



Older Women/Younger Men: An Analysis of the ‘woman-older’ Trend in *Babygirl*, *The Idea of You* and *A Family Affair*

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Abstract

People generally tend to be more disapproving of age-gap relationships among older women and younger men than older men and younger women. In recent times, there have been researches done in case of younger women and older men but not much light has been shed in case of women- older relationships. It has rather been limited or outdated. This double standard has been portrayed in movies with older women dating younger men as being happy and satisfied compared to other women who dates age proportionately. This power dynamics has been narrated as a pathway to substantial equality, with women feeling empowered in achieving a physical as well as an emotional gratification and contentment. Analysing the movies *Babygirl* and *The Idea of You*, the directors have tried to normalise this trend and the sexual dynamics and power involved in such a relationship.

Keywords: - Cultural Studies, Cinema, Hollywood, cougars, heterogamy, homogamy

Introduction

There exists number of methods by which one may choose an eligible mate for any sort of relationship. According to (Kerckhoff & Davis 295) a person starts off the mate selection, taking into consideration the geographic nearness, age, race, ethnicity and the socio-economic position. Taking into account all these factors, generally leaves one with a meagre number of suitable partners, where “like attracts like” becoming a normalised rule in selecting apt partners (Knox, Zusman, & Nieves 445). Even though all these elements play a prominent rule in the selection process, age decides the normalcy, in any sort of relationship, whether it be dating or marriage. Society has always tried to bring a sort of normalcy in men-older relationships and the major disapproval is directed towards the women-older concept. Women-older relationships have always been treated as an abhorrence and shaming such women as “cougars”- a derogatory term that connote a predatory nature. There exists a double-standard

when this age-gap is based on the gender of the older partner and this tendency has been reflecting in almost all walks of life.

During the 1950's and 60's, the homogamous relationships underwent a small transition, with heterogamous relationships becoming popular in the 1980's and 90's. The current society has been more tolerant towards mixed racial, ethnic and interfaith relationships but men-older set-up, still remain as the prevailing norm (Knox, Britton, & Crisp 290). Society has always normalised men-older concept but pounced upon women-older with the term cougar. According to (Vera, Berardo & Berardo 553) society and culture have scorned and despised women-older relationships, since it is being connected with the incest taboo. Fundamentally, the age disparity between the woman and man is perceived as a mother/son relationship.

Most of the social surveys conducted among older women and younger partner relationships, have revealed a satisfied women who are committed to their relationships when compared to women who were having partners that are elder to them or with partners that are close to their age. To put it the other way, even though older-women relationships are not welcomed by the society fairly and may lead to repudiation and loss of social support, majority of such women in heterogamous relationships seem to be thriving and successful. The publication of many self-help books dealing with this topic and the spotlight being shown on various celebrities' choice of having relationship with men who are way younger than them, establishes the fact that society has finally retreated from this concept and has proceeded beyond the frontiers of the customary practices in marriage and dating. There are certain surveys that confirm the fact that few women who were single at the time of their midlife are turning to younger men for a relationship.

Various elements are responsible for the age-related heterogamous relationship among people. According to (Atkinson & Glass 685) one of the major reasons for the change is the escalation in gender equality world-wide. With the gender equality, women have become more equal to men and not ready to follow the age-old patterns and customs and thereby neglecting the society accepted condition of older man and younger woman. (Shehan et al. 291) opines that education plays a prominent part deciding whether a woman will choose an age-heterogamous relationship or not. Numerous surveys done in this aspect has come up with the theory that a swelling in education can be vied in correlation with a rise in the inclination among women to engage in heterogamous relationships. This can be attributed to the fact that the more a woman is educated, the more she takes time to decide and marry and there- by reducing their chances in finding a potential mate. This ends up in her choosing a much younger man as her partner. Besides, they may acquire more unprejudiced notions about dating, marriage and relationships in general. (Shehan et al. 295). finds marital history as another factor in women choosing age-heterogamous relationships. They are of the opinion that women who opt for second marriages are more prone to age-older relationships. Even women who remain single into their middle age are susceptible to marry people who are younger to them and this trend is more common among women than men (Bytheway, 923).

