

Lessons in Life on the Verge of Death

Spiritual Mothering in *Ai Laṛkī* by Hindi Author Krishna Sobti

*Spiritual mothering and the mother–daughter relationship are two important and intertwined themes in *Ai Laṛkī*, a short novel written by Krishna Sobti, a major author of Hindi literature. This article offers a reading of this late twentieth century literary work through the lenses of maternal theory, examining how an ill, old, and dying mother attempts to pass on maternal wisdom to her unmarried daughter who will never become a mother. Several of the basic tenets of maternal theory are useful to read literary works of fiction produced in contexts where apprehensions of religion, spirituality, motherhood and the mother–daughter relationship differ from those of the contexts where the body of knowledge known as maternal theory first emerged.*

Ai Laṛkī is a short but extremely dense and rich work of fiction in Hindi, which consists of a series of dialogues between an old and terminally ill mother and her grown-up daughter, who cares for her on her deathbed. Krishna Sobti¹ (born in 1925), a prominent novelist and essayist writing in Hindi, published *Ai Laṛkī* in 1991. It has been translated into English, under the title *Listen Girl!*,² as well as in other languages. In the following, I read this work through the lenses of maternal theory and address, primarily, scholars in motherhood studies and in the study of religions, without the pretence of offering a full-scope literary analysis aimed at specialists in Hindi literature or in South Asian studies. In addition to summarizing key elements of the plot and to analyzing two recurring maternal themes in this work, I engage with the following theoretical questions: are the basic tenets of what is known as maternal theory³ relevant to an analysis of literary works of fiction with mothers as central characters and produced in contexts that, though patriarchal, are not Euro–American? Which aspects of maternal theory could be useful to read an already much commented⁴ late

twentieth-century work of Hindi literature produced in a context different from where maternal theory and motherhood studies first emerged?

To answer these questions, I highlight the connections between two intertwined maternal themes in *Ai Laṛkī*: the first is spiritual mothering, and the other is the mother-daughter relationship. The latter seems to “have gained new currency in contemporary fiction” (Raja 860) at the turn of the twenty-first century, whereas there were only marginal references to these in oral and folk literatures of South Asia (Raja 860) and even fewer in mythological “grand narratives” (Lyotard), such as the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. This and other aspects of motherhood in South Asian contexts have been studied in a variety of disciplines. From a motherhood studies perspective, two recent edited volumes that focus not only on womanhood or femininity but on motherhood and mothering are important to mention here: *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment* (Krishnaraj) and *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood* (Sangha and Gonsalves). I draw from these collections for a more general framework. Readers unfamiliar with the specificities of mothering in South Asia (and in communities of the South Asian diaspora) can refer to these volumes for other examples of studies focusing on motherhood and mothering, some of which are also based on literary materials.

Additionally, in an article on “intergenerational connectedness in recent Indian fiction” (853), where she analyzes *Ai Laṛkī* with a focus on intergenerational conflict, Ira Raja offers an extensive and critical literature review on the specific topic of mothers and daughters in India. Raja notes that *Ai Laṛkī* provides material for an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship around the themes of matrophobia and mother-quest (Raja 855-858), both of which are relevant to motherhood studies scholars. Her perspective places a strong emphasis on the psychoanalytic theories on the mother-daughter relationships and their (feminist) critiques, including in South Asia. Just like Raja, I am aware of the restrictions that arise from focusing on a “comparatively small selection of texts” (862). A thematically focused analysis on *one* literary work of fiction published over twenty-five years ago does not allow for a general argument about South Asian mothering past or present, or across languages, cultures, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, a reading of *Ai Laṛkī* through the lenses of maternal theory is sufficient to gain insights into rarely studied literary expressions of “spiritual mothering,” as expressed in a work of fiction written in Hindi. My disciplinary standpoint and my intention with this contribution are, thus, different from Raja’s, as I purposefully leave aside the rich feminist psychoanalytic readings of this short novel in order to focus instead on the “spiritual mothering” that provides a framework in which this mother-daughter relationship unfolds.

As a historian of religions, I am aware that my use of the term “spiritual mothering” may be unconventional, in reference to a form of spiritual mothering that is mostly independent from institutional religious practice. Women’s religious and spiritual knowledge, and frequently their ritual expertise as well, constitute a negotiation with or even a challenge to understandings of notions of the self, of life and death, of connections to others, and of one’s proper place and role in society, which are rooted in religious traditions, contested or reclaimed. Providing a contextual definition will, thus, be useful: I understand spiritual mothering as a transmission of a maternal wisdom acquired through personal experience and aimed at reaching fulfillment and happiness in life. My understanding of spiritual mothering is not limited to its traditional Christian sense of guiding, nurturing, or being a role model to “children” (practitioners less advanced or experienced in their path, whether or not they are biologically related) by assuming the position of a “mother” who protects life, fosters (spiritual) growth and shapes social acceptability among one’s (religious) peer group.⁵ Spiritual mothering is a non-biologically dependent maternal practice, one specific aspect of which scholars of South Asia have studied rather extensively: women gurus who are often called by maternal titles, such as Amma, Ma, and Mataji, to name only a few. In India, and nowadays also abroad, women hold public leadership roles as gurus in various strands of Hinduism. In contrast, the spiritual mothering in *Ai Larḱī* takes place between two biologically related grown-up women, a dying mother and her unmarried and childless daughter, in their private and domestic sphere. *Ai Larḱī* could hardly be classified as religious or spiritual literature. Nevertheless, religious themes surface regularly in the story. Moreover, Krishna Sobti underlines how, for the mother, these maternal kinship ties are not only biological and embodied but also spiritual.

How does this mother-daughter relationship unfold in the framework of a spiritual mothering process throughout (and perhaps also beyond) *Ai Larḱī*? To answer this question, after contextualizing this text and its author, I highlight how the mother and the daughter in the story deal with disruptions of traditional expectations shaped by religious and cultural imperatives. Afterwards, I focus on excerpts that present mothering one’s own children as a positive, empowering, and spiritual experience, despite the patriarchal institution of motherhood, with references to religious expressions and practices that are valued in this particular context. I also make explicit how this spiritual mothering concretely takes place through the dialogues. I explain how the mother in the story becomes a spiritual teacher to her daughter by offering her an opportunity to temporarily take on a maternal role and, thus, learn some spiritual insights through the notion of disinterested service. In conclusion, I point out some of the key tenets of maternal theory that are useful—despite their limitations—to read works of fiction on mothers written in Hindi and referring to religious frameworks that are clearly

different from those contexts in which most of the maternal theory read and published today emerge (in North America and in English for the most part).

Krishna Sobti and *Ai Larḳī*

At the international level, in contrast with their colleagues who write in English, Indian authors who write in Hindi tend to see their “regional” or “vernacular” status emphasized by both Indian and non-Indian commentators. They, sometimes, are even “looked on with a mixture of condescension, surprise and disdain,” as recently described by Hindi literature scholar Annie Montaut (333). Montaut goes on to explain that

one of the reasons why the so-called “regional” masterpieces are largely ignored as such ... in postcolonial literary studies, and in world literature, is that they are generally so poorly translated, if at all, that their literary quality is hardly visible. A case in point is the translation of Krishna Sobati’s which she herself used to oppose, and which, once they became available, were several criticized. (336)

Even though she writes in Hindi (rather than in English), lives in India, and is a “woman author,” Krishna Sobti is widely recognized as a major contributor to Hindi literature. She is no marginal figure in South Asia, and her works (dozens of short stories, essays, and many novels, sometimes published under the pen name Hashmat) have been republished several times and translated. She also has received many awards.⁶

Sobti’s work features many female characters, including mothers, who “often are common women who lead usual, everyday lives” (Strelkova 73). “The bliss of life” (Verma 58) rather than considerations focused on death and the after-life is a central theme in her work, even if Sobti has also written about violence and destruction, as in her works on the Partition of India (e.g. the short story entitled *Merī māṃ kabāṃ?* [*Where Is my Mother?*]). As noted by Ashok Verma,

all Sobti’s works stand testimony to her fascination with this world as the characters go on celebrating their worldly existence and exhibit an intense desire to enjoy these pleasures and joys of life with their five senses.... She is simply overwhelmed by the myriad games of life and thus wishes to participate actively in them. (59)

This is the case in *Ai Larḳī*, too, where an old lady is on the verge of death but remembers and still enjoys the delectable pleasures in life, such as drinking freshly brewed tea.

The *kabānī* (short story) is a popular genre in Hindi literature. *Ai Larḳī* is of a hybrid genre: it is a *lambī kabānī*, or a “long short story” (K. B. Vaid qtd. in Strelkova 79), of 119 pages in the original Hindi work. *Ai Larḳī* consists of a series of dialogues, interrupted only by minimal contextual indications, between a daughter and her mother during the last days of her life. Except for one scene, all conversations take place in the room of the mother, who is old and terminally ill. The dialogues also feature a maid and personal support worker named Susan, as well as a doctor who is called in at the end of the story. Other characters, mostly deceased or absent relatives, are mentioned. The story reads almost like a theater play, with all the focus on the contents of the dialogues. Sobti gives very little details about the settings and the appearance of the characters.

It soon becomes evident to the reader that the mother leads the conversation, both thematically and quantitatively. The fact that both women speak in the narrative contrasts with another bestselling Hindi novel written by a woman author, Geetanjali Shree, and published just two years after *Ai Larḳī*. In Shree’s novel, the narrator is a daughter whose old mother is facing serious health issues. The story is told from the grown-up daughter’s perspective. There is comparatively little direct speech from the mother herself, who nevertheless gives her name to the book: *Māī* (“Mother”).

In contrast, Sobti’s book opens with the words, *ai larḳī* (“hey, girl!”), that give it its title. In *Listen Girl!*, the translated work, Krishna Sobti herself—the author, and not the unnamed narrator in the story—explains why she wrote this book. This foreword, titled “On Writing *Ai Ladki*” (included in *Listen Girl!* 7–12), was first published in the Literary Review section of *The Hindu*, an English-language Indian newspaper. It was “slightly modified” (*Listen Girl!* 12) and then integrated at the beginning of *Listen Girl!* Before writing the short story, Krishna Sobti recently experienced the death of her own mother:

Ai ladki...

Instinctively I knew: Here were the key words. They came quietly into my fingers. I did not have the slightest idea I was going to create a symbol of deep personal value with those very ordinary words, Ai Ladki. As I wrote I knew with ever growing confidence that I could provide the spiritual framework to accommodate the deep intimacy of those words, their comforting presence inside every bit of me. I know I would create an abiding togetherness between a dying woman and her daughter, the fading and failing interior, the unsaid words, the silences that record more than words that last her statement, a text of the undying human spirit. (*On Writing Ai Ladki* 11)

Hindi, like English, distinguishes between the words “daughter,” *betī*, and “girl,” *lar̥kī*, a distinction which is not marked in all languages; in French, for instance, *fille* is the word for indicating both gender (girl) and filiation (daughter). With very few exceptions, the mother addresses her daughter throughout the dialogues as “*ai lar̥kī*” (“hey, girl”). Through these words, the adult woman remains a never grown up *lar̥kī*. She is not a complete and fulfilled woman. When the old mother expresses regrets about her past choices and about never pursuing her own interests, then the word “*betī*” is used in the Hindi text. Sobti writes: “After this she would not call me by my name, she simply said *Ai Ladki*, Hey girl. Was she creating a distance between the dying and the living?” (*On Writing Ai Ladki* 10).

The daughter intimately but respectfully calls her mother *ammū* or *ammī*, and not *māi* or *mātā*, other Hindi words for “mother” that are more formal. Kinship and filiation would better be emphasized through the word *betī*, but *lar̥kī* is used. *Lar̥kī* could be just any girl; however, Sobti’s piece relates the idea that kinship relations are constructed not only through blood or milk but also through the mind and the transmission of a spiritual heritage.

Many themes emerge from reading *Ai Lar̥kī*, most of which are linked to marriage, motherhood, and family life, and a few pertain to worldviews about one’s proper rank and place in society. Just by reading the preface, the reader knows that the story ultimately will be about the mother’s death, but the dialogues are not at all gloomy. The mother reflects on her own past and mostly contented life, on the current and unconventional lifestyle of her unmarried daughter, and on their past and present relationship. She also expresses a few regrets about what her fulfilling family life prevented her from doing or achieving. The characters discuss the potential for an ordinary woman to have “her own life” or other important aspects to her identity (e.g., professional, political, or intellectual) aside from being a mother. However, this notion is difficult to apply as such in this context. Spiritual life is, in this sense, relevant: even within a context with many social and ritual obligations for women and mothers, they can find ways to cultivate their own spiritual path, though with certain restrictions. Even while the mother is awaiting the end of her worldly existence, which marks the end of the story, she rarely engages in lengthy reflections about the afterlife or about God. Strelkova notes that “for her, the existence of Hindu gods is just a fact of reality and she abandons life contentedly” (74). The focus really lies on “the bliss of life,” as often is the case in Sobti’s work (Verma). I argue that the mother in *Ai Lar̥kī* has built for herself such a spiritual practice—one of contentment, measure and happiness—and that she desires to transmit it, in turn, to her daughter. The mother’s identity (and her discourse about it at the end of her life) is centred on her experience being a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law in a joint family household. The

daughter's life, in contrast, has many aspects (such as intellectual and artistic work), but she is not a mother. Emphasis *from a maternal perspective* on the woman's role as a mother *and only as a mother*—a theme dear to contemporary motherhood studies scholars—is difficult to find in Hindi literature. As Sangha and Gonsalves point out in their introduction to *South Asian Mothering*, “South Asian women are often socialized to perform motherhood in a way that neglects their selfhood,” (3) and this may relegate other components of their identity to the background. Even in *Ai Larḳī*, details about the significance of the maternal role *in isolation from* a woman's other social functions are rare. In this article, I focus on such expressions.

In the following excerpt in her foreword, Sobti writes (in English) about her feelings just a few days after her mother's funeral and explains how she was prompted into writing *Ai Larḳī* after visiting a Sikh⁷ place of worship:

I spotted a high yellow flag fluttering in the air, a gurudwara, a shrine of my mother's faith. I decided to go in. A turbaned priest was reciting verses from the Adi Granth, the scripture of my mother's faith. I quietly sat in a corner, my eyes closed. When I at last opened them, it felt as if I had had a final message from my mother.... My death is not the end of the world for you. Little did I know this was something I could not shake off easily. I was bound so intensely to that past that I just had to touch it again. Me, my mother's daughter. And she her daughter's mother. (*On Writing Ai Ladki* 10)

The novel features a few other elements of Sikhism and of Hinduism as a spiritual (and sometