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"My Pencil Is My Friend/I Keep Him to the End"--- *The First Grader* and the Social Narrative of Literacy, Agency and Ageing in Postcolonial Kenya

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I. Introduction

What does it mean to 'age well' and what role does 'literacy' play in the lives of the aged and affect their sense of wellbeing? Seemingly contradictory ideas are brought together in James Chadwick's 2010 film *The First Grader*. One does not easily conflate the images that attend literacy narratives---that of schooling and teaching with an old man's figure bent over a first grader's tiny desk, trying to emulate the etchings on the blackboard onto his page. He struggles to hold the pencil between his fingers correctly and respond to the teacher's questions in the classroom, nudged by classmates half his height, as his auditory functions are impaired by age. The name of the film itself attempts to destabilize our expectations regarding the 'age' and 'body shape' we imagine we shall see on screen as the first grader, thereby alerting us to the problematic and inherent ageist ideas informing our perceptions regarding the aged and their requirements.

Wahl, Iwarsson and Oswald (2012) define ageing well as "maintaining the highest autonomy, well being and preservation of one's self and identity as possible, even in the face of severe competence loss". The P-E fit (Wahl, et. al, 2012) or person–environment interaction that decides the level of autonomy experienced by the aged, largely focuses on physical competence and cognitive abilities of the older adult and the ability/inability of the immediate environment to support or sustain the same. As articulated by these theorists, "person-environment resources are central to agency and belonging," (Wahl, et. al, 2012) as environmental configurations often decide a person's experience of ageing, by either limiting his possibilities, or enhancing them. While Carstensen's research (2006) iterates that curiosity and explorative behavior decreases with advance in age and Wahl, Iwarsson and Oswald concede the possibility of the same, suggesting the increasing importance of 'belonging' increasing with advance of age in a person more than that of processes of agency, they keep room for the opposite to happen as well. Over the course of their study, Wahl, Iwarrson and Oswald (2012) grant that often with a sudden cessation of activities performed at the workplace and/or home, the older adult might actually seek new experiences and opportunities for an enhanced sense of agency and thus belonging in society.

James Chadwick's *The First Grader* enacts the second event conceptualized by Wahl, Iwarrson and Oswald, by narrating the story of Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge, an 84 year old man's battle with socio-political systems to acquire literacy , by attending primary school with toddlers who reach till his knees. When the Kenya government announces free primary schooling for all, this octogenarian seeks to attend primary school, but is turned away by the school teachers who are surprised and bemused that an old man like him wants to attend school. He asserts that the government announcement mentioned "all" and hence included him as well. The school teachers, unable to come up with a suitable rejoinder, tell him that a school uniform was essential for attending school and hence he was not eligible. Even later, when Maruge dons half pants and walks to school in "uniform" and is sent back again, elders living in the neighbourhood are visibly disturbed by his actions and

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appearance and he is seen as an 'odd' old man among the aged and the young.

The ageism experienced by Maruge and seen by us in the film is a result of social expectations regarding how the aged must behave or contribute to society. Even older adults themselves seem to absorb these notions regarding ageing and participate in criticizing anyone stepping outside the boundaries acknowledged as proper behaviour for the aged in a particular time and space. The film, based on the actual incidents of Maruge's life attempts to visually 'break the mould' and question predetermined ideas regarding what the aged require or desire.

Just as ecological theories of ageing stressed by Lawton and Nahemow (1973) stress that an individual's optimal level of functioning is determined by a unique combination of "personal competence" and "environmental characteristics" , I wish to suggest that Maruge's desire for literacy in his old age and the resistance of society and government to the same might be understood as society's inability to provide/comprehend the 'environment' necessary for Maruge's 'optimal level of functioning', owing to preconceived notions regarding literacy and its 'use' in the greater narrative of growth and development of the State.

