

Article

‘No, My Husband Isn’t Dead, [But] One Has to Re-Invent Sexuality’: Reading Erica Jong for the Future of Aging [†]

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Abstract: New biomedicalized forms of longevity, anti-aging ideals, and the focus on successful aging have permeated the current sociocultural and political climate, and will affect the future of aging. This article examines changing attitudes towards sexual practices and the perception of sexuality in later years, as exemplified in Erica Jong’s middle and late life works and interviews. Instead of succumbing to anti-aging culture and biomedicalization of sex in old age, Jong reveals alternative ways of exploring sexual practices in older age, and challenges a pharmaceutical market that promotes the consumption of medication to enhance the idea of virility and ‘sexual fitness’ in older men. Jong’s work undoes the narrative of decline that portrays older individuals as sexually inactive and frail, and, at the same time, shows that the interest in sexual intercourse and the erect phallus gradually becomes less important as people grow older. This qualitative narrative analysis opens the discussion for reconsideration of late-life sexuality beyond biomedical understandings of late-life sex and old age. The study also reveals how a literary approach can provide alternative and more realistic perspectives towards sexual experiences in later stages of life that can have significant implications for healthcare policy and the future of aging.

Keywords: aging; biomedicalization; gender; literary gerontology; phallogentrism; sexuality; tantric sex

1. Introduction: The Shifting Meanings of Aging

A prolonged life course and rapidly changing demographic trends have given way to the transcendence of age-related categories and norms which are becoming less defined and more flexible in a current anti-aging-driven society [1–4]. As Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs state, “[a]geing is not what it once was” ([3], p. vii). However, the process of growing older continues to be a complex and controversial issue in contemporary society. The body of scholarly work known collectively as successful aging has mitigated against this to some extent [5,6]. Originating in the US in the second half of the 20th century as a positive model to measure life satisfaction, the concept of successful aging was aimed to replace negative constructions of aging and old age by emphasizing positive aspects of the process of growing older [5]. Accordingly, the perception of old age has shifted focus from a stage marked by loss, frailty, or decay, as it is the case in the narrative of decline [7], to become an enriching period in life that opens up a rainbow of possibilities, among them being active sexual lives, anti-aging ideals, and healthy lifestyles [5,6,8–16]. Stephen Katz observes that the successful aging discourse is so integrated in the measurement of the well-being and life satisfaction of older adults, as well as the current sociocultural understanding of the process of aging, that its questioning “would be considered unprofessional, if not heretical” ([9], p. 135).

Sexual functioning and its optimization have been given a special focus within this discourse. The idea of having an active sexual life in older age, previously negatively associated with menopause, the lack of libido, asexuality, and impotence, is now changing partly due to the model of successful aging. Research reveals that pleasurable sexual experiences can enhance a sense of happiness, vitality, emotional intimacy, and self-esteem in older adulthood, and provide older people with physical health and psychological benefits [17–20]. Mental well-being is, in fact, particularly important in assuring fulfilling sexual relationships in later life stages [21–23]. Liza Berdychevsky's and Galit Nimrod's findings show that sex is an "enjoyable, gratifying, and stress-relieving leisure activity" that becomes even more satisfactory due to the abundance of free time upon retirement ([19], p. 232). In fact, extended sexual performance has become an indicator of the overall quality of life of an aging individual. Older adults are taught that they have a fundamental right to their health and well-being and are eligible to "'age better' by 'not being old'" ([3], pp. 145–146). By using "repetition, frequency and self-referential logic," the successful aging discourse spreads persuasive messages that carefully instruct in how to turn back the clock and postpone the ravages of time ([24], p. 1237). In this respect, the degree of consumption of anti-aging products or sex-enhancing tools, such as Viagra or lubricant gels, as well as recurring to medical interventions [1,10,14,25–28] becomes a sign of one's 'sexual health' [6,8,9,16,27]. Yet, instead of rooting out negative associations with age, the successful aging discourse has created new pathological pressures to conform to a normative understanding of gendered heterosexuality. Moreover, most existing literature on the sexual lives of older subjects is based on a biomedical perspective and lacks the subjective experiences of older adults themselves [19,20].

