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**Abstract**

This article focuses on two female ensemble dramas *Tenko* (BBC/Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981-1985) and *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012...) and uses an ageing studies lens to explore the way that the ensemble format provides a particularly rich insight into the relationship between women, ageing and understandings of women's identity over time. The two dramas provide complex and evocative links between the spaces and times of British politics, culture and society in different historical periods enabling a highly nuanced engagement with the ideological constructions of concepts of age and women's gendered identities.

**Key words**

**Ageing, space, time, female ensemble dramas, television**

**Ageing across space and time: Exploring concepts of ageing and identity in the female ensemble dramas *Tenko* (BBC/Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981-1985) and *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012 ...).**

*Tenko* (BBC/Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981-1985) and *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012...) were created and broadcast in the UK just over thirty years apart. In simple chronological and generational terms this suggests a significant passage of time; a period when the twentieth century shifted to the twenty first century and new generational groupings, such as Millennials (1977-1994) and Generation Z (1995-2012), emerged into public consciousness.

Thinking about the cultural organisation of time, space and age is central to the following exploration of the two series. Although separated by thirty one years in terms of production and reception, both series are united across time and space in multiple ways. Both texts are female ensemble dramas and both are presented in a flexi drama form that employs an unusually wide range of female characters of diverse backgrounds and ages that foreground many of the complexities of identity formation for women during the respective production periods. Exploiting a range of characterisations brought to the screen by their female ensemble casts, *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* open up impressive engagements with intersectionalities of age, experience, politics and identity in variable distinctive historical spaces, Southeast Asia during the Second World War and Britain in the late 1950s/early 60s where the dramas are respectively set, and also within the shifting contexts of reception produced by broadcast repeats as much as multiple viewing platforms. Despite the intercession of just over thirty years between first broadcasts, the two texts nevertheless share some remarkably analogous political production contexts. Both texts were produced during periods of populist Conservative government; *Tenko* was broadcast during Margret Thatcher's first and second terms in office and *Call the Midwife* during David Cameron's Conservative Coalition government. Indeed, at the point of writing, and in anticipation of the next *Call the Midwife* Christmas Special (due to be broadcast on December 25<sup>th</sup> 2016, followed in 2017 by series six), both texts now also share the provenance of being produced in post-recession economies governed by female Prime Ministers.

As is the way with all texts set in the past, *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* say as much about the current context of viewing and cultural constructions of female identity and age as they do about the periods in which the narratives are set. The different historical settings of the two

dramas, offer insights into a possible imaginary of what ageing for women might be or look like across the spaces and times of this study.

### **Thinking with age, time and space**

Analyses produced from an ageing studies perspective have established that contemporary twenty-first century notions of age and generation embed identities within restrictive linear and normative chronologies (Baars 2012; Halberstam 2005; Jennings and Krainitzki 2015). These chronologies work to reinforce and reiterate ageist narratives that position ageing as bleak decline (Woodward 1999; Gullette 2004). As Wiersma explains, ‘to talk about age and aging means to talk about time and its passage’ (2012: 73-74) but more often than not, ageing identities are socially constructed as binary polarities where people are divided chronologically into categories of either young or old; categories that are maintained in opposition rather than as a formation of identities sourced from an ongoing culmination of experiences along the lifecourse. The case, certainly in contemporary western societies, is that old age has become, as Lynne Segal (2013) argues, ‘a foreign country’ (62); an abject final stage of life that is culturally almost too painful to contemplate. A consequence of this is that the potential to imagine either a more positive or a more diverse range of possibilities for what being an older woman is, and might be, are closed down.

Since the nineteenth century, notions of generation or generations in the West have been used as a form of social and cultural organisation. In this way, chronological markers of age and time periods have been imposed on populations to categorise them. These markers distinguish different age groups from each other by linking each identified age cohort to perceived changes

in society over time (Alwin and McCammon 2003). In ageing studies, this tendency to compartmentalise identities along the life course, including by overemphasising generational identities, has been criticised as an oversimplification. Such artificial divisions are considered as mechanisms which polarise understandings of, and between, young and old (Woodward 1999) by failing to acknowledge the multiple overlaps and contradictions in the ways that age is embodied and experienced by people in their everyday lives (Moglen 2008).

