

### 3 Midlife from a Philosophical Perspective

Anup Dhar

This chapter builds on my own experiences – or perhaps, non-experiences, absent experiences of midlife. I was never acutely aware of the idea of midlife. I never felt: here *is* midlife. Which age would I call midlife? Is midlife a stage in the biological aging of a subject? Is 45–64 years of age midlife, as has often been suggested? Isn't it too long a range: 19 *years* of midlife! What is it a 'mid' to? 'Mid' to current life expectancy? But life expectancy has increased from about 32 years in 1900 to about 71 years in 2021. Between 1901 and 1930, midlife was believed to begin at 35. By 1950, the perception of life and midlife had changed. People were now living longer. The possibility of youth and youthfulness appeared to be extended. Women at 40 were no longer seen as middle-aged. By the 1950s, midlife looked to begin at age 45 and lasted until 64! This was a significant shift from figures in the mid-1850s. What should the figure be *now*? Do we need the concept of midlife any more? Can it be post-fixed by *crisis* any more? Or do we need a more creative and complex take on midlife in particular and life in general? The most important phrase in the previous sentence would be 'life in general'. If life in general and the time of life or the timeline of life (let's call it the *temporal* axis) is conceptualized differently, midlife – as one segment of life – would also be conceptualized differently; or could be seen as nearly redundant. Further, what is midlife along a *spatial* axis and in a spatial sense? Would there be differences in conceptualizations of life and midlife in Europe or in Japan? Or in sub-Saharan Africa? Would *subject positions* – of class, caste, race and gender – affect what would present itself as midlife in a culture? Do we need to *sexuate* the idea of midlife – where *sexuation* refers to being 'unconscious of gender-sexuality'? Would women experience midlife differently? Would a Dalit subject, a black survivor of apartheid, experience midlife differently? Or not at all? Midlife thus requires thinking along three axes:

1. Temporal Axis of Life (one could call it the *temporalization of midlife crisis*);
2. Spatial Axis of Culture (one could call it the *spatialization of midlife crisis*);
3. Subject Positions (one could call it the *subjectivization of midlife crisis*).

In other words, I do not see midlife crisis as either a *given* or as *naturalized* stage of life. I see midlife crisis as open to problematization and as a historical-social process; and not just as a biological or psychological fact. Biology, psychology, sociology, cultural studies,<sup>1</sup> economics and philosophy of life need to come together in a true interdisciplinarity to make sense of midlife crisis.

#### The Concept of 'Crisis': *Sexuating* Midlife

Let us also reflect for a while on the concept of 'crisis'. Crisis is invoked in economics in the forms of crisis of overproduction in capitalism or financial crisis. Crisis is invoked in medicine: life in crisis as in a myocardial infarction. The term 'crisis' is usually understood as a diagnostic category, whether of a person or of society. Further, does the first glimpse of grey hair symbolize much more than just loss of melanin; does it announce the onset of a deterioration that leads first to old age and ultimately to death? However, 'crisis' in classical Greek (*krisis*) gestured towards political critique, critique of norms or normative dimensions: kind of *putting to crisis* the established paradigm or the normalized. Do we see midlife crisis as a *descriptive designation* of a catastrophe, or as critique of the normalizations of the larger social?

The question of *sexual difference* becomes important here. Erikson's stage pertaining to 'generativity' needs to be *sexuated*. Is midlife a stage of male fatigue and grumpy discontent about the achievements of life? Is it merely about the compromise due to aging that haunts the autonomy and physical strength of the 'manly man'? Is it about the anxiety that pervades the male illusion of vigour and masculinity, as bodies take newer forms (not necessarily begin to *wane*, as is the popular perception). The more that manliness became associated with physicality and power, the greater the threat to a midlife man's sense of mastery. By the end of the 20th century, age-based male emasculation had deepened. Retirement schemes formalized the idea that a man lost power and status as he grew older.

