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Katie Mehrer
Grand Valley State University

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Depictions of Older Women in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*

Katie E. Mehrer

Grand Valley State University

Introduction

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011), directed by John Madden and written by Ol Parker, is a film that centers around the lives of older adults. The film features 7 older adults who, for varying reasons, all move from England to India to stay at the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: “for the elderly and beautiful.” Upon their arrival it becomes clear to the characters that the hotel is not all that was promised, but all choose to stay despite this--a few out of necessity, and the rest of their own accord. The film explores their time in India, their abilities and inabilities to involve themselves in the culture, their relationships with each other, and the changes they experience within themselves. It attempts to explore the complicated nature of aging in a world where youth is valued and old age is rejected or forgotten.

Although *Marigold Hotel* is widely considered an average film from a reviewers standpoint, it does one thing that is notable in the film industry: feature a full cast of main characters “of a certain age.” In an industry charged by youth, seeing a large cast of main characters all above the age of 55 rarely occurs. Although the character development is not perfect and some characters are cast into stereotypical roles, the film presents a more complicated and realistic image of older adulthood than many other examples in Hollywood.

The film features 4 female characters: Madge, a woman seeking a new husband; Jean, who is forced to move with her husband due to financial insecurity; Evelyn, who chooses to move due to financial insecurity and a desire for independence after her husband dies; and Muriel, a racist woman forced to move temporarily to receive a timely and affordable hip replacement. They are joined by Graham, a high court judge, secretly there to find his long lost male lover; Norman, an older man attempting to regain his sexual vigor; and Douglas, the

husband of Jean. For the purpose of this analysis, the female characters will be examined under a postfeminist lense, which refers to the concept that goals of feminism have been achieved in society (McRobbie).

The characters in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* are victims of a postfeminist world that highlights the opportunities and autonomy of the young and affluent, and ignores the realities of anyone who does not fit that category (Jermyn, 2009). As older women in the modern world, they are simultaneously expected to fit the norms of youth and fall into the despair of old age. Older women do not have a place in the idealized postfeminist world: they may not be as autonomous as desired, they are alienated from the culture of youth, and cannot fit the aesthetic and modern ideals (Wearing, 2007). Therefore, the older women in this film can be seen as having been cycled through and pushed out of a new postfeminist culture they are forced to be a part of, yet can never be.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel attempts to present a more holistic view of the aging process, showing older women as complex and autonomous, while still falling into the trappings of postfeminist ideology.

Literature Review

Postfeminism as a term refers to the idea that feminism is no longer necessary in society because the goals of the movement have already been achieved and “taken into account” in everyday society, thus rendering feminism unnecessary (Tasker & Negra, 2007). While this definition is largely agreed upon in previous literature, there is a great deal of controversy over how to address postfeminist film analysis. There are two main sides to the argument: 1. that feminism is truly unnecessary in modern society because equality has already been achieved, and

films should be examined under that assumption, and 2. that there is an untrue assumption in the film industry that feminism is no longer necessary, and the workings of this assumption should be examined when analyzing films (Genz & Brabon, 2009). Both sides of the argument presume films are made within a postfeminist culture where men and women are believed to be equal--it is whether or not this depicts real lived experiences where the main difference lies.

Postfeminist culture is rooted in a belief that women are given full freedom of choice over their lives, which limits the ability of women to critique gender biases in society as these are considered to no longer exist (McRobbie, 2004). If a woman fills a certain role, it is viewed as her choice, and gendered societal pressures are not taken into account. This aspect of postfeminist ideology has been greatly criticized, arguing that "such a limited vision of gender equality as both achieved and yet still unsatisfactory underlines the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significant, universally accessible" (Tasker & Negra, 2007). In other words, some of the postfeminist ideals may exist, but only for those who are young, wealthy, and white.

The role of older women in postfeminist film culture has been studied, examining what space they have in a culture that is centered greatly around youth. In an analysis of women of a certain age in romantic comedies Jermyn (2009) argued that older women have more complicated depictions in romcoms than other areas of the film industry, but that they still fall into typical gender roles and desires, characterized by the benefits of looking and acting younger. A similar argument was made by Wearing: "representations are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in expressing desires to thwart the 'old' negative associations of age, it remains

critical to be sensitive to the sexual, economic, and gender politics thereby produced in the 'new aging.' Equally, it is interesting to note examples of moments in which an undercurrent of 'ageism' is...reproduced...in popular representations of feminism as an outdated anachronism, ripe for a makeover" (2007). These and other postfeminist analyses of films about older women exemplify the contradictory nature of such portrayals, emphasizing the duality of their existence as both pushing boundaries and keeping women rooted in traditional gender roles.