As May and Thrift (2001) acknowledge, concepts of time and space are symbiotic and culturally produced categories of perception. The ability to notice cultural change is therefore central to the perception of time and space (Baars 2012). In this contemporary reading of two historically located female ensemble dramas, an understanding of change is very important and is manifest in the narrative negotiations around their identities and contexts that the female protagonists make in both texts. Each text focuses on issues that signal notions of change (or not) over time to their viewers. Reading these historically located texts in the twenty first century involves simultaneous engagements with the overlapping times and spaces of past and present. For instance, my reading of *Tenko* serves to illustrate the complex ways that time and age intertwine through my own analysis; informed, as it is, by having watched the series in my twenties (when it was first broadcast during the 1980s and years before I ever thought of going to university), then again when repeated on screen in the intervening years and now, once more, on DVD in my late fifties as university academic.

The multiple points of identification elicited by characters played by the female ensemble casts in both series conjoin with the polysemic indicators of space and place (*mise-en-scène*, costumes, soundtrack and so on) in each text and function to draw viewers into their diegetic worlds. Unlike many historical dramas neither text invokes time as nostalgic longing for a better

time or place, certainly not the hardships of a 1940s Japanese prisoner of war camp or daily life in the slums of post-Second World War London. The two texts perform, however, as technologies of prosthetic memory which immerse viewers into a ‘larger history’ (Landsberg 2004: 2) of both the historic periods in view and also a rich ‘herstory’ of women who have been marginalised by dominant historical accounts. The spaces and times of the two dramas work to converge the on and off-screen viewing process so that the ‘fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future’ (Boym 2007: 8). As I will investigate further in relation to understandings of age, the centrality of the two female ensemble casts privilege issues that are especially pertinent to women and create points of resonance for contemporary women viewers.

### **The importance of female ensemble dramas**

As Vicky Ball (2007: 2013) charted in her seminal work on British female ensemble dramas, series focussing on groups of central women characters and their lives have been a feature of prime time television in the UK since the 1960s. The use of multi character female narratives, rather than narratives driven by a single female protagonist, expand the potential address to female audiences by offering a more comprehensive range of viewing engagements and viewing pleasures than has been usual (this has also been part of their commercial success and facilitated their potential for greater market share). The development of female ensemble dramas on British television has mirrored the trajectories of social and political change including that of second wave feminism, post-feminism and newer resurgent feminisms that have emerged during their period of production from the 1960s to the present. A majority of these dramas also evolved as vehicles for female writers and producers who, on entering a previously male dominated television industry, took opportunities when they arose to make both the representation of

women and their own industry presence more meaningful (Hallam 2013). Their work, especially when using the female ensemble drama format, opened up new onscreen spaces to foreground and explore the complex intersectional negotiations of gendered identity that women make on a daily basis within the different contexts of their lives. Whether, like *Tenko* with its 1940s South Asian setting, or one of the most recent additions to female ensemble dramas, *In the Club* (2014 ...), set in the north of England during the 1980s, the female ensemble format has constructed important social relationships between women that work across, and often against, common cultural and social divisions between women based on class, race, ethnicity and sexuality. As Ball explains: ‘the female ensemble drama moves to centre stage that which is celebrated only periodically in British soap opera: women’s relationships with other women outside of their familial roles as wives and mothers’ (Ibid.: 246). Importantly for this study, in *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife*, the range of ages and experience of the central cast members is also more diverse than usual and provides an important antidote to the more rigid age constraints in place in US dramas such as *Sex in the City* (1998-2004) and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) where the female protagonists are of similar age and status. The first two texts have been identified as portraying a feminist world view (Ball Ibid.; Jennings and Krainitzki 2016) whilst the latter have dominated discussions of women, television and post-feminism (Gill 2007). This would seem to have significance for this study’s focus on age, space and time, particularly as Christine Holmlund has observed that: ‘postfeminists are generally young; few are middle aged: none seem old’ (2005:116).