Based on the psychobiographs of 115 women, Sheehy (1976; see Schmidt, 2020) shows how midlife could also be seen as a period of self-fulfilment and creative self-discovery through the dissolution of extant gender roles at the onset of middle age; in women's lives, midlife crisis gestures towards a *critique* of the work-and-life styles of the patriarchal family. So while for men midlife could be an experience of wilting and decline, for women midlife could be the birthing of a new idiom of life that is free from the confines of the patriarchal ideas of duties and obligations, ideas that had ruled the 'daughter-wife-mother' triad in the woman.

Sara Ahmed (2021) connects midlife to the conception of 'living [at last] a feminist life': 'In the middle of my life ... I left a certain kind of life and embraced a new one.' For Ahmed, the act of rejecting one life – the patriarchal one – and choosing another typifies the feminist critique of traditional lifestyles as the only right choices. In this sense, she argues, 'it is good to think



of life as always potentially in crisis'. It is good to keep asking the Socratic question (the Socratic question is also the psychoanalytic question): *who am I; how to live?*<sup>22</sup>

Now that I am older ..., my life is not a speculative life, or a blueprint for a future life. It's just my life. This oldness is a good feeling – a feeling of nothing more to be decided. What happens now will be something other than the strain of making a decision, or the stress of fighting with nature .... You start life all over again, this time with *yourself*. (pg- 179).

I hence see midlife in terms of the ancient Plotinian (Plōtīnos, c. 204/205–270 CE) activity of a sculptor, chipping away at related blocks of the marble of self, or accretions, in order to find, as in a new self-becoming. The movement in such practices of the self is thus from a *mirror of being* to a *canvas of becoming*. In the psychoanalytic setting also, the analyst serves as the mirror for the *analysand* (the person in analysis). The analysand sees her motivational, aggressive, nurturant, envious, and erotic architecture (also *arche-texture*) etc. in the analyst-as-mirror-of-self. The invitation to the analysand is to work through the extant architecture and engender self-transformative realignments. The urging in this chapter on midlife is to use the same mirror of self/being as a *canvas of a new be-coming*: as Sara Ahmed does.

### Individual Dis-ease as a Symptom of a Larger Social Pathology

This section will be a further reflection on the question of 'crisis'. It will de-pathologize the concept of (midlife) crisis. What is crisis? When is an 'x' seen as crisis? I see '*individual dis-ease*' as a *symptom of a larger social (at times cultural) pathology*. I do not pathologize the individual. I hence designate disease as dis-ease, as un-ease, as suffering. For me, individual suffering is a symptom of larger *social pathology*. At times, not just individuals, but larger societies suffer. One can designate it as *social suffering*. Is individual midlife crisis a symptom of larger social pathologies in a neoliberal age, in an age of uncertain and extremely competitive cut-throat job environments, environments that are marked in turn by the hard and cruel logic of output, outcome and target. I hence see midlife crisis – even if it exists in some individuals – as a symptom of a larger social pathology. Without addressing the larger social pathology of the atomization of human beings, of narcissistic attention to self (bordering on self-obsession), of the aggressive teleology of achievement-success, we will not be able to reach an expanded understanding of midlife crisis.

This opens up multiple questions with respect to midlife. Is midlife a biological stage? Is it a psychological stage? Or is it a biopsychosocial stage? Is it a stage of decline? Is it a stage of wilting? Is *senescence* the only way to understand life after 45? Is the idea of 'midlife crisis' a fiction? Is it at all a *depressive crisis* (just like adolescence has been conventionally seen as a psychotic crisis or the crisis of micro-psychosis)? Is what we have hitherto seen

as midlife, paradoxically, the *prime of life*? How does one revisit midlife as not being an impossible attempt at preserving younger days? Why preserve? Why remain frozen in younger days? Why not *grow*? Do we need to revisit phrases like 'biological clock is ticking' with respect to recent advances in studies in neuroplasticity? With the discipline of psychology at the doorstep of a new revolution (let's call it the *affective turn*) do we need to rethink midlife – which could be seen as a stage of 'mature affective attunement', even if there are a few facial wrinkles? This chapter will thus offer a counter-hegemonic perspective on midlife. It would also like to argue that it is possible to invert the extant philosophy of midlife through a close reading of, say, Rabindranath Tagore's *Nijer Katha* (imperfectly translated as *My Life* or *Narratives of My Self*) or Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*. *Nijer Katha*, for example – at a surface level – is a collection of Tagore's letters. But at a deeper level it is Tagore's *auto-psycho-biograph of midlife*. In this book of letters, Tagore reflects deeply on his own self at age 65. He even seems to suggest that *Jivansmriti* – his *A Book of Memory* (Kakar, 2014) – is not his true autobiography. These letters written at around age 65 are. It is in these letters that Tagore explores the architecture of his self; he manages to speak at ease about himself, about the uncanny lanes and bylanes that inhabit the self. Gandhi wrote *My Experiments with Truth* between 1925 and 1929. Gandhi was 56 years old when he started publishing these weekly instalments in his journal *Navjivan*. It would not be out of context to foreground how Gandhi introduced *My Experiments with Truth* (2018, p. 45):

