

Article

Critical Approaches to Ageing Body Politics in the Works of Erica Jong

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Received: 20 April 2019; Accepted: 10 June 2019; Published: 13 June 2019



Abstract: The ways we read our bodies and bodily transformations are deeply inscribed in cultural meanings that vary across different historical times and societies. Even if the desire to achieve culturally imposed beauty standards and ideals is relevant to all age groups, anxieties about bodily decline become more pronounced as we approach the final stages of our lives. Physical changes are never just manifestations of cellular and organic loss, but can also be a source of troubled identities and fragmented personalities caused by the mismatch between our external appearance and the inner perception of the self. This paper offers the longitudinal analysis of female processes of ageing from age-studies and feminist perspectives, as depicted in the works of Erica Jong, a contemporary American writer. It uncovers significant aspects of the pressures older women are subjected to in order to look more appealing in youth-oriented cultures, and demonstrates that the human body is often regarded as a conflicting site of perpetual ambiguities and troubled feelings caused by physical decay.

Keywords: ageing; body politics; gender; literary and cultural gerontology; feminism

1. Introduction

Today's increased life expectancy has exposed the human body to a longer period of bodily ageing and, consequently, to more complex perceptions of the body [1] (p. 100). The ways we read our bodily transformations are deeply embedded in our understandings of the ageing body, which are inscribed in cultural meanings and symbols that vary across different historical times and societies. Even if the desire to achieve culturally imposed beauty standards and ideals is relevant to all age groups, anxieties about bodily decline become more pronounced as we approach the final stages of our lives. Physical changes are never just manifestations of cellular and organic loss, but can also be a source of troubled identities and fragmented personalities, caused by the mismatch between our external appearance and the inner perception of the self [2].

Although ageing affects both men and women, the process of growing older is more visible in women because of the 'double standard' [3]. That is, women, in comparison to men, are subjected to higher pressures to keep their youthful looks, as a sign of desirability and social currency. As women grow older, they are expected to embody socially and culturally acceptable images through various regimes of bodily control and beauty work. As Barbara Marshall and Stephen Katz state, our culture mandates to grow older without getting and looking older, which especially affects women "because of the cultural idealization of their bodies as age-defying technologies" [4] (p. 224). Concerns and anxieties about bodily changes and attractiveness are especially visible in the works of age studies scholars, writers, and feminist gerontologists. Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Margaret Cruikshank, Ruth R. Thone, Toni Calasanti, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Laura Hurd Clarke, Carolyn Heilbrun, Kathleen Woodward, Peter Öberg, Julia Twigg, Chris Gilleard, and Paul Higgs, to name just a few, in their numerous works point out gendered ageist attitudes towards female bodily changes and their stigmatization in youth-obsessed Western society.

Erica Jong's oeuvre is also of special interest in terms of ageing body politics and women's social identities. Jong has been chosen as a case study not only because she explores gendered ageism and the stigmatization of female bodies in her writings, but also because the author of this article has done a longitudinal study based on her writings from an age-studies and feminist perspective. The works selected in this paper range from Jong's early poetry and fiction to her middle and late-life poetry, essays, fiction, and interviews, and clearly reflect the complex dynamics of bodily decay. The article is grouped into two sections—Jong's early works and her mid- and later-life works. The division is made in relation to the author's biography and her changing attitudes towards the body. If, in her earlier works, Jong already expressed worries about her exterior image, which are visible in her constant surveillance of her own body in order to adjust to Western beauty ideals of femininity and desirability, the concerns about the bodily image became more pronounced and fragmented as she steps into the second half of her life.