Although the majority of female ensemble dramas have achieved successes in terms of ratings, their association with women writers, producers and audiences have nevertheless positioned them as being of low cultural value (Ball Ibid.). The multiple layers of female creativity in

evidence in cast, writing, production and in content all contributed to the idea that from the 1990s onwards, television was moving away from the quality of its Public Service Broadcasting pedigree by ‘dumbing down’ through a process of feminisation (Ball 2012; Hallam 2013); a view that is testament to the continuing devaluing in Western society of women, their abilities and their experiences. The dominance of ageist conceptions of later life, as outlined earlier, compounds this situation and adds a further layer to the oppression of older women. Indeed, further reinforcing the triple jeopardy at work between the low status of older women, women in and on television and female ensemble dramas, is the lack of academic studies exploring British female ensemble dramas in television scholarship, including feminist television scholarship (Ball 2013). This is in direct contrast to the more homogenously “glossy” American female-led dramas featuring younger women protagonists such as *Sex in the City*, (mentioned above) and *Desperate Housewives* which have provoked a proliferation of such work and the interest shown in recent generational series such as *Girls* (2012...) (Jennings and Grist, forthcoming 2017).

Critical attention to the role and representation of older women within feminism (see Calasanti 2008, Gullette 2004, Woodward 1999) and also within feminist media studies has until recently been similarly neglected (Jermyn 2013). This discussion therefore brings together an analysis of two neglected areas of research to make a powerful point about the ways that sexism and ageism work together structurally and ideologically to diminish both women’s status and opportunities in society and also to rob them of cultural resources to imagine for themselves an alternative and more powerful vision for the whole of their lifecourse. The following study of *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* argues that these two British female ensemble dramas offer potent and diverse visions of ageing that challenge the prevailing ageist myths of old age for women by disrupting many of the binary divisions of young and old that underpin it.



**The times, spaces and ages of *Tenko***

As Lucy Mangan outlines in her brilliant ‘Cable Girl’ review of the series for the *Guardian* newspaper, *Tenko* was ‘an invigoratingly female affair’ (2007). One element of this ‘female affair’ is accentuated by the way Mangan frames her review as part of a memory timeline linking herself to her mother and her remembrance of her mother’s passion for the series when it was first screened; namely when Mangan, who was a child at the time, was sent to bed during the opening credits so that her mother could enjoy watching it without distraction. As an adult reviewing the series, Mangan is connected intergenerationally to her mother through her viewing process and her memories. In this process she recognises *Tenko* as an exceptional attempt to produce a female centred text which was invested in exploring the possibilities of female experiences in a rich engagement between text and viewers (like her mother and now herself). This was partly through the quality of performance by the female ensemble cast but also through the determination of the female-led production team (Lavinia Warner and *Warner Sisters* productions) and key female writers such as Jill Hyem and Anne Valery who challenged both broadcasting institutions and the gendered status quo. The achievement of this creative breakthrough required great tenacity in order to make it meaningful to the writers and to women in general. One obituary of Valery that describes her late-life reflections on her own career and the unsupported assumptions brought to bear on her writing quotes her as saying: ‘with complete sincerity – and a note of finality – they would tell Jill and me: “Oh, but women do not behave that way; they do not talk that way”’ (Jefferies 2013). *Tenko* also demonstrated a ground breaking commitment to age equality of opportunity for its cast. Unusually for a prime-time drama, at the time of first broadcast, half of the main female ensemble cast were aged forty years or older at the start of shooting, (Ann Bell [Marion Jefferson]; Stephanie Cole [Bea Mason];

Patricia Lawrence [Sister Ulrica]; Reneé Asherson [Sylvia Ashburton]; Jean Anderson [Lady Jocelyn/Joss Holbrook]), with Asherson and Anderson being sixty six and seventy four respectively. The age profile of its core female cast added to a hitherto unheard of equality of performance in terms of screen time and storylines for its central female characters (Mangan 2007). The scripts concentrated on the interplay of the characters and the issues affecting them developed through intersecting storylines; there were no dominant characters or major stars monopolising episodes, giving the project itself and its address to viewers an “everywoman-ness” appeal.

