

# The Representation of Queen Victoria in Postfeminist Biopics: Mourning and Old Age in Mrs. Brown (1997) and Victoria & Abdul (2017)

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Peulić, Lana

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Lana Peulić

**The Representation of Queen Victoria in Postfeminist Biopics: Mourning and Old Age  
in *Mrs. Brown* (1997) and *Victoria & Abdul* (2017)**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B. A. in English Language and  
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Supervisor:

Dr Antonija Primorac, Assoc. Prof.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will focus on the lack of Queen Victoria's agency in recent screen biopics by analysing and comparing the portrayal of her old age and gender in two postfeminist biopics: *Mrs. Brown* (1997) and *Victoria & Abdul* (2017). The first part will offer case studies of each film, focusing on the effect of casting and central scenes; the second part will offer a comparative analysis. By emphasizing their similarities and differences the thesis will show the extent to which these two films reproduce postfeminist media's portrayal of women, especially those of old age, by reducing their roles to the two elements – gender and age. Both the analyses and comparison are based on recent biographies of the Queen as well as on the work which closely researched postfeminism and its impact on media and its consumers.

**KEYWORDS:** Queen Victoria, Mrs. Brown, Abdul, postfeminism, biopics, old age, gender, media

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## 2. Introduction

Queen Victoria, currently the second longest reigning monarch of the United Kingdom after Queen Elizabeth II, is the central figure of the period carrying her name (1837-1901) known for its many social and cultural changes and most often associated with the core “Victorian values” of family, earnestness, and duty. On a personal and familial level, she was the mother of nine children and a devoted wife who spent a considerable part of her life in deep mourning after her husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861. This thesis focuses on the two prominent screen representations of Queen Victoria in her old age: *Mrs. Brown* (1997) directed by John Madden and *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) directed by Stephen Frears, asking the following questions: in what ways has Queen Victoria’s agency as a ruler and as an older woman been depicted in these postfeminist biopics?

According to Ford and Mitchell, biographical films about queens have “a particular weight, for they are instances in which the male domination of the power structure is disrupted by female eminence.” (2) This is further proven with a statistical fact that the percentage of all biographies that are focused on the lives of men is 65 percent which is more than twice the number of female biopics thus making the biopics that follow the lives of the queens the only category in which women outnumber men as the main character in films (Ford and Mitchell 2). However, the number of screen adaptations depicting Queen Victoria’s life is surprisingly low. In addition, they are predominantly focused on her early life and on her relationship with Prince Albert. This is evident in the BBC’s mini-series *Victoria and Albert* (2001), the film *The Young Victoria* released in 2009 or the most recent TV series *Victoria* (2016). All of them place romance at the central part of the plot and those adaptations which deal with Queen Victoria’s life after Prince Albert’s death are primarily centred on her life as a widow and on the nature of the relationships she had with other men that entered her life (Primorac 178). It seems that in Queen Victoria’s case the male domination in screen adaptations remained untouched.

Queen Victoria is the nominal central character of all the screen adaptations depicting her life; however, the male characters carry almost the same importance as her. While these screen adaptations focus on her life thus making her the main character, they deploy male characters by her side who then take up most of the screen time and her story becomes their story as well. This could be considered as the doing and the undoing of feminism which is what

postfeminism culture is known for (Gill and Schraff 4). Gill and Scharff defined postfeminism as a term which is;

used to signal an epistemological break within feminism, and mark the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism; postfeminism understood as an analytical perspective and a kind of maturing or 'coming of age' of academic feminism (3)

In other words, postfeminism believes that feminism has already achieved all of its goals and has become outdated. In her article "Postfeminism and Popular Culture", Angela McRobbie reflected on the beginning of 1990s as a significant historical moment for feminism. She described this period as a "turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory...in feminist cultural studies, the early 1990s also marks a moment of feminist reflexivity..." (256) She further stated that postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasize that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force." (255)

While this may be the case, postfeminism already started to appear in the early 1980s. Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash; The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) wrote how this movement came to be when in the early '80s the press released headlines such as "feminism is dead" and "the women's movement is over." (90) Press was the first form of media to publicly show the change that was starting to happen and the terms such as "the man shortage", "the biological clock", "the mommy track" and "postfeminism" were coined (Faludi 91). Both the 80s and 90s were periods in which feminism was slowly but surely being replaced with postfeminism, which Primorac defined as "a form of anti-feminism that has appropriated aspects of feminism and has been particularly prominent in cotemporary Anglophone media and popular culture." (31) Postfeminism started to set out new goals and expectations from the media as well as the population in general.

Postfeminist media and its consumers seem to associate women of age as something negative resulting in the lack of their presence in any form of media, especially films. As living and breathing creatures on this planet we are all undergoing the process of aging; however, this process appears to have different implications depending on gender. Sandra Coney argues that "Aging in men is normal; [but] menopause is not. Our biology renders us abnormal." (Gwynne and Muller 89) This will become evident after analysing the films *Mrs. Brown* and *Victoria &*

*Abdul* which focus on Queen Victoria's later years where her process of aging is either cleverly hidden behind the leading male character and his youthfulness or it is overly emphasized.

The focus of this thesis will be on two postfeminist screen adaptations about Queen Victoria: the first one *Mrs. Brown* directed by John Madden and written by Jeremy Brock, dates from 1997, and the second, *Victoria & Abdul* directed by Stephen Frears and written by Lee Hall, was released 20 years later. By analysing and comparing these two films and their director's and screenwriter's choices of portraying Queen Victoria firstly as a woman of old age dependent on the men that enter her life, this thesis aims to examine the lack of agency of in the films' leading female character. This is particularly problematic since, as stated previously above, biographical films about queens present an important form of media in which female characters disturb the male domination. If even queens are deprived of their power in biopics, how can then ordinary women compete with male omnipresence in contemporary media?

### **3. Film analysis: *Mrs. Brown* (1997)**

The film *Mrs. Brown*, directed by John Madden and written by Jeremy Brock, was released in 1997 and it portrays the relationship between Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) and Mr. John Brown (Billy Connolly). When Prince Albert died, Queen Victoria fell into a depression and secluded herself from public life. The film focuses on the role that Albert's gillie John Brown played in bringing her back to public life with what is depicted as his unconditional devotion and admiration.