2. Erica Jong's Literary Universe

Erica Jong is a contemporary American writer who is famous for her ground-breaking novel, *Fear of Flying*, published in 1973. In it, she voiced the sexual experiences and professional anxieties of a young woman, Isadora Wing. Apart from addressing unconventional aspects of intimate female experiences through Isadora's character, Jong also illustrated the sociocultural and political climate of the seventies in the USA, which was characterized by the sexual revolution, social upheavals, and the second-wave women's liberation movement. Although the author is best known for exploring sexual female experiences in her writings, for which she has also received controversial and even misogynist comments, in her works she also addresses women's emotional struggles and bodily preoccupations, which become more pronounced in her middle and later works. As will be demonstrated in this paper, Jong is still a very prolific writer, who now voices the concerns of women of her generation with a special focus on older women, sexuality, and body politics in later life. Her position as a spokeswoman of the American post-war generation is especially relevant, given that the female representatives of the baby-boom generation are now approaching their latest stages in life and, therefore, are exposed to new challenges within the context of controversial anti-ageing imperatives. Through her later works, Jong speaks loudly for her generation of women, who continue to be doubly marginalised in our youth-driven and anti-ageing obsessed society. By voicing the fears and doubts about growing old from a female point of view, Jong's writings provide valuable data towards the understanding of how anti-discourse operates in society and draws a clearer picture of ageing body politics from a female point of view. This article also attempts to show that a study of old age through the lens of literary and cultural gerontology can help to rethink the current constructions of ageing, and provide insights into what it means to grow older today [5–9]. In other words, it tries to demonstrate that an age-studies approach to Jong's literary universe not only contributes to a better understanding of the author's work and its sociocultural significance, but also reveals aspects of female identity and body politics that have not been sufficiently addressed, and which can help to better envisage the complex female experience of growing older in contemporary Western societies.

3. Body Politics in the Early Works of Erica Jong

Jong's contradictory position and unease about bodily ageing is already visible in her early writings. Her characters seem to be caught between adhering to youthful ideals of femininity and, at the same time, criticising them. Her heroines express their fear of gaining weight and looking old because they do not want to lose men's attention and their sexual appeal. Jong's works demonstrate that cultural pressures to embody the beauty ideals of femininity as closely as possible are especially high for women, who very often tend to perceive themselves from the perspective of others and, especially, from the external voyeuristic male gaze [10,11]. According to social gerontologist Laura Hurd-Clarke, men's attention is often seen as a marker of femininity and desirability. That is to say, if women can no longer attract their male counterparts, they may develop feelings of self-loathing and

antipathy towards themselves and the very process of growing older [10] (pp. 42–43). As Hurd-Clarke states, “women reiterate the importance of male attention and sexual interest as an indicator of feminine attractiveness” [10] (p. 42). Andrew Blaikie, too, notes that women “remain under pressure to satisfy the male gaze or risk social invisibility by dint of losing their physical attractiveness” [12] (p. 191). Media messages and advertisements contribute to disseminating the idea that if a woman wants to be considered sexually appealing, she must adhere to social expectations and keep her physical looks under constant surveillance through active engagement in specific beauty work practices from the very early stages of her life:

to diet, to dye their hair, to have surgery on thighs, stomachs, breasts, and faces, to make up faces in order to be beautiful and desirable, to be ashamed of natural body odor, to wear high heels to make legs ‘look attractive’, i.e., thin, and to have the buttocks wiggle, and to dress in a manner that reflects outside approval, not inner comfort. [13] (p. 4)

It is worth mentioning that social pressures to conform to the beauty ideals of femininity and to keep one’s body under a constant control are not only characteristic of middle or older age, but are already imposed onto young women and even teenagers. Hurd-Clarke states that, from an early age, girls learn that their “social currency largely derives from their ability to achieve and maintain proximity to a privileged feminine appearance, which is a youthful, toned, healthy, voluptuous yet slim body” [10] (p. 21). Yet, as she observes, the pleasures that both young and aged women derive after having accomplished ‘better’ self-images come from the achievement of culturally imposed beauty standards [10] (p. 137). In this respect, using beauty work, adhering to contemporary feminine and youth-driven ideals, and defining one’s value in relation to one’s appearance, imply the acceptance of ageism and patriarchal values in an anti-ageing-obsessed culture [10] (p. 137). Although these cultural notions are widespread globally, they are especially relevant “in a society like the United States, which is obsessed with youth images, narcissistic gratifications, and the prolongation of life at all costs” [14] (p. 386).

Jong’s most famous heroine, Isadora Wing from *Fear of Flying*, is aware of the importance of her bodily image for her self-definition and desirability in her late twenties. Isadora points out that American girls are brainwashed into thinking that, if they take good care of their looks—“[their] smells, [their] hair, [their] boobs, [their] eyelashes, [their] armpits, [their] crotch, [their] stars, [their] scars, and [their] choice of Scotch in bars”—they will be able to “meet a beautiful, powerful, potent, and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever” [15] (p. 15). However, this character seems critical about the social pressure to maintain one’s graceful looks in order to attract the male gaze. The following quotation illustrates that from the early stages in life women are convinced to adhere to Western standards of beauty:

Growing up female in America. What a liability! You grew up with your ears full of cosmetic ads, love songs, advice columns, whoreoscopes, Hollywood gossip, and moral dilemmas on the level of TV soap operas. What litanies the advertisers of the good life chanted at you! What curious catechisms! [15] (p. 14)

Yet, time and again, although the heroine is aware of the fact that such ideas are deterministic and rooted in discursive mechanisms, which turn the female body into an object to be looked at, she cannot resist the desire to sculpt her body according to contemporary beauty ideals.