The first two episodes of *Tenko* present the socio-cultural context of the characters within a comfortable colonial expatriate life in Singapore shortly before the Japanese invasion. These episodes set up the conventions and expectations surrounding the women’s lives and behaviours during the period in which the drama is set. They also highlight the initial tensions and divisions class, nationality, race, education and sexuality that exist between the central characters before they are then forcibly confined and grouped together as prisoners. Once the women are captured and become Japanese prisoners of war, these tensions and divisions continue to permeate the women’s relationships in the camps; providing the impetus for the interpersonal and collective negotiations by the women of their differing world views that are then explored throughout the series in ways that resonated with the experience of female audiences, bringing as Ball notes: ‘a sense of second wave consciousness-raising to women’s historical experiences’ (2007: 101). The two prison camp settings that dominate the majority of episodes construct a liminal space that disrupts the usual everyday negotiations of female identity within a patriarchal society. The distinctive spaces are still subject to the surveillance of patriarchy (the guards) but, despite the relentless structuring panopticon of patriarchy, enhanced by what writer Jill Hyem terms

‘unconscious male censorship of our work...we would find dialogue or scenes softened and termed “unfeminine”’ (Hyem 1987: 157, the narratives of each episode are constructed to privilege the relationships between the women themselves. In other words, the women may be contained under fear of punishment and death but the men still somehow remain mostly marginal to our focus.

The prison camp spaces correspond to Victor Turner’s notion of betwixt and between, locating the women prisoners as a ‘community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual’ (1969: 96) that significantly in this case is the structuring ritual of the daily roll call or *tenko*. In contrast to comparable films (e.g. *Bridge over the River Kwai* [1957]) or television series (e.g. *Colditz* [1972-1974]), where the male prisoners are not civilians, and where military duty to escape and foil enemy strategic plans drive the narrative through acts of heroism, the civilian women’s camps are more mundane explorations of minute to minute survival. They do, however, create space and time to develop and to: ‘celebrate female homosocial bonds and networks despite their marginalisation within patriarchal culture’ (Ball, 2007: 106). These homosocial bonds also engender a supportive context to explore not just the intersectionalities of their identities as women but also, more radically, aspects of female identity that were excluded from public examination at the time when the series is set; issues such as sexual vulnerability, sexual threat and sexual manipulation (see also Duguid, accessed 10 December 2016). The drama tackled unspoken taboo subjects that were, in the extra-diegetic reality of the 1980s when the series was created and produced, only just starting to be publicly recognised by women themselves as the consciousness raising and activism of second wave feminism began to permeate the public sphere. Within their liminal space of betwixt and between, and despite facing death, torture and despair, the women

characters in *Tenko* could be seen to develop a level of independence and strength they had never dreamed of before the war. Once they had been removed in time and space from the pre-war socio-cultural consensus of how womanhood should be and look, conventional understandings of gender, power and age were no longer as rigid or as binding for them. It is significant that in the final reunion episodes of the series, it is clear that there is little appetite to return to their former roles in a society that left them at the mercy of violent men or as meek trophy wives organising trivial tea parties. Within the squalid conditions of the prison camp the previously unquestioned hegemonic work of securing a feminine identity is suddenly open to examination for them and their women viewers. This one of the most crucial interventions that *Tenko* makes as a female ensemble drama to debates about women, ageing and identity. What is revealed during their suffering and throughout their desperate attempts to maintain their identities as women under a Japanese regime that has even more public disdain for them as women than the British colonial culture of their pre-war existence, has great consequence for their self-understanding of what they are and what they might be. In this space, place and time, the vigilant policing of femininity that Beverley Skeggs (1997) ascribes to the women-only spaces of conventional patriarchal culture becomes reversed in the liminal patriarchal space they now inhabit. In short, ‘the structure of the heterosexual matrix, which is held in place by the mirror, the queue and the invite to bodily inspection’ (Skeggs 1997: 305) is no longer salient and, as a result, the usual order which prizes youthful femininity (Kaplan 1999; Dolan and Tincknell 2012) is downplayed in favour of a more diverse range of female identities (celibate, lesbian, single mother, leader, doctor, housewife, secretary, nurse, teacher and, indeed, combinations and intersectionalities of all of these) that form a more diverse female imaginary for the construction of possible identities along the whole lifecourse. Certainly within the confines of *Tenko*’s onscreen world

intergenerational co-operation is a necessity for survival and the day-to-day realities of disease, starvation and physical punishment mean that the frailty, so often culturally associated with older age, is understood to be able to strike in a remarkably egalitarian way at any age.

