

FOREVER YOUNG: CONSUMER CULTURE AND THE AGEING BODY IN HANIF KUREISHI'S "THE BODY"

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89

Who wouldn't like to be forever young? Unfortunately, the demographic tendency of present-day British —and Western— society seems to be exactly the opposite. For a few decades now, thanks to advances in medicine and technology and an improvement in the quality of life, a revolution in longevity is causing human beings to live longer and longer and, therefore, to grow older and older. Youth lasts just one third of a lifetime and, in spite of an increasingly elderly population, Western society still feels a blind veneration for the youthful and beautiful body, which is seen as reflecting a specific kind of personality.

The ageing body and old age have been the quintessence of negative implications in the history of Western civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Coming of Age*, in Western thought, old age is and has been considered “a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention” (1996: 1). For her part, Kathleen Woodward defines old age as one of the discontents of our civilization that has traditionally been represented “in terms of splitting”: “Youth, represented by a youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad” (1991: 7).

In Ancient Greece, old age was perceived as a punishment or a fate like disease or poverty, whereas in Classical Rome, images of ageing waver between adulation for the wisdom and experience of the eldest and the contemptuousness for their decadence. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, the development of a strong religious conscience through Saint Augustine popularised the metaphor by which “old age

represent[ed] the body and sinfulness and youth represent[ed] the soul and salvation” (Troyansky 1992: 41). In the Renaissance, old age was conceived as a period of imposed repentance and, thus, the last opportunity to come to terms with the earthly vices.

Although the ageing body has never been a source of pride in the Western history of art and literature, it was during and after the Industrial Revolution that old age was imprinted with the most negative values. The obsession for constant development and progress that became the basis of advancing industrial and capitalist societies implied that elderly citizens were perceived as a social problem —increasingly dependent people who were not only unable to be part of the productive workforce but who had also to be cared for.¹

It is during the Industrial Revolution that discipline of the body was established as a means of controlling social transactions. According to Michel Foucault, during this period the body acquired a “biopolitical” meaning which turned it into the “engine of power, to produce and accumulate” (Hewitt 1991: 230).² As a consequence, the external body became the main way of controlling the good and bad properties of the individual in relation to health, attitudes and behaviour:

90

First, by the nineteenth century the body was no longer subject to the sovereign’s absolute and unmitigated power, but endowed by various experts with a range of properties indicating types of crime, sexual aberrations and states of grace, health and mind. Each property was accorded a specific technology of control and form of corporeality. [...] Secondly, the application of discipline to correct deviations of the body, its behaviour, timing, speech, sexuality and even thought, required attending to the norm. (Hewitt 1991: 228)

The “social politisation” of the body accounts for the reinforcement of the ageing body; elder citizens were to be perceived not only as unproductive, but also as dependent and, therefore, deviants from the norm. The social position of the aged becomes further negativised when the organisation of knowledge is made prominent in the form of “timetables, taxonomies, typologies, registers, examinations and chrestomathies”, a schema that allowed “the control of large numbers of bodies within a regimented space” (Turner 1991: 158).³ Thus, within the development of the school, the factory and the hospital, little space seemed to be left for the old who, although admittedly smaller in number at that time, were almost entirely left out of this emerging social organisation.

From the last decades of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, a period characterised as the era of technology and information, keeping the body fit has not been centred so much on bodies that have to be part of an industrial workforce as on bodies that require what is known as ‘body maintenance’, a concept strongly influenced by an economic system increasingly focused on

consumerism. Sociologists Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner have studied and theorised on the concept of body maintenance and the preservation of health as a way of exercising social control through the body and its close association with consumer culture. Mike Featherstone argues that the term 'body maintenance' is an indicator of the "popularity of the machine metaphor for the body", so that "[l]ike cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency" (1991: 182). As such, the well-kept body not only becomes an object of cult *per se*, but it also becomes a sign of virtue and wisdom in the person who lives within it.⁴

In fact, consumer culture has turned the precious jewel of youth to its own benefit by trying to convince future clients that the negative qualities attached to an elderly body can be defeated by applying a number of techniques and products. In this sense, consumer culture is another form of social regulation by which the negative stereotypes constructed around old age are redefined from an equivocal perspective that, in many cases, actually contributes to their greater diffusion. Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth reflect on the double-edged messages of consumer culture in relation to the ageing body and old age and contend that,

as far as body maintenance is concerned, an array of evidence continues to accrue which disproves the necessary decline of mental, sexual and physiological capacities in old age. Chronological age continues to be discredited as an indicator of inevitable age norms and lifestyles and a new breed of body maintenance experts optimistically prescribe health foods, vitamins, dieting, fitness techniques and other regimens to control biological age—which is the true index of how a person should feel. (1991: 374)