The theory of the need of older adults to "age in place" (Wahl et. al, 2012) might also be examined for its limitations and limiting capacity on the way both older adults and the young form narratives regarding ageing and ageism. I argue that ageing in "place", emphasizing the older adult's need for 'belonging' over that of 'agency', becomes a metaphor for binding a person to a "place" that is predetermined in terms of personal competence, skills and cognitive faculties.

Robert Butler's extension of his earlier (1968) definition of ageism in 1975, recognizes it as "a process of systematic stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old," these belief systems or stereotypes becoming so ingrained in people's psyche that they are implicitly embedded in the way society is structured. The fallout of this is that the "gaze of the youth" (Calasanti, Slevin & King, 2006) structures State policy and beliefs regarding older persons. Butler concedes that "…Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings." In my view, this process of 'othering' is implicit in theorizing about old age as well, as seen in the limiting constrictions of ageing in 'place'. Of course, Calasanti (2008) would argue that ageism includes such 'age-blindness' and a belief that age doesn't really matter, such as I may be appearing to suggest. However, I am not suggesting that age does not matter or 'age' should be ignored. Rather, I am searching for an approach to age studies that does not constrict or delimit the needs and desires of the aged.

II. Refusing to 'Disengage'

The First Grader, in this respect is an appropriate film for the purpose of my study. Maruge challenges the way society views him—as an 'old man', who is expected to behave in a certain way, shaped by individual and collective ideas regarding ageing. When head teacher of the school Jane Obinchu asks him in surprise, "Mzee, why does someone as old as you want to go to school?" he replies, "I want to learn to read." Bemused and startled, Alfred, the other school teacher barks out, "Go home and rest in peace." At this Maruge reacts sharply, "Rest in peace? I'm not dead. My name is Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge." Maruge has obviously faced such a perspective earlier as the elderly are often equated with the 3 'D's by the young, and even by the old themselves—disease, disability (functional impairment) and death (Butler, 1975). However, Maruge refuses to be typecast, not accepting this idea of disengagement which society forces upon him. Disengagement theory as set forth by Cummings and Henry (1961) details the steps whereby the old disengage from active social life and highlight the importance and benefits of this process to the social system as a whole. This theory has of course been challenged for its assumption that this is an innate, natural or inevitable process , rather than one created and enforced by society that does not see 'profit' in keeping the old engaged and participant in important social spheres. It also deprives the older person of agency, representing him/her as a pliant tool, succumbing to the social system. Maruge's figure provides a visual challenge to such a theoretical model, highlighting his anger against a system that attempts to create a power hierarchy between the young and the old, as represented by the school fence standing between the figures, physically differentiated by their 'age'. His act of asserting his name and identity as a person, rather than an 'old man' or 'mzee' begins his journey of claiming agency in a system that seeks to suppress this need. Arlie Hochschild (1975, 1976) has pointed out that those who do not 'disengage' as society would expect them to, following the model proposed by Henry and Cummings, are seen as "troubled outliers". In this film too, we see how Maruge is seen as a troublemaker, who refuses to 'go home' and 'rest in peace' , who refuses to be confined to the 'home' or assume a static/peaceful existence, rather seeking to walk to school each day and participate in new activities as he wishes to learn to read and write.

It is also worth noting that he wants to be recognized as a part of the "everybody" that the Kenyan State has envisioned as beneficiaries of free schooling. When the school , its board members and finally the State are so startled and surprised by his demand for inclusion, it points again to the unthinking yet systemic process of exclusion and marginalization of the elderly from the social perception of "all". It is apparent that the

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social perception of "all". It is apparent that the 'young' and the 'old' adults of the film see Maruge as a bothersome 'extra' creating trouble and disturbing the smooth functioning of their idea of education and social progress. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2000) understands, hence, that the problem with ageism is a tendency to structure society "based on the assumption that everyone is young, thereby failing to respond appropriately to the real needs of older persons." Hence Maruge's figure disrupts this invisibility of the old, suddenly 'popping up' and refusing to be 'less important', claiming centre stage, till the school finally accepts him as a student.

When Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge steps into the school grounds, it's significant that the camera captures him with the Kenyan flag flying in the background. Many aspects of the narrative coalesce here. Maruge had been a Mau-Mau warrior in his youth, sacrificing his family and all he held precious for the ideal of freedom and liberty. He refused to give up his oath of allegiance to the Mau Mau and their call for freedom from British rule and for this his family was killed and he was tortured in the camps. The film wishes to sensitize its audience to the fact that the Kenyan flag flying high in the school grounds owes much to him and thousands like him, now old, marginalized and rendered 'invisible' as the postcolonial State of Kenya seeks to participate in the 'narrative' of progress and development, to be secured by promotion of literacy among other initiatives, with the focus on children as future of the newly emergent modern nation State.

While the film does not directly challenge the idea of literacy as a means of transformation and personal betterment, participating in the 'grand narrative' of literacy (Daniells, 1999) promoted by the Kenyan State with Maruge himself subscribing to the view, it complicates this narrative by questioning the State's demarcation of eligible participants of this narrative. When Maruge travels to Nairobi to meet the board members deciding State education policy after Jane Obinchu, the school teacher helping him, is transferred to a remote location, he breaks into the meeting room, refusing to be sidelined again and views the photographs of Mau Mau freedom fighters lining the walls of the boardroom. He silently takes off his coat and shirt before the board members stunned into silence by his sudden entrance and actions. He turns around to reveal a back criss-crossed by lashes, signs of the torture inflicted upon him at the camps, reminding the government representatives of the history that enables them to sit in this boardroom and decide the policies of the State affecting the citizens of Kenya. It is significant that the element of surprise is repeated in Maruge's action of taking centre-stage, refusing the invisibility cast upon him by State policy, yet again. His active resistance to the transfer of his beloved teacher is also unexpected by the board members as they expect an old man to 'go home' and accept what has been handed out to him by a hostile society. Maruge's actions also critique the policies of a State that forgets its past and simply continues implementing the legacy of colonial practices without reconstructing them to include the needs and aspirations of every section of society under the banner of the Kenyan State.

I am using Beth Daniells' (1999) concept of 'little narratives' to therefore read how the film text critiques the perceptions and representation of older adults in a newly emergent State. The film does cater to audience expectations of a 'literacy narrative' as a transformative text, subscribing to the usual master narrative of movement from darkness to enlightenment (Inayatullah, 2013) exemplified by literacy narratives. However, by visually embedding Maruge's past within the present social system, it disrupts this grand narrative as well. When Maruge is rebuked by a teacher in school that he has not sharpened his pencil, he shuffles slowly to do so, but is overcome by the memory of the same pencil used to torture the Mau-Mau warriors in the British camps. The contrast between the present, where children learn to hold the pencil in their hand and chant after their teacher , "My pencil is my friend/I keep him to the end," and the terror of colonized Kenya when children do not have the possibility of receiving this education in a State of freedom, rather terrorized by the spectre of their mothers and fathers being shot when demanding the British leave their land, further intensifies the problematic of a State narrative that forgets the sacrifice of the elders in the society and does not seek to comprehend their desires and necessities.

III. Learning from the 'Old'

We see in one scene that Maruge is teaching the children the value of the education they are receiving, as it is in his vision. He says to them, "A goat cannot read. A goat cannot write his name. An old man no better than a goat." Of course these statements are awkward as they ascribe to literacy a paramount value without which a human is compared to an animal. However, perhaps it is representative of a social system wherein the elderly find it difficult to participate, without the skills available to the larger section of population. For maintaining a sense of independence and self-dependence as also for retaining agency in a transforming world, the aged are often forced to learn and acquire new skills, whether of literacy or digital literacy, as we often find older adults at home seeking to participate in the new media of the internet and smart phones, sometimes struggling with the new jargon associated with new media. Returning to the theory of ecology of ageing discussed at the beginning of this paper, we remember that it is the unique interaction between a person, his competence and physical functioning and environmental press (Wahl et al., 2012)

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Maruge attempts to re-engineer his environment or the facilities provided by his social environment so as to improve his functioning in society and continued active participation in it. He wishes to read on his own a letter sent to him many years ago. His sense of independence does not allow him to simply ask another to read it out to him. Thus the film does sensitively portray the difficulties faced by an older adult seeking active participation in society.