#### **3.1. Film Summary**

The story of Queen Victoria and Mr. John Brown begins in 1864, nearly three years after Prince Albert's death. In the opening voice over, the Queen's private secretary, Henry Ponsonby (Geoffrey Palmer) talks about inviting John Brown in order to help the Queen as she has completely shut herself away from public life. The voice over creates a setting in which it is clear that the royal household feels imprisoned by the Queen's mourning and that they are in desperate need of someone who is able to set them free. In the following dining scene, the Queen first finds out about John Brown's arrival and shortly after he is shown making his entrance at the Palace standing upright on a carriage. The two meet in the Queen's study and she barely acknowledges him. They engage in some small talk about his family and his well-being and how her late husband has always thought well of him. The Queen becomes fully aware of Brown's presence when she notices him standing outside her window with a horse waiting for her to come riding with him. At first, the Queen is opposed to this idea but Brown makes it very clear that he is prepared to wait until she is ready and after some time she finally agrees to go with him. She talks of Albert and how her private secretary and her son want her to return to public life. Soon Brown establishes his dominance in the household and two years later he becomes her private secretary which causes much jealousy and displeasure, especially in her son Bertie (David Westhead), The Prince of Wales, who did not want to be dictated to by a servant.

In 1867 the prime minister Disraeli (Antony Sher) receives newspapers with a political cartoon asking about the Queen's whereabouts. He believes he may be the one to convince her to return to London. However, she refuses and her decision is also supported by John Brown. The same year Parliament votes to disestablish the Irish Church and when the vote is won, a



Member of Parliament suggests that the monarchy be disestablished, too. This is the main reason Disraeli wanted the Queen to come back since her popularity may be the key to keeping the monarchy safe. At the same time, rumours about the Queen and Brown's relationship become public knowledge, published all over the newspapers. Brown gets in an argument with Bertie and is ambushed afterwards by some men who then stage everything as if he had been in a drunken fight. This is used in an attempt to dismiss Brown on the grounds of drunkenness; however, the Queen stands by Brown and will not allow him to leave the court. Prime Minister Disraeli again tries to convince the Queen to leave Balmoral in 1868 but because she feels happy there, she is reluctant to do so. This time Brown is the one to talk her into returning after a conversation with Disraeli in which he realises that this is the only option for both of them. Queen Victoria feels betrayed, she cannot understand why he would let them take her away and the two get into an argument ending with Queen Victoria requesting Ponsonby and Dr Jenner (Richard Pasco) to take up Brown's duties from then on. The Queen's return to London re-establishes the monarchy's popularity and she gains the public support. When the Prince of Wales becomes ill with typhoid, the Queen is quite worried and once he recovers she decides to host a thanksgiving service at St. George's Chapel. It is then that she is almost assassinated but Brown was able to stop the assassin and for that the Queen awards him with a special medal.

Years pass and the scene that was right at the beginning of film is returned to here, with Brown searching for a possible intruder around the woods during a storm. This makes him fall ill and Queen Victoria comes to visit him. She apologizes for not being the friend he needed her to be, he accepts the apology, and soon after he dies of pneumonia. In the final scene we see Dr Jenner and Ponsonby getting John Brown's diary which he had kept during his years of service. They decide it is best if the diary were not seen by anyone else and it seems that they either hide it or completely destroy it.

## **3.2. Film Analysis**

### **3.2.1. Familiarity with Women in Power – Being the Queen**

*Mrs. Brown* was released in 1997, when the Labour party won the general election by a landslide majority, making Tony Blair the new Prime minister. Labour's landslide victory brought the 18 years of Conservative party's rule to an end and it also dramatically increased the number of women in Parliament, bringing the total number of female members to 120

(Webb n.p.). In addition to the many changes the Labour party was making, they kept some of Margaret Thatcher's policies, but they were quite vocal about the equality in the workplace and worker's safety and health (Webb n.p.). Women were starting to get more and more recognized as equal members of society, and while this may be the case it is also important to point out the fact that Margaret Thatcher preceded Blair as a deeply influential Conservative prime minister of Britain from 1979 until 1990 who was, at the same time, the first ever female PM of the UK. Unlike the Queen she was not only a woman representing power, she was a woman who was able to use it, wield it over the whole country and abroad. She was the only British minister to win three consecutive terms in a row in the 20th century and when she resigned she had been the longest serving prime minister since 1827 (Young n.p.). Because of this, and because of the fact that in 1997 Queen Elizabeth II had been ruling for over forty years, one could argue that Britain was well accustomed to women in power and that it had been a part of their life for quite some time.

It is in this wider context that the director John Madden chose to make a biopic about Queen Victoria that represented her as someone who is quite opinionated, stubborn at times, openly critical of the people around her and vocal about the current political events. This chimed with the picture of the queen painted by the British historian and biographer, A. N. Wilson. According to Wilson, Queen Victoria's nature was known for her tendency to defy her advisors, politicians, the prime minister and other members of the Establishment (271). In the film she defies her prime minister on multiple occasions, she does not conform to other people's advice nor does she bow to the press which spread rumours and lies about her personal life. When the relationship between the Queen and Brown became public knowledge one newspaper claimed that she had come out of mourning, to which she said:

No one should think themselves wiser than me. It is not for any of the Queen's subjects to presume to tell her Majesty when and where she should come out of mourning. It is the Queen's sorrow that keeps her secluded. It is an overwhelming amount of work and responsibility, work that she feels will soon wear her out entirely. Is it not enough that she is uncheered and unguided? That she should also have to suffer these malicious rumours. I am not a fool. I know there are those in the establishment too afraid to attack me so they attack my dearest friends. Sometimes I feel Brown is all I have left of Albert and now they attack Brown too. I will not give it up to them. (*Mrs Brown* 51:20-52:16)

However, John Brown did get attacked, quite literally, and when they tried dismissing him for this staged attack the Queen said that she "will not be dictated to and made to alter in

any way what she has found to answer for her comfort.” (*Mrs. Brown* 62:16) Sometimes her stubbornness received backlash from her government and the people; she was accused of showing a lack of involvement in her public duties, which, after all, is the sole point of a constitutional monarch. In this way the film highlights the fact that everyone around her – the press, her children, monarchists and republicans – were questioning whether the country was able to function without the Queen since she spent half the year secluded from it (Wilson 267).

### **3.2.2. John Brown as a Dominant Outsider**

Madden’s film aims to portray the change in Queen Victoria’s life brought about by John Brown, and the way it portrays this change puts a considerable stress on the fact that this presence was a man’s. At first, Victoria is shown as still grieving, as hostile and bitter towards all the royal house members. This is evident by the way Ponsonby talks about the atmosphere in the royal house, in his voiceover he states that the Queen “has now restricted herself to a regime of such ferocious introspection that we are all at our wits end.” (*Mrs. Brown* 03:15). Another example of her “ferocious” mourning imposed on others is when she comments on her daughter’s decision to wear a shawl that was not black by saying “That’s a pretty shawl you’re wearing Alice, the colour suits you well. But you’re not eating enough. One must not let vanity overrule one’s appetite.” (*Mrs. Brown* 07:23) However, when John Brown arrives her manner changes: he manages to distract her from her mourning, which before was present day in, day out, and she becomes stronger, more independent and, one might say, happy. Ebert described this depiction of Queen Victoria as a woman hiding behind her desk, “dressed in mourning” and having a “formidable façade” which Brown was able to reach through (n.p.).