The influence of consumer culture on how the ageing body should be cared for and restructured is unquestionable in our present times. The contribution of consumer culture to challenging negative stereotypes related to the ageing body is questionable however since, while it delineates fashionable trends in body image, it indicates at the same time what is socially acceptable and what is unacceptable. In this sense, the "positive" ageing discourse that is heard more and more can be considered equivocal; as Blaikie points out, it "effectively eclipses consideration of illness and decline", whereas "final decay and death takes on a heightened hideousness since these will happen, regardless of whatever cultural, economic, or body capital one might possess" (1999: 72). Moreover, consumer culture contributes to making extreme old age and death invisible, two realities that seem to be increasingly erased from the surface of our day-to-day lives.

Thus, in present-day Western society, the ageing body has inherited some of the negative values that have been attributed to it from Antiquity, but is now considered a 'machine' that can be repaired at any time, with the result that those whose bodies show signs of ageing are seen as untidy and careless, characteristics

that apparently match their personality. On the other hand, those aged people who look young and healthy are those more highly praised, thus widening the dichotomy between young and old.

Some of the consequences of the over-emphasis placed by Western society on keeping a youthful body are fear and anxiety, felt both before reaching old age and, later, when inhabiting that 'foreign land' and when the signs of ageing are irremediably marked on the body. Peter Laslett lists a number of fears felt by the aged and, mainly, by those who "have begun to recognise for the first time how much of their life still to come will be spent as an older person" (1991: 14). Among those fears there is not only the fear of death, of life-threatening diseases or senility, but also the fear of loss of "beauty, attractiveness, fertility, potency" (1991: 14). However, for Laslett, the most significant fear in the process of growing old "arises from the fear of simply being *classed* as such", since it implies that the negative stereotypes related to old age will be attached to that person, who then becomes "the victim of a set of inseparably inter-related prejudices —as undesirable, unproductive individuals, incapable of change" (1991: 15). For Haim Hazan, the dissolving of boundaries between young and old, between chronological and social age, results in an even more equivocal status of the aged that ultimately pervades the negative stereotypes attached to them. Hazan ultimately defines age as both "an overt form of social control and a tacit device of manipulation and regulation pervading all areas of life" (1994: 63).

92

Therefore, in contemporary British and Western society, the ageing body is much more than wrinkles or white hair, signs of ageing that frequently contribute to negative stereotyping that does not match the person behind them. If taking extra care of our bodies has become synonymous with wisdom and keeping the signs of ageing at bay with moral maturity, the time has come for a revision of our cultural and social views of old age and death, confronted as we are with an increasing elderly population. Nowadays, a postmodern conception of the world has challenged past boundaries and categories, and today's market-economy societies see the retired and elderly as potential consumers to be targeted through messages of constant body renewal and rejuvenatory leisure activities. However, such challenges are fallacious. Through images of ageing presented in the media, consumer culture tempts those entering retirement, who are still healthy and energetic, with messages of youthful eternity. By taking advantage of a wide range of products and techniques displayed in the marketplace, one can apparently keep as young as one wishes. Andrew Blaikie summarises this shift in the conception of old age thus:

Popular perceptions of ageing have shifted from the dark days when the 'aged poor' sat in motionless rows in the workhouse, to a paternalistic pause when 'the elderly'

were expected to don retirement uniform, to modern times, when older citizens are encouraged not just to dress 'young' and look youthful, but to exercise, have sex, diet, take holidays, and socialise in ways indistinguishable from those of their children's generation. (1999: 73-4)

In this paper, I aim to analyse the contradictions in relation to the conceptions of the young and old body, and, by extension, of youth and old age within British and Western contemporary society; contradictions further nurtured by the ambiguous messages we daily obtain from a consumerist-based media.

In his short story "The Body", Hanif Kureishi pushes such contradictions to an extreme by presenting a surrealist-like story in which a desire to remain young forever merges with the need to keep one's sense of self and identity within a community. Ultimately, the story highlights the present-day growing mismatch inherent in ageing bodies, youthful selves and prejudiced societies.