Method

Postfeminist film analysis will be used to critique the depictions of older female adults. This analysis will recognize that postfeminism has not been achieved in reality, but is presumed in filmmaking, and will thus examine the *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* to see how the images and messages the audience is given about older women are complicated by postfeminist ideology. I will analyze how the characters exist in and react to a postfeminist society, while also seeing where this society is inaccessible to them. Additionally, this lense will be used to determine how the creation of these characters were shaped by postfeminism and how this contributes to both their complicated nature, and their stereotypical frames.

Postfeminist film analysis is useful in that it allows for more complicated examinations of gender in films, giving the ability to recognize areas that a film may be progressive and other areas where it remains problematic. It does not call to condemn or approve, but rather recognize "a number of intersecting but also conflicting currents" (McRobbie, 2004).

Analysis

The following analysis addresses each character individually, examining the intricacies of their arcs and interactions. The positive and complex aspects of their character are examined

alongside the ways that they remain rooted in cultural norms, expectations, and postfeminist ideology. The analysis then culminates in an examination of portrayals of older women as a whole in the film.

Evelyn

Evelyn is the first female character presented in the film, revealed to be a housewife whose husband has recently passed, leaving her to deal with his massive debts that had previously been unknown to her. She is told by her son that she will live with him, but she reveals that she does not want to and instead chooses to move to India. While in India, she is shown to embrace the culture, even her wardrobe changing to reflect the surrounding society. She quickly develops friendships with Graham and Douglas, the latter relationship being ambiguously romantic in nature. In India she writes a blog about her experiences, and gets a job at a call center, teaching the workers how to connect with older Westerners. By the end of the film it is implied that she stays in India and will continue a relationship with Douglas, who has separated from his wife, Jean.

From a surface level viewing, Evelyn's journey appears to be one marked by autonomy and a rich depiction of old age. Despite being one of the oldest in her group, she is shown to be relatively lively and naive in nature, taking it upon herself to travel around the country and try and learn new things, while simultaneously remaining timid in her actions and in awe of her surroundings. She defies the typical picture of old age--she is not shown to experience losses, but primarily gains: her independence, a job, new friends, experiences, and even a new relationship. The economic situation she finds her in feels reflective of actual troubles real women often go through after their husbands deaths, especially coming from a generation when women may not

have been expected to have been as involved in the economic aspects of their homes. The fact that she is forced to get a job out of economic necessity depicts a complicated and under discussed problem in the lives of older adults (especially previous housewives) of looming poverty.

Looking at Evelyn's experiences on a deeper level, however, reveals many complications in her interaction with the mainstream ideas of a postfeminist world. Although on the surface it appears that it is her independence and autonomy that leads her to her actions, these decisions are not fully her own. Evelyn remained in her strict gender roles for the majority of her life, which she implies contributed to her economic downfall. Her decision to move to another country is not due to a long rooted desire, but it is instead a result of economic necessity caused by her husband's death and her rigid housewife role. Her decision to get a job is not based on a move toward independence but, again, is it out of economic necessity. This interaction with gendered poverty is one that is often ignored in postfeminism. Tasker and Negra discussed this, saying "assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might choose to retreat from the public world of work. Postfeminist fictions frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a 'choice'" (2007). Evelyn's actions serve as a counterexample to the assumptions of the postfeminist ideal, complicating the film's narrative. However, although the film recognizes these economic instabilities, it also overlooks the struggle of sexism, ageism, and lack of work experience that real women in her position would have to overcome. The job Evelyn receives is unrealistic and easily obtained. She does not approach the company and explain her worth, but is instead convinced of it by a

stranger, taking away the power and conviction from her. In this way, Evelyn is placed back into the postfeminist ideal, where women are able to choose to work without having to contend with outside, gendered, influences limiting their abilities to do so. Evelyn's situation is common in postfeminist texts, as Tasker and Negra refer to the tendency to "combine a deep uncertainty about existing options for women with an idealized, essentialized femininity that symbolically evades or transcends institutional and social problem spots" (2007). Furthermore, the job she receives can be boiled down to teaching young Indian workers how to be sympathetic and understanding, a very feminine position. This encourages an "inflected oppositional reading" which Sellnow describes as, "the messages represent a mere bending of hegemony to suit one's own needs rather than an outright rejection of it" (Sellnow, 2010).