Multiple timelines weave between text and viewer when watching *Tenko* and these grow more complex depending on when that viewing takes place (at the time of first broadcast or at times between then and now). As a historically located serial, viewers are cast as participant observers (Creeber 2004) and, as mentioned earlier, are ‘sutured into a larger history’ (Landsberg 2004: 2) where there is the possibility to re-visit and re-work identities from ‘the interaction of our own points of view and those of others in an ongoing process of re-vision’ (Duggan 2003: 84). The identity concerns relating to women’s lives and experiences as explored in the onscreen narrative serve to position the women’s issues highlighted in the 1980s period of second wave feminism that would have been recognisable to many of its contemporary viewers, in contrast with the nascent feminism of the onscreen women characters living through the Second World War. However, the continuum between feminism, women and age does not end there but is also explicitly connected to first wave feminism through the character of Lady Jocelyn (Joss) Holbrook (the oldest member of the cast and also the oldest onscreen character) who is a former suffragette, and who, as we learn in the final reunion episode, maintains this thread to her identity until death when she bequeathst her estate o the Fawcett Society, the charity founded in 1866 to fight for female equality and women’s rights. *Tenko* thus provides a qualitatively different “mirror” from the one that Skeggs (Ibid.) suggests polices women’s identities within hegemonic heterosexuality. The older women characters, in particular, constitute object bridges (Nippert-Eng 1996) or transitional performances to an understanding of ageing as a continuum of experiences that unsettles the dominant ageist chronological imaginary that engages with the

intergenerational viewing practices of mixed-age groups and those individuals who revisit the drama throughout their life course.

### **The times, spaces and ages of *Call the Midwife***

When I first watched *Call the Midwife*, some thirty years after my first engagement with *Tenko*, I was immediately struck by similarities between the texts, after all, how often do nuns, nurses, doctors and suffering women combine in central casting? The central characters of *Call the Midwife*, a group of nurses and nuns who together provide community midwifery and nursing to an economically and materially deprived local London Borough, give screen time to important issues of identity affecting women in the 1950s and early 1960s which resonate for contemporary viewers (Tincknell 2013). Within the diversities of their characterisation and intersectional identities, particularly age, class, education, and sexuality, *Call the Midwife* as a female ensemble drama offers, like *Tenko*, a further imaginary of possible ageing female identities across the spaces and times of its serial drama form.

As in *Tenko*, the central female ensemble of characters span a wider age range than those in most successful primetime dramas since three of the nuns are older women and are aged between their late fifties and eighties – Sister Monica Joan (Judy Parfitt), Sister Evangelina (Pam Ferris) and Sister Julienne (Jenny Agutter) - and Nurse Phyllis Crane (Linda Bassett) is also a woman in her sixties. Completing this noteworthy representation of older age by the onscreen cast, is the equally powerful off-screen narration performed by Vanessa Redgrave, aged seventy five at the time of first broadcast in 2012, and who confers a patina of stardom to the production that is not found in *Tenko*. As the voice of the mature Jenny Lee, Redgrave frames each episode with the recollections and reflections of the young midwife, the character played by

Jessica Raine who is configured as corresponding to Jennifer Worth, whose memoirs form the basis for the series. This act draws the viewer into the diegetic world of the series and also incidentally into a radical disruption of chronological ageing. Redgrave's sonic presence of older age works to exemplify ageing as a continuum of experiences (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015), linking and interweaving older and younger identities at the same time (Moglen 2008). Equally, the visual style of the opening credits of each episode includes the superimposed handwritten pages of what we are given to believe are Jenny Worth's memoirs, inter cut with scenes of life in the East End of London in the 1950s. This signals, 'a fluid concept of time from the outset' (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015).

*Call the Midwife* and *Tenko* share status as historically located female ensemble dramas but their resemblances go deeper. One of their key similarities is in the way that notions of space, place and time are manipulated within both their narratives to explore issues vital to women and the resources they have for identity-making as a lifecourse project (Bennett 2013). I would argue, however, that at this point in the twenty-first century when media and neoliberal economic and political discourses are reinforcing attitudes of cultural ageism towards the old much more strongly than in the 1980s through engendering fear of an increasingly old and frail population demographic, *Call the Midwife* presents a vital act of televisual resistance to this tendency (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015).