2. A Phallogentric Vision of Success in Old Age

Whereas, in the nineties, the media portrayed old men as caring grandparents who enjoyed spending time with their grandchildren and pursuing their hobbies, during the last decades, these images have undergone some important shifts [29]. One of them has been a new emphasis placed on the functionality of men's sexual organs, to the extent that male impotence has come to be understood as a sign of failure in sexual relationships [1,10,13,14,26–28]. The decrease or cessation of the erectile sexual function and the inability to perform penetrative sex is now considered as the inability to embody the ideals of 'real' manhood [28]. Under the paradigm of successful aging, older men are required to adjust to new hyper masculine and youthful roles, in which 'staying hard' and 'playing hard' are seen as the indicators of healthy aging, age-appropriate gender behaviors, and 'success' in old age [25,27,29]. Those men who suffer from sexual dysfunction and reject the consumption of pharmaceutical drugs that promise the recovery of sexual capacity may develop feelings of guilt and inadequacy, because they do not follow the 'correct' model of traditional masculinity [26,29]. Therefore, to adapt to the socially constructed ideals of manhood, men are suggested to look for the intervention of adequate medical treatments [1,25–28]. One of the solutions to regain the masculine potentiality and the desired functioning of the phallus, as suggested by the pharmaceutical industry, is to turn to sexologists and the medical science, which promise to bring back youthful virility through the consumption of sexuopharmaceuticals, such as Viagra or testosterone supplements [1,25–30]. As Linn Sandberg highlights, the liberating promises of the discourse of successful aging have resulted in promoting "the discursive apparatus of the sexy senior, formulated as the intersections of biomedical, consumerist and successful" ideas of aging ([12], p. 223). In a similar vein, Toni Calasanti and Neal King state that:

Sexual functioning now serves as a vehicle for reconstructions of manhood as 'ageless,' symbolizing the continued physical vigor and attractiveness derived from the experiences of younger men. To the extent that men can demonstrate their virility, they can still be men and stave off old age and the loss of status that accrues to that label ([25], p. 16).

In this light, the growth and popularity of biomedical and pharmaceutical solutions to sexual dysfunctions reveal that sexual performance and its optimization in later life are based on very narrow

youth-oriented understandings of sexuality, in which sexual intercourse and the erectile phallus are seen as the ultimate goals for successful sexual lives in old age [1,12,27,28]. In fact, in the West, the phallus is perceived as the most important element that guarantees sexual pleasure for women, because it is commonly assumed that women's sexual desires cannot exist without penile-vaginal penetration. As Judith C. Daniluk observes, "[m]en, and the magical penis, still play a central role" in cultural understandings of 'good sex' ([31], p. 217). This notion is "based on the assumption that somewhere deep inside every woman, a fierce erotic desire exists, waiting to be unlocked by the lovemaking talents of an erotically skilled man" ([31], p. 213). Similar to the emphasis on the erectile phallus, older women are also instructed that regular sexual activity helps to tone up their muscles, stimulate their blood circulation, maintain their vaginal health, and produce lubrication, which is necessary for the performance of successful sexual acts and, consequently, for the maintenance of 'sexual health' in later years [27,31,32]. Masturbation and orgasm are considered as insufficient for woman's sexual satisfaction—penetrative sex and active sexual lives are still regarded as the indicators of well-being and happiness of women of all ages ([31], p. 317). These and similar aspects are explored in Erica Jong's later works, exemplified in the following sections.

3. The Importance of Reading Erica Jong for the Future of Aging

Erica Jong, one of the key figures of the Second-Wave Women's Liberation Movement, is best known for her ground-breaking novel *Fear of Flying*, published in 1973. In this book, the writer, aged thirty-one, narrates in the first person the story of a young woman, Isadora Wing, in search of emotional, artistic, and sexual satisfaction. Through Isadora's story, Jong depicts the sociocultural and political milieu of the US of the seventies, characterized by sexual liberation, social upheavals, and consciousness-raising groups promoted by feminist activists. *Fear of Flying* became a *succès de scandale* in the America of that time and made Jong an international media celebrity [33,34]. The writer is also known for having coined the term 'zipless fuck,' which appears in the same novel and refers to an idealized sexual meeting between a man and a woman, in which there is no power relation or sexual objectification of body parts—the strangers are only driven by the purest desire towards each other. Since the publication of *Fear of Flying*, the term 'zipless fuck' rendered Jong a reference figure of the sexual revolution and an iconic writer, who has openly addressed female sexuality and managed to reveal unconventional aspects of intimate female experiences.