The main character of "The Body" is a well-known theatre director, Adam, who is starting to confront the idiosyncrasies of an ageing body:

Want to hear about health? I don't feel particularly ill, but I am in my mid-sixties; my bed is my boat across these final years. My knees and back give me a lot of pain. I have haemorrhoids, an ulcer and cataracts. When I eat, it's not unusual for me to spit out bits of tooth as I go. My ears seem to lose focus as the day goes on and people have to yell into me. I don't go to parties because I don't like to stand up. (*The Body and Seven Stories* 3)

93

However, it is not so much the physical deficiencies, clearly exaggerated, which disturb Adam as the fact that his ageing body is increasingly unable to arouse desirability and likeableness, attributes which seem to be restricted to the young. As Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone explain, in present-day Western society "the process of growing old is complicated by the fact that there are really two kinds of ageing: biological and social. The natural physical changes we associate with ageing are evaluated according to social norms which place a high premium on youthful energy and beauty" (1982: 3).

At the party venue that opens the story, full of glamour and fashion, Adam realises that, at his age, "education and experience seem to be of no advantage" in contemporary society. As he reflects to himself, "I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate?" (*The Body* 5) It is not so much the ignorance or curiosity of younger ones that Adam values as the social information they display through their bodies —shrines of praise in spite of their intellectual or cultural vapidty.

When he was about forty, Adam realised he was getting out of shape physically, his paunch growing bigger and bigger. But it was when he was in his fifties that he became aware of the first signs of bodily deterioration, “having had it pointed out by a disappointed lover” (*The Body* 29). As a consequence, Adam started dying his hair and even signed up for sessions at a gym, although soon he “was so hungry that [he] ate even fruit” (*The Body* 29). Then, all of a sudden, he realised that his society was being bombarded with messages of body maintenance; and everyone around him, from his wife to the most beautiful actress, seemed to be hooked on to taking extra care of their external appearance, as if ageing naturally was sinful:

It was rare for my wife and her friends not to talk about botox and detox, about food and their body shape, size and relative fitness, and the sort of exercise they were or were not taking. I knew women, and not only actresses, who had squads of personal trainers, dieticians, nutritionists, yoga teachers, masseurs and beauticians labouring over their bodies daily, as if the mind’s longing and anxiety could be cured via the body. Who doesn’t want to be more desired and, therefore, loved? (*The Body* 29)

94

Despite his awareness of the impossibility, even the craziness, of fighting against bodily deterioration as one ages, Adam acknowledges the social value of a youthful appearance, a value which also contributes to shaping one’s personality. So he finally surrenders to a most strange proposition. At that same party, a stranger proposes that Adam undergo an operation so that his brain is transplanted into a young and attractive body. After some reflection, Adam reaches the conclusion that he does not relish becoming old and invisible; like any human being, he prefers to be desired, loved and to go through exciting experiences. He begins to feel his body is disguising a man full of aspirations and expectations, and he agrees to go through the operation on the condition that he would recover his old body within six months. After the transplant, the doctor visits him and explains: “Everything is complete now. Your mind and the body’s nervous system are in perfect coordination. [...] Your clock has been restarted, but it is still ticking. See you in six months” (*The Body* 37).

The society described in the short story, a society quite similar to Western society, has apparently found the source of eternal beauty and youth which has been longed for and sought after in our own culture for centuries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, technological and medical advances have not only made it possible to delay the onset of an ageing appearance, but have actually proved constant physical rejuvenation to be a reality. From inside its new body, it occurs to Adam’s brain that they “were making a society in which everyone would be the same age” (*The Body* 37). However, as he learns later, it is not everyone who has access to such operations, but only those who are powerful and have money, those who have made a name for themselves just as he has done. As Matte, one of the

eccentric and rich new bodies he meets in his new guise, contends, this new transplant will allow them to create a "superclass of superbodies" (*The Body* 96). In this story, a long-term rejuvenatory technique is posited by which, as argued by Mike Featherstone (1991: 182), old car chassis are substituted for new ones when their owners consider it necessary, so that a person's presence and opinion are still taken into account and even considered relevant. Adam himself realises that, in a new body, he starts seeing the old "like a race all of whom look the same" (*The Body* 42); thus confirming the premise by which external appearance becomes the main and almost the only informant to the self.