It can be argued that her ability to appear so strong-willed is, in this film, only because John Brown was in her life and was the one who had taken on the duties which Prince Albert once had: those of controlling the household and the servants. He was able to fulfil this position because he had a very dominant personality, would not take orders from anyone but the Queen herself and he was prepared to do anything in order to protect her. Brown represented a character which is often introduced in such films with the purpose of ridding the monarchs of their everyday struggles and troubles and once they succeed they are simply gone (Primorac 184). As Ford and Mitchell further state it was only natural that an outsider could provide an alternative to the “stultifying protocol of court life” (172). The historical evidence that survives shows that the Queen described him as “so simple, so intelligent, so unlike an ordinary servant

and so cheerful and attentive” (Wilson 242). This confirms that she thought only the best of him and was devoted to him as much as he was to her.

### **3.2.3. What Is Happening “Beneath the Guarded Surface”?**

At first glance one might consider this film to be about Queen Victoria and Mr. John Brown’s strong connection and their closeness. However, there are barely any scenes of the two actually spending time together. They do go out and ride horses, she does come to his family home but there are almost no scenes of them having genuine conversations. The film is mostly filled with scenes of other people discussing their relationship or them having a conversation about it with other characters in the film. The reason may lay in the fact that the postfeminist media would often shy away from representing aging women as subjects of affection and desire (Primorac 186). Even more so, it is important to state that very few people really knew the true nature of Queen Victoria and Brown’s relationship. This could also be the reason why this film lacks scenes of them conversing with each other: perhaps Madden wanted to create a film which is more historically accurate rather than shooting imaginary scenes of Queen Victoria and Brown. Even A.N. Wilson, a prominent biographer of Queen Victoria, was unable to decide whether the Queen and Brown had a romantic relationship or whether it was merely an overly close friendship. Wilson believes that Brown and Victoria had an “embarrassingly close monarch-and-servant relationship” and that it was quite improbable for them to be anything more since the Queen was still fixated on the memory of Albert and she found Brown only to be her Highland servant and nothing more (275). The only scene in which we see the two main stars of the film together in an intimate setting is toward the end of the film when Brown wants to resign and the Queen confesses that she cannot go on with her duties without him: “I cannot allow it because I cannot live without you. Without you I cannot find the strength to be who I must be.” (*Mrs. Brown* 64:48) and they kiss each other’s hands. The director is asking his viewers to see what is happening “beneath the guarded surface.” (Ebert n.p.). Their relationship is dependent on strict rules and customs and they seem just the same when they are following them as well as when they are breaking them, a lot of the times the actual tension and intentions are hidden in their eyes (Ebert n.p.).

One might say that this was the director’s way of respectfully portraying the monarchy and the overall problematic that stood behind the topic of the Queen and Brown, but it is worth noticing just how little the Queen herself is shown throughout the film. In addition, it is mostly

Brown and his point of view that the viewers see which could further prove the previous claim that in postfeminist cinema, when a film is predominantly about a woman of an older age, most of the screen time is devoted to the masculine and/or more youthful character (Primorac 186).

### **3.2.4. Queen Victoria as Mrs. Brown**

The title of the film itself is quite suggestive. “*Mrs. Brown*” clearly refers to Queen Victoria but why was this title, reserved for Brown’s wife, given to someone who was his Queen and friend? In his biography *Victoria: A life* (2014) Wilson, despite having concluded that Queen Victoria and Brown merely had an uncomfortably close master-servant relationship, found some evidence that points to the Queen and Brown having a bond which could be considered as a romantic one. The first piece of evidence comes in the form of a diary entry from Lewis Harcourt, in which

he wrote that Lady Ponsonby – wife of the Queen’s private secretary – ‘told the Home Secretary a few days ago that Miss Macleod declares that her brother Norman Macleod confessed to her on his deathbed that he had married the Queen to John Brown and... had always bitterly regretted it. Miss Macleod could have no object in inventing such a story, so that one is almost inclined to believe it, improbable as it sounds (Wilson 275).

The second piece of evidence supports the first one and it has to do with the Queen’s burial instructions which were given to her doctor but were only revealed by his granddaughter-in-law, Michaela Reid:

Among the many and detailed instructions which the Queen gave was that she should be buried with ‘a plain gold wedding-ring which had belonged to the mother of my dear valued servant and friend Brown and was given him by her in ’75 – which he wore for a short time and I have worn constantly since his death – to be on my fingers (Wilson 470).

In addition to the ring of Brown’s mother, the Queen also requested to be buried with Brown’s pocket handkerchief and his photograph. Shrabani Basu even claimed that the Queen was buried with Brown’s photograph and a lock of his hair in a case and the two items were placed in the Queen’s left hand (277). All of this is still not enough to firmly state that Queen Victoria and Brown were in a romantic relationship, but it does suggest that there was something deeper and more complicated than a mere Queen-servant relationship. By giving this film a title which is meant for Brown’s wife, the film both stresses this romantic connection

and, at the same time, reduces the Queen's role of a monarch, a ruler of a kingdom, to that of a female character, a part of Brown's life and implicitly his dependant. Through this subtle change of focus, the male figure of the film receives the spotlight.

#### **4. Film analysis: *Victoria & Abdul* (2017)**

The film *Victoria & Abdul*, directed by Stephen Frears and written by Lee Hall (2017), depicts an unusual friendship between Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) and a young Indian clerk named Abdul Karim (Ali Fazal). The film was based on the book by Shrabani Basu *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* which was published in 2010 and tells the how this Indian servant became an essential part of Queen Victoria's late life, and of his effect on her as well as on the whole royal household.

##### **4.1. Film Summary**

The film begins with a scene in which one of the main stars of the film, Abdul Karim, is praying in Agra in 1887 soon after which he is told that he would be travelling to England to present a traditional ceremonial coin from India during Queen Victoria's golden jubilee celebrations. In contrast to the scenery in India where everything seems to move fast and the streets are bustling with working people, the following scene takes place in Buckingham Palace where the first thing one is able to hear is the Queen herself, snoring. As the camera moves, she is seen lying in bed, the frame showing only her grey hair. The next sound is her hesitant growl because she is being woken up by one of her servants. This contrast between the lively streets in India and the stagnant life of the aging Queen and other members at the Palace represents the contrast between the young and the old. A theme which is constantly present throughout the film and further emphasized with the following scenes.