There seems to be very less studies done in heterogamous relationships, even though it is very frequent no-a-days and there is debate or discussions dealing with the problems that such couples may face and go through. There have been certain discussions around this topic that older-women tend to be content and happy since in case of older woman and younger man, the power dynamics will shift towards significant equality. Any relationship, that enjoys substantial equality, is correlated to happier couples and the agreement more equitable too. Older the woman, dominant will be her position in a relationship and many of the men do have this tendency with submitting to older women as a submissive. Along with that, a strong feeling of empowerment too is a factor that underpin their satisfaction and may be this feeling of

empowerment permits women to achieve more of what they want and need, emotionally and physically.

According to (Seskin and Ziegler) many women are of the opinion that that the reason for them in choosing and their readiness to indulge in such socially unsatisfactory relationship is the appeal and c

harm of their partners. Women find younger men youthful and the physical desirability that goes along with it. Along with youth comes their activeness and liveliness that older women find attractive enough to date them. Few women find the involvement in such relationships as helping them in feeling young as the men are not in the same bracket of ageing and the young men too find it stressless since they do not have to worry about ageing.

Along with the advantages, the age difference has hoisted certain issues of insecurity too for the women, bordering attractiveness, in case of intimacy. According to Seskin and Ziegler there have been women who reported about feeling insecure about the attractiveness that which is connected with youth even though they may be in good shape and the age difference is not something that which such couples could totally forget and live. Certain studies conducted in this area also revealed the fact that, they are forced to go through tremendous pressure from their previous children and partners if they get involved in age-heterogamous relationships. Most women complain about even their friends are not accepting and understanding their involvement with younger men. Women having children from previous relationships report that their children often find it embarrassing and obnoxious of the age difference and all these factors plays a key role in determining and defining what is acceptable for the society and what is not and women-older relationships explicitly breach the bars set up by the society and culture.

Financial status and position of women in the society also plays a detrimental role in women-older relationships. Surveys conducted posit the fact that there are many women who finds it bad for making more money than their partners and being well-established and flourishing in their careers. This aspect raises major issues while dating young men, leading to conflicts. According to Brings and Winter (2000), few studies conducted in this area revealed the fact that in woman-older relationships, the augmentative stage of the male too is a decisive factor. Younger men possess different tastes than older women and most of them will be hesitant to commit themselves in a serious relationship. Unlike older men, young men find it difficult to enter into a commitment phase, since they will be usually clueless about who they are and what they want out of life.

Popular culture and media have always been interested in relationships where the woman is much older than the man and have come up with this rather derogatory and a slang term called 'cougar' This term has been used to characterize the older, single women who chased young men, like that of a predator. Sometimes this term ranged from empowerment to offensive and in simple words, cougar is a woman who is above 35 years of age and chases after young men who may be a decade younger to her. On a biased note, there exists no such parallel term signifying an older man trying to date a younger woman. Usually, older women dating younger men is mentioned as 'May-December' relationships due to the age disparity.

Hollywood and Age-Gap Romances

The years following 2020 witnessed a growing popularity in Hollywood with movies being made around the highly problematic trend of 'age-gap' in the romance movie genre. The age-old theme of same-minded people crossing paths and falling for each other and that too in a society accepted way has been the norm that Hollywood has been following so far. With the arrival of the various OTT platforms have resulted in the production of certain movies that did not go well with certain audiences because of its questionable and controversial themes where both older men falling for a younger woman as well as an old woman dating a much younger

man. But the real change has happened with a sudden rush in the romantic movies' genre, dealing with older woman and younger man. There have come out a plethora of movies where older women are exploring their emotional and sexual lives through younger men which is an outright turn-around of the previous Hollywood trends. These romance movies' lead includes big names like Nicole Kidman, Anne Hathaway, Brook Shields etc.

Traditionally, Hollywood has often paired older men with much younger women on-screen and that too not just in romantic movies. There has been a trend in the Hollywood film industry to normalise these age-gaps through the frequency in which they happened. Patriarchy decided everything in the industry and it kind of eclipsed the roles in almost all the movies. But one should not forget the skill and talent of these male actors to visualise very convincingly, the chemistry and romance between them and much younger female co-stars. The major reason behind is the common opinion of the creepy element attached to the plot in the 'older men and younger women' movies. Beautiful women in such movies were often highlighted for their looks and often discarded their skill aspect. With time, Hollywood has moved away from this tendency in the last few decades with the opening up of meaningful roles for older women and gender reversals, where their skill is explored and showcased beautifully.