Unlike *Tenko*, which has acquired something of a cult status by means of its groundbreaking credentials as an iconic feminist text celebrated as one of the first female ensemble dramas to make a radical intervention in relation to the screening of women's issues and to portray meaningful and cooperative relationships between women, *Call the Midwife* has a more mainstream status. It quickly established itself as a popular British television 'national treasure';

securing for itself an annual primetime slot on BBC One's Christmas Day schedule. This reputation is interesting as, certainly within British culture, the term 'national treasure' is both potent and ambiguous. Culturally, the status of 'national treasure' is a contested one; signalling not only respect and affection but often also the act of being appropriated into the mainstream, a label that Dame Judy Dench rejects on the basis that it is, 'Too dusty, too in a cupboard, too behind glass, too staid' (Dench in Teeman 2013). *Call the Midwife* clearly embodies these tensions and inhabits a complex cultural position. Not only has this female ensemble drama sustained success in the peak viewing family slot of British television at 8pm on a Sunday evening, but it also now produces, as mentioned above, a much anticipated annual Christmas Special. Its mainstream status is undercut, however, by its feminist message (Sharma 2013).

First broadcast on UK television in 2012, in many ways, *Call the Midwife* takes over where *Tenko* stops; picking up on the ways that British women built their lives ten years or so after the end of the Second World War. Echoing *Tenko*'s tactics, *Call the Midwife* has created a liminal women-centred space where women's issues and identities are explored within a safe and supportive milieu. This is an environment where men have structural power but are peripheral to the central relationships between the female ensemble cast and, more specifically, to the central focus of narrative action: childbirth (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015). I am not likening the drama's central location, the Anglican convent Nonnatus House, to a prison camp, but Nonnatus House is nonetheless a distinctive liminal space where the central female characters are removed from society at large and where they bow to the discipline of being on call twenty-four hours a day serving the local community and/or to the special rhythm of spiritual devotions, serving God, which punctuate each day. As Kenway notes, *Call the Midwife* represents: 'a commune of



independent women, living together and sharing their daily lives without the domination of any man' (Kenway 2012).

Along the socio-political continuum between the creation of *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* there have been dramatic shifts in feminist/post-feminist, lesbian and gay/queer/trans identity politics/positions. Considering it was created in an era of civil partnerships (2005, UK) and then also same sex marriage (2014, UK), in many ways, *Call the Midwife* started off as more overtly heterosexual in terms of its exploration of female intersectional identities than *Tenko*. The connecting biographies of central women characters and the women in the community function as a critique of some of the expectations and power inequalities within heterosexuality itself. Unlike in *Tenko*, where representations of same sex desire are distributed across young and older characters, Nelly Keene (Jeananne Crowley), Bea Mason (Stephanie Cole), Joss Holbrook, the examination of non-heterosexual identities in *Call the Midwife* is restricted to younger characters, nurses Patsy Mount (Emerald Fennel) and Delia Busby (Kate Lamb). The depictions in *Call the Midwife* reflect a period when lesbian identities are still closeted but their representation through the narratives of the female ensemble cast members anchors them into concrete situations in time and space, providing a rich timeline in identity politics between past and present and between individual and collective subjectivities that: 'are interactively linked to representations (including self-representations) through historically and materially specific stories of identity' (Duggan Ibid.: 74).

Viewers are also invited to identify with the feminist ideas that suffuse *Call the Midwife*, ideas that operate within a spectrum of changing understandings of gender, race, sexuality and class oscillating between the female ensemble cast members and viewers. These understandings operate within the systems of power that construct: 'historical, cultural, social and political

subjects' (Anderson 2006: 115) and which, within the narrative, are played out, 'through the reality of women's lives, rather than through the abstract' (Sharma 2013). The narrative ethos of *Call the Midwife* can be encapsulated by the concepts of 'service, community and women's friendships' (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015) and is set in opposition to the more individualistic 'sensitivity' of postfeminism (Gill Ibid.). Within the communal values of the drama, Sister Monica Joan is an important figure (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015). As the oldest character she, like Joss Holbrook in *Tenko*, provides connectivity across time: she has had a pivotal role in her Anglican order and, in the community, she has welcomed several generations of children into the world as a midwife. Also like Joss Holbrook, she gave up the security of an aristocratic life but in her case to serve God and the poor as a nun and nurse rather than becoming a suffragette. It is disclosed that Sister Monica Joan became one of the first women to qualify as a midwife at the turn of the twentieth century, investing her with pioneer status. Along the continuum of a lifecourse, Sister Monica Joan is now very old. She has entered her ninth decade and suffers from dementia. Despite this hugely stigmatised illness associated with old age, she still remains a respected member of the community who is protected and cared for by the other nurses and nuns of Nonnatus House. As Tincknell suggests, Sister Monica Joan operates as 'The mystic of the convent, ... the idiot-savant ..., unwittingly getting to the nub of an issue through her cryptic ramblings' that always reveal an 'underlying clarity of thought' ... 'while her impending senility allows her to "speak truth to power"' (Tincknell 2013: 781). Although she is sometimes fearful and confused her depiction as an old woman with dementia is not the one dimensional and negative representation that is favoured in dominant twenty first century scenarios. Her life remains complex; she delights in the small pleasures in life by conducting small acts of rebellion, such as stealing cake from the pantry, and at the same time she also delights in the more spiritual