Even though Second-Wave feminists challenged gender and social inequalities, they did not take into account the construction of age and its impact on female identity and condition; thus, the needs and concerns of older women were not addressed, which is also the case with Jong's early work [35,36]. However, as the writer grew older, she started to incorporate voices of aging women in her fictional narratives and, in so doing, filled the silences left by Second-Wave feminists. In her later work, Jong continues to courageously defend her position as a feminist and as a spokesperson for her generation with a special focus on late-life sexuality. Although the author aligns with new cultures of aging in her interest in sexuality, she also criticizes the narrow Western vision on phallic intercourse. As will be demonstrated, the writer offers a much broader vision of heterosexual desire and emotional needs of older people than those articulated through successful aging discourse. It may be argued that Jong's exploration of later life sexuality is her 'consciousness-raising' for the baby-boom generation that is aging in youth- and sex-oriented societies. A closer analysis of Jong's later writings is especially relevant given that her generation is exposed to new challenges within the context of controversial mainstream discourses of aging and the anti-aging imperatives.

Feminist writers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan and, more recently, Lynne Segal and Jane Juska, to name just a few, have also explored the difficulties inherent in this approach in their numerous works. Like Jong, Segal straightforwardly questions female sensuality, gender relations, and the complex dynamics of sexual scripts. Juska, for example, in her two memoirs, *A Round-Heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance* (2003), and *Unaccompanied Women: Late-Life Adventures in Love, Sex, and Real Estate* (2007), humorously describes her real-life sexual

adventures and experiences with men of different ages. Her poignant and honest writing not only addresses sex and erotic longings in later years, but also deals with heartbreaks, disappointment, intimate relationships, and reveals the difficulties of being an aging woman in contemporary society. Although these feminist writers seek to find new models for older women, challenge negative notions of old age, and show that a need for sexual and emotional intimacy does not finish with menopause, there is still a lack of better examination of middle and older women's lives from a feminist perspective and a less phallogocentric vision of late-life sex [37]. As Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne observe, "there are less clear ascriptions applied to aging masculinity than to femininity" ([37], p. 5). This is especially important given that the ways people are represented in the culture have a huge impact on how they understand and experience their own aging ([38], p. 17). What is missing in the works of many women writers is the exploration of less phallus-oriented sexual practices in later life, which are addressed by Jong in her later works.

This article examines Erica Jong's often autobiographical fiction and her more personal accounts in the form of memoirs and interviews. The combination of her late-life novels, midlife memoirs and interviews provides a more realistic picture of the treatment of sexuality and aging realities from a perspective of an aging female writer and feminist. This article paves the way towards further analysis of more subjective experiences of aging and sexuality that cannot be properly grasped by medical sciences alone [39–43]. Reading Jong's latest work is a twofold task: it demonstrates the contribution of literary texts to a better understanding of the process of growing older and the future of aging; and it shows how anti-aging ideals, new forms of biomedical intervention and new 'sexual health' impact the lives of Jong's characters, who represent the views of the post-war generation. In this respect, this article brings together additional insights into the field of literary gerontology in the hope of providing new perspectives on the process of growing older and late-life sexuality. Such analysis will, hopefully, be useful for future research in interdisciplinary gender- and age-related fields.

4. Late-Life Sexual Alternatives According to Erica Jong

Jong's mid- and late-life writings and interviews provide a critical standpoint about the centrality that the biomedicalization of sexual activity, penile-vaginal intercourse, and the erectile phallus occupy in the current anti-aging discourse. In one of her later midlife memoirs, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life* [44], written at the age of sixty-four, Jong stated that "our sexuality is so focused on the stiff prick that we have no idea what to do when that becomes occasionally problematic as it does with age. You can become a Viagra junkie or you can create other ways of making love" ([44], p. 79). The same idea is presented in an interview conducted a year later [45], in which Jong highlighted that men were too obsessed with their phalluses and were expected to meet women's erotic needs as a proof of their masculinity, virility, and sexual potential. To Jong, this view leads to overlooking the fact that the human body is an erogenous zone with unlimited possibilities. According to the writer, men "have to get over their identification with themselves and the hard dick. And once they do, the sex can be truly wonderful" [45]. Moreover, the author added that:

Suppose he doesn't have an erection? You have to be whole-body—tantric sex. You have to change the way you look at sex, and him too, because men have a real problem with that. They're so focused on their penis, you may have noticed, that making the change from focus-on-the-penis to focus-on-the-whole-body is hard for them [45].