Actor-gender flips started occurring in the Hollywood movies, especially in the romance genre, where subversion of the traditional norm became the custom with middle aged women exploring their lives and sexuality. It is quite surprising to see the focus being shifted to 40 plus women, getting a second chance at love and life especially in circumstances where the woman is older than the man. This 'reverse' age-gap dynamic has become prevalent in many of the romcom movies like *The Idea of You*, *Family Affairs*, *Babygirl*, *Mother of the Bride*, *Lonely Planet*, *No Hard Feelings* etc.

The Idea of You and the Forbidden Love

The year 2017 saw actor cum writer Robin Lee publish a work titled '*The Idea of You*' which instantly became a runaway hit and later in 2024 adapted into a movie and directed by Michael Showalter. It revolves around Solene Marchand, an art gallery owner and a single mother who falls for a boy, who's part of a boy band. The entire plot of the adaptation revolves around a talented divorced mother having feelings for a British singer who is in his 20s. Even though much criticism got raised for diminishing the boldness of the woman protagonist and changing the coloured characters into white actors in the movie, the middle-aged women audience found the movie as a portal to a romantic universe where their fantasies got fulfilled in a particular way.

The character Solene portrayed by Anne Hathaway epitomises that woman who falls for a man half her age and regains her confidence after a rather painful divorce and while in her mid-age too. Her marital history would have been something disturbing and that must be the reason why she decided to see a man younger than her. She was hesitant to respond to the romantic advancements of Campbell initially but gives in ultimately for his activeness and physical charisma. The way Campbell treats her is also commendable, since an already empowered woman like Solene, could actually feel the shifting power dynamics in their relationship and ultimately to gender equality. The initial romantic rendezvous was void of insecurities but social acceptance and pressure from her daughter and ex-partner makes her move back from the boy that she loves. There is an instance in the movie where Solene feels the heat of her actions while globe-trotting with Campbell. When one of his band mates' girlfriend points out the age disparity, she flees back to her home and to her comfort zone.

Insecurity is one of the major issues that age-heterogamous couples go through. When one of the partners is old and even though good looking, insecurity may creep inside periodically about the younger partner. What Solene finds stiflingly unavoidable is the celebrity status of Campbell and the unwanted attention that he gets wherever he goes. That attention

sowed seeds of insecurity in her mind and the fact that the world will never accept her as someone proper for him creates chaos inside her. Along with that, her daughter too finds it unbearable with her school-mates making fun of her mother's romantic escapade. All these made her to break off what is that which binds her to him and asking him to take five years off to know whether he feels the same about her then also. The movie ends with a positive note with Campbell visiting her gallery post five years and their faces beaming with joy. The emotional and the sexual contentment and satisfaction that Solene goes through after being with Campbell is worth picturised as worth taking the risk. He is not ready to acknowledge or being answerable to the world for their age disparity unlike her. But all in all, the movie *The Idea of You* is a clear-cut subversion of the patriarchal plans of Hollywood.

Babygirl: Dominant/Submissive Magic

Directed by Halina Reijn, the movie *Babygirl* is neither a movie belonging to the genre of romance nor a comedy, but rather an erotic dramedy. This movie, kind of, follows the path of the blockbuster trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but popular opinion is that of this movie being devoid of actual emotion and soul. The female protagonist, Romy, played by Nicole Kidman, who is a corporate CEO, falls for an intern in her company. Romy is somebody who is very much rooted in her family affairs and Antonio Banderas plays as her husband. The beginning of the movie portrays a normal western society, where the parents are mid-aged and thriving. Her relatively calm and well-organised life gets turned upside down with the arrival of an intern, Samuel, played by Harris Dickinson. Kidman is double his age and he initiates her into a BDSM kind of dominant/submissive pattern, tinged with eroticism and sexual gratification.

