

Resistance Against Age: A Study of May Sarton's Journal 'At Seventy'**Nivedita Karmakar****Dr. Seema Prasad**

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Article Received: 12/03/2025**Article Accepted:** 12/04/2025**Published Online:** 13/04/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.413**Abstract**

In May Sarton's journals she has exposed her own feelings and experiences regarding aging and age related issues which are taboo to the young. The cause behind their insouciance to old age is that they do not believe that in future they would be old. May Sarton from a very young age formed an interesting attitude towards older people than the young. She had friends and lovers always much older than her. When she was seventy she started to write a journal named *At Seventy*. The paper would focus on how May, an artist looks upon her own age and her experience of the old age as she expressed in the journal. The paper is an attempt to analyse May's attitude to aging while living in a society with the preposterous concept that old age is a period of decline. Her work tried hard to change people's conception of aging that she celebrated as the time of growth and maturity. Old age brings with it an infirm body but it also possesses its wisdom and a sense of richness and fullness.

Keywords: Aging, Old age, Cultural Gerontology, Journal.

Introduction

May Sarton, an American writer with a remarkably vast oeuvre with nineteen novels, seventeen books of poetry and several journals to her credit is a significant writer of our age for few but important reasons. One of the reasons is her writing marked an important difference in the discourse of aging and old age. Old body with very little beauty and strength left in it is a negative representation of life that we never want to discuss about. May Sarton from her youth to her old age never agreed with this cultural imprint of aging. From a very tender age she fell in love with people of much older than her. For example, Jean Domonique was thirty-nine years older than her. Juliet Huxley, Judith Matlack were almost fifteen years older than her. As a lover or a muse she always depended on women of ripe age. her journals and some of her novels (*Kinds of Love, As We Are Now, A Reckoning*) reflected her own experience of aging or growing into old age. This paper will enlighten the way May Sarton views old age as she became seventy. She revised and reimagined old age that goes against

the cultural discourse on the same. Her experience with her age is a resistance against the stereotypical notion of old age. Cultural gerontology also has emerged as a field where old age is not associated with weakness and burden but with productivity and positivity (Twigg and Martin). May Sarton's work is a significant contribution to this field. My study would be analyzing old age at an individual level. Throughout her journal, *At Seventy*, which was written between 3rd May, 1982 to 2nd May, 1983 May tried to point old age as a different experience than what culture tries to define. In most of the cultures of the world, either in the east or the west, old age is a space where no one wants to move on. For May Sarton old age is not an ending but this age helps in reaching unity and harmony of the self.

Materials and Methods

The issues of old age have been dealt with in various fields, mostly in the medical field. As the aging body is the centre of various diseases a considerable number of doctors work in the field of geriatrics. Most of them are worried with the failing body and very few deal with the diseased mind. Films and literature generally avoid this part of human life considering it uninteresting and not beautiful. The cosmetics industry and food industry always try to offer products that would keep people young. Advertisers never try to promote their products with the picture of an aging body except in case of pain relief tablets or arthritis medicines. May Sarton going against these trends tried to focus on aging and how she felt life after she was seventy. *Kinds of Love* (Sarton, *Kinds of Love*) shows Catherine in her eighties still feeling the passion of love, *A Reckoning* (Sarton, *A Reckoning*) recorded the pain of a dying woman and her restlessness for her friend. In *As We Are Now* (Sarton, *As We Are Now*) Caroline, though old, long for love and touch. Her journal *At Seventy* (Sarton, *At Seventy*) will be considered in the paper to focus on an old woman and her experience and how that can be incorporated in the mainstream feminist theory so that the theory can include the experience of aging body as one of its subcategories. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (Beauvoir) would help me to understand the cultural impression of old age and old body. An analytical method would be used to reach a positive attitude regarding old age and old body in women as has been felt and expressed in the journal, *At Seventy* by May Sarton.