*it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography*. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. *But I shall not mind*, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the *reader*. My experiments in the political field are now known, not only to India, but to a certain extent to the 'civilized' world. For me, they have not much value; and the title of 'Mahatma' that they have won for me has, therefore, even less; often the title has deeply pained me; and there is not a moment I can recall when it may be said to have tickled me. But I should certainly like to narrate my experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field. If the experiments are really spiritual, then there can be no room for self-praise. they can only add to my humility. the more I reflect and look back on the past, the more vividly do I feel my limitations ... the experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which everyone may carry on his own experiments according to his own inclinations and capacity.



One can see this as Gandhi's reflection on what we are now designating 'midlife'. He has a balanced view of midlife. He is not overwhelmed by what he has achieved: 'my experiments in the political field are now known, not only to India, but to a certain extent to the "civilized" world. For me, *they have not much value*; and the title of "Mahatma" that they have won for me has, therefore, *even less*.' He is also not overwhelmed by *limitations*: 'if the experiments are really spiritual, then there can be no room for self-praise. they can only add to my humility. The more I reflect and look back on the past, the more vividly do I feel my limitations.' Yet these limitations could serve as 'illustrations, in the light of which everyone may carry on his [or her] own experiments according to his [or her] own inclinations and capacity'. Gandhi also sees the past as the story of numerous experiments *with* truth. He was not conducting experiments to *reach* scientific truth, which is the paradigmatic method in the natural sciences. Gandhi was experimenting with the truths of life or the *dharma*s or *dharma-sankats* in life – say, for example, *should* one be violent, even if one were to correct a wrongdoing.

Take the *radical rewriting* of the Bhagvad Gita by Gandhi. What is the fundamental self-doubt or *dharma-sankat* that haunts the text of the psychic in the Bhagvad Gita? The psychic teleology in the Bhagvad Gita has been sparked off by an 'affront to a menstruating woman in the blind king's court of justice', and it is now about to be avenged by the collective of husbands – the Pandavas. However, there is a catch or halt or deferral to this seamless narrative. One of the five husbands – *Arjun* – is haunted by a near-primal doubt that could be so characteristic of the conception of *dharma-sankat* (What should I do? Should I kill? Can I kill?). Not ordinary killing. Can I kill my relatives, my brothers, my teacher Dronacharya, my grandfather Bhishma, especially, even if I am here to avenge the trauma inflicted on 'my' woman? The commonsensical answer would be 'yes, you have to kill' to forestall further harm and auxiliary destruction by a group of marauding men – the Kauravas. Faced with such a *dharma-sankat*, Gandhi's answer, however, would be a resounding *no*: 'satyagraha is essentially a weapon of the truthful. A satyagrahi is pledged to non-violence, and, unless people observe it in thought, word and deed, I cannot offer mass satyagraha.'<sup>3</sup> Violence for Gandhi led only to *double destruction*. Destruction of both aggressed and aggressor. Physical death for the aggressed. Moral death for the aggressor. Violence only led to a *radical nothingness*. The *sunyata*, the *void* at the end of the war of Kurukshetra, stands testimony to such an all-consuming nothingness. Midlife had perhaps taken Gandhi to a much deeper reflection on *dharma* and had brought him to an insight (*militant non-violence*, to be precise [Erikson, 1993]) that stood against commonsense defence and legitimization of violence.