In the poem *Ageing* from the collection *Fruits & Vegetables*, published when Jong was 29, she expresses her preoccupation about the first marks of age around her eyes, mouth, and nose, which go deeper and wider with time: “I’ve been studying how women age/how/it starts around the eyes so you can tell/a woman of 22 from one of 28 merely by/a faint scribbling near the lids a subtle crinkle/a fine line/extending from the fields of vision” [16] (p. 45). In the poem, getting older equals deterioration: “it’s only the beginning as ruin proceed downward/lingering for a while around the mouth hardening

the smile/into prearranged patterns (irreversible!) writing furrows/from the wings of the nose [. . .]” [16] (p. 45). As shown in the following lines, the ageing face is compared to a tragic mask that slowly takes over the whole surface of the body and reminds of the presence of death:

& plotting lower to the corners of the mouth drooping them/a little like the tragic mask though not at all grotesque/as yet & then as you sidestep into the 4th decade/beginning to crease the neck (just slightly)/though the breasts below/especially/when they’re small (like mine) may stay high far/into the thirties/still the neck will give you away & after that the chin [. . .]. [16] (p. 46)

Although the poetic voice uses an anti-ageing cream to stop ageing, she sees it as mere “perfumed grease” that cannot stop the bodily transformations: “[h]ooked for two years now on wrinkle creams creams for/crowsfeet ugly lines (if only there were one!)/any perfumed grease which promised youth beauty/not truth but all I need on earth” [16] (p. 45). The use of cosmetic products shows that the young speaker succumbs to the anti-ageing discourse that promises to help to erase or at least to postpone ageing. Yet, paradoxically enough, although she employs anti-ageing creams, she is not convinced that they can efface the first signs of old age. Jong even seems to lament the obsession with beauty and the negation of the natural ageing process, as seen in these lines of the same poem: “desperate to censor changes which you simply might have let play/over you lying back listening opening yourself/letting the years make love the only way (poor blunderers)/they know” [16] (p. 46).

In the collection of poems *Loveroot*, published when Jong was 33, she makes references to her ageing body again. In *Wrinkles*, the speaker writes about her friends and attributes their wrinkles to the tiredness of life: “the ones who are married are tired/of being married”, whereas “the ones who are single are tired/of being single” [17] (p. 51). To her, it is impossible to “persuade them that being married/or being single/has nothing to do with wrinkles” [17] (p. 51). To escape the marks of ageing and their everyday burdens, the figures alluded to in the poem seek cosmetic surgery, which promises to efface the signs of ageing and fatigue: “[t]hey trade the names of plastic surgeons/like recipes” [17] (p. 52). In fact, the poetic voice confesses that she would like to accept the natural process of ageing because it liberates the soul and allows the experience of inner freedom. However, she feels an obligation to adjust to contemporary ideals of female beauty: “[s]ometimes I think/ (but do not dare to tell them [her friends])/that when the face is left alone to dig its grave,/the soul is grateful/& rolls in” [17] (p. 52). This early poem advances the complexities of the narrative of bodily ageing and the discrepancy between one’s inner self and the perception of one’s outer image, which will persist in Jong’s later work.

The notion of temporality of human bodies is again exemplified in *People who Live*, a poem which appears in the collection *At the Edge of the Body*, written when Jong was 37. In it, the body is compared to a fragile sandcastle built on the sea shore, which is never permanent and steady, but deteriorates with every single wave of salty water: “[p]eople who live by the sea/understand eternity/[. . .]/They know that the house of flesh/is only a sandcastle/built on the shore,/that skin breaks/under the waves/like sand under the soles/of the first walker on the beach/when the tide recedes” [18] (p. 94). The inability to reverse time and stop the body from growing older is again present in *Anti-Matter*, a poem from the collection *Ordinary Miracles*, written when Jong was 41. In it, the speaker expresses her disgust for the ravages of age that are visible in rotten and smelly bodily changes. The speaker in the poem is aware of the fact that her own body is facing the first signs of her unavoidable death and that there are no remedies to stop the erosion caused by time:

