

**Ageism and Elder Abuse in Velma Wallis's Two Old Women**

الشيخوخة وإساءة معاملة المسنين في امرأتين عجوزتين لفيلما واليس

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Doi: [10.37654/aujll.2022.176402](https://doi.org/10.37654/aujll.2022.176402)**Abstract**

Ageism is attitudes and behaviors that reflect prejudice against older people. There are many forms of abuse against parents including: physical, financial, emotional and sexual abuse. This paper defines ageism as having attitudes, prejudices, actions, and activities against persons differ only because of their age. Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women* presents the elderly people and explores their abuse and mistreatment by both close and strange persons. The author uses an Alaskan myth/folktale about two women to reveal the main problems of elderly people. In particular, the two women have to submit to the difficult decisions of the tribal leadership and have been through very hard times and ordeals which they passed by their bravery and patience.

**Keywords:** Ageism, Elder Abuse, Velma Wallis, Two Old Women.**المستخلص**

الشيخوخة هي المواقف والسلوكيات التي تعكس التحيز ضد كبار السن. هناك العديد من أشكال الإساءة ضد الوالدين بما في ذلك: الاعتداء الجسدي والمالي والعاطفي والجنسي. تُعرّف هذه الورقة النفرقة العمرية على أنها أن المواقف، والتحيزات، والأفعال، والأنشطة ضد الأشخاص تختلف فقط بسبب سنهم. تقدم امرأتان العجوزان لفيلما واليس كبار السن وتستكشف سوء معاملتهم وسوء معاملتهم من قبل أشخاص مقربين وغرباء. يستخدم المؤلف أسطورة ألاسكا / حكاية شعبية

عن امرأتين لكشف المشاكل الرئيسية لكبار السن. على وجه الخصوص ، يجب على المرأتين الخضوع للقرارات الصعبة للقيادة القبلية ، وقد مرتا بأوقات عصيبة ومحن مرّتا بشجاعتهمما وصبرهما.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمر، إساءة معاملة المسنين، فيلما واليس، امرأتان كبيرتان.

## 1- Ageism and Elder Abuse

The term ageism was first introduced by Butler in 1969. According to its initial definition, ageism is a term that is reflected in the prejudice of one age group against another. Although age discrimination may target younger age groups, most theoretical and empirical research in this age group has focused on older groups. Butler himself refined the definition of ageism in 1975 as "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because of their age"(Lev etal. 51).

Ageism is defined in the literature as having attitudes, prejudices, the actions and activities of a person differs only because of their age. People see old age as a time when efficiency, productivity and independence in all areas of life decline. Society's attitude towards old age and aging is full of prejudices and stereotypes. Ageism involves beliefs (parents are ugly, contradictory, sick, etc.) and attitudes (preferences for young people and adolescents over the age) that can be translated into behavior (Dedeli 2).

Aging is considered a decrease in productivity, sufficiency, individuality and independence in all areas of life. Parents and the aging

process are mostly viewed with stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Age discrimination includes beliefs and attitudes that can lead to discriminatory behavior. Synonyms of aging or elderly usually have a negative connotation. They are associated with negative situations such as weight loss, weakness, illness, wear and tear, and uselessness. As a result, aging is seen as something that should be avoided as much as possible. Negative safety attitudes towards the elderly and the aging process affect the health services of the elderly.

Age is a mindset that leads to age discrimination, a series of actions that can benefit older people (positive discrimination) or harm them (negative discrimination). Age discrimination can be direct, when older people are treated differently on the basis of age alone, or indirect, when older people are disproportionately harmed by a policy or set of measures that are equally and universally applied. Direct age discrimination occurs when direct unequal treatment based on age cannot be justified. Direct unequal treatment is a situation in which a person is, has been, or may be treated less favorably than another person in a comparable situation because of their age. Indirect discrimination occurs when a seemingly neutral provision, action or practice has adverse consequences for an individual (Dedeli et al. 7)

Older people are seen as useless, weak, strange, and inadequate individuals, or as benevolent, wise, and a group of such individuals. Today, traditional uses such as respect and protection of elders have changed due to urbanization, industrialization, changes in family, economic and social life, the share of women in enterprises and the transition to modern family structures.

When evaluating age information and dealing with elder people, it may involve both positive and negative attitudes. Negative attitudes towards old age include factors such as illness, impotence, vice, mental retardation, insanity, helplessness, isolation, poverty, and depression. Positive attitudes are compassion, knowledge, reliability, intelligence, political power, freedom, and happiness. Beliefs and attitudes towards older people can affect the quality of care and services. As a result, parents may be subjected to abuse and neglect.