### Historicizing-culturalizing Midlife

This section of the chapter will first *historicize* the idea of 'midlife'. It will build on the text *Aging by the Book* by Kay Heath (2009) to show how

during the Victorian era, midlife (which was hitherto seen as the 'prime of life') was conceptualized as a period of decline in the West. Was there a gender angle to this shift? This was a time when single women were seen to be nearing middle age at 30, mothers in their forties were expected to become sexless, and fortyish men were seen to be in anguish over whether their time for love had gone by. The chapter will argue that our current negative attitude towards midlife springs from Victorian roots (the word 'midlife' first appeared in an English-language dictionary in 1895). The 18th century was an especially crucial period in the 'history of age' because demographic changes such as lengthening lifespan affected definitions of old age. The elderly began to be seen as a separate cohort in the overall population, age came to be defined chronologically rather than by functional capacity and fitness, and the concept of elders as dependents or 'burdens' on society developed, setting the stage for 19th-century pension schemes. In the past, people never kept track of one's exact age; people would round the number to the nearest decade. But with the Enlightenment, more emphasis was placed on record keeping, and ages became known with greater accuracy (see Ottaway, 2008, p. 53). Further, women near the age of menopause, were described with images of lost 'bloom', withering, and fading, past their reproductive prime. Women not only aged into midlife earlier than men in Victorian England, but were also considered elderly sooner (Ottaway, 2008, p. 35).

One hence needs to engage with the concept of 'age' in both philosophy and psychology (and not see age as biological; psychological and psychoanalytical age may be distinctly different from biological age; one may be biologically 50 and yet be childlike psychologically). The chapter thus sees age as not just culturally constructed but as a philosophical concept with psychological roots. Further, is midlife crisis a crisis of the social, and not of the individual? Is midlife pathology a symptom of a larger social pathology, as I have suggested above? Is the subject of midlife in crisis? Or is it society and society's conservatism that puts the subject of midlife in crisis? Does life end at 40, or does it begin at 40? Does one then need to look at midlife *beyond* the standard binarism: decline and rise, end and beginning – which Tagore and Gandhi were trying to do, perhaps, with partial success? This chapter hence foregrounds the importance of the phenomenological turn in our understanding of midlife. In the process, it opens up the axes of embodiment (the 'body-mind') and the difficult task of 'life-writing'. It also argues for the importance of psycho-biographs of midlife – which are psychoanalytic biographs (without, of course, the entrenched ableism and masculinism of Freud and Lacan) – and where the focus is on listening to, communicating and relating with the subject of midlife.<sup>4</sup> Is midlife, then, an uncanny experience of different kinds of en-able-ness? Does a close reading of Tagore's *Nijer Katha* – as suggested above – take us to such a psychobiograph of *midlife en-able-ness* – 'en-able-ness', because I do not see midlife as disable-ness, but as a different kind of en-able-ness?



Midlife *en-able-ness* is missed in many Westernized cultures, primarily because Westernized cultures have become ever more youth-oriented, increasingly devalue ageing, in the process pushing back the years of *en-able-ness* to earlier stages in the life course. I argue that today's hyper age-consciousness, with its aura of a fate worse than death, is a dogma we have inherited from the Victorians, our predecessors in midlife trauma. Age is universal, a fact of existence for all living things, but one understood differently by each society and era. The idea of midlife hence requires *culturalizing*: 'whatever happens in the body, humans beings are aged by culture first of all' (Schmidt, 2020: 172). While a grandmother's wrinkle in indigenous contexts is interpreted by her granddaughters as a marker of increased status and wisdom, the same wrinkle in hyper-Westernized contexts is read as a sign of loss of youth and a proof of decay. Westernized cultures place great stress on chronological years, and transition from one life stage to another often is discussed in terms of significant birthdays: is one 'over the hill' at 30 or 40 or finally and surely at 50? There is a constant sense of time running out. For men especially, turning 40 meant saying goodbye to impossible dreams, taming and re-channelling the ambition of youth. Nothing could dislodge the stereotype once reserved for men: stalled career, fading youth and listless marriage.

Non-Westernized cultures, however, emphasize other factors. For example, progression through social roles according to community status, including alterations in the lives of one's children, may be more significant than chronological age or biological symptoms (Shweder, 1998, p. xi). Shweder quotes Sudhir Kakar to show how in semi-rural India, one enters the Hindi stage of *burbapa* or abstinence at 50, and when the first child marries, the parents begin a 'psychological transition ... into middle age'. Some may even cease their sexual relationship, because 'It is thought to be polluting and undignified for two generations to copulate under the same roof' (Shweder, 1998, p. xii).

Westernized Indians connected to the circuits of Western academia – socialized into the culture of the discipline of philosophy or psychology – tend to view their own temporal journey in terms of Western ideas of age and ageing, including Western ideas of loss and regret, success and failure, the lives you wanted and the life you have. Western ideas of mortality and finitude, ideas about the temporal structure of human life come to colonize us. We begin to view ourselves in terms of the premium put on youth. One single strand of grey hair or one solitary wrinkle on the face upsets us. Polivka (2000, p. 227), in an article titled 'Postmodern Aging and the Loss of Meaning', quotes Featherstone and Hepworth (1998) to point to, paradoxically, the *end of ageing* (let us call it the optimistic<sup>5</sup> view):

In fact, they are optimistic about the capacity of biotechnology to slow or even reverse the aging process and create the conditions for a long midlife period extending far into what is now considered old age as we enter a new techno-culture. These developments will make it possible

for 'old' people to take full advantage of the multiple, shifting identities characteristic of postmodern culture, especially those 'old' people with the resources to consume the growing array of medical procedures, technological devices, travel options and cultural goods produced by a high growth, information-based global capitalist economy. According to this perspective, at least implicitly, the aging experience is, in itself, meaningless, so nothing essential is lost in the changes Featherstone/Hepworth describe and endorse. They see greater freedom and room for agency in a greatly lengthened middle age ending in a 'deep' old age, presumably some time past eighty or ninety and older.

Tagore and Gandhi take us beyond this excessively optimistic view as also the ubiquitous view of decline and degeneration to what could be designated as the *reflective phenomenological view of midlife*. For Tagore and Gandhi, midlife is not seen as a life stage. For them, midlife is an existential *question*. When one asks the questions in all earnestness 'Who am I?', 'How should I live?', 'What is the purpose of life?', 'What may I hope for?', one is not just engaging with the question of midlife, but also with the temporality of one's multiple orientations to the past and the future, including one's relation to unrealized possibilities or counterfactuals.

### The Mystic Writing Pad of Midlife

Freud's metaphor of the 'mystic writing pad' (Freud, 1923–1925) can offer an interesting way of looking at, making sense of and tolerating the experience of midlife as also setting up an equally interesting way of looking at the relationship between (a) the accumulated traces of the past, including traumatic marks of the past, that cannot be erased but which form a complex and uncanny cartograph and (b) possible new life inscriptions that can be birthed creatively.

The mystic writing pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a worked edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet; it itself consists of *two* layers which can be detached from each other except at their two ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin, translucent wax. To make use of the mystic writing pad, one writes up the celluloid portion of the covering sheet which rests on the waxed slab. No pencil or chalk is necessary, since the writing does not depend on material being deposited on the receptive surface.<sup>6</sup> A pointed stylus scratches the surface, and the impressions constitute the 'writing'. At the points which the stylus touches, it presses the lower surface of the waxed work onto the wax slab, and the grooves are visible as dark writing on the otherwise smooth, whitish-grey surface of the celluloid. If one wishes to erase what one has written, all that is necessary is to peel the double covering sheet from the wax slab; the close contact between the celluloid and the wax slab at the places which have been scratched (on which



the visibility of the writing depended) is thus brought to an end. The surface is now clear of writing and ready to receive fresh inscriptions. Is midlife such a two-layered moment and experience of life, comprising of (a) the hauntings of past writings or inscriptions and (b) possible present writings or new inscriptions? Does midlife run into crisis because one is haunted by past writings and life looks bereft of possible new writings? The metaphor of the mystic writing pad offers a picture of life that can receive perceptions but retain no permanent trace of them so that the life can act like a clean slate to every new perception while the permanent traces of the excitations which have been received are preserved in 'mnemonic systems' lying behind the perceptual systems. Life and midlife is thus endowed with a 'double system' contained in a single differentiated apparatus: a *perceptually available innocence* and an *infinite resource of traces* and the doubled up process of 'repetition and erasure' (Derrida, 1978, p. 226). Does midlife run into crisis when there is *only* repetition and no erasure? Does midlife run into crisis when there is *only* retention of past traces and no available innocence for the *new*?