Additionally, Evelyn's role in the group at the Marigold Hotel is often problematic in nature. Jean describes Evelyn as a "simpering, doe-eyed, ex-housewife," which despite all inclinations to argue against, can hardly be rejected. Although Evelyn moves to India on her own, she seems to be taken care of consistently by Graham and Douglas, and even Muriel toward the end of the film. Although the movie attempts to present Evelyn as independent, she is hardly ever given the chance to be alone. She is thrown into a relationship with Douglas after her husband has only been dead a matter of months at the longest. She is shown to be naive, almost childish in her wonder at times, desirable to Douglas because she is everything that his wife, Jean, is not. Thus, Evelyn is set up to be the perfect example of an older postfeminist woman, outwardly appearing to be independent, while still choosing to take part in roles already set up for her, and never straying from her gentle, youthful, femininity.

Jean

Jean is first presented in the movie with her husband, Douglas, as they look at a new place to live. The features for old age are highlighted by the realtor, though they are clearly not old enough to need them at this point in time. The place looks dreary and plain, and Jean is upset that this is all their financial situation will allow them. Eventually Jean finds The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, a cheap option that she romanticizes in her head. She is delighted upon the arrival at the airport to find herself in good company (seemingly middle to upper class, white, older adults). However, once arriving in India she refuses to engage in the culture that she deems uncivilized, and focuses all of her energy on attempting to seduce Graham, who clearly fits her sentimentalities. She ranges from inattentive to volatile in relation to her husband, and seems to have little self awareness. By the end of the film she has engaged with the culture no further, made a fool of herself chasing after the disinterested and homosexual Graham, and chooses to leave her husband and return home alone.

Throughout the majority of the film, Jean is shown to be rooted in the past, set in her conservative ideals of what graceful aging should look like, while unable to obtain them. She seems to have a clear image that pathetic old age is what is waiting for them all, but is not yet willing to settle into that fate. Her actions in the film fall on one of two extremes of emotion: nagging irritability or girlish foolery. She is characterized as grasping tightly onto her views of what is proper and acceptable in life, but is occasionally shown openly and youthfully seeking after the attention Graham. It is only in her moments with Graham that she is shown with any softness. In almost all other moments she is set firmly into the trope of the henpecker over her husband, Douglas.

In many ways, Jean's character can be seen as a stereotypical look at old age. She is conservative in nature, constantly criticizes and nags her husband, she is cruel to anyone who threatens her worldview, and refuses to change to the environment around her. She is presented as looking drab in comparison to her counterparts, and is never sexualized. She views old age as a time when one lies down and dies, and simultaneously is preoccupied with how she believes life should have been, leading to her girlish pursuit of Graham.

Jean is set up to be the antithesis to Evelyn, with their relationships with Douglas used to highlight this. Their relationship to one another can be described as thus: "The postfeminist heroine is vital, youthful, and playful while her opposite number, the 'bad' female professional, is repressive, deceptive, and deadly" (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Jean is firmly set apart from the postfeminist ideal, her controlling nature and desires contrasted against the unflawed support that Evelyn provides Douglas. Jean is shown attempting to be in power over Douglas, acting as the head of the household as her husband follows along. Under the postfeminist assumption that gender equality is already achieved, this power structure highlights the unnecessary of feminism. Jean can be seen as representing feminism, attempting to assert her power as a woman where it is not necessary to do so. Her actions are therefore oppressive, undoing the existing equality. Her lines in the film, such as telling Douglas, "If I wanted your opinion, I would give it to you," illustrate her as someone who is bossy, entitled, and controlling. In comparison to Evelyn, who is shown letting Douglas take care of her, Jean becomes a straw man used to reject feminism. She was never given any redeeming qualities, but instead exists to show what happens when women have too much power, encouraging the notion that women should defer to their husband. Thus, Evelyn's power dynamic with Douglas is made to appear equal in comparison to

Jean's, shadowing the reality that Evelyn is passive in her relationship and highlighting this passiveness as an ideal.

Muriel

Muriel is first presented in a hospital, seeking the help of a physician. Her requests are overtly racist and this quickly becomes her defining characteristic. When she finally meets with a physician he is Indian, much to her chagrin. He informs her that she will have to go to India to get the hip replacement she needs in a timely and cost effective. She reluctantly agrees, and moves to The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, where she spends most of her time in her room or at the doctor's office. However, a servant at the hotel becomes extremely grateful that Muriel acknowledges her, and Muriel is forced to interact with a culture she stereotypes and ignores. The arc of her story in the film is that she overcomes her extreme racism, and ends up saving the hotel which she will now help run.

Muriel's character is one of the more complicated ones in the film. Muriel is presumably the oldest in the group, the only one who is disabled, and the one who is most anachronistic in her ways. Yet, she is also the one who goes through the greatest amount of positive change throughout the story, and ends up making some of the most autonomous decisions.

It is important to explore the coinciding aspects of Muriel's personality and history. Muriel does not fit into a postfeminist world. She does not accept the social changes of the world around her, and is therefore unacceptable in a culture predicated on the "pastness" of issues such as sexism and racism, ideologies she embodies. She spent her life taking care of someone else's family, and was eventually discarded by the younger generation. She is disabled, and therefore somewhat limited in her independence. It is never mentioned that she was ever in

any sort of romantic relationship herself, and is for all intents and purposes depicted as asexual throughout the film. The only comment on her sexuality is given by Norman, who tells her to claim she is his mother if anyone asks because he does not want people to think he is with her. It is a comment he does not make of the other two single women on the trip, perhaps because of Muriel's disability. This others her, making her appear older, outdated, and undesirable in nature. However, her disability also gives her the opportunity to become very observant, and allows her to play up on her seeming helplessness to achieve her goals (e.g. saving the hotel). She is subtly shown to be intelligent and self-reliant, roles not often applied to the handicapped unless they are glorified.

Madge

Madge is introduced as leaving her daughter's home when was supposed to be babysitting, suddenly choosing instead to leave to find a new husband. The decision is completely spontaneous, and her going to India specifically is depicted as random choice. She spends most of her time in India looking for a suitable, wealthy, mate. She appears to lament the possibility that her time with men has passed, but comes to the conclusion that it is never too late. She is briefly shown suiting someone at the end of the film.

Madge's storyline can be seen as the most rooted in postfeminist ideology. Her self worth is defined by her own aesthetic qualities and ability to meet certain standards for desirability women are expected to fulfill. Although it is problematic to have a female character who places her worth on her ability to find a husband, feeling young, and being attractive, especially when this seems to be her only motivation in life, her actions are supported in a postfeminist world. She is shown to be an active and willing participant in the system, which is therefore considered

freedom under postfeminism, ignoring the fact that there are outside social factors and norms relating to her participation.

Even so, Madge's character is not a flatly sexist creation. Posing an older woman as truly desirable, and not yearning for desirability as the butt of a joke, does present a more complicated and enriching view of older women than is usually seen in typical media. She is not seen as a cougar or Mrs. Robinson figure, a trope that shows older women targeting younger, inexperienced, men, but instead going after relatively appropriate men of her own age. This gives a space for older women to be sexual in a way that their younger counterparts have always had the opportunity to take part in. Yet, the lack of her direct sexuality on screen, despite the prevalence of direct visual depictions of sexuality in the genre, shows that this new space for older women is only moderately taken outside the comfort zones of the modern psyche.

Combined Analysis

Having looked at each character separately, it is important also to look at their place in the film as a whole as well. With a few exceptions, Jean, Evelyn, Madge, and Muriel do not spend much time interacting with each other in important ways. Most of the interactions they have together on screen are at meal times, or at the beginning and end of the film. A majority of the interactions we see the characters have, with the exception of Muriel, are with one or more of the men in the group. While Graham is homosexual, all of the female characters are depicted as heterosexual, with the possible exception of Muriel who appears almost asexual. Evelyn, Jean, and Madge are all put in romantic or sexual situations within the film, either by virtue of them pursuing a relationship (Jean and Madge), being in one (Jean), or ending up in one (Evelyn). Muriel, as mentioned previously, is never put into a romantic situation, nor does she imply she

has ever been in one. Although it could be considered problematic that three out of four female characters have romantic or sexual storylines, it is also important to consider that all three of the male characters do as well, and that it gives much needed visibility to the sexuality of older adults. Furthermore, the film is part of the “romantic comedy” genre, therefore making it a necessity for the characters to have these romantic roles. The nature of these storylines, however, does deserve attention.

The relationship between Evelyn, Jean, and Douglas could be considered a love triangle, but it is questionable in the context of the film. Jean is never shown to be tender toward Douglas, nor does Douglas show much affection toward Jean. On the other hand, the relationship between Douglas and Evelyn does not look appreciably different from friendship throughout, and the implication that it may be romantic in nature is only hinted at until the end of the film when it is implied that Douglas stays in Jaipur for Evelyn.