Equipped with his new body, Adam undergoes experiences he had never had for lack of time or opportunity during the years he was working hard to maintain his family. The experience and knowledge acquired during his sixty-five years of life together with a valorised young and attractive body offer him a wide range of possibilities:

I was delighted with the compliments about my manner and appearance, loved being told I was handsome, beautiful, good-looking. I could see what Ralph meant by a new start with old equipment. I had intelligence, money, some maturity and physical energy. Wasn't this human perfection? Why hadn't anyone thought of putting them together before? (*The Body* 56)

95

In this short story, youth and knowledge have been artificially conjoined. But, as with the protagonists of past literary works, the myth of eternal beauty fails to work. Goethe's Faust and Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray conspired with powerful but evil forces in order to keep eternal youth and knowledge. However, both characters were deprived of their souls and finally disappeared. In "The Body", Adam neither trades with the devil nor with evil forces, but he does succumb to consumer culture's messages of eternal youth and beauty, messages also absorbed by those around him. Ultimately, he is engulfed by false expressions of the self and the values of an equivocal society and, as past heroes in similar situations, he ends up by losing everything. Adam, the name of the first man inhabiting Paradise according to the Bible, characterised by his innocence and virtuousness, adopts a different name while in his new athletic body —Leo— and, under this label, the protagonist crosses the boundaries not only of his sixty-five year old respected morale but also of his own individual and social self.

The way we develop our personalities is intimately related to society. Influenced as it is by social movements and groups, selfhood is moulded throughout the course of life; as Anthony Cohen argues, "[t]he self is not a monolith; it is plastic, variable and complex" (1994: 2).⁵ One of the most influential researchers on the concept of selfhood in contemporary society has been George H. Mead and the conceptual framework he developed —symbolic interactionism. Mead was

interested in analysing and describing how our sense of selfhood develops and is transformed through social interaction. Thus, Mead distinguished between the “me”, the reflexive part of the personality, and the “I”, the reflective one. The symbolic interactionist perspective is relevant when considering the experience of ageing because the symbols and images related to it that are at the base of any social interaction, influence the constant redefinition of the sense of selfhood of elderly citizens. Therefore, despite a person’s sense of having a self that has always been much the same, that person is ultimately compelled to redefine his or her identity of self.

In the case of Adam, this redefinition only takes place at an external level so that he soon becomes aware of the mismatch that exists between his body and his self as well as between his self and the society that starts surrounding him. As he explains to Ralph, the young man who introduces him into this world:

In bed, I was aware of these twinges, or sensations. There were times in my Old body life, particularly as I got older, or when I was meditating, when I felt that the limits of my mind and body had been extended. I felt, almost mystically, part of others, and “outgrowth of the One”. [...]

This is different. It’s as if I have a ghost or shadow-soul inside me. I can feel things, perhaps memories, of the man who was here first. Perhaps the physical body has a soul. There’s a phrase of Freud’s that might apply here: the bodily ego, he calls it, I think. (*The Body* 45)

Still, after a few pleasant experiences in his own city, Adam, now Leo, decides to get on a train and stop in any European city he felt like visiting and enjoying. It is during this period that Leo becomes the boy companion of a famous designer, the paid lover of a middle-aged American heiress, the friend of a group of young men who spend their time taking drugs and filming themselves and the idolised member of a spiritual centre formed by a group of divorced middle-aged women. As he explains, knowing that he could “go back home” made him feel there was no limit to the pleasure his body could give him:

After the purifications and substitutions of culture, I believed I was returning to something neglected: fundamental physical pleasure, the ecstasy of the body, of my skin, of movement, and of accelerated, spontaneous affection for others in the same state. I had been of puny build, not someone aware of his strength, and had always found it easier to speak of the most intimate things than to dance. As a Newbody, however, I began to like the pornographic circus of rough sex; the stuff that resembled some of the modern dance I had seen, animalistic, without talk. (*The Body* 58)

Following Bryan S. Turner’s argument, Adam feels his self become “a representational self, whose value and meaning is ascribed to the individual by the

shape and image of their external body, through their body-image;" so that control of his body is "exercised through consumerism and the fashion industry rather than religion" (1995: 23), as it was in the past. Thus, he allows himself to lose control of his own self by consuming pleasure thanks to his new body but always keeping in mind the fact of his capacity to recover his old body, his old self and his beloved community. Immersed in his life of hedonism, he is aware that it is his new body which allows him to experience pleasure in all its forms and varieties. Thus, if consumer culture has an important influence in shaping and establishing social stereotypes related to the body, it also has an impact on the construction of the self, a self constantly revised according to other people's attitudes which, at the same time, are shaped by the information we give off and which is culturally and socially charged.

The possibilities his new body offers Adam start to narrow when, after some satisfactory experiences, he finds himself at a party on a boat full of new bodies just like his own and he realises that these people's facial expressions are completely void. The owner of the boat, Matte, a most eccentric man, wants to get Adam's new body for his sick brother. When the strangeness of the situation eventually sinks in, Adam realises that, "Matte and I were both mutants, freaks, human unhumans — a fact I could at least forget when I was with real people, those with death in them" (*The Body* 102). To save his life, he has to escape from Matte's men and he returns to his old neighbourhood, where he spends time observing his wife and son. It is when he becomes an external observer of his past life that he is aware of the extent to which he misses it: "I didn't have time to begin a new life as a new person, and, expecting to go back, I missed my old life. I was in limbo, a waiting room in which there was no reality but plenty of anxiety" (*The Body* 108).