These ideas are more accentuated in her latest fictional work to date, *Fear of Dying* [46]. The novel, written when Jong was seventy-three, depicts an aging couple, Vanessa and Ash. After Vanessa's husband's near-death illness, he becomes impotent. However, his sexual dysfunction is not seen as a problem, but rather as an opportunity, which leads the couple to significant discoveries about late-life sexuality and tantric sex. As Vanessa and Ash grow closer to each other, they learn that getting older can be seen as a positive stage in life that provides alternative ways of lovemaking that are no longer linked to youthful sexual urges, erect phalluses, and a search for pure orgasm. After Ash's recovery,

the couple discovers *kundalini*, commonly defined as a physical energy, which runs through the body like an electric serpent and grants new bodily experiences.

The universal experiences of *kundalini* have been known since ancient times [47]. According to classic Hindu yogic traditions, every person has the energy of enlightenment and the capacity to experience *kundalini*, but until it is properly stimulated, it lies hidden in the body. *Kundalini* is very often compared to an unconscious instinctive force or a huge volume of potential primal energy, similar to an electric current running along the spine like a dormant serpent, which can be awakened through mediation, breathing, chanting mantras, sex or even traumatic near-death experiences. The *kundalini* experience activates the seven chakras, the centers of energy, in the human body and passes “from the base of the root of the spine to the crown of the head” ([47], p. 111). Thus, those who experience *kundalini*, feel a boundless energy that starts in the abdomen and moves upwards to reunite body and mind. Research reveals the human mind is a part of many erogenous zones that arouses sexual excitement and expands erotic possibilities [31,47].

In Jong’s *Fear of Dying*, the finding of the whole-body practice is especially significant to Ash, who is intolerant to Viagra which gives him “those infamous blue spots” and makes him feel as if he has “been run over by a truck” ([46], p. 149). The couple realizes that Viagra is not the solution to their sexual fulfillment and that the libido changes as people grow older: “[n]o matter what the cheerleading gurus of aging may say, sex among the seniors is not what it once was when we were young” ([46], p. 145). The discovery of tantric sex helps Ash realize that the erectile phallus is not the key element in sexual fulfillment. These examples show Jong’s criticism of the medicalization of sexuality in old age and the need to optimize men’s sexual capacity as a proof of one’s masculinity and sexual potential. As Vanessa and Ash grow older, they no longer see sex as an expression of sexual intercourse, but rather as a whole-body experience, which leads to the discovery of alternative ways of sexual practices. When Ash makes love to his wife for the first time after his recovery from his illness, he reports feeling “a bolt of lightning go down [his] spine” and confesses that he has never felt it before ([46], p. 213). The sensation of involuntary wave-like movements along his spinal column is so strong that it also reaches Vanessa, who experiences an immense flow of sexual and spiritual energy ([46], p. 213). According to the heroine, *kundalini* is a mental state that is closely related to spirituality, creative energy, and maturity: “[t]he *kundalini* is life force, energy, fire, sexual power. Some yogis believe that when you harness that body power to the mind, there’s nothing you can’t do. When you have that fire—sexuality, creativity, knowledge—everything comes together” ([46], p. 213, my emphasis). Newly found sexual experiences help the couple to grow closer to each other and lead them to conclude that their bodily urges are not physical, but rather spiritual. They are initiated by the waves of bliss and inner fire that ignite their newly found sexual desires:

Meanwhile, Asher and I were growing closer and closer. His near-death experience had opened him up somehow. And I was opened up too. I was reminded of how overwhelming real passion could be, how it could become your *raison d’être*, and how few people wanted to acknowledge that ([46], p. 215–216).