Queen Victoria and Abdul first see each other at the presentation of the ceremonial Indian coin and the most important thing is that the servants are not allowed to make eye contact with the Queen. She slightly dozes off while the two Indian servants bring the coin and acts completely uninterested by this gift. As they are slowly leaving, Abdul looks at the Queen and, as their eyes meet, the framing of the shot implies an instant mutual connection and fascination. The next day the Queen expresses her fascination with Abdul and because of that the two servants are urged to prolong their stay in England. Through their conversations, Abdul introduces her to the Indian culture, their customs, traditional dishes, spices, and fruit such as mango which the Queen immediately requests after Abdul mentions it. Realising that she has no privacy at the Palace, Queen Victoria goes with Abdul to Glass-alt-Shiel, her safe place

where she always feels like she could escape from it all and she opens up to him and expresses how lonely she actually feels. After revealing her emotions and state of mind, she promotes Abdul to be her “Munshi” (Urdu word for “teacher”) and then proceeds to present him with a locket with her picture in it. Clearly, their friendship turns more and more into a familiar relationship because the Queen starts to treat Abdul as if he were her son. This makes everyone else who was a part of the royal household, especially Bertie (Eddie Izzard), displeased and eager to put a stop to it. The first and only argument that the two have is depicted in a scene in which Queen Victoria shows her lack of knowledge about the Indian Rebellion of 1857. She is portrayed as unaware of the fact that the Muslims led the revolt and has to be informed of this by her royal house members. She is shown as embarrassed in front of everyone and it is all because Abdul told her a different story: he told her how the Muslims were the Queen’s friends and that they were far more loyal to the Crown than the Hindus. For this reason she feels betrayed and orders Abdul to go back home. After their quarrel, there is a scene of Queen Victoria in her bedroom, wearing a nightgown with her hair down and quite emotional about what had happened. She looks at Albert’s photograph and then goes to Abdul straight away and changes her mind about him leaving.

As their friendship blossoms, the Queen’s most “trust worthy” servants are plotting behind her back to put a stop to it. Sir Henry (Tim Pigott-Smith) and Bertie are compiling a dossier on Abdul’s background in the hope of finding out something that could send him back to India. They learn that his family is poor, calling him “a lowborn imposter” and suggest that he had also suffered from gonorrhoea. They prepare all the evidence to present it to the Queen. However, to their surprise, the Queen remains loyal to Abdul and is completely on his side: she even decides to give Abdul a knighthood. When Sir James Reid (Paul Higgins) and Sir Henry tell everyone else about the Queen’s intentions they are all displeased and they decide to stand up to her. If she is to refuse, they threaten to resign and have her certified as insane and removed from office immediately.

Over time Queen Victoria keeps getting worse. The last time she and Abdul speak is when she is on her deathbed calling for him. Bertie lets Abdul into her room and the two are left alone. They have a heartfelt conversation where they say goodbye to each other and soon after the Queen dies. The director cuts from the scene showing Abdul saying a prayer and kissing the dead Queen’s feet to the one which shows his wife and mother-in-law being thrown out of their accommodation with all their possessions. Bertie takes everything that Abdul has written or anything that had connections with the Queen and burns it. The only thing Abdul



manages to save is the locket with the Queen's picture in it. Abdul returns to Agra in 1901 and dies eight years later.

## **4.2. Film Analysis**

### **4.2.1. Queen Victoria - a "Fat, Lame, Impotent, Silly Old Woman"**

When it comes to the portrayal of Queen Victoria in this film it is clear that the main focus is placed on her old age and her declining health. Right from the beginning, the first scenes of the Queen are those of her barely getting out of bed, falling asleep at the table and being unable to concentrate on anything. In addition to displaying her old age, the Queen herself talks about it in almost every scene where she opens up about her state of mind. For example, when Queen Victoria and Abdul arrive to Glass-alt-Shiel, there is a scene in which the Queen expresses just how unhappy she is with her life by saying:

They don't understand anything, these stupid aristocratic fools, toddling around, jockeying for position, I've had it all my life. They couldn't bear me bringing dear John Brown here but I was happier here than anywhere in the entire world. Oh, I miss him Abdul...and Albert. It's 30 years now and I think of him every day. I'm so lonely, everyone I've really loved has died and I just go on and on. It's an impossible position, no one really knows what it's like to be Queen. I'm aging by millions of people all over the world. I have nine children, all vain and jealous, at loggerheads with each other. And Bertie is a complete embarrassment. And look at me, I'm a fat, lame, impotent, silly old woman. What is the point Abdul? What is the point? (*Victoria and Abdul* 36:29-38:20)

It is clear that the Queen is discontented with her position, her children and other people around her. The only people who brought her joy, John Brown and Prince Albert, are dead and she feels lonely. Within the space of this short monologue, the director and the screenwriter managed to fit all the stereotypes within just a few minutes: the difficulty of being Queen, spoiled children, motherhood, tragic relationships, and aging as a woman.

This set up very much reflects the postfeminist media's representation of women's attitudes to their occupations, in particular, the ways in which, as Faludi points out, the film directors would take "feminist films and run the reels backward." (139) Although women are displayed as having an occupation, at the same time their occupation makes them miserable and they are desperate to escape from it. It is made to seem that they find their careers "taxing and

tedious.” (Faludi 139) Queen Victoria’s “occupation” is not a common one and the concerns and feelings she expresses in the monologue above are what is to be expected from someone in a position such as herself. However, if we observe this depiction in the light of Faludi’s observations, it can be argued that Frears and Hall did exactly what Faludi wrote about. They made it seem as if the core reason for the Queen’s unhappiness was the fact that she occupied the position of power as Queen and that she is old, without a man by her side and that everyone around her, mostly men, are waiting for her to be gone.

