Understanding life through unwanted childlessness

Ethnography and fiction from Ghana, Bangladesh and 'Dystopia'

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Fig. 1. *Ghanaian mother and child.*

'Negative knowing' refers to the paradox of noticing things and people more in their absence than in their presence. Taken-for-granted presence hinders our cognition. Proximity impairs our vision, absence makes us perceptive. The meaning of water, money, warmth, nature, silence, and company, only occurs to us when they are no longer there.

This experience applies perhaps most strongly to loved ones. This epistemological path with obstacles, a kind of *via negativa*, can also bring us closer to the meaning of 'new life', pregnancy and the birth of children. What happens to people when no children are born to them? In this essay we will sketch out the social, emotional, and existential consequences of childlessness in Ghana and Bangladesh, and then proceed to make sense of these experiences in a new way by linking them to the issue of continuity and what it is to be human.

Childless

During his anthropological research into a matrilineal Akan community in Ghana many years ago, Sjaak van der Geest, observed some of the problems associated with childlessness. In most cases, a marriage that produced no children was dissolved with the approval of all parties, as the most essential ingredient was considered to be missing from the relationship. Husband and wife gave each other the freedom to try elsewhere because their 'blood' did not seem to 'fit together'. A woman without children would be pitied or even accused of being responsible for her barrenness.

One such woman was Yaa Boahemaa, whom van der Geest regularly met in the street where she sold fried yam and cocoyam. She became a national celebrity when a famous Highlife band made a hit song about her:

Yaa Boahemaa mourns for herself
During her life
Because when she dies
There will be no one
To mourn for her.…
Childbirth is not bought,
It is a gift from God.
Yaa Boahemaa's womb
Has been wicked to her.
What can she do?
God will provide, Yaa,
God will provide.
Yaa Boahemaa mourns for herself …

As part of van der Geest's research, more than 400 Ghanaian secondary school students in the area where he conducted fieldwork were given several incomplete sentences relating to various issues in their daily lives, which they were asked to complete based on their own thoughts and ideas. Two of the unfinished sentences dealt with childlessness, beginning with: 'A man without children…' and 'A woman without children…'

Almost all of the students could only think of negative statements in response. With respect to women, these included (in order of most frequently mentioned): that they were unhappy and lonely; that they had no one to help them at home or on the land; that they were discriminated against and criticized by others; and that they were 'incomplete' women. There were similar comments about men without children but with slightly different emphases (Bleek 1978).[1]

Some examples of the comments about childless women were that 'A woman without children…':

…will never be happy in her life.
…is always sad; her friends have children and she doesn't.
…is always unhappy because she does not have a child to play with or to send on an errand.
…is punished by God.
…is a very bad woman because God has given her some [children] but she has killed all of them.[2]
…is a pen without ink.
…is like soup without salt.

Papreen Nahar, the second author, did extensive anthropological research on childless women in Bangladesh. The results were a depressing collection of complaints and heart-breaking stories; far worse than van der Geest experienced in Ghana (Nahar 2007). The ease with which a Ghanaian woman may decide to seek a new man in the hope that he will give her a child is a scenario which does not exist in the predominantly Muslim and patrilineal/patriarchal society of Bangladesh. In most cases, a poor, rural, divorced Bangladeshi woman is left to fend for herself; her parents are often too poor to support her, she may be expelled from the family and rejected by her community. She might be even worse off than when she was married and childless.

A woman without children is trapped. She can only try to prevent rejection by her husband and his family through resorting to ingenious strategies (Nahar & van der Geest n.d.).[3] If she fails, she will have to live the rest of her life with the double stigma of being both childless and divorced. If she is lucky, her parents may be able to arrange a new marriage for her with an old widower; not to have children but to look after him.

Women in Bangladesh are predominantly blamed for childlessness in a marriage. Even if the cause of infertility lies with the husband, he will never be openly blamed for this; the wife will remain 'responsible'. Nahar describes a case where the husband of a childless woman had been medically diagnosed as infertile. Only two people knew about it: the man himself and Nahar, whom he had confided in but made her promise confidentiality. The wife was saddled with the blame by her in-laws and everyone else, despite her biological innocence.