Through the discovery of *kundalini*, the spouses embrace new powerful energies that allow them to obliterate Ash’s illness and his impotence as they learn to channel the heightened energy into a betterment of their sexual life. Hence, Vanessa no longer wants to go back to her youthful days when penile-vaginal intercourse was understood as the essence for good sexual life: “[f]uck young and beautiful—this is worth everything—and I come with fierce contractions that seem to go on and endlessly” ([46], p. 213, emphasis in original). This quotation shows that the whole-body sex can also lead to organismic experiences, which ‘seem to go on and endlessly.’ Yet, very importantly, although Vanessa no longer advocates for coital sexual performance, she does not belittle the importance of orgasm. However, sex becomes less crucial in her life because the heroine realizes that orgasm-oriented experiences are less significant in older age: “[r]eally, folks, the search for orgasm is pure hunger. You think of it when you haven’t had it in a while. After a long time you forget, become more light-headed. Sexual starvation is like other forms of hunger, but hunger is not love” ([46], p. 226). For Jong,

“intercourse produces an orgasm in the pelvic area, but other kinds of sex produce it all over the body—and mind” ([44], p. 80). The writer believes in the power of mind, which she sees as “our most important sexual organ,” and helps people to engage into sexual fantasies and creative ways to explore alternative sexual drives [45]. According to Jong, people “could lose everything else, but as long as [they] didn’t have a lobotomy, [they]’d be sexual. It’s the key to everything” [45]. The same ideas are highlighted in one of her latest interviews, in which the writer stated that sex “doesn’t necessarily open up people’s souls, and I think that we have to learn that really true intimacy is rare and it depends on other things besides sex” [48]. These observations reveal that, to the author, sexual drives and transcendence are synonymous, since they help people to get closer to their inner being and a sense of emotional intimacy.

However, it is also worth mentioning that although Jong’s work provides alternatives to late-life sexual practices through the use of the Hindu tradition and yogic practices, this approach seems to bring her later writings closer to popular self-help literature. By appropriating the liberating power of *kundalini* to solve sex-related issues, Jong seems to be promoting her own philosophy of sexual fulfillment in later life. References to tantric sex in Jong’s later work can be also regarded as commercial strategies that enable the author to keep up with the readership and public image of a writer of ‘popular’ texts. Moreover, it may be argued that Jong herself is influenced by the popularity of the classic Hindu yogic traditions, which America has successfully brought into its fold.

Vanessa laments that people are too focused on genital stimulation and pure sexual pleasure, which are especially relevant to American culture aimed at “mutual orgasm” through one-night-stands ([46], p. 216). Since the whole-body sex is not an orgasm-based practice, it is “alien to a lot of Americans” who are blind to see that human bodies function as “the instrument of the sexual symphony” ([46], p. 216). Instead of penile-vaginal stimulation, Jong’s characters seek mutual understanding, complexity, and “a sense of safety and caring” ([46], p. 216). These experiences lead the couple closer to each other: “[w]e had beaten terrible odds and we were still holding hands in bed” ([46], p. 145). By drawing examples from Jong’s latest works and interviews, the next section expands on the analysis of sexual practices in old age and demonstrates that, as people grow older, they start to place greater emphasis on such values as trust, affectionate expressions, and a sense of emotional fulfillment. These aspects are missing from the perceptions and definitions of sexual practices in current successful aging discourse, in which late-life sex is defined in terms of sexual fitness and endorsed under the healthy aging paradigm.

5. Emotional Intimacies in Later Years

Jong’s later writings show that aging not only allows for the discovery of alternative sexual practices, but also determines a higher degree of intimacy and mutual understanding between partners, who become more confident when experimenting with sex. Research also shows that even though the meanings of sexual needs and perceptions of sexuality undergo important changes in later years, the need of closeness and touch gain more importance as people age [10,11,21,28,31,32,49,50]. A sense of emotional attachment and intimacy increases with the growth of self-assurance and maturity, all of which add to better sexual experiences in later years. Gentle touching, hugging, and compliments are regarded as “‘nourishment for the soul’ and as a context for companionship and a loving relationship” ([19], p. 232). Studies also reveal that, with age, men give less focus on the phallus and more emphasis on lovemaking, foreplay, and the whole sexual intercourse [10,32,49,51]. A sense of the connection between sex and emotion increases with age, as shown in Ash and Vanessa’s sexual experiences in later life [28,49,50]. Sandberg’s doctoral qualitative study on aging, masculinity, embodiment, and sexuality, based on in-depth interviews and body diaries of twenty-two men aged sixty-seven to eighty-seven [10], lends weight to the fact that many older men start to give more importance to intimacy, closeness, and touch than to genital stimulation. As Sandberg states,

[men’s] experiences of aging bodies could neither be reduced to experiences of loss or of erectile or other bodily capacities nor be understood as success stories whereby men resisted

aging and regained their bodies of youth, for example, through sexuopharmaceuticals. Instead, the materiality of the men's aging bodies directed them towards increasing intimacy and touch, and towards a wider discovery of the body as a whole ([10], p. 33).