Results

It is not necessary to accept the notion of senescence from culture and be inevitably old and dilapidated. The result of this study brought us to a new perspective of aging. It is true that the body would lose its elasticity and luster but would gain a confidence and power as it has passed the tests of life and difficult situations. It still feels the passion of love and experiment and it still is ready to explore the mysteries of old age. The body gains control over the emotions created by worldly activities. *At Seventy* helps us to incorporate in the knowledge of the world the importance of being old and May Sarton as an artist recreate the

identity of an aged body that is not bereft of respect and restraint but a new identity with power over own self and others and in control of her own life.

Discussion

Time's passage for Sarton had never been unbearable from a very young age and she had realized the value and impact of time on man and his development. Aging had always been synonymous with growth. In her poem 'What the Old Man Said' Sarton wrote about the courage of Lugne Poe (the founder of the oeuvre who revolted against contemporary theatre). He was an old man but May wrote on him, "At sixty-five his anger conquered fear:/The old man raged but he did not despair" (Sarton 93). He was not scared of the young anymore and he severely criticized the plays that according to him was not good enough to be staged. He could not admire them falsely and being himself he expressed his hatred against them. Generally, the old should be in despair because they do not have the strength to go against the wrong. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age* (Beauvoir) has described the way old are considered to be outcasts of society. They are not human enough and should be in despair eternally. They are not allowed to even comment on the actions of the young.

In *At Seventy* May recorded on 15th May her experience with her friends on the occasion of her seventieth birthday. From a very young age she made friends with men and women who remained friends to her till her death. She was very happy to have Martha Wheelock, Nancy Hartley, Anne Woodson and Barbara and Lee as her friends and with time they became her family. With all these friends and Lee as an artist found out themselves when they were old. She wrote, "...we had all managed to become our true selves, that none of it had been easy, and that all of it has been built on dedication and on love" (33) she felt no more nervous during her poetry reading sessions so she enjoyed them. While talking about old age at Hartford College in Connecticut she told, "This is the best time of my life. I love being old". The audience was surprised to listen to her. Their knowledge regarding old age was socially and culturally constructed. The medical discoveries promised a healthy long life but could not enlarge the psychological implications of being old (Cole). They asked for a clarification. She explicitly told that she felt more herself now with less confusion and doubt. She felt happier than before. She was always fond of older people and she herself longed to be old all her life. when an old person (of sixty or seventy) is confident and careful about his/her work he/she can work better than a young. It has been established by Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age*(Beauvoir) in the chapter named, 'Old Age in present-day Society'.

One poem by Sarton must be mentioned here. "Now I Become Myself" though published in 1953 exposed the way Sarton made peace with time early in her life. With age she becomes aware of her "weight and density" and accommodating with time she felt the growth in herself and also the detachment.

Now to stand still, to be here,
 Feel my own weight and density!
 The black shadow on the paper
 Is my hand; the shadow of a word
 As thought shapes the shaper
 Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
 All fuses now, falls into place
 From wish to action, word to silence,
 My work, my love, my time, my face
 Gathered into one intense
 Gesture of growing like a plant. (Sarton 162)

The process does not bring fear of death but the maturity to see through things. This vision and feeling is much more than the passing time and worry for it. On 5th May she wrote in her journal that “the joys of my life have nothing to do with age”. She felt happy with the morning sky, her flowers, her gardening, the birds and these will ever be her source of happiness and aging could not change it.

In her May 17th entry she wrote about her happiness of being at seventy once more. She felt that she had more control over herself and she thought that she could cope with herself better at this age than she could at her fifty. She wrote, “I think that is partly because I have learned to glide instead of to force myself at moments of tension”. With age she felt less anger, and a kind of detachment had grown in her so she felt less fear of incomplete work or the death. She thought ‘self-protection’ which is an important criteria of Feminist attitude to be useless when the opportunity of growth is there. When the worry for self-protection is absent and one knows that one is dying only the urgent actions would be done and life would leave the inessential behind. The essence of life would be reached sooner.

May felt that gardening (Sarton 49) and writing are her essential works that could not be changed with age.

In *At Seventy* She recorded on 6th June her personal opinion regarding Golda Meir, an Israeli politician and fourth prime minister of Israel and the first lady to hold the post. She watched a Television play on Golda and her role was played by Ingrid Bergman. She objected to the fact that Bergman was too beautiful to replace Golda whose power according to Sarton lied on her wrinkled, worn face and grey, dishevelled hair. She liked the real face of Golda more than that of Bergman. Golda's face showed the tension, courage and suffering she had to undergo in her life. Sarton wrote here against the anti-aging publicity that "...why do we worry about lines in our faces as we grow old?" Unwrinkled face shows lack of suffering of life and therefore an uneventful life and lack of wisdom. Sarton wrote of her friends who were over eighty and had enriched life and were full with wisdom. Beauvoir pointed out in *The Coming of Age*, "There is often a very important gap between the myths a society creates and the customs it actually follows"(Beauvoir). She noticed how primitive societies glorified old age and found their gods to be old. When Sarton examined her photographs of young age she thought that she looked "complete and richer person" now than when she was twenty-five. She remembered the time when she had ambition and conflicts inside and her inside was covered with a kind of sophistication. Now she wrote, "I wear the inside person outside and am more comfortable with my self. In some ways I am younger because I can admit vulnerability and more innocent because I do not have to pretend." On 20th June she expressed her experience of youth which had its genius: its curiosity, hopes and its deep interest in everything (from a trivial to a serious object). The old age can recognize this genius and it has already become much subtler, gentler and wiser. Some old people can keep up the genius of the youth: one example was May's friend Elizabeth Roget. May created a new knowledge bank on old age which had never been explored before. On 22nd September she wrote that her age had earned many real friends as well as many earnest readers. She loved to read numerous mails that she received from them every day. An important task of her day was to reply these letters. She wrote letters to her friends once in a year and sometimes more than once. Telephoning them regularly led to the growth of these relations with time. Another person Eva Le Gallienne inspired her by her energy at eighty-four. She lived with the world of theatre and the intensity and the richness of her world made her life worth living.

There was a significant aspect behind May Sarton's growth at seventy. She always involved herself in the creation of art and as she recorded on 28th July art was for her a way to find an answer to her question regarding life and living. It was a process to create order out of chaos. This search for an answer/an order helped her to grow. She never felt exhausted with the puzzles of life. Rather writing for her was "a way of understanding what is

happening to me, of thinking hard things out". Her friends like Eleanor, Laurie, Marguerite were almost ninety and they were full of vitality and May declared that "seventy is not old" (136) and she would be happy to be old after two decades following her friends. On 31st august she remembered that it was her father's birthday. Though she had a troubled relation with her father she admired his patience as he was engaged in writing a history of science. According to her he knew that he could not complete this herculean task. Still he never thought that anything was more important than his work. May observed the suffering of her mother, Mabel. Her tremendous pain to run the family alone, her inability to nurture the artist inside her, her ailment and finally her suppressed anger never let her live joyfully. May thought that because of all this suppressed emotion she fell sick and had to die in Cancer. May repented that she could not bear her suffering and even was unable to spend some time sitting beside her mother when she asked for it.

May felt never out of enthusiasm when she was to go for an outing or a camp. Like a little girl she was overjoyed and packed her things for a camp to Monhegan. She wrote about this adventurous trip on 31st August. On 25th September she wrote how eagerly she waited for every season that arrived with its own vibe. When summer was over she waited for the silent days that would help her to organize herself anew. But she did not feel autumn of her life had arrived yet. She looked forward to have new days which would be full and rich with her work. On 17th February she wrote that she felt much young than the time when she wrote *House by the Sea*. She thought that if the health permits nobody should be afraid of what is there in future. She felt lucky that she inherited her father's health. She decided to write a new book on Anne Thorp, her teacher of Shady Hill School in Cambridge. The thought of planting bulbs in her garden thrilled her. She was so excited that she felt that after a vacation the school days had started. 'Creating something'(171) for her was synonymous with living. She wrote that on 11th October and regarding solitude she wrote that solitude helped her to come back to her self. Solitude was necessary so that she could nurture her artist within her.

On 8th November she recorded that a miracle was taking place as she felt the presence of a muse. She had a full view of the ocean and she felt rejuvenated. Though doctor warned her that both of her parents died before they were seventy-five she set aside the prospect of her old age and moved forward with her creative vigour. Regarding the presence of the muse she wrote, "But the discipline this time must be, with this muse, to make every effort to live in eternity's light, not in time...To live in eternity means to live in the moment, the moment unalloyed-to allow feeling to the limit of what can be felt, to hold nothing back, and at the same time to ask nothing and hope for nothing more than the amazing gifts of poems." An illuminating time for her appeared and she was ready to write poems that would later be published as *Letters from Maine*, a series of prose poems. This time she did not experience that

her muse was a passionate lover. At seventy she did not feel that a sexual encounter would start the creative ecstasy and that was new to her at seventy. The time of creative elation continued and on 5th December she recorded how enchanted she was to see the sunlight all over the things of her room. The stuffed animals looked real and had some message for her.

On 3rd March she was asked by Karen Saum from *Paris Review* what difference she felt between sixty-five and seventy. Her reply was that she felt no difference. The only thing that she noticed was time flew away very quickly. Writing poems or few pages of a novel and replying to letters every day kept her engaged for a long time. She waited for surprise to take place every day. That was not something extra ordinary. Just a new bird like a robin on her bird feeder would be enough for her spirit to lift up. She continued writing poems and that was very illuminating for her. Only the events of the world made her anxious: war, unemployment, poverty, safety of women and children, cruelty against animal.

On 25th March she wrote about her concern regarding her wrinkles on face which she considered the first sign of old age. Do they really lessen the beauty of the face? May noticed Lotte Jacobi looked better than when she was young. Old face without wrinkles would give an impression of falsehood. According to May reaching old age was like reaching a peak where one has to learn to let go. Wrinkles should be considered a trivial matter so that old age does not mind about it. It has more serious things to consider. The beauty of this age lies not on the face outside but on the life inside and its wisdom. She remembered Jean Dominique telling her that she even could not see her face on the mirror for her failing eyes. So naturally the wrinkles do not have any impression on the soul. She had other examples of old people who enjoyed life at that age and nurtured life inside in a joyful way. Others are compelled to forget that they are living with a very old person. Her proclamation that the essence of the self never changes with age leaves an impact on the reader's mind. She had an occasion to live with her schoolmate Jean Leiberman in California when she was on a poetry tour. She felt at ease with her though they did not meet for a long time. They were four friends who loved and admired Anne Thorp, their teacher very much. Jean had copied all the poems written by these four friends in a diary and showed to May. They missed the other two and May felt it was magical to end her seventieth year in that way. Time changes but the sensation of coming close to the deep roots does not change.

But aging brings deterioration of health and death of friends. She had been a witness to Judy's going away from herself and felt immense pain for this confident lady who changed with age. She loved to spend her Christmases with Judy and in the past they enjoyed to decorate the tree together. Usually she brought Judy on this occasion from her nursing home to her house. Gradually she had to stop that because she was unable to manage Judy. On 8th September she wrote that she went to meet Judy not for her but for herself. She wanted to go back to the base and true love is there. Though the real self of Judy was no more there she

talked to her regarding their past days. She loved to talk though Judy could understand nothing. She loved her more than a friend because she was the only person who made a home with her. For fourteen years they lived together and age was unable to influence this special relation for May. On 22nd December she wrote about the news of Judy's death. She felt relieved listening to the news. She at last became free from her unrecognizable body. May would continue to live with Judy in her.

Conclusion

Ageing is natural but the negative ideas associated with old age is constructed culturally (Gullette). When women's body ages it loses its strength and beauty and the power associated with it. So there is a difference between an old man's ageing and that of a woman as Susan Sontag has pointed out in "The Double Standard of Aging" (Sontag). Cultural Gerontology creates a new perspective where aging brings with it not declining narrative but a progressive concept with surprise and expectation. May Sarton's journal approves this new perspective of gerontology. Instead of denying age she promotes the value of ageing and her happiness at that age goes against what our society and culture summarize as the woes of old age.

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