Some of the women's stories collected during Nahar's study illustrate the tragic consequences of childlessness. Shonkhomala, a 21-year-old village woman, had been married twice; first when she was seven years old and then when she was 17. She never became pregnant. She said:

> What is the meaning of this life? No one cares for me, as I don't have a child. I am not welcomed by my parents-in-law, so I made my own hut in my parents' place. My husband comes from time to time. I cook on my own. Even my parents never come to see if I have enough money to buy food. They think I am doing fine. If I had a child, the child would cry for food. My parents would know that we don't have rice and would try to help us. But now I won't go to my parents for rice, I won't cry. I go to my bed and just lie down silently. Childless people live alone and die alone. A lonely person is worthless, whether in life or in death. You are no-one if you are not a mother. If I had a child I would not ask anything from God anymore. If I could love a child (*ador korte partam*) I would feel as a normal woman (*shoman bedin*), as valuable as all other women.

Another rural childless woman, Mayaboti (aged 23, never pregnant, married at the age of 18) said:

> There are two kinds of lives for a woman: a mother's life, which is glorious, and a non-mother's life, which is dark. If there are children, the family is full of happiness, otherwise it is dark. Nobody is concerned about how a childless family is passing their days. After having dinner when I come inside my hut, there is no-one inside. My husband goes to a mosque for prayer. I just lie down alone. If I had children they would sit around the stove while I cook, I would feel so happy. But now, there is just the two of us. When he returns from the mosque we do not have anything to talk about. Silence remains in our home all the time. We childless women are rotten. A sun or moon never rises inside a childless couple's hut. This world is for the mothers not for the childless women. I want to have light in my life by having a baby. I want to hear someone calling me '*Ma*'.

The more affluent and educated childless women in the city also desperately longed for children. Although they experienced less stigma or social and familial exclusion than rural childless women, they suffered too. Jomuna, 35 years old, said to Nahar:

> I do not enjoy anything. I used to wear new clothes every other day but now I am different; now I keep on wearing the same dress day after day. A few days ago my husband took me to a five star hotel but I did not enjoy it. To me there is no difference between a five star hotel and my house or an ordinary hotel on the street corner. Nothing is meaningful to me.

Jhilom, a college teacher (aged 29, never pregnant, married at the age of 23) stated:

> I come back from my work, take a rest, do some household chores and then I have nothing to do. If I had a child the child would come to me to play and would call me '*Ma*'. The child would ask to eat and I would prepare many things for him/her. Then we could go out for a walk, I could take him/her to school, I would think about his/her future, study, marriage, and so on. That is what a normal woman does.

Podma, a lawyer (aged 40, one child after medical treatment and one miscarriage, married at the age of 25) said:

> I was always fond of children and was good at taking care of them. My sisters used to leave their kids with me and I nurtured them as a mother. Sometimes my sister's kids called me mother. When I got married, I stopped thinking about my career. I thought: I have reared others' children, now I will rear my own. To be a mother, that was all I wanted.

The words of these women from Bangladesh and the completed sentences of the Ghanaian students describe the desolation and loneliness that can result from childlessness. When they talk about practical difficulties, like having no-one to send on an errand, this disguises a deeper grief. 'No child' means emptiness and boredom; a lack of 'life' in both senses. An older woman in Ghana who lived in a house full of noisy children assured van der Geest that there was nothing as bad as a silent house. One of the Bangladeshi women also complained about the permanent silence in her house. 'Life', here in the sense of noise, announces the continuation of human life.

The best solution for childlessness in the Ghanaian village where van der Geest lived was for a woman to give one or more of her own children to a childless sister. Often these children would only discover much later in life that their 'mother' was not their birth mother but a stepmother. This form of fostering was facilitated further by the existing kinship terminology whereby all sisters and even female cousins of one's mother would also be called 'mother'. In that context, the precise biological connection was much less important than in Dutch or Bangladeshi society. On several occasions, after the death of a stepmother, van der Geest heard stories of how good she had been for 'her' children. 'You should have seen the coffin the children bought for her; I've never seen such a beautiful coffin!'