Adam returns to the hospital to get his old body back so that he might become the person he once was, now highly-esteemed in his own mind. However, it is too late; neither the hospital nor the doctors are there. He has already sold his soul to the overblown ideal of keeping a youthful and attractive body as the illusory goal of an enviable personality and acclaimed social position. Adam finally realises he has lost his sense of self, individually and socially, something he laments in the last lines of the story: "I was a stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone, condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life" (*The Body* 126). Eternal youth proves to be a burden rather than a blessing, aggravated by the fact that Matte would keep chasing him in order to get his new body, something that made Adam feel he was "wearing the *Mona Lisa*" (*The Body* 126).

In "The Body", the individual and social contradictions existing between an elderly body and a youthful and active self are pushed to an extreme. As Featherstone argues, nowadays "[a]pppearance, gesture and bodily demeanour become taken as

expressions of self, with bodily imperfections and lack of attention carrying penalties in everyday interaction” (1991: 189). Because Adam feels this contradiction both within himself and in his society, he decides to undergo a most unusual transplant, with the result that he is not only deprived of his external appearance but also of his inner and social self. His external appearance informs others of the person he is and, at the same time, he sees and redefines himself as reflected in those he loves and appreciates. In this sense, when Adam knows he cannot go back to his former body, he is aware he has actually lost his true value as an individual within a social group. As he visits his wife in his new body and disguised identity, he explains:

I put on my wife’s favourite record. I kissed her hands and felt her body against mine as we danced. I knew where to put my hands. In my mind, her shape fitted mine. I didn’t want it to end. Her face was eternity enough for me. Her lips brushed mine and her breath went into my body. For a second, I kissed her. Her eyes followed mine, but I could not look at her. If I was surprised by the seducibility of my wife, I was also shocked by how forgettable, or how disposable, I seemed to be. (*The Body* 118)

98

Ultimately, Hanif Kureishi’s “The Body” invites us to redefine contemporary Western images of ageing and old age as conceptions that are highly-influenced by a culture rooted in consumerism, an ideology that, at the same time, takes advantage of our traditional obsession with physical beauty as represented by the media. According to Thomas R. Cole, nowadays the renewed search for eternal youth can be interpreted as the inability “to infuse decay, dependency, and death with moral and spiritual significance;” as a result of which “our culture dreams of abolishing biological ageing” (Post 1992: 128). Indeed, images of the ageing body are culturally —and socially— determined, and, for this reason, liable to be questioned and redefined. In their book *Quality of Life and Older People*, John Bond and Lynne Corner see the plethora of negative images of the ageing body and old age as evidence of pervading ageist attitudes towards elderly citizens. As he explains, “[i]f we perceive ageing as a process of increasing ill health and disability, of a time of diminished personal and social opportunities, we are likely to accept as inevitable the negative stereotypes of old age and ageism” (2004: 73). In this respect, Hanif Kureishi in “The Body” presents an extreme possible outcome in the event that conceptions of body, self and society are not challenged and made clearer. Adam himself wonders at one point in his experience as a new body what path our society is taking if “[w]e are changing ethics for aesthetics” (*The Body* 97), thus questioning the dehumanising quality of a society driven by unlimited technological and economic advance.

Notes

¹. In *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Andrew Blaikie quotes a report of the "Royal Commission on Population", published in 1949, in which older people are considered to "excel in experience, patience, in wisdom and breadth of view", whereas the young are highlighted by their "energy, enterprise, enthusiasm, the capacity to learn new things, to adapt themselves, to innovate". The report concludes by stating that "[i]t thus seems possible that a society in which the proportion of young people is diminishing will become dangerously unprogressive" (1999: 39).

². In "Bio-Politics and Social Policy: Foucault's *Account of Welfare*", Martin Hewitt revises Foucault's conception of the body

within society as presented in his works, mainly *Discipline and Punish*.

³. Bryan S. Turner also bases his explanations of the politicisation of the body in Michel Foucault's work.

⁴. In Mike Featherstone's own words, "fitness and slimness become associated not only with energy, drive and vitality but worthiness as a person; likewise the body beautiful comes to be taken as a sign of prudence and prescience in health matters" (1991: 183).

⁵. Anthony Cohen writes about selfhood and identity in *Self-Consciousness. An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (1994).

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Maricel Oró Piqueras

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