Jean’s pursuit of Graham is very childish in nature. She waits for him to come back to the hotel so she can speak to him, she does not appear to know very much about him personally, and she will do her best to appear in places where she thinks he might be. This comes across more as a schoolgirl crush than an actual romantic interest, as she seems to be more interested in the idea of Graham than who he is as a person.

Madge’s sexuality is at first explicit in the film. She leaves with the set intent to search for a new husband, she makes jokes about flirting, she is shown seeking out men. She is also the only female character who appears naked, although it is only from the shoulders up, and she is the only female character to talk about sexual relations directly. However, other than a small

flash at the end of the film which we cannot hear the dialogue of, we never actually see her interact with a possible romantic interest, only searching for one.

One notable commonality when looking at these relationships on film is that there is a timidity in their depictions of romance or sexuality. Unlike most films in the genre, there is never an explicitness to the interactions. It is common in a PG-13 film to show characters engaging with each other sexually, but this does not occur in the slightest in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Although it can be seen as refreshing not to have women sexualized in the film, it is equally questionable that a film about older adults breaks the genre in this way. Muriel, the one who can be seen as most fitting the physical older adult stereotypes does not receive a sexuality, and the youngest of the group is given the most apparent sexuality, but it is never able to be explored on screen. Norman does have sex with an older woman, though this is also not shown on screen. Sunaina, a young Indian woman who is dating the manager of the hotel, is shown to get naked and get into bed with someone, although it ends up being the wrong person. It appears that the young and able bodied are provided an explicit sexuality while the old are not, and the disabled may not be given one at all. There is a modesty given to older women that is not given to the younger women that dominate the genre. While this can be considered a step in the right direction, removing some of the hypersexuality attached to romance, it is also important to note that it is a stray from the norms of the genre, implying a possible bias against older adults and their sexuality.

Another aspect of the characters of the film that cannot be ignored is their race. All seven of the older adults in *Marigold Hotel* are white, and one of them a staunch racist and xenophobe. It is implied in the film that they are coming to India because people in England (read: white

people) do not like their elderly, and it is therefore also implied that Indian people do not share this attribute. However, there are almost no non-white older adults with speaking roles. There are three minor exceptions: 1. There is an old man who is silent throughout the entire film except to deliver a few lines, not in English, 2. The wife of Graham's old lover who is shown briefly, 3. The hotel manager's mother, who is middle aged. The hotel manager's mother, Mrs. Kapoor, is the closest example of an older woman, although she was in her 50's at the time the film was made. She is depicted as very conservative, stern, commanding, and overbearing. She is very beautiful, but is not sexualized. Her primary purpose in the film is that of a plot device, providing conflict for the hotel manager, working to prevent him from keeping the hotel open and marry Sunaina, while Mrs. Kapoor tries to close the hotel and break them apart. She does not receive the same amount of complexity that her counterparts receive and, additionally, she serves to stand as the only example of Indian older adulthood in the film.

Conclusion

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel's portrayals of older women is complicated. The film is successful in that it shows characters with a range of personalities, experiences, and circumstances, instead of a singular standard story applied to older women which is often seen. It shows growth and life during old age, defying the natural assumptions of the category. It also gave a sincere light to a romantic and sexual side of older women that is frequently either ignored or joked about. However, the film also had its shortcomings, such as the sexuality of older women being saved for off-screen, and sexuality being reserved for only the white, able-bodied, women. It also ignored many of the struggles of older women who were born before the upsurge in feminism, and are aging during a culture of postfeminism. There were many

instances where the characters were rooted in stereotypical gendered roles. However, the film overall did give a more complex view of the experiences of older women, with a larger cast of older women, than is usually seen. This attempt is important because it gave insight, however flawed, into an underrepresented group in the media.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel is important because it provides visibility to the stories and lives of older adults, complicating the stereotypes that exist in society. As Sellnow explains, "popular culture persuades by empowering and disempowering certain people and groups by conveying messages about 'desirable' and 'undesirable,' 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate,' 'normal' and 'abnormal' beliefs and behaviors" (2010). Showing older adults in more diverse ways helps to break open cultural stereotypes and redefine the ways older adults can exist in society. While flawed, these representations are beneficial because it helps to younger audiences challenge their existing beliefs, inviting them to think critically about previous messages they have accepted. This contributes to a greater culture of freedom and acceptance of multiple ways of "being old."

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