The reason for Romy to indulge in such a dom/sub relationship, as she herself admits, is her upbringing where she spent most of her childhood in community living where the remains of American Puritanism has withheld her and controlled her sexual fantasies and cravings. The shifting of the power dynamics is so relevant in this movie that Romy, being the CEO, becomes a mere submissive in Samuel's hands that she forgets the moral consequences of such an illicit, amoral and an extra-marital affair. Already, Kidman is an empowered woman, who's equally established theatre director husband poses no insecurity in her. She is drawn towards Samuel's active, attractive and young persona where he blindly reads her as someone who prefers to be ordered and treated like a submissive. The fact that whatever that which she is having is socially unacceptable derails her now and then, yet, she enters into a trance where giddy deliriousness enraptures her with self-discovery.

When Samuel offers her a 'Babygirl' tag instead of a 'girlboss', Romy accepts it with thrill for satiating her kinky side that explores her limits. Romy is given an opportunity to probe into the various shades of docility. Kidman's character accepts the element 'power' as being the reason that prevented her from obtaining what she needs and meeting Samuel helps her in shifting the power dynamics where she is being treated as a submissive and the intern as the dominant. Samuel literally helps her in exploring her sexuality in various levels and to quench the hollowness in her, created by her non-repulsive life at home. The swapping of the power dynamics among Romy and Samuel explores the common fetish sub-culture in a subtle way. The scene where she wants to be treated like a dog and have all her autonomy being taken away from her points towards examining the nuances of the taboo attached to kinky relationships. Lust predominates Romy's intimate times with Samuel and the thrill of having an extra-marital affair has been expressed through this movie. In short, the age-older concept has been celebrated and non-solo pleasuring of the woman character drives the movie in turning upside down the age-old norm of age disparity among couples.

A Family Affair: Second chance love

The year 2024 saw another age-gap romance by Richard LaGravenese where Nicole Kidman, yet again romanced a younger Zac Efron. Brooks (Kidman) is an author, a single mother and a widow who is having a daughter, Zara, working for Chris (Efron), a celebrity actor. Brooks has been a wonderful mother who is so into her daughter and her things that she forgot to live for herself and the movie begins with her trying to write another book and get it published. The meeting between them makes the movie worth watching and their age gap which is around sixteen years turns it more interesting and exhilarating. It becomes evident that the right woman (Brooks) in any man's life is going to make him realise his true self and his shortcomings. Being a celebrity made Chris get scared of relationships and he always runs away once things fall in the right place.

In this movie too, it is the daughter who finds their relationship amoral or not suitable. Since she (Zara) works as a manager for Chris and knows him inside out, she really wanted to protect her mother from any potential heart-break. But Brooks feels liberated and satisfied both emotionally and physically with Chris. Brooks symbolises that woman who is not afraid of giving happiness a second chance. She feels not at all threatened or intimidated by Chris' celebrity status or age. She has been a woman whose world revolved around her daughter after her husband's demise and she found the relationship with a much younger man during her middle-age as a breath of fresh air and completely rejuvenating. Being a writer and as a woman, she is totally aware about the equal status that each gender enjoys and she finds her attraction towards Chris as a pathway to self-realisation and contentment.

Unlike the movie *The Idea of You*, this movie female lead is a widow, who has mourned enough for her late partner and she is free to pursue her life and happiness as she finds it right and she is contented with the feeling that she lived for her daughter after her partner's untimely death. She is equally attracted towards a young man who is active and charming. Age disparity never comes in between them as an obstacle except that fact that with youth and the celebrity status, comes the hesitation to settle down and be committed. Social acceptability never bothered them and as any Hollywood movie belonging to the romantic genre, *A Family Affair* too ends with a happy note of a pleasurable future for both the man and the woman.

Conclusion

In media and popular culture, the phenomenon of couples where the woman is older than the man has attained a high prominence in the last few decades. Hollywood has followed the patriarchal trend where a significant age gap of man with the woman as a normal thing. The subversion of this trend can be seen in the current few decades with women coming out of the 'cougar' status and claiming their position in the society as worthy enough to be considered empowered and liberated. Even though an emerging trend, after 1980s, this trend where age-older women dating younger men has been normalised through various narratives like literature, cinema etc. There are issues revolving around the longevity of such relationships but there happens to be certain social and economic factors that are responsible for the occurrence of this type of partnering arrangement. Most of the women in such relationships are well-educated and most of the times, well-paid than men. The further growth of such heterogamous relationships among couples and age-older woman will likely help in making disappear the term 'cougar' as a negative term or at least change its current connotations.

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