Theorists such as Choi and Kim (2011) have discussed the benefits of the Activity Theory in gerontology, which see it as beneficial to both the older people and to society that they remain 'active', performing roles that they had always performed before being classified as 'aged'. The theorists understand that social perceptions regarding ageing affect individual perceptions regarding age among the aged themselves, further affecting psychological wellbeing. Both a sense of agency and a sense of belonging are perhaps necessary co-ordinates essential for an older adult's sense of wellbeing and self-valuation. In Maruge's case, this sense of agency and belonging are derived from the right to literacy and the right to pursue the same in a sensitive atmosphere conducive to learning, alongside recognition of the older adult's contribution to the present that Kenya enjoys.

The teacher of the school tells the parents of children who have gathered to resist Maruge's presence in the school alongside toddlers, "I think we have a lot to learn from Maruge…The children have a lot that they can learn from the old." We are now led to think about Maruge's interaction with the children in the school and analyse the children's response to this old man in class. When he first steps into the classroom , the teacher initially seeks to place him at the back of the class, but he says he won't be able to see the blackboard. So the teacher is forced to place him in the front of the class where he shuffles into a space besides a toddler, who looks at him, interested, curious but not with disdain, different from the way the other teacher in the school treats the 'intrusion' of this old man in 'his' school. The children, not yet drawn into the social narratives of exclusion of the aged, accept his presence quite happily after the initial 'gazing', because of his different body shape and size in their class--that of the 'adult', usually associated with the 'teacher' rather than the 'student'. At lunch hour, some of them start interacting with him and he inspires them in re-iterating the battle cry of 'freedom!' which they take so easily for granted, not knowing the sweetness of this freedom won after a tough struggle and much loss. There is disjuncture, as the children uttering the word and Maruge uttering the same word , bears different meanings for both, but at the same time, it also creates the mildest sense of awareness of a past, teaching the children to respect it and learn from it.

Lauren Marshall Bowen (2014) in his analysis of this film asks pertinent questions regarding how the elderly are supposed to visualize their social roles in a modern society. Does Maruge therefore represent the past? Do the old represent the past, alone? Barbara Myerhoff (1992) discussed the importance of the stories older people tell, as they 'make' themselves through this process of narration. While Maruge is largely silent regarding his past and does not wish to "speak" about the horrors experienced by him, his past is always present for him, as seen through the flashbacks in the film that impinge upon his present narrative. In *The First Grader*, the present is sought to be changed by Maruge as he warns the government and the school board that "we reap what we sow". His past experiences, and therefore his "age" endows him with an understanding regarding the fallout of decisions taken over time. He encourages the policy framers to recognize the efforts of a good teacher like Jane Obinchu, instead of punishing her with a transfer as that will foster and encourage the kind of sensitivity towards Kenya's history as also the ability to re-interpret predetermined cultural meanings of ageing displayed by Jane.

The film depicts a student named Kamau, who is weak in mathematics and falling behind the rest of his class. His father, deeply resistant to Maruge's figure in the school, feels that the teachers are giving more attention to the old man rather than the young children, who 'should' get greater care, being Kenya's 'future', leads the demonstration against Maruge. However, later, it is Maruge who helps Kamau learn to write '5' correctly, repeating the teacher's rhyme regarding '5', drawing the number with a stick on the ground. Kamau, inspired and encouraged in a friendly atmosphere learns joyously. Later, when Maruge is transferred to an adult school and Jane Obinchu to another school, it is this child who leads the other children in throwing stones and barricading the school, refusing entry to the new headmistress appointed by the school board. The children's ability to accept 'differences' created and perpetuated by adult society stands out as a sharp critique of the way ageist attitudes are often unconsciously built into the way society functions. Novak's (2012) concept of the Conflict Theory of Ageing is significant here as it highlights the impact of ageism on society's valuation of the elderly. Often seen as unproductive and as 'burdens' on the economy, only valuable in terms of feeding the burgeoning market of health care, specific needs of older adults are brushed under the carpet of a universal policy regarding older persons and ageing, seeing them as a homogenous bracket of people.