Another instance of the Queen emphasizing her old age and declining health is when the members of the royal household threaten to have her certified as insane and removed from office if she gives Abdul a knighthood and not have him leave the court. To their threats, she replies by saying:

I am 81 years of age. I've had nine children and 42 grandchildren, and have almost a billion citizens. I have rheumatism, a collapsed uterus, I'm morbidly obese and deaf in one ear. I have known 11 Prime Ministers and passed 2,347 pieces of legislation. I've been in office 62 years, 234 days. Thus, I am the longest-serving monarch in world history. I'm responsible for five households and a staff of over 3,000. I am cantankerous, boring, greedy, fat, ill-tempered, at times selfish and myopic, both metaphorically and literally. I am perhaps disagreeably attached to power and should not have smashed the Emperor of Russia's egg. But I am anything but insane. If the household wish to disobey me, so be it. Let them do it to my face. I will see everyone in the Durbar Room at once. (*Victoria and Abdul* 1:22 – 1:24)

On the one hand, in this monologue, Queen Victoria highlights the length of her reign, the many prime ministers that she had dealt with, the children and grandchildren she has had, and the important paperwork she had gone through. On the other hand, she talks of her vulnerabilities such as her old age and the consequences of it. It seems that the screenwriter and the director tried to stress the fact that the Queen managed to accomplish all of those things while being a woman – and an aging woman at that. She is portrayed as someone who, despite her gender and the process of aging, is able to stand up to anyone who doubts her sanity.

Postfeminist media is known for giving agency to only younger women since their agency is closely related to their sex appeal thus displaying them as sexual beings. In contrast, this film points in a different direction since in both of these monologues the main theme is how old, fat, senile or unhealthy the Queen is. One might even say that the film overdid this display of aging because it became all anyone could see. The role of her as Queen, an Empress, mother, widow, all this has been reduced to her being an old, dying woman. However, it can be argued

that Stephen Frears only tried to depict the reality of being old instead of hiding it as many other postfeminist media does. But one does question if it were the other way around, if this was a film about an aging King, would it be the same?

According to Victoria's biographers (e.g. Wilson 2014), when Queen Victoria became closer with John Brown the public and the Royal house members were seemingly shaken up by this fact and the same repeated when Abdul arrived. However, Wilson argued that if the roles had been reversed and if the Queen had been a widowed King who had an affair with one of his servants, the Court "would have politely turned a blind eye and even affected a certain manly amusement", but since she was a woman this kind of behaviour became intolerable to the people around her and it didn't even matter if she had even slept with him or not (272). Just the same can be said when it comes to the portrayal of Queen Victoria's process of aging. Since this film shows the Queen's later years of reign, as a character in a film she no longer possesses an important requirement – attractiveness. All that seems to be left then is her age and her occupying the position of the queen. Primorac stated that in contemporary media, a woman still needs to "play down her abilities and carefully police her appearance so as not to cross the thin line between 'empowered' femininity and aggressive masculinity." (36) In other words, if a woman is in power or is seeking power she needs to be conformed to basic human elements such as age, body image, gender, so as not to seem too powerful. If a woman is in a position of power, such as Queen Victoria, it is portrayed as if she is breaking down barriers and taking something which does not quite belong to her (Primorac 36). Consequently, Queen Victoria loses agency in this film since the little agency that she has is part of her portrayal as an old and dying woman.

#### **4.2.2. Under Control**

Another repeated motive is the one of the Queen being controlled by everyone in her life, especially her advisors. Kinzler argues that because of her gender she was always in an "inferior position" regardless of her occupying the nation's highest office (57). In their first conversation, when Abdul says he works at a prison as a clerk, Queen Victoria says "We are all prisoners." (*Victoria & Abdul* 23:35). This dialogue clearly indicates the Queen's feeling of being trapped in the palace and her position.

What was also interesting to note was the fact that while Queen Victoria was the Empress of India she had never been there and knew little about it. In a matter of few weeks,

the Queen learned more about India, its language, traditions and religions than she had known for the entirety of her reign thus far (Wilson 395). In the film, she explains to Abdul that the reason for her never visiting India was because everyone else feared she would get assassinated since there were quite a few attempts at her life in the past. Hall's decision to put the word "forbidden" in the Queen's mouth further highlights this pattern of the Queen's lack of agency and her being controlled by other people around her.

And while this may be the case, historical facts point to yet another reason why Queen Victoria would not have been safe had she travelled to India. India had been under the direct British rule since 1858 but the Queen was proclaimed the Empress of India in 1877. Even though 1877 was supposed to be the year of connecting Britain and India closer together, it is also the year during which the Madras Famine (Great Famine) continued to bring starvation and death to millions of people up until 1878 (Mathew n.p.). So while people were starving to death, Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India, decided to create a grand celebration to mark the Queen's new role as the Empress of India (Goldfinch n.p.). This was nothing more than a further assertion of power and authority of the British Raj. In addition to this, the British continued to export tons of food from India during the famine, which proves that there never actually was any shortage of food in the country overall. When India was claimed by the Crown, this further reduced India's freedom and independence, limited Indian people's freedom of speech, introducing the infamous 'divide and rule' policy which disturbed the harmony between communities and emphasized the religious differences (Goldfinch n.p.). It could be that the Indian population associated the Queen with one of their darkest periods in its recent history, since at the height of the famine there was a banquet for nearly 60 thousand people in her honour as if there were no people struggling to survive at the exact same moment (Mathew n.p.).

It seems that the Queen's reputation in India was not dependent on her own actions or presence but rather on another male figure, Lord Lytton in this particular case. Just the same can be seen in the film where her advisors surreptitiously tried to put a stop to the Queen's and Abdul's friendship and by doing so it only proved that a lot of things happen without the Queen's knowledge. Ultimately, she is depicted as someone who is unable to make her own decisions and as someone who is dependent on her male advisors (Kinzler 58).

### 4.2.3. (In)dependence

However, from time to time the Queen does display defiance towards the men who were trying to control her. For example, when Henry Ponsonby, her Private Secretary, brings her the boxes containing her daily paperwork she asks him to leave because she is “perfectly capable of working through the boxes” (*Victoria and Abdul* 31:04) with Abdul at her side. When Sir Henry becomes hesitant, she says “And I am the Queen of England, I will have whatever help I require with the boxes.” (*Victoria and Abdul* 31:17). She also refuses to send Abdul home even after Sir Henry, Bertie and Sir James Reid try to overwhelm her with incriminating information about Abdul. She is depicted, moreover, as making everyone say “I will be courteous to the Munshi” (*Victoria & Abdul*, 1:15), and when all the members of the royal household threaten to resign if she proceeds to give Abdul a knighthood she stands up to them and asserts her authority.

The scene in which the Queen shows her lack of knowledge on the topic of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 truly represents the way in which she is made to seem completely dependent on the information she receives from her (male) advisors – in this particular instance, Abdul. He talked about how the Muslims were being marginalised in India since they were a minority and made it seem as if the Hindus were the antagonists in the religious riots (Basu 169). When her royal house members inform her that the Muslims were the ones who led the revolt, Queen Victoria feels betrayed and has a fight with Abdul. At the time, the British administrators did not consider the Muslims to be the Queen’s friends as Abdul stated, since they were seen as the main cause of the Indian Mutiny which had been led in the name of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar (Basu 170). Consequently, Queen Victoria is depicted as someone who is unable to have her own opinions as it is made to seem that her knowledge completely relies on the information she receives from either her advisors or from Abdul.

At the same time, the Queen shows that she is capable of using her power and expressing her opinion. However, she is only able to do so because she now has another strong male figure by her side – Abdul. Her independence becomes paradoxical since she is actually dependent on yet another man that came into her life.

## **5. Film comparison: *Mrs. Brown* (1997) and *Victoria and Abdul* (2017)**

The films *Mrs. Brown* and *Victoria & Abdul* share many similarities and it can be argued that the film about Queen Victoria's companionship with the Indian servant Abdul is a sequel to the famous biopic *Mrs. Brown*. Even though the two films were made twenty years apart, the casting of Judi Dench in both offers continuity; furthermore, they have similar stories and *Victoria & Abdul* shows the Queen's life after Brown's death. Both were created to display a monarchy film which uses an "exoticized transgressive commoner" as someone whose purpose is to rejuvenate the Queen (Primorac 188).

### **5.1. Judi Dench – the Queen on the Screen**

The main star in both films is Judi Dench, a well-known actress in the British theatrical world. Over the course of her long career in theatre and on film, she had played Ophelia, Juliet, Isabella, Portia, Titania, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, all of which are important female characters of Shakespeare's work (Ford and Mitchell 169). It is no wonder then why the directors of both *Mrs. Brown* and *Victoria & Abdul* chose her to play Victoria. Dench even got an Oscar nomination for her role in *Mrs. Brown*, and for playing Queen Victoria in the film *Victoria & Abdul* she was nominated for The Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy at the Golden Globe Awards. What makes Dench such a great choice as Victoria is her ability to convey complex feelings through facial expressions. Ford and Mitchell describe her face in *Mrs. Brown* as "a miraculous birth, light comes back to her eyes. Her vacant gaze refocuses. She begins again, to see the world around her instead of the landscape within" (168) This is also evident in the film *Victoria & Abdul*: from her barely keeping her eyes open at the table to her laughing, having fun and enjoying herself. Dench considered *Victoria & Abdul* as a sequel of the story of Queen Victoria and Brown, and of her playing Queen Victoria again she said, "I hope it will match up to the person that I played in *Mrs. Brown*" (Mandell n.p.).

### **5.2. Queen Victoria as a Captive of Her Mourning and Old Age**

The beginning of each film shows the male protagonists first. In *Mrs. Brown* the film starts *in medias res* with a scene of John Brown maniacally racing through the dark forest, pulling out

his gun, shooting in blank air and screaming “God save the Queen” (*Mrs. Brown* 02:43) while in the film *Victoria & Abdul* the camera shows Abdul Karim praying in Agra just before he’s told he would be travelling to England. However, shortly after John Brown’s appearance, the back of Queen Victoria’s head centres the camera shot, followed by her sad and drained face’s reflection in the dressing-table mirror, emphasizing the fact that what viewers are actually witnessing in this film is an image, a “second hand, reversed image” (Ford and Mitchell 167). On the other hand, in *Victoria & Abdul*, the Queen’s face is shown in a close-up, 12 minutes into the film, before that there are two crosscutting scenes, the first of the two Indian servants on their way to England and the second of Queen Victoria’s preparation for the jubilee. While the women servants are getting the Queen dressed and ready for the jubilee there are only shots of the Queen lying in bed and getting carried out of it, her grey hair dominating the screen accompanied by her snoring and sighing. It is worth noticing that in both films, the Queen’s first appearance shows her either as a captive of her mourning or her old age.

### **5.3. John Brown Becoming the Queen’s Private Secretary and Abdul Karim Becoming Her “Munshi”**

Brown is depicted as a man with a more dominant nature who establishes his place at the royal household rather quickly. In the film, he places himself at the head seat at the servants’ table, orders them around, humbles Ponsonby, and bullies Bertie. As Ford and Mitchell state:

He pursues the queen’s interests, even asking a maid what Victoria is reading. Brashly, he accrues power, and, brashly, he uses it, wielding the queen’s favour as he climbs. “There’s no stopping me now,” he declares as he and his brother dash naked into the cold sea, another example of Brown’s hardy physicality. (173)

Similarly to Brown, within months at the royal household Abdul upgraded his status from cooking curries for the Queen to becoming her ‘munshi’ (Basu 22). On the second of August in 1888 the Queen wrote in her journal: “Am making arrangements to appoint Abdul a *munshi*, as I think it was a mistake to bring him over as a servant to wait at table, a thing he had never done, having been a clerk or munshi in his own country and being of rather a different class to the others.” (Basu 101). Abdul was open about the discontent he felt about him being a servant and wanted to go back to India if he were to retain this position. Because of this the Queen quickly decided to raise his rank. She wrote: “He [Abdul] was anxious to return to India, not feeling happy under the existing circumstances. On the other hand, I particularly wish to

retain his services, as he helps me in studying Hindustani, which interests me very much, and he is very intelligent and useful.” (Basu 101). Based on the Queen’s diary entries it is safe to assume that the Queen had become very much reliant on her new Indian companion and would adhere to his wishes if it meant that he would not leave her side. This is depicted in the film as well where the Queen’s loyalty and fascination with Abdul is highlighted throughout the entire film.

Much like the Queen had given Brown the status of her private secretary, Abdul is given the status of her teacher. Basu described Abdul as “the lonely monarch’s closest confidant, filling the shoes of John Brown, her trusted Scottish gillie, who had died four years earlier.” (22). Abdul was the Queen’s support while she was in mourning of both her husband, Prince Albert, and of her most trusted companion John Brown.

#### **5.4. Abdul Karim: The Son Queen Victoria Always Wanted**

While the true nature of Queen Victoria and Brown’s relationship remains unclear both in real life and in the film *Mrs. Brown*, the Queen and Abdul’s relationship and its nature gets established early on in the film. The Queen is portrayed treating Abdul as if he were her son: when she finds out that Abdul has a wife back home she does seem surprised at first but then she requests that he return to India and bring her back to England. The Queen’s excitement that is displayed at the prospect of meeting Abdul’s wife and her calling them children make the nature of their relationship quite evident. At the end, while Queen Victoria is on her deathbed, she is shown saying goodbye to Abdul and calling him her “sweet son.” (*Victoria & Abdul* 1:36).

In her book *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* (2017) Shrabani Basu wrote about the Queen’s involvement in Abdul’s marriage. She knew that they were unable to have children and she immediately wanted to help them. The Queen would write to Karim, providing advice for his wife such as: “Your wife should be very careful not to neglect her bowels and never to let a second day pass without their acting. She should take a weak pill if necessary. She should be careful at the particular time every month not to tire herself or go on rough roads.” (Basu 167). The intimate details that she wrote about further prove the closeness between Queen Victoria and Abdul, and that their relationship was based on complete trust and freedom to say anything, similar to a parent-child relationship. Basu claims that the



Queen monitoring their love life and providing them with advice and suggestions on how to solve their problems gave her “a sense of matriarchy and fulfilment” (168).

### **5.5. Servants Are a Queen’s Best Friend**

Why the Queen chose those two commoners to be her pillars of trust and emotional support remains unknown. It could be that since Queen Victoria had been trained from childhood to remain reserved and to maintain a certain image of herself, she never had the ability to create an intimate bond with any of her ladies-in-waiting or with anyone else that was at the household (Ford and Mitchell 176). In *Mrs. Brown* this lack of real human connection between the Queen and the people around her is shown through the scenes of her ladies-in-waiting following the Queen’s every move and speaking to her only when addressed. It comes as no surprise that the Queen would long for “a real companion” (Ford and Mitchell 176). Her attitude on the matter can be gleaned from her correspondence where we find that the Queen believed that “Servants are often the best friends to have”, as she told her sister-in-law Alexandrine (Wilson 273). This certainly proved true for the friendship she had with Brown and with Abdul.

Brown became the Queen’s confidant; his arrival created a change which was much needed at the court. Like Brown, Abdul represented another trusted companion of the Queen. Perhaps the Queen felt like he understood her and that she could relate to him as well; the film certainly hints at this. In the film *Victoria & Abdul*, the Queen openly talks about her loneliness and how no one really understands what it means to be Queen. However, it is interesting to observe that those two “real companions” are both men, and to examine the way they are portrayed in the two films.

### **5.6. Occupying a Typically Masculine Role**

Wilson argues that Brown brought stability back to the Queen’s life and that upon his arrival she “had what she had always so very much felt she needed: a man at her side.” (252) It is true that the Queen was inconsolable after Prince Albert’s death and she never really managed to completely accept his being gone, so this could be the reason why she formed such a quick bond with Brown, and why she later experienced a similar relationship with Abdul. However,

Kate Williams, a royal historian and the author of the biography about Victoria's early years, provides some facts of Queen Victoria's early life that point into a different direction.

In her book *Becoming Queen Victoria: The tragic Death of Princess Charlotte and The Unexpected Rise of Britain's Greatest Monarch* (2008), Kate Williams described Queen Victoria's early life and the beginning of Victoria and Albert's marriage. When she first became the Queen she loved being her own mistress, answering to no one and taking pride in making her own decisions. Because her mother had been in a relationship in which she was completely dominated, Queen Victoria vowed never to "feel similarly cowed" (Williams 313). She wanted someone who would obey her and do exactly what she asked. Prince Albert seemed to fulfil this desire. When she first saw Albert, Queen Victoria praised his physical beauty, using the words such as "fascinating", much like a man would describe a woman (Williams 317). By being the Queen, meaning the dominant one with power in any relationship, Victoria actually occupied the typically masculine role, and Williams writes that "she had the power, riches, judgement and wanted a handsome young spouse to sit by her at dinner and ride out with her" (317).

So, while the two films might show Queen Victoria as a weak and emotional aging woman who was in dire need of a man to stand by her side, historical record of her early life shows that Victoria primarily longed for a handsome man to obey her and listen to her troubles. Just like she commented on Prince Albert's appearance, in the film *Victoria & Abdul* the very first thing she recognized about Abdul was that he was "terribly handsome" (17:12). Similarly, *Mrs Brown* stresses Brown's physicality and attractiveness, incorporating a scene of him swimming naked in the sea besides the ones where he goes "riding out with her".

However, historical record of Queen Victoria's life after marrying Prince Albert also needs to be taken into consideration. She spent most of her time pregnant and in childbearing and she was quite open about her not enjoying it as well. The Queen confided in Vicky, her firstborn, "what made me absolutely miserable was to have the first two years of my married life utterly spoilt by this occupation" – i.e. childbearing (Wilson 88). Consequently, Albert took over little by little. The Queen was reluctant at first to surrender her political power to him, but this became inevitable with each new pregnancy. Despite the fact that she was a strong woman who managed to successfully give birth to nine children and who had every help possible, from nurserymaids, governesses and similar, this was still too much for her to be able to perform her duties without Albert becoming "an effectual political secretary" to her (Wilson 88). Queen Victoria was therefore forced to rely on him and gradually their marriage "infantilized her" –

so much so that she became accustomed to him being the one making the chief political decisions and drafting the diplomatic and political letters (Wilson 208). So, once he was gone she was lost and this marks a shift in her relation to power and explains the habit of her relying on him and then later relying on other men in her life – Brown and Abdul.

### **5.7. Rules are to be Broken**

Another common theme in the two films are the strict rules of the royal household, which are laid out at the very beginning. Ford and Mitchell describe the state of the court during Queen Victoria's mourning after Prince Albert's death and upon Brown's arrival in the following words:

May anyone raise his or her voice? No. May anyone leave the house without the queen's permission? No. May anyone walk ahead of the queen? No. May anyone speak to the queen before being addressed? No. May anyone try to lift the queen's burden? No. May anyone do anything to dispel the gloom? No. May anyone acknowledge that the world might still hold interest? No. No. No. (168)

From this, it is clear that the court was a place of sadness and unhappiness and everyone who was a part of it was also a prisoner of it. Brown is shown breaking the rule of not speaking to the Queen before being addressed and acknowledges the poor state she was in by saying "Honest to God, I never thought to see you in such state. You must miss him dreadfully." (*Mrs. Brown* 11:08) Consequently, the Queen asks him to leave the room because she was unable to accept his comment since there was hardly anyone at the royal household who had been this direct – and honest – with her. Abdul Karim is also shown breaking the rule that was told about before he entered the court: he was not to make eye contact with the Queen. However, after they had given the ceremonial coin to the Queen and as they were leaving the dining table, Abdul could not help but look at her. Their eyes meeting marked the beginning of their friendship. While in *Mrs. Brown* the Queen expresses resistance towards Brown at first and refuses his help, in *Victoria & Abdul* she is eager to find out more about this Indian servant and is intrigued by him.