Abuse of elderly persons by caregivers in their homes and facilities remains one of the most common and reprehensible acts directed against individuals simply because of their membership in a group. About 1 to 3 million Americans over the age of 65 have been hurt, exploited, or abused by someone they depended on. More recent estimates suggest that abuse rates could be five times higher than previous estimates because many cases are never reported to the authorities.

There are many forms of abuse against parents including: physical, financial, emotional and sexual abuse. This abuse is of course the most visible, but neglect which is perhaps the most fertile and difficult to detect. Significantly, there are many types of ageism:

- **Physical abuse:** Abuse or threats of physical pain or injury to a vulnerable elderly person, or deprivation of basic needs.
- **Sexual violence:** Sexual contact without consent of any kind, or forcing an older person to witness sexual behavior.
- **Psychological abuse:** psychological, grief, or pressure on an older person through verbal or non-verbal actions.

It is very important to mention that very few researches have been done on how age contributes to this ongoing abuse experienced by older people; However, the federal government's lack of response to the issue illustrates a seemingly tacit acceptance of old age( Wisdom 23). First, there are psychological, sociobiological, or human explanations that see ageism as a result of our deep-seated fears about aging, obsolescence, and our own death. Sociobiologists claim that youth in all human societies is associated with energy, strength, speed, endurance, biological fertility, and so on. An uncomfortable question: if we are psychologically "determined" to prioritize youth, can we get rid of old age? Logically, we can only do this after

eliminating aging and death itself. Second, the cultural explanation would point to the slow marginalization of parents in pre-industrial times from the controversial thesis "worship of contempt." Third, the economic explanation is the most plausible, and that the prevalence of male retirement over the past 120 years has been accompanied by a more negative perception of the economic value of parents (Macnicol 4).

In recent years, efforts have been made to recognize and combat age discrimination in the workplace and in society. The media also has great power to influence the general perception of parents. The study concluded that when there is social contact and communication between generations, there is a positive attitude and more recognition of the individual characteristics of people, less than their age, young or old. Social contact between age groups can be caused by positive attitudes towards senility and the elderly in our society ( ibid)

Hence, due to the importance and significance of elderly people abuse, several novelists endeavor to draw the attention of governments and organizations to this prior subject through reflecting upon it in their works. Among those novelists is Velma Wallis who depicts through her novel *Two Old Women* the struggles of two old women, abandoned by their tribes, to survive and resist the hard conditions of loneliness and weakness.

## 2. Ageism and elder abuse in Velma Wallis' *Two Old Women*

Velma Wallis is an Athabasca Native American born in Fort Yukon, Alaska. This remote village of about 650 people is located about 140 miles northeast of Fairbanks and a few miles north of the Arctic Circle. It is the largest village in the Yukon Flats and can only be reached by small plane, dog sled or riverboat. Wallis is one of 13 children. When she was 13 years old, her father died and she dropped out of school to help her mother raise her younger siblings. Years later, she moves into her father's cabin, a 12mile walk from the village, and learns traditional survival and hunting skills. An avid reader, she graduated from high school and started her first literary project by writing a legend her mother told about two abandoned old women and their struggle to survive. These experiences led to the writing of her first book, *Two Old Women*, which wowed her publishers, selling 1.5 million copies worldwide (Chapman 2).

Wallis wrote *Two Old Women* based on a story his mother told her. The story revolves around the two main characters, Ch'idzigyaak and Sa'. These characters, two old ladies, have become satisfied with their roles in the band. While women only became obligated by taking from the group and giving nothing back, the group also stopped respecting women as bodies of knowledge. As the group prepares to move to their winter camp in search of food, they make the difficult decision to let the two women die. However,

women do not die, but thrive as they reconnect with their abilities and use their experience to their advantage. At the end of the book we see the women and the group reunited. This time the women contributed to the group's success and the group valued women's knowledge. ( William 11)

Velma Wallis said of Two Old Women that this was "a story about my people and my past, something I have to understand and call my own". She presents her written stories as an attempt to continue what television and modern "comfort" have quickly succumbed to. Children, who now seem disinterested in traditional fairy tales, may someday call the legend their own. By writing this story on paper, she succeeded in not only attracting future generations among his own people, but also in giving presentations of Athabaskan knowledge to outside readers of all ages. In a vivid and engaging way, and with vivid detail that embodies a landscape that many readers find difficult to imagine, Wallis recounts the traditional Athabaskan legend of a nomadic tribe trapped in a harsh winter and no longer concerned with the few old women who could care for it. They are considered a burden to them; so faced with an impending famine, the tribe decided to abandon the women at the age of 80 and 75 (Patrick 83).

Two old women who had been cared for by the gang for years were left to die. The younger people thought that there was no point in feeding these two old women who didn't have a long life. The two old women, who



had been left to endure the harsh winter cold, said, "Let's die trying." And they try, remembering the old skills learned from childhood "The women went back in time to recall the skills and knowledge that they had been taught from early childhood" (Wallis 43).

They are empowered by the skills and knowledge they learned from their parents as children: gathering food from frozen waste and building shelters to support them, and telling stories around a campfire - about two old women living another winter. In Alaska it is impossible to survive. When the gang returned, they were surprised that the two old ladies were not dead; they are still alive because of the local "skills" they acquired in childhood: fishing, hunting rabbits, and sleeping in warm tents made of hides and skins:

“the men realized that these two women not only had survived but also sat before them in good health while they, the strongest men of the band, were half starved ” ( Wallis 113).

When the men from the group of girls who had left woke up in the morning to return with the good news that the two old women were safe, they were sent with “packed bundles of dry fish, enough to restore the people’s energy for travel” (Wallis 123). The skills and knowledge of these two old women, taught to them in childhood, saves the group. The story has

been told and retold to younger generations in this Athabascan Indian community, "they never again abandoned any elderly person. They had learned a lesson taught by two whom they came to love and care for until each died a truly happy old woman (Wallis 140).

Taking lessons from the stories of old women has educational value in different cultures around the world; be it Native Americans of Alaska in the north or Luo around Nyanza Bay on the shores of Lake Victoria in Homa Bay County. The sustainability of India's vegetarian cooking habits is being celebrated around the world and in East Africa (Ojwang 6).

Coming to the reasons behind Ageism and the abandonment was that the leadership felt burdened by the age of two women. In Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women*, the narrator states that "this group is the first, but starving parents were not something unknown at the time." It can be seen that the leader of the tribe betrayed the women because there was not enough food to feed the entire tribe. However, this statement is completely untenable, because two women could not eat all the food stored by the tribe. Meanwhile, Sa' and Chidzigyaak happily obeyed the decision of the tribal leader. At the same time, they don't want to give up and eventually prove that desertion helps them become independent.

Eventually the Athabasca realized that desertion could not solve the problems of the tribe as a whole. However, Sa and Chidzigyaak did not want to trust the members of the tribe. But they have the fact that they can share food with others and can teach valuable survival lessons. Therefore, the members of the tribe admitted their mistakes, and the two women happily collaborated with others, including their families. Velma Wallis portrays courage and survival instincts as symbols of courage and survival instincts in Sa and Chidzigyaak. In particular, both women knew that their tribe was about to abandon them. But they do not hesitate, because they are ready to succumb to the fate of life. It can be seen that the courage inherent in the spirit of Chidzigyaak helps to achieve the essential life of a hermit. (studentshare.org)

They never complain because they see life as a long journey with ups and downs. Now they face many challenges in life, but they must persevere and prove that they are worthy of it. In particular, the instinct of self-preservation inherent in people helped Sa and Chidzigyaak survive in critical life situations. In the novel, the narrator explains, "They now realize that two women of age must have known more than the man thought." As mentioned earlier, their decision was to survive the winter at all costs. This decision helped them eventually succeed.

The abuse of elderly people in the novel is explored as the author uses an Alaskan myth/folktale about two women to reveal discrimination and oppression of the elderly people. Since this subject is rarely tackled and little attention is offered to it, Wallis manages to deal with and attracts publics' care to the mistreatment of the old people. the two women have submitted to the difficult times when decisions of the tribal leadership are made to abandon them to face death as if they are non-human beings. this discrimination represents the negative attitude of family members and society in general towards old people. In most societies, aging and the changes associated with it are considered largely negative.

The solution to the problem of age discrimination, society should take the experience of the elderly and take advantage of their experiences not to psychologically abuse them for their age. Older people have a lot of experience of what they went through in their lives and learned the right ways to live not like these days. The elderly should benefit from them in all areas .

## **Conclusion**

There are psychological, sociobiological, or human explanations that see ageism as a result of our deep-seated fears about aging, obsolescence, and our own death .Older people are seen as useless, weak, strange, and

inadequate individuals, or as benevolent, wise, and a group of such individuals. Today, traditional uses such as respect and protection of elders have changed due to urbanization, industrialization, changes in family, economic and social life, the share of women in enterprises and the transition to modern family structures. Velma Wallis portrays courage and survival instincts as symbols of courage and survival instincts in Sa and Chidzigyaak. In particular, both women knew that their tribe was about to abandon them. But they do not hesitate, because they are ready to succumb to the fate of life. Those two elder women proved that they are out of use to be abandoned as their tribe believe. This novel successfully exposes the abuse and discrimination experienced by elder people.

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