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IV. Critiquing the Homogenization of the Needs of the 'Old'

However, as depicted in *The First Grader*, one size does not fit all. The "gaze of the youth" (Calasanti et. al., 2006) is not sufficient in comprehending the subjectivities of ageing. 'Age' often acts as an additional layer of discrimination along with the prejudices associated with race, gender, caste, creed and financial status. As Phelan (2008) notes, "Ageist assumptions become so integrated into common discourse in diverse social contexts that they become tacitly acceptable and legitimize a particular version of social reality which objectifies older people as a homogenous group in subject positions which emphasize these stereotypical negative attributes." At the same time, age based discrimination is overlooked or granted less importance than other forms of "othering", on the basis that "we all grow old" (Law Commission of Ontario, 2017). However, this film attempts to critique this homogenization of the 'old' by depicting difference in the way older adults respond to, or experience the same situation. While Maruge is interested in learning and attending primary school, other old men in his locality laugh and jeer at him for not following the norm. "A school is no place for an old man," they say, "You don't belong there!" However Maruge is undeterred. He creates his own space. It is also worth observing that he is extremely depressed when sent to an adult school as 'befits' him, as he finds his classmates absolutely uninterested in learning and the teacher uninvolved with the learners, in contrast with the primary school he used to attend, where the teacher teaches him to hold the pencil and begin writing and personally attends to the needs of the students. Therefore, what might suffice for a lot of older adults does not satisfy him and his yearning to learn in an environment conducive to learning, with other learners equally excited to write 'a…b…c'.

With a burgeoning aged population, the Kenyan government introduced a National Policy on Older Persons and Ageing in 2009, attempting to at least include the older adult's needs in their national vision of collective progress. Julliet Kola, the head of the Kenyan government's social welfare programme in 2009, accepted that the government had previously focused on the youth and ignored the older people (Brown, 2009). This policy attempted to provide continued employment to older adults and include them in the workforce, seeing that they can contribute to society even in old age. This approach, in keeping with the Activity theory of ageing (Choi & Kim, 2011) discussed earlier, focuses on the "willingness and productivity" of individuals as the only determining factor regarding their suitability for continued participation in social activities, instead of an age barrier. However, while this shifts the way the elderly are seen in society, from the position of 'advisors' to that of active participants, it might do well to continually remember the differing needs of older adults and their differing skills and desired methods of participation and retaining 'agency'. With Kimani Maruge's efforts at acquiring primary school education in 2003, and his being recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest man to start primary school, the Kenyan government included the promotion of education for seniors in their 2009 policy as well. Maruge's efforts did lead to an inclusion of the necessity for thinking about the need for literacy as a 'need' amongst the elderly, hitherto never considered by the stereotypical assumptions of the State and society at large. Towards the end of *The First Grader*, we learn that the letter Maruge had preserved so carefully and been unable to read, was the government recognizing his efforts and contribution as a freedom fighter and promising him a pension. It brings tears to his eyes, listening to the letter and also points to the lacunae in the State's vision that promises a pension to individuals through the medium of a letter, not reflecting on the fact that most of the Mau-Mau fighters were probably unlettered. While it does redeem the image of the State partially in that it recognizes the need for financially supporting these older adults in society, yet it points out the unconscious acts of neglect and marginalization, deeply embedded in way the State functions.