But where such an elegant solution to the problem of infertility is not available, a childless woman is faced with a miserable life – certainly in Bangladesh, as the quotes above show. The grief underlying such complaints is, however, difficult to articulate. The French term *ennui*, as outlined by Sartre (1938) in his first novel *La Nausée*, perhaps comes the closest. It is a paralyzing sense of futility which makes all the pleasure in life disappear; a growing aversion to everything around: things, nature, people, one's own body.

The words of Jomuna (above) who said she was no longer interested in how she dressed, express some of this sense of *ennui*. Even when her husband wanted to surprise her with a dinner in a posh hotel, it meant nothing to her. Activities such as cleaning and cooking had lost their charm because there were no children for whom to do these activities, and who would make her happy with their presence. A husband, even if he continued to support his wife, could not fill that void.

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1. van der Geest used the pseudonym 'Wolf Bleek' to protect the identity of his informants in some of his publications on witchcraft, sexuality and reproduction in Ghana (see: van der Geest 2003).

2. This is a reference to witchcraft. Childless women are frequently accused of witchcraft in African societies (see also Silva 2009).

3. It should be noted that all childless women we met, both in Ghana and in Bangladesh, had made numerous attempts to be cured from infertility, mostly by consulting local healers, such as herbalists and spiritual practitioners, but also biomedical doctors. More than half a century ago, Field (1960) studied 2,537 cases of people seeking help from religious healers in Ghana. Nearly one quarter of them reported problems linked with infertility and childlessness.

4. A collection of articles about growing old without children in some Asian and European societies (Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill 2004) mainly talks about demographic considerations and practical problems such as a lack of filial attention and material support. An explicit reference to discontinuity and the emotional emptiness that results from it is not mentioned.

5. In German: '*der Mensch*'. The absence of a gender-neutral word for 'human being', remains an awkward limitation of the English language.

6. A conscious choice for a life without children exists also in highly pro-natalist societies, such as Bangladesh. That choice may, however, be too controversial to be revealed. Nahar & Richters (2011) describe how women in Bangladesh who choose not to have children, pretend – to the outside world – that they are involuntarily childless. They prefer the lesser stigma of barrenness to the bigger one of voluntary childlessness.

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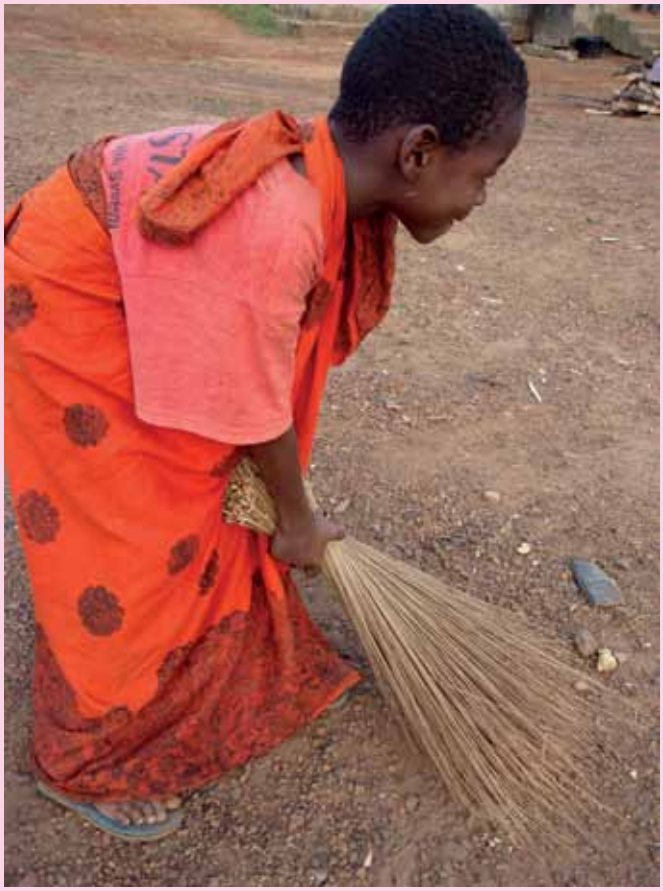