pleasures of mystical philosophy and poetry. Representing her as being both young and old at the same time, her condition functions as a disturbance of linear chronologies of time (Moglen 2008). Her ‘age (in)appropriate behaviour ...[exists] on a fluid spectrum of age’ (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015: 183) suggesting that, ‘the ways in which we measure time and its passage may differ from how we experience time and its passing’ (Wiersma Ibid.: 74).

## **Conclusion**

The two historical series at the heart of this discussion are examples of an important British intervention in the representation of diverse female identities across space and time. In many ways, the two female ensemble dramas produced between 1981-1985 (*Tenko*) and 2012 to the present (*Call the Midwife*) mirror each other in both their format and their concerns. It is also possible to map a clear relationship in both series with the articulation of feminist issues and agendas across time, even if these articulations of feminism are not, because of periods in which the dramas are set, named as feminist within the texts themselves. Central to this mapping is the interplay that characters of different ages have with each other and also with viewers; an interplay that provides multiple perspectives and engagements with the transformational experiences about women’s identities that the female characters undergo within the liminal spaces of South Asian prison camps and the convent house within the East End of London. Two characters, Joss Holbrook (*Tenko*) and Sister Monica Joan (*Call the Midwife*) provide a connective thread through times and spaces of each specific series. They disrupt the chronological compartmentalisation of time that divides generations of women by linking the times and spaces of historical and contemporary accounts of both age and feminism. In *Tenko*, Joss Holbrook unites first wave women’s suffrage movements, nascent second wave feminism and the second wave feminist context of original viewing in the 1980s. In *Call the Midwife*,

Sister Monica Joan also creates a link over time with earlier forms of female emancipation, pioneering women's medical training, but because the series was created more than 30 years later than *Tenko*, a further layer consisting of more contemporary understandings of postfeminism and feminisms are also in the minds of the viewers. The character of Sister Monica Joan is also crucial because she also mobilises considerations of one of the most traumatic contemporary spectres of old age in the twenty-first century, dementia. The way it is dealt with in the series, however, through many levels and layers of communal support, challenges the individualism of neoliberal models of ageing that position being old as so unthinkable that it affords women no available imaginary to prepare for it.

In both these female ensemble dramas the past is constructed within their narratives to intersect with the present (and also the point of contemporary broadcast) and, in so doing, they offer identity-making resources for the future and for older age. The multiple connectivities between characters, and between characters and viewers over the times and spaces of the texts and their historical settings' complicates notions of time and leads to: 'an understanding of age not necessarily defined as years, as we experience the passage of time through age in our bodies and feel its social consequence' (Wiersma, 2012: 75).

*Tenko* thus offered space to the women of Thatcherite Britain to think about their identities and rights in relation to those of their mothers and grandmothers. Similarly, *Call the Midwife* offers space for women to also consider their identities in relation to women of other ages and in relation to the twenty-first century Conservative-led coalition/Conservative governments in Britain. While writing this analysis near the end of 2016, and while also looking forward to the 2016 Christmas Special, it would seem a good moment to look to the future and contemplate the contemporary resonances between *Call the Midwife* and what the situation might

be like in Theresa May's Post Brexit Britain for those of us either moving into old age or already there. It is no accident that *Call the Midwife* explores in detail the very real benefits to women's lives, and indeed everyone's lives, brought by the National Health Service, just at the very point when it is being dismantled by stealth.

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