Similar findings are also reflected in Emily A. Wentzell's study [28] on how older men in Mexico cope with aging, chronic diseases, intimate relationships, and decreasing erectile capacity. Wentzell reveals that age-related sexual disabilities and the cessation of the frequency of penetrative sex lead to the development of multifaceted understandings of bodily changes and sexuality in later life. Taking into account the embodied manliness through sex in Mexican culture, it is interesting to see that none of the study participants have provided narrow stereotyped portrayals of their sexuality. Instead, they have revealed more complex approaches to the cult of the phallus and penetrative sex, such as acting as financial providers, incorporating fond feelings, and cultivating emotional attachment to their partners and commitment to their families [28].

It is significant to mention that an increased degree of intimacy and touching, rather than sex [10,28,32,49,50], also promotes a greater sense of happiness, while the lack of it may result in feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Research shows that "[l]oving physical gestures, such as holding hands, linking arms, hugging and kissing, become much more important during old age. A person who has lived a long time often craves for something deeper than a sexually fulfilling relationship" ([32], p. 112). Although sexual relationships in older age become less frequent, they become more satisfactory due to an increased sense of intimacy and confidence between partners, who tend to express their sexual needs more openly [21–23,50]. Moreover, because of a gradual decrease in testosterone levels from the ages of forty-five to seventy, it takes longer for men to ejaculate, which may also result in sexual acts becoming longer and more sensual [32]. Sexually active older individuals report that they practice sex not because it benefits their health, as highlighted in the medicalized discourse on late-life sexuality, but because of mere pleasure, personal fulfillment, and even a sense of spirituality [10,31,32]. In fact, many older adults regard sex equally or even more fulfilling than in their previous life stages [52]. Moreover, studies reveal that the need for emotional closeness becomes more important when people grow older, as they experience that their contributions to society become more limited and a sense of the close presence of death becomes more intensified [32]. Ash's near-death experience and the couple's discovery of tantric sex bear evidence to these statements.

A growing importance of emotional intimacy is also present in Jong's first midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty* [53], written at the age of fifty-two. In it, the writer reveals that, with age, she finds self-fulfillment in feeling close to her husband Ken, which also leads to sexual betterment:

[my] waking life with my husband has become more and more sexual. We find ourselves making love every night, laughing and kissing in the morning. I find myself telling him my dreams and fantasies, reading him pages which excite him, teasing him like a new lover. We have gone into a domestic idyll. This astonished me ([53], p. 121).

Jong and Ken discover that sexual pleasures can be lived through a different spectrum of sensual expressions in which cuddling, tenderness, and closeness are very important elements for their sexual satisfaction. These statements are further exemplified in an interview conducted in 2015, after the publication of *Fear of Dying*:

Throughout our lives, from infancy to old age, we need touch. Infants who are not touched grow up unable to make connections with other people, that has been proven many times. When older women are not touched, it seems tragic to me... and, actually, most of the older women I know have some kind of love, touch or intimacy in their lives. It's a lie that women shouldn't be touched when they're older. But it's another powerful aspect of sexist propaganda—that you're only fuckable if you're under 25 and pathologically underweight [54].

Jong's later works also reveal that it takes a lifetime to detach ourselves from the almost automatic association of sex with genitalia. In her later memoir, *Seducing the Demon*, the writer stated that even if

she “tried to write about the role of sex” in people’s lives, only in her sixties did she realize that in her fifties she knew only “the half of it” ([44], p. 79). According to the author, “[u]ntil you get wise enough (or old enough) to understand sex as a whole-body experience you know nothing. All my life I had heard about tantric sex and I thought it was utter bullshit” ([44], p. 79). Jong and her aging male and female characters learn that later life sexual activity should not be understood in narrow terms as solely penile-vaginal penetration or as the narrative of decline [7]. Instead, sex should be regarded as a transformative experience that involves other forms of emotional intimacy and bodily expressions. In an interview following the publication of *Fear of Dying*, when Jong was seventy-three, she revealed that as people grow older, touch becomes “more important, erections are less important,” and that “somebody needs to write about that” [55]. As demonstrated in this article, this is exactly what Jong does in her later life works, in which she honestly explores the changes that occur in the human mind and body as people grow older. Jong’s most recent work and her interviews challenge the phallogocentric and biomedical vision of late-life sexuality, and place more emphasis on alternative sexual practices, which are accompanied by the growth of emotional closeness and intimacy between partners.