V. "The Power is in the Pen"

Representation and visibility therefore play a great role in transforming this systemic stereotypical imagery perpetuated over time. The radio plays an important role in Maruge's journey in the film. It is through the national announcement over radio that he learns of the State policy announcing education for 'all'. Again, it is the radio that starts spreading the news of Maruge attending primary school, in 'uniform'. The radio jockey's shifting interpretation of Maruge's actions, portray the shifting interpretations by society and thereby changes the manner of representation as well. From deep surprise at his actions, to celebrating his success at this journey, to exclaiming in joy at Maruge representing Kenya at a global forum like the United Nations, the radio jockey's narrative demarcates the possibilities of change engendered by mass media. At the same time, the film also projects a strange contrast between the billboards of Kenya showcasing Maruge and his words "The power is in the pen" and his lonely figure walking through the streets, fighting for a revisioning of the purpose of literacy and education. While the media cashes in on his figure of resistance, at the same time, it seems uncaring towards the actuality of that struggle. Similarly, while the National Policy of Kenya on Older Persons and Ageing (Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Services, Republic of Kenya ,2009) strives to include the interests of the elderly, it does not create space for the specific and the individual axes of

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struggle faced by each older adult, Maruge, simply being a representation of one. I think the film succeeds in drawing our attention to the instability of images perpetuated through media and the power of the same.

At the same time, Maruge's figure inspired an entire generation of older adults to begin attending primary school. While, as Lauren Marshall Bowen's (2014) detailed analysis of this film suggests, the film does not question or interrogate the nature of literacy being offered to the children of this postcolonial State , I think the film is important in creating the sub-narratives or 'little narratives' that question the lack of representation of older adults in the grand narrative of literacy closely aligned to the grand narrative of progress and development of the State that so easily bypasses the need to include the requirements of older adults, who form such a large chunk of society. Thus, by representing a "need" not usually associated with older adults and their perceived requirements, the film assists in breaking stereotypical representations of the aged, and making us aware of the lacunae in our understanding of age. It also revisions the notion of curiosity and enthusiasm for new experiences declining with age (Carstensen, 2006) and suggests, rather the need for 'agency' as essential for a sense of belonging in society; this 'agency' derived from acquiring skills that enhance the ability to participate in social activities, without the need for depending on another.

VI. Conclusion: Re-Modelling 'Place'

In my view, the Ecological Framework of Place (Moore, 2014) provides a better heuristic for the environmental gerontology concept of "place", including in its ambit the five axes of 'people', 'physical setting', 'program of the place' (referring to the socially shared understanding of the place, enabling effective 'co-action'), 'human activity' that acts as a catalyst for the earlier three axes and 'time' as major agent of change. While drawing upon earlier research on person-environment interaction (Lawton, 1983; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973; Rubenstein, 1989; Scheidt & Norris-Baker, 2004; Oswald, Wahl, Rowles & Chaudhury, 2005), it provides a more sensitive model of ecology of ageing by providing for simultaneous intersections of 'social embededness', 'temporality' and 'human agency' as factors contributing to differential experiences of 'ageing' and 'place', by older adults. Maruge's re-creation of the image of an old man in popular imagination impels a transformation in the way a generation of older Kenyans viewed themselves and also acts as the catalyst transforming the social understanding of a primary school as 'place', with a specific 'program'. *The First Grader* also makes us aware of the importance of providing an environment sensitive to the problems faced by these older persons seeking to re-engage, as the support of the environment equipped to respond to the requirements of the elderly decides the level of autonomy experienced by them in the face of declining physical and cognitive abilities as per the ecology theories of ageing analyzed at the beginning of this paper. However, this notion of 'decline' is also problematized as Maruge's figure purposefully striding through the arid landscape of Kenya, refusing to be 'held down' to any definition of 'decline', challenges this concept regarding the elderly as well and focuses attention on the need for seeing older adults as 'agents' in the process of remodeling of "place" (Moore, 2014), as a socio-physical milieu inhabited and catalyzed by them.

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