The inscriptions *received* on the resin or wax *cannot be lost altogether*; and although such inscriptions would not qualify as legible writing in the ordinary sense of the term, they would still constitute a *script* of the past – albeit an uncanny one. Whenever one is writing, one is writing on the *already written* script, one is *getting written* by the uncanny script of the past, of youth. The new and old, the present and the past, the fresh and the retained have to come to a dialogue to give shape to what Tagore and Gandhi birthed as a *reflective phenomenological view of midlife*, a view that was neither metaphysical about the past nor about the present, about the old nor about the new. *New* writing does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the *legacy* or *past* within us which always already keeps watch over our new writing, be it internal or external. The always already written becomes meaningful only in the context of new writing. The mystic writing pad as metaphor of midlife offers us a Möbius strip of the old and the new, the past and the present.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Neither chronological, biological nor sociological factors alone are sufficient for defining midlife. Only by placing various aspects of midlife within a cultural context can we begin to understand its spectrum of meanings.
- 2 Philosophy has moved away from the old Socratic questions 'Who am I? How should I live?' The current question of philosophy is mostly focused on the 'nature of the world', or 'what is true' and 'what is false'. It is not directed to the 'self'. Questions are directed towards questions like 'is it a snake or is it a rope?' They are rarely directed to questions like 'Who am I? What are my difficulties and roadblocks? How can I overcome them? How should I live to nurture my creativity?' Philosophy as a 'way of life' (and not a way of knowing the world) has also been seen as *therapia* (see Dhar, 2018 for the turn to *practical* and *transformative* philosophy).

- 3 'I had in my speech described Western civilization as being, unlike the Eastern, predominantly based on force. The questioners pinned me to my faith, and one of them – the captain so far as I recollect – said to me: "supposing the whites carry out their threats, how will you stand by your principle of non-violence?" To which I replied: "I hope god will give me the courage and the sense to forgive them and to refrain from bringing them to law. I have no anger against them. I am only sorry for their ignorance and their narrowness. I know that they sincerely believe that what they are doing today is right and proper. I have no reason therefore to be angry with them' (Gandhi, 2018, p. 319).
- 4 In 1965, psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques published the essay that coined the phrase: 'Death and the Mid-life Crisis'. In dissecting the crisis, Jaques quotes a patient in his mid-thirties: 'Up till now,' he said, 'life has seemed an endless upward slope, with nothing but the distant horizon in view. Now suddenly I seem to have reached the crest of the hill, and there stretching ahead is the downward slope with the end of the road in sight – far enough away it's true – but there is death observably present at the end.'
- 5 In 1999, the *Washington Post* ran a special section titled 'Midlife without the Crisis'. In the *New York Times*, the headline was 'New Study Finds Middle Age Is the Prime of Life'.
- 6 Writing does not depend on material, ink or chalk that is being actually deposited upon the receptive surface. Writing depends on the *impression* the material makes on the receptive surface.
- 7 The three-dimensional figure of the Möbius strip subverts standard Euclidean experiences of space and the notion of 'inside' and 'outside'. It looks like there are two sides to the Möbius strip, but it has only one. At a particular point of time, at the level of the localized experience of time, there appear to be two sides and the two sides can apparently be distinguished, but when the whole of the strip is traversed, it becomes clear that they are in fact continuous. A shorter temporality offers two experiences of spatiality; a longer temporality offers one. Further, because the two sides are continuous, it is possible to cross over from inside to outside, and from one side to the other. Yet, when one traverses the length of the Möbius strip, it is not possible to pinpoint at which precise point one has crossed over from the inside to the outside or vice versa. The figure does not just problematize binary oppositions but shows how apparently opposed terms – like old and new – could be understood as *mutually constitutive* terms (see Dhar, 2021).

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