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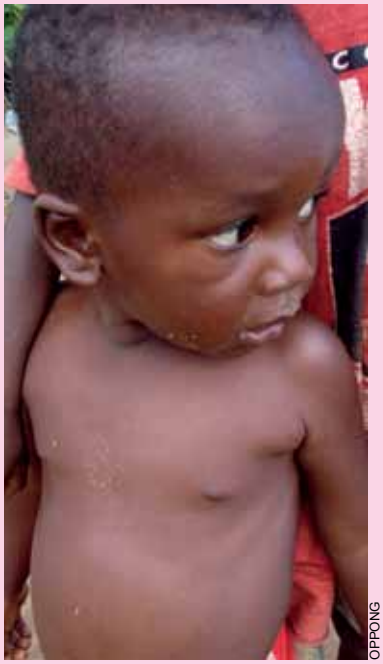

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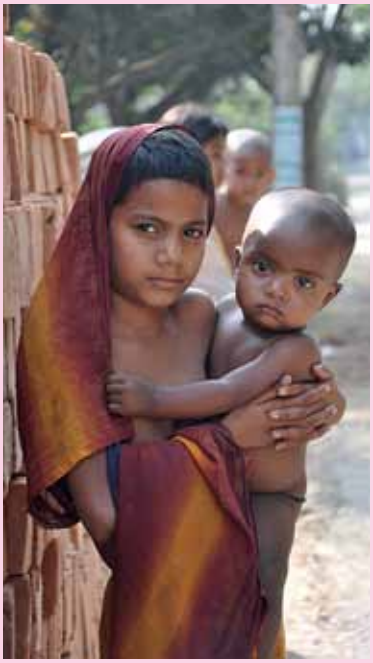

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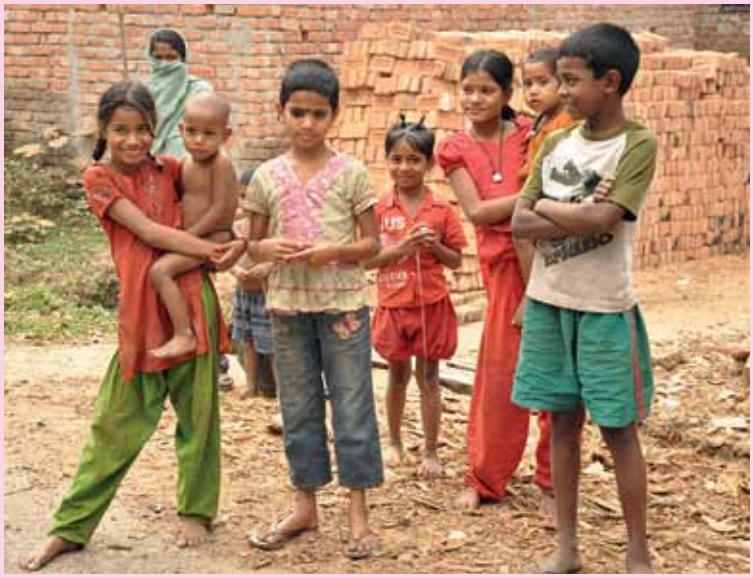

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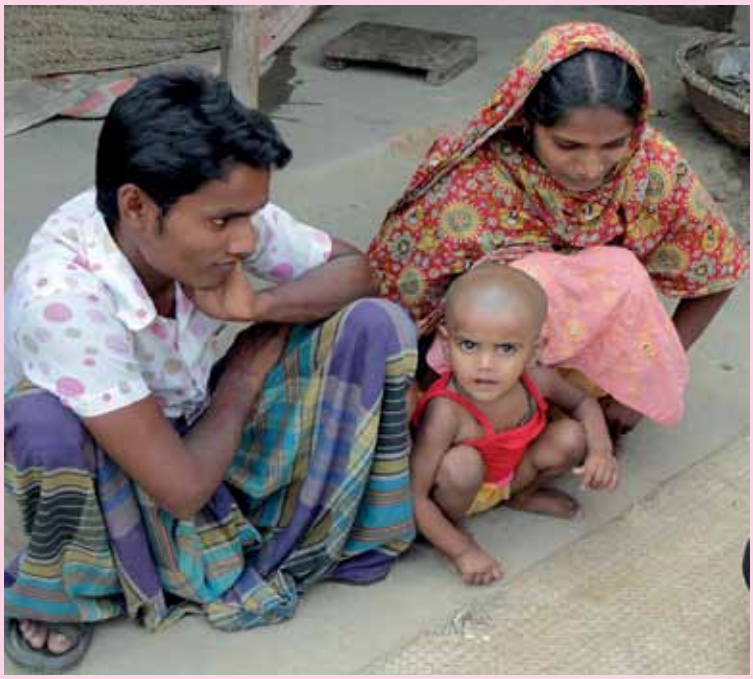

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(From above to below, left to right)
Fig. 2. *Ghanaian child brushing teeth.*
Fig. 3. *Ghanaian sweeping girl.*
Fig. 4. *Young Ghanaian child.*

Fig. 5. *Bangladeshi children looking after each other.*
Fig. 6. *Bangladeshi children.*
Fig. 7. *Bangladeshi family.*

But there are different types of 'childlessness'. During a conversation about death, an older Ghanaian man made the following remark:

> The most painful thing of death is that if an older person dies there will be no one left to tell you stories of the past. I used to ask my elders when I was young and I am now handing it over to the children. …

But, he continued:

> … I don't understand why my grandchildren and the young people in my house don't come to me and ask me about a lot of things I know. I want them to come so that I can tell them a lot of things. But they don't ask me. If they don't come, I will die and take it all with me. My head is full of things but I will go with them because they don't come (van der Geest 2004: 90).

Continuity

The last quote nuances the concept of 'childlessness'. The speaker had several children and many grandchildren, but in a sense it felt as if they did not exist. Children are 'successors' who carry your objects and thoughts into the future. But if they do not do that, a different type of 'childlessness' can emerge that sours the last phase of life and makes one lethargic. In the Ghanaian Highlife song about Yaa Boahemaa, the tragedy of her life is summarized in its depiction of her weeping for herself during her life, because after her death there will be no children to grieve for her. In conversations with both adults and young people in Ghana, this thought repeatedly came to the fore.

This brings us closer to the deeper grounding of *ennui*: the interruption of the flow of life. Children make the finiteness of life bearable because they ensure its continuation. This somewhat cerebral and analytical wording will rarely be found in interviews with childless men and women. Van Balen and Trimbos-Kemper (1995), who interviewed 108 Dutch couples without children, note that 'continuity' was rarely mentioned by respondents; the most frequently cited motives for their desire for children were 'happiness' and 'well-being'.

Yet we believe that their words speak to what several authors refer to as the life-transcending role of children. Dyer (2007) called this 'maintaining lineage' or 'maintaining inheritance,' and Inhorn (1994) speaks of 'immortality desire'. 'Light of the generation' (*bongsher bati/prodip*) is a term that Nahar's respondents in Bangladesh often used, meaning that children will take care of the family and family affairs in the future when the present generation is no longer around. Children are important to maintain property rights, for example. An urban respondent, Normoda (35), said:

> I feel guilty when I think of my in-laws… they do not have a 'light of the generation.' Who will carry on their family name, their properties? All will go to the 'Ghost's stomach'.

As rural women have hardly any property to leave behind after they die, this 'immortality desire' is fulfilled mainly through children (cf. Nahar n.d.), and they live on in their children through the memories they leave. The impending termination of one's lifeline is an unspoken, deeper reason for the sadness of the unwanted childless life. Another obstacle to the continuation of the lifeline of a childless woman is mentioned in Silva's study in Zambia and Angola. One of her informants said: 'Childless women do not become revered ancestors, but join the anonymous mass of *tukundundu*, or the worthless dead, next to the simple-minded, the slothful, the indigent, the bachelors, and the evildoers…'(Silva 2009: 189).[4]

John Kotre (1984) speaks in this context of 'generativity', a term he derives from the psychologist Erik Erikson. A concise definition is provided in the title of his book *Outliving the self*. His slightly longer definition is: 'A desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self' (1984: 20). Among other possibilities, people hope to 'live on' in their children, who will continue their work and values and will take care of their properties in the future. They hope that others may remember them for their ideas and activities or quote them in the future. Generativity occurs in all phases of life, but becomes more urgent and conscious towards the end of life as the biological self is about to end. The threat of permanent eclipse leads the elder to seek alternative ways to continue his/her life.

One may argue that Kotre's concept of generativity is a typical product of 'Western' psychology, philosophy and literature that may not 'fit' Ghanaian or Bangladeshi concerns about childlessness and death. Without delving too deeply into cultural psychologies of the self, we have observed that generativity through offspring is strong in the two societies discussed in this essay. There is however a difference: the purpose to live on through one's children is not so much expressed in individual terms but as a collective goal to which individual members comply.

The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1996: 83) writes that the ultimate purpose of marriage is '… to produce children who will continue with the heritage and name of the family, so that the family does not disappear. Barrenness and sterility are considered a threat to the continuity of human life and existence'. After quoting the proverb 'There is no wealth where there are no children', he explains that its meaning is '… not that children are to be considered as a source of wealth as such, but that one does not really enjoy one's wealth when there are no children to care for… Thus, despite the abundance of wealth a person may have acquired: Nothing is as painful as when one dies without leaving a child behind' (ibid: 84). In Bangladesh children are also regarded as a prolongation of the family (Maloney et al. 1981). Nahar's respondents expressed themselves in similar terms as we saw earlier.

In Ghana, the reward for living well is to be remembered as an elder by one's children and generations to follow. Citing the names of ancestors during libation with palm wine or schnapps is a demonstration of the continuation of the lineage. Funerals are a celebration of remembrance and an attempt to mark the beginning of the deceased's career as an ancestor.

In Bangladesh too, death rites are intended to help family members to remember. Although there is a hurried response to bury the dead soon after death, a sequence of rituals are performed beginning with ritual washing followed by a funeral prayer. An extended prayer is then held on the third day after death and yet another collective prayer on the fortieth day. Usually a remembrance prayer is held in the name of the deceased every year on the death anniversary.

Resistance to the 'terror of death' (Becker 1973), or the hope for a continuation of life, is present in one form or another in all religious traditions. But that hope is more than a religious doctrine; the focus on what happens after death and the shadow it casts on the present, is part of daily life experience. This is passionately argued by, amongst others, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch in his monumental *The principle of hope* (1986). Bloch designs a philosophical anthropology in which hope – the optimistic expectation of a future – is the fundamental drive of human life. Not only religion, but also fairy tales, novels, theatre, dance, film, travel, medicine, technology, architecture, painting, poetry, and especially music are presented as signs of a hopeful orientation toward a future and better world. Man[5] is a utopian being, a dreamer, someone who believes in living well. Death is both the great destroyer and the threatening driver of this dream.

It is striking and surprising that Bloch, in his sketch of a future-oriented and utopian people, refers to the great

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achievements of human culture, including art, technology, and science, but ignores probably the most 'common one' where people place and invest their hopes for a better future: their children. Let us now return to the concept of 'negative knowing', understanding things through their absence, to capture the meaning of children as harbingers of life's continuity.

Dystopia of childlessness

The full – and absurd – extent of total childlessness, the complete absence of human birth, is outlined in the dystopian novel by P.D. James *The children of men* (1992). The first sentence of the novel is also the first sentence of the diary that the main character Theodore (Theo) Faron begins on 1 January 2012: 'Early this morning, 1 January 2012, three minutes after midnight, the last human being to be born on earth was killed in a pub brawl in a suburb of Buenos Aires, aged twenty-five years, two months and twelve days' (1992: 3). Gradually the writer unfolds what has happened in the past years: in 1994, male seed all over the world lost its fertility. Human beings are no longer able to reproduce themselves, and the world is preparing for a future-less future. In England, where the story takes place, Xan Lyppiatt, who came to power in the last election in 2006, has set himself the task of leading the final collapse of the country in the best possible direction. He is a ruthless despot who is advised by a board of five people, one of whom is Theo.

The government promises to protect the population against fear, lack, and boredom in the face of gradual extinction. All citizens must acquire certain skills, such as growing food, in order to learn to stay alive when services collapse and they are left to their own devices. Foreign workers are brought in to do the dirty work, but are forcibly repatriated once they turn 60. Older citizens become too heavy a burden because there is no younger generation to take care of them. For the rich Britons there are nursing homes, the others are expected to kill themselves when the time comes or participate in organized mass drownings in the sea. Schools and everything belonging to children have become superfluous. With the advancing of the years of the last-born generation, the 'Omegas', the decay of public services increases.

> The children's playgrounds in our parks have been dismantled. For the first twelve years after Omega the swings were looped up and secured, the slides and climbing frames left unpainted. Now they have finally gone and the asphalt playgrounds have been grassed over or sown with flowers like small mass graves. The toys have been burnt… The schools, long closed, have been boarded up or used as centres for adult education. The children's books have been systematically removed from our libraries. Only on tape and records do we now hear the voices of children, only on film or on television programmes do we see the bright, moving images of the young. Some find them unbearable to watch but most feed on them as they might on a drug (ibid: 11).

In the first years after the beginning of the infertility pandemic, people still resisted the reality of the disappearance of pregnancy and birth.

> Doll-making was the only section of the toy industry which, together with the production of prams, had for a decade flourished and had produced dolls for the whole range of frustrated maternal desire, some cheap and tawdry but some of remarkable craftsmanship and beauty which, but for the Omega which originated them, could have become cherished heirlooms. The more expensive ones – some he remembered costing well over £2,000 – could be bought in different sizes: the new-born, the six-month-old baby, the year-old, the eighteen-month-old child able to stand and walk, intricately powered. He remembered now that they were called Six-Monthlies. At one time it wasn't possible to walk down the High Street without being encumbered by their prams, by groups of admiring quasi-mothers. He seemed to remember that there had even been pseudo-births and that broken dolls were buried with ceremony in consecrated ground (ibid: 39-40).

The rest of the story, which turns into a thriller, is less relevant for this essay. Theo gets involved in the activities of a small resistance group and a pregnant woman, who escapes the attention of the authorities, delivers a child. The hunt for the child and his mother, who disturb the constituted order, builds up to an exciting ending full of biblical references.

Our point is that through a thought experiment – the gradual extinction of the human race due to total childlessness – the author demonstrates how fundamental birth, new life, is for the meaning of human existence.

> … all ideas of social improvement and reform, all justice, hope, and love depend on the existence of future generations for whose sake all the good that we do is ultimately done. … Without the ability to bear children… we also lose the ability to care about anything but our own comfort and safety (Bowman 2007: 208).

The emotional and psychological paralysis, apathy, and sadness that we encountered in the stories of the Bangladeshi women have become commonplace in James' novel. People no longer have any interests and wait resignedly for the end, for the total disruption of hope and expectation. Nothing will remain of them, nothing will remind anyone of them, because there will be no-one to remember them; no-one will mention their name, nobody will ever witness what they have left behind. The future is locked and the past has no meaning because it no longer has a message for future people.

Life as future

In a chapter on older people and meaning, the Belgian psychologist Alfons Marcoen (2006: 382) writes: 'Older people give meaning to their lives by informing themselves and daring to dream about a future in which they will not live but for which they strive'. Without a new generation, dreaming about a future and making efforts for that future are an illusion. Ultimately, the new life evokes the old life, and gives it soul and meaning.

Obviously, this does not mean that every human being is individually required to produce children and thus contribute to a future that he/she will not personally experience. Women are not defined by their ability to give birth and bearing children is not their singular purpose and duty in life. Childlessness may indeed be a conscious choice for which people have many good reasons (McQuillan et al. 2012; Sundby 1999).[6] As we have seen, generativity – outliving one's self – can take different routes. Kotre (1984) distinguishes four types of generativity: biological (bringing forth), parental (bringing up), technical (teaching skills), and cultural (passing on ideas and symbols). Outliving our selves is also achieved through the fruits of our work and our way of life and is separate from the biological production of children. It is about what we leave behind: students, friends, letters, books, photos, recipes, ideas, furniture, crockery, homemade items, money, possessions… all these subjects and objects enter a future where we will never tread, but in the wake of these legacies we still enter the unreachable future in a metonymic way. The prospect of this border crossing produces comfort and acquiescence. But without a new generation the metonym does not work. Without people, there will be no future, as James describes in her novel, which she provocatively placed in the 'near future' (now our own time) and not in some distant unimaginable future. To quote Theo's words in his diary, as he mourns a future with no past: '… [to look back] without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruin' (James 1992: 10-11). ●