6. Conclusions

By drawing examples from Erica Jong’s mid- and late-life works and interviews, this article has presented the author’s changing understandings of sexuality as well as her criticism on the importance given to the erectile phallus and penile-vaginal intercourse in later years. The author interrogates the measurements of ‘success’ in old age, and challenges the narrative of decline and the current Western understandings of a new ‘sexual health,’ which has created a rather oppressive ideology [27]. Jong’s later writings are alert to the need of alternative narratives to foster a less phallogocentric vision of sexual future for older people. To Jong, sex and aging are compatible—the process of growing older is seen as a continuum of multifaceted sexual and spiritual meanings beyond coital paradigms. The writer’s critical thoughts about late-life sex challenge the ‘cultural blindness’ of contemporary Western society and advocate for a balance between body and mind that helps to keep the physical body healthy. According to Jong, the only true, realistic, and fulfilling way to “reach a certain level of connection” is through emotional closeness, love, and mutual understanding, which become even more exciting and stimulating as couples discover alternative forms of intimacy [48]. In Jong’s later works, therefore, growing older and sexual dysfunctions are not seen as problems or signs of the inability to adjust to traditional masculine ideals of sex. Rather, these issues are regarded as new opportunities to rediscover one’s sexuality and new bodily sensations, in which touching, hugging, or simply holding hands become especially significant in later life. Jong’s aging characters continue to be sexually active well into later years and place a greater importance on nuanced perspectives of intimacy that are closely related to Hindu yogic traditions. New forms of sexual pleasure grant Jong’s characters psychological benefits, strengthen their relationship, and help them to become more spiritual, renewed, and self-confident.

The main limitation of this analysis is that it is not empirically grounded, but based on Jong’s own view on this topic and, inevitably, to the interpretation that the author of this article has of it. It is also predominantly limited to heterosexual notions of sexuality and Western-based visions of old age from a female perspective. Despite these limitations, a close reading and interpretation of Jong’s works and her interviews illustrate the changing attitudes to sexuality, a diversity of sexual experiences, and the importance of physical and emotional sexual intimacy in advanced age beyond anti-aging imperatives and a traditional view of coital performance. This study has intended to provide alternative insights into the sexual lives of older adults that can be useful to future research in interdisciplinary age-related fields. Critical feminist and gerontological scholars, sex-educators, and healthcare practitioners may benefit from the inclusion of alternative narratives of sexuality in later life. Alternative views towards late-life sex may help to rethink the ways older people express their intimacies beyond biomedical and pharmaceutical solutions, aimed at the prolongation of sexual activity. Jong’s later work may also encourage future researchers to be more attentive to subjective sexual experiences of older adults in order to better understand the multifaceted nature of sexuality.

There is a need to put aside sexual ageist notions and double standards, undo culturally constructed stigma and embarrassment associated with sex in older age, and give more importance to the voices of older adults, which are crucial to the design of sexual education programs and healthcare policy [51]. Overcoming the difficulty of talking about sex with healthcare providers is especially important given that they appear to influence older people's views about their sexual practices and their willingness to discuss sex-related issues in the future [51]. Recent findings also reveal that older adults themselves advocate for the need to normalize the diversity of sexual experiences and different forms of desire in later years [51], as Jong's later work demonstrates.

The article also bears evidence that individual stories and a narrative perspective allow to expand the basis for future gerontological studies outside contemporary biomedical, political, sociocultural, and demographic models of aging. Fictional narratives can serve as an efficient vehicle to encompass a wider understanding of many age-related transformations from a life course perspective [39–43,56–58], and provide long-term visions to better examine sexual practices in older adulthood [19]. As Gary Kenyon et al. argue, narratives can be used as 'data' to "shed light on the dynamics of our lives as we grow and change and age" ([59], p. xii). In sum, this article, based on Jong's later works and interviews, has shown that there are many dimensions, interpretations, and meanings attached to the complex process of growing older and late-life sexuality that cannot be measured by the medical sciences and the pharmaceutical industries alone, nor by the model of successful aging.

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