The strict rules and the atmosphere at the court are further emphasized in the dining scenes, present in both films. On the one hand, the dining scene in *Mrs. Brown* is completely colourless, everyone is dressed in black and the room is filled with tension the moment the Queen arrives. On the other hand, in *Victoria & Abdul* Victoria is struggling to stay awake at

the table and only when she spots Abdul does she really open her eyes. Both scenes are either colourless or lifeless and with the appearance of the male protagonists the screen lights up, liveliness enters the room and the atmosphere changes. In other words, in both films the first impressions of Queen Victoria are reduced to images of someone so deeply in mourning that she is barely alive to the world, or of someone so old she is technically dead to the world.

### **5.8. A Stir at the Court**

The Queen's relationships with Brown and Abdul created quite a stir at the court and with the public. At the time of the Queen and Brown's friendship, rumours started to spread about them being romantically involved. To escape from the ever-seeing eye of the public, Queen Victoria, in both films, finds her sanctuary in Scotland. In *Mrs. Brown* she comes there to seclude herself from the public life and mourn in peace with Brown at her side. In the film, there are two opposing scenes, the one of Queen Victoria visiting Brown's family in the Scottish Highlands and the other, a scene of the royal members at a party. The Queen seemed to enjoy the setting of a humble and ordinary home, she smiled at Brown's jokes and this is the first time one is able to see her truly happy in this film. At the royal gathering, everyone was commenting on their relationship and just how inappropriate it had become. The prime minister Disraeli and Bertie talked about the reputation of the monarchy and how the Queen must be persuaded to return to her public duties before a "situation develops." (*Mrs. Brown* 38:08) Simultaneously the Queen's agency becomes more prominent, she gains new experiences and makes her own decisions, while her family and courtiers are trying to put a stop to it. Similarly, once she realised that she had no privacy at the Palace, Queen Victoria went to Glass-alt-Shiel with Abdul.

This house was known as the Widow's Cottage and it was the first house built by Queen Victoria since Prince Albert died. When it was built she decided to celebrate the housewarming with John Brown (Basu 116). After Brown died she swore never to return there, however once Abdul arrived to the royal she changed her mind. When she took Abdul to Glass-alt-Shiel, Reid wrote to Jenner; "The Queen is off today to Glass alt Shiel to stay there till tomorrow. She has not done this since 1882, having given it up when Brown died, and said she would never sleep there again. However, she has changed her mind and has taken Abdul with her." (Basu 117).

According to Wilson, Queen Victoria was quite stubborn and the question remains whether she ever realized how bizarre her devotion to Brown appeared to the public (Wilson

271). The fact that there was even a slight possibility that the two might have had an affair was enough to cause a scandal across the country. As the rumours about the Queen's feelings for her Highland servant became more public, the Queen herself became the object of everyone's entertainment and ridicule which caused suspicion of Queen's sanity (Ford and Mitchell 166).

After Brown's death and upon Abdul's arrival, the court was again shaken up by her choice of companion. Either she did not notice or simply chose to ignore all the snobbish and racist feelings of the other servants and courtiers at the royal household, all of which despised Abdul and considered him "John Brown in a turban" (Wilson 400). The Queen even gave Brown's old room to Abdul which was immediately noticed by the household; Sir William Jenner, the Royal Physician, wrote to Reid "I am rather surprised that Abdul occupies John Brown's room, I don't believe in the ghosts of those long dead or I should expect one in that room." (Basu 105)

This atmosphere was captured in *Victoria & Abdul*. Once more, the viewers see the Queen's private secretary and Bertie squirming as Abdul helps the Queen with her daily paperwork, teaches her about Indian culture, dances with her and ultimately becomes her Munshi. Sir Henry and Bertie went out of their way to prove that Abdul should leave the household and that he was a liar. And to their surprise and discontent, nothing was going to change Queen Victoria's mind. She was loyal and trusting of Abdul as much as she was of John Brown. When her sanity gets questioned again she does not bow to other people's threats. She holds the court together and asserts authority over them.

As she regains agency in both films, after further examination, it becomes evident that this agency is closely related to either Abdul's or Brown's presence. She stands up to other members of the Royal household only to defend them and her happiness also relies on their existence. Each time she uses her power or expresses her opinion she does so with them by her side or to keep them by her side. This is why when Brown dies, there are no longer shots of the Queen, it only shows Dr Jenner and Ponsonby getting a hold of Brown's diary. Similarly, when Queen Victoria herself passes away in *Victoria & Abdul*, he and his family are shown being thrown out of court and Bertie burning everything that Abdul had written or anything that had connections with the Queen. It is true that this did happen in real life as well, the court did get their way. However, the concern lays in the way in which Queen Victoria had been represented in each film. It seems that in both she was portrayed as either an aging damsel in distress waiting to be rescued by a man, or as an old woman waiting to die.

## 6. Conclusion

The perceivable lack of Queen Victoria's agency becomes quite evident after analysing and comparing both *Mrs. Brown* and *Victoria & Abdul*. This is not surprising if we consider the broader context in which these films were made. They come out from the postfeminist cinema, where a lack of agency appears as a repeating motif in postfeminist portrayals of leading female characters. The reason behind this is the fact that in postfeminist media, women's agency is directly associated with sexiness and youth – both of which Queen Victoria no longer possessed in the films. Usually, women are made to “connote to-be-looked-at-ness and turned into objects of display...yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all” they become “the scenery on to which men project their own fantasies” (Gill and Scharff 204). Their role is reduced to their bodies and their physical appearance and when they fail to be the perfect example of what the industry considers to be attractive and feminine their screen time and their own points of view no longer matter.

Youth is equated with beauty, power and sexuality and aging is closely related to the loss of all of those traits thus carrying a greatly negative connotation. As Primorac stresses, when there are “no conventionally defined sexy bodies” there is little to no interest in the postfeminist film industry in representing past romantic relationships (187). It seems that when it comes to aging women in films, especially such as this one about an aging monarch, most of the scenes are there to put focus on the male characters and their appearance, opinions and actions. This is what happens to Queen Victoria in each film: by the end of both films she becomes stronger, independent and more lively. However, it seems that all of these traits appear only because she has either Brown or Abdul by her side. The focus of the two films was placed on the nature of her relationship with, respectively, Brown and Abdul, and it makes it seem as if her independence was a direct consequence of them becoming a part of her life.

Historical record does prove that she did share an intimate bond with both servants; however, it also proves that Queen Victoria was used to asserting her authority well before any man entered her life. Arguably, Brown and Abdul's presence in Queen Victoria's life did not make her stronger or livelier, it only reminded her that she already was all of those things. In conclusion, even when the male characters are not necessarily in the framing shot or at the centre of the plot, they are somehow made to be the cause of the female character's sense of self-worth, as it has been proven through the analysis of the two films.

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