheezon mẽ qaid ho jānā." The playful destruction of the bedsheet reopens narrative possibility, aligning with Ricœur's emphasis on reinterpretation over repetition (Ricœur 62–63).

Intergenerational conflict is reframed through ethical generosity rather than obligation. Dattatreya's advice, "aulād nalāyak nikle to sirf uska bachpan yād rakhna chāhiye", releases ageing parents from resentment and affirms emotional autonomy in later life. Death, too, is stripped of terror: "main apnī zindagī mẽ ek bār bhī nahĩ marā… zindā hai tab tak marnā nahĩ." Mortality thus becomes the ethical outcome of a life lived expansively, complementing *Mukti Bhawan*'s

spiritual acceptance and *Uunchai*'s emphasis on moral endurance.

## COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: PLURAL MODES OF AGEING WELL

Read together, the three films articulate a plural gerontological imagination that resists monolithic representations of old age. Each challenges narrative foreclosure while proposing a distinct mode of ageing well: spiritual reconciliation in *Mukti Bhawan*, ethical perseverance in *Uunchai*, and playful renewal in *102 Not Out*. Despite their differing aesthetic strategies, all three decouple agency from physical autonomy, locating it instead in interpretive capacity, ethical clarity, and narrative openness. Across the films, selfhood aligns with Ricœur's notion of narrative identity, remaining dynamic through reinterpretation rather than eroding with bodily decline (Ricœur 26). Death functions not as rupture but as an ethical horizon that intensifies meaning, resonating with Gadamer's insight that finitude enables understanding rather than negating it (Gadamer 278). Intergenerational relationships are depicted without sentimental idealisation, affirming later life as a phase of autonomous ethical judgement.

Collectively, these films exemplify Hindi cinema's capacity to function as cultural pedagogy, communicating ethical meaning through affect rather than didacticism (Dwyer 31–34). By integrating Indian philosophical horizons,*ātman*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa*, as lived ethical orientations rather than abstractions, they expand cultural gerontology beyond Western productivity-centric models.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that contemporary Hindi cinema offers a culturally grounded yet theoretically significant reimagining of ageing. Through a gerontological hermeneutic lens, ageing emerges as interpretation rather than decline, as ethical clarity rather than redundancy, and as narrative openness rather than closure. *Mukti Bhawan*, *Uunchai*, and *102 Not Out* collectively affirm later life as a distinctive mode of being that is spiritually reflective, ethically demanding, and narratively unfinished.

By synthesising hermeneutic philosophy, narrative gerontology, and Indian philosophical thought, the paper contributes to both cultural gerontology and film studies. It underscores the importance of non-Western cinematic texts in expanding how ageing is imagined, lived, and valued, offering a humane and plural vocabulary for understanding later life in an ageing world.

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