I am not interested/in my body –/the part that stinks/& rots & brings forth/life,/the part that the ground/swallows,/death giving birth/to death –/all of life,/considered/from the body’s/point of view,/is a downhill slide/& all our small/preservatives/& griefs/cannot reverse the trend. [19] (pp. 14–15)

In *Poem for Molly’s Fortieth Birthday*, which appears in the same collection, the speaker’s daughter, Molly, asks her mother why she has wrinkles on her forehead, and wonders if they signal

her old age: “[w]hy do you/have stripes/in your forehead,/Mama?/Are you/old?” [19] (p. 23). The persona in the poem is transported back to her childhood memories, when she used to walk the streets with her grandfather. Like Molly, she, too, thought that her grandfather was old: “I can see/myself/sinking back/into that childhood/street/I walked along/with my grandfather,/thinking *he* was old/at sixty-three/since I was four,/as you are four/to my/forty” [19] (pp. 23–24, emphasis in original). It is important to mention that, in contrast to the earlier poems, this piece reveals a different position towards physical decay. There is a marked acceptance of ageing, which is interpreted as respectful signs earned throughout one’s life: “[t]hese stripes/are decorations/for my valor –/forty years/of marching/to a war/I could not/declare,/nor locate,/yet have somehow/won” [19] (p. 25). Instead of lamenting her ageing body, as seen in earlier poems, the poetic voice appears as a victorious heroine and a mother who has successfully fought the battles of life and whose memories lie engraved on her skin. These contrasted attitudes are significant, as they convey uneasy feelings that are generated by ambivalence towards bodily ageing. It seems that the poetic persona is trapped between two positions: she would like to accept the signs of ageing, yet she is also constricted by the desire to adjust to ideals of femininity that render her more visible and appealing. The presentation of bodily changes in Jong’s later writings become even more ambiguous. As revealed by her later fiction and poetry, more importance is given to the male gaze and one’s own sexual attractiveness, which is seen as a sign of identity and of female subjectivity. In sum, Jong’s early work already reveals that the maintenance of beauty and youth are very important aspects for her heroines. Although they know that the contemporary ideals of femininity are social constructs and an expression of patriarchal oppression, they still try to adjust their exterior looks to social expectations by policing their bodies to fit into acceptable standards of beauty. The importance that Jong grants to the male gaze and the maintenance of youthful looks never loses ground, but, on the contrary, it becomes even more pronounced in her later works.

4. Body Politics in Erica Jong’s Middle and Later Works

Erica Jong’s middle and later works show that, with age, it becomes more difficult to maintain the desired bodily image because the ageing body becomes more unforgiving. In her midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, Jong reveals her concern about her ageing body and the loss of men’s attention: “[n]ever again, I thought, would I walk into a room and meet some delicious man who would change my life” [20] (p. 3). The writer worries about her inability to catch a man’s eye and compete with younger and prettier women:

Every year another crop of beauties assaults me on the streets of New York. With thinner waists and blonder hair and straighter teeth, with more energy to compete (and less cynicism about the world), the class of 1994, 1984, 1974, is inexorably replacing my class-Barnard ‘63—yikes! [20] (p. 2)

In *Fear of Fifty*, the writer clearly shows that she is not ready to approach her midlife—she does not like getting older. In fact, the very title of this midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, already indicates her fear of facing the second half of life. Jong states that she does not want to be the representative of her post-war generation: “I am the older generation now, and I am not always sure I like it. The losses sometimes seem more clear-cut than the gains” [20] (p. 2). According to the author, as a woman grows older, almost every birthday becomes a turning point in life, which reduces her sexual attractiveness and renders her less visible in society [20] (p. xvii). To Jong, reaching her midlife is more a personal tragedy for a woman than for a man, because it “is a more radical kind of passage to the other side of life”, which shows the existence of a double standard of ageing [20] (p. xvii). The idea that turning fifty is a symbolic date in women’s lives is also stated by Kathleen M. Woodward, who establishes that midlife coincides with the biological marker of menopause, often seen as a decline rather than growth and maturity [21] (p. xiii). Similarly, Catherine B. Silver contends that the extension of the adult life has led to a more visible “segregation and depersonalization” of ageing women [14] (p. 430). Very often,

older women are ignored, pitied, and even feared in society, because they are thought to represent death and uselessness. According to Marshall and Katz, over time, female ageing bodies become sites of gendered social inequalities and fragmented personalities [4]. Hence, unless older women embody socially acceptable roles as caregivers, grandmothers, or wise women, they cannot be visible in the public domain [13], (p. ix). Jong's unwillingness to celebrate her fiftieth birthday in public, but rather in a private encounter with her daughter in a spa, also suggests her fear of growing and looking older. As explained in her memoir, at that stage of her life she "needed something private, female, and contemplative to sort out these conflicting feelings. A spa was perfect. And [her] daughter was the perfect companion" [20] (pp. xvi–xvii). In her later memoir, *What Do Women Want*, the writer, aged 56, expresses her concerns with weight and her never-ending efforts to adjust her body to contemporary beauty standards, which generate inner frustrations and anxiety:

I had always felt a discontinuity between being an intellectual and wanting to look pretty. I felt I could not be allowed both. As a pretty teenager I tried to hide my prettiness under fat, then under rampant anorexia, which made my skin break out into a plague of boils and my eyes look hollow and purple-rimmed. I hated my body—hated it fat, hated it thin. In fact, I could not distinguish between the two. I felt oozing flesh there was only bone; my brain muddled the perception of my body. I could not have told you what I looked like. [22] (p. 62)

In her latest fictional novel to date, *Fear of Dying*, written in 2015 when Jong was 73, the main character, Vanessa, also laments her loss of sexual appeal and her youthfulness:

I used to love the power I had over men. Walking down the street, my mandolin-shaped ass swaying and swinging to their backward eyes. How strange that I only completely knew this power when it was gone—or transferred to my daughter, all male eyes on her nubile twentyish body, promising babies. I missed this power. It seemed that the things that have come to replace it—marriage, maternity, the wisdom of the mature woman (ugh, I hate that phrase)—weren't worth the candle. [23] (p. 5)

Vanessa envies the young and confesses that she did not know how to appreciate her good looks when she was younger. As the character ages, she becomes even more aware of the value and benefits that youthfulness has in contemporary society. Hence, the heroine looks back in anger, regret, and nostalgia, and blames herself for not having used her young beauty to her advantage when she still had it: "[b]ecause when we *were* young, we didn't appreciate our youth. That's what makes me *nuts!*" [23] (p. 155, emphasis in original). Vanessa wishes for the impossible—she wants to get her previous looks back. At the same time, though, she wants to maintain her wisdom: "[a]ll I want is to be thirty years younger, knowing what I know now" [23] (p. 155). In fact, the heroine is so displeased with her ageing body and the loss of her charms, that she would even sell her soul to the devil if he could promise her the recovery of her beauty and the power of seduction:

Now I believed I was old, and I didn't like it. I didn't like the hairs on my chin. I didn't like dyeing my eyebrows. I wanted my youth back—even with all its miseries. I envy the young and they don't know they are enviable. I certainly didn't know it when I was young. I hate, hate, *hate* getting older. I would sell my soul to the devil to stay young. [23] (p. 151, emphasis in original)

The quotation clearly illustrates that the heroine struggles to accept the ageing body that does not correspond to her more youthful self-perception. Vanessa's inability to synchronise her inner and outer selves and her wish to turn back the clock, but not to lose her actual knowledge, is repeated many times in the novel. This repetition reveals that the protagonist is never at ease with her ageing body, and that the fear of ageing never abandons her thoughts. This makes Vanessa similar to other characters in Jong's works. Yet, although Jong's latest novel shows the heroine's wish to find the elixir of youth, it also reminds her readers that the desire for eternal youthfulness has a high cost: "[i]n most

Faustian transformations, the dabbler in magic is punished. We're not supposed to play with time and the devil. Challenging the gods shows a lack of humility that often proves fatal" [23] (p. 157). Jong seems to remind her readers that the desire to reverse time has its price—her fictional figures' longing for rejuvenation generate conflicting and uneasy feelings that limit their freedom of expression. Jong also shows that women are made to believe that if they do not take care of their looks, they will have no chances to be successful in a beauty- and youth-obsessed Western society.

Jong's conflicting position about bodily ageing and the anti-ageing ideals is also seen in her criticism of feminism. According to the writer, feminist activists have failed to establish proper validation of ageing women and to reshape the meanings associated with age. The author thinks that, instead of trying to root out pejorative notions about old age, the contemporary feminist agenda remains inactive and invisible:

What has happened to our twenty-five years of protest about not wanting to be plastic Barbies? What has happened to the anger of Naomi Wolf analysing beauty myths, or Germaine Greer fiercely celebrating cronehood, or Gloria Steinem showing us how to accept age gracefully and turning inward at last? [. . .] Are we just a bunch of old broads talking to each other in the steamroom, cheering each other up? We write and talk and empower each other, but the obsession with newness and youth (newth?) does not seem to change. [20] (p. 2)

Yet, it is interesting to note that Jong, herself a feminist, instead of trying to combat ageism and negative characterisations of older women, succumbs to the feminine ideals promoted by the anti-ageing discourse. Unlike Isadora in *Fear of Flying*, who challenged patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality and liberated many women writers' voices, Jong's ageing fictional characters appear as hapless victims of powerful male-dominant discursive mechanisms and the anti-ageing-industry. In an interview with Carole Burns for *The Washington Post*, Jong, aged 73, again pointed out that ageing women are supposed to adjust to contemporary beauty standards and constantly rejuvenate themselves: "[a]s women, we can't look old. We can't be fat. We're supposed to look like the 14-year-old models in *Vogue*, who are younger and younger and skinnier and skinnier, and they are air-brushed and contoured and Photoshopped" [24]. Jong acknowledges that in today's society it is very hard for the women of her generation to find their true selves because they lack role models: women's social and individual identities are constructed around consumerist lifestyles and the marketplace.

5. The Ambivalence about the Ageing Body in Erica Jong's Later Works

Although the physical body is of crucial importance to a woman's self-definition and self-esteem, the existing literature shows that many aged women see the process of growing older as liberating, since they no longer feel the need to meet unrealistic beauty requirements and attract the male gaze. Hence, they can regain their true selves and establish their own criteria about their ageing bodies [25,26]. Ruth Raymond Thone thinks that female "attractiveness is not determined by body size, hair color, and makeup, old is beautiful; and ageing is glorious, not ugly, bad, nor wrong" [13] (p. 62). Hurd-Clarke and Griffin's findings attest to these statements as they show that, over time, many ageing women learn to accept their sags, stretch marks, wrinkles, and grey hair, which they interpret as signs of self-identity and gained life experiences [27].

The notion that bodily transformations are part of the natural processes of ageing, whose signs can be interpreted as markers of life experiences and personal identities, is also visible in many excerpts of Jong's later writings and interviews. In one of the scenes depicted in the memoir *Fear of Fifty*, Jong, approaching her midlife, appears comfortable about her nude body in front of her husband, who is positively surprised at her confidence to expose her nakedness:

'I love how comfortable you are with your body,' he said. 'You just walk around the room dressed, half-dressed, undressed, and you're happy in your skin. I've never been with a woman like that.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Usually they lock the door and put on makeup. Women are so afraid to be seen in their own faces’. [20] (p. 274)

Research shows that a woman’s relationship with her body and the comments she receives from her significant others are very important in defining her personal identity and her emotional intimacy [25] (p. 300). A positive validation of a woman’s external image adds to a higher degree of self-appraisal. On the contrary, if a woman’s physical appearance is criticized, it creates emotional and psychological barriers that limit her self-acceptance and may lead to a development of low self-esteem and a need to hide her body [25] (p. 300). Jong claims that “[her] age is part of who [she is]. But women, even desirable women, are always afraid of seeming undesirable. Honesty takes a long time” [20] (p. 264). A similar statement is also observed by Margaret Cruikshank, who notes that although young naked female bodies are everywhere in the visual media, there is an absence of naked bodies of older women because they are thought to evoke shame and even guilt [28] (p. 149). Woodward terms this phenomenon ‘unwatchability’, which is especially visible in the film industry [21]. In it, an older woman’s body remains concealed from the spectator, which illustrates the gendered ‘double standard’ of ageing and the notion of an aged women’s asexuality. In fact, in the West, an older woman’s nudity is even regarded as immoral and shameful; thus, it must be hidden from the public eye. Research findings reveal that older men are always represented in larger numbers in the film industry—they appear ten times more frequently than older women [29]. For instance, “Paul Newman, Harrison Ford, Clint Eastwood, and many others retain a ‘sexy’ image into their 50s, 60s, and even later, while thinking of their equivalents among Hollywood actresses is considerably more challenging” [29] (p. 155). Yet, each time there are more films that try to reverse the idea that people are invisible when old. An example is Nigel Cole’s comedy *Calendar Girls* (2003), which is based on a true story that shows a group of ageing women who decide to produce a nude calendar with the aim to raise money for leukaemia research. However, both older men and women’s nude bodies remain largely hidden from the screen.

The acceptance of the process of ageing is also exemplified in other works by Erica Jong. For instance, in her memoir *What Do Women Want*, the writer states that she even likes the signs of her ageing face and will accept her older body as it is: “I will adjust to my face, accept it as God meant me to. [. . .] I even like my furrows, and wrinkles. I earned them. Why give up these badges of life deeply lived?” [22] (p. 61). To Jong, the physicality of the individual cannot express his/her personal identity, because age, beauty, and youthfulness do not belong to the same category: “I don’t believe that women should be defined by their looks, that age equals ugliness, or that youth and beauty are synonymous—so why should I change my face? It goes on ageing as I go on trying to come to terms with it” [22] (p. 62). In an interview conducted in 2015, Jong, aged 73, stated that: “I wouldn’t swap. I believe humans are spiritual beings encased in a fleshly body—and the body is very much a part of our being. I wouldn’t reverse time, I accept time. It’s not easy, but I do” [30]. Jong’s interviews and her less commercial writings also display a different picture about bodily ageing. In one of her essays, written when Jong was 72, she stated that the wish to regain youth with all its flaws and delights may be risky and delusory because by reviving good looks and innocence people also get back pain, lack of self-esteem, and inner frustrations: “[a]t first we think we’ll regain our dewy looks, our enthusiasm, our joy in the newness of love and lust, but we are dumbstruck to learn that we might also have to live with pain again, our unformed identities, our confusions” [31] (p. 86). In another interview, conducted in 2015, Jong confessed that ten years before she did fear looking old, but this fear had gradually faded with age [24]. Yet, although some excerpts from Jong’s late-life works and her interviews point to her and her heroines’ acceptance of their ageing bodies and the rejection of the narrative of decline, the majority of her writings still display unease with the ravages of time. On the whole, her characters’ ambivalence and conflicting feelings about the biological process of growing older, and, in some cases, even ageist beliefs, mirror Jong’s deeply-rooted anxieties about physical decay. Jong’s writings show that many ageing women’s fears and anxieties are conditioned by sociocultural contexts and dominant discourses in an anti-ageing-driven society.

6. Conclusions

By employing literary and cultural gerontology and feminist perspective, this paper has offered a longitudinal analysis of Erica Jong's works, and has explored how current socio-culturally embedded perceptions of body have influenced her and her heroines' notions of bodily ageing. It has questioned how physical changes affected the development of Jong and her heroines' social and individual perceptions of self, and how they respond to the pressures of the anti-ageing ideals of femininity. The article has revealed that Jong's works reproduce the ambivalence and conflicting feelings generated by the ageing process. Her middle and later-life writings, in particular, show that women's individual satisfaction is closely related to the desire to rejuvenate their ageing body. The ageing heroines in Jong's works regard the physical signs of ageing not as subjective life experiences, but as obstacles that do not allow them to synchronise their older bodies with their still youthful inner selves. These internal discrepancies generate ambiguous and conflicting feelings and reveal a profound fragmentation of women's identity. Her female characters are grounded on prejudiced sociocultural realities and subjected to the patriarchal tyranny and the male gaze to always remain youthful and sexually attractive. This article also hoped to demonstrate that the analysis of female processes of bodily ageing through Erica Jong's works is of paramount importance to gender, body, feminist, and ageing studies, because it uncovers significant aspects of the pressures older women are subjected to in order to look more appealing in youth-oriented cultures. Additionally, it has aimed to show that a study of old age and bodily changes through the lens of life narrative and literary and cultural gerontology can help to rethink current constructions of ageing, and provide insights into what it means to grow older in contemporary Western societies. The research findings can also benefit health professionals, gerontology scholars, and students enrolled in women's studies, health education, and body politics.

Funding: This article is part of the doctoral dissertation, which was funded by a Doctoral Scholarship of the University of Lleida (Doctorate in Territory, Heritage and Culture, RD 1393/2007).

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful to Núria Casado and Isabel Santaulària (University of Lleida) for their guidance and expert knowledge, as well as the Grup Dedal-Lit for the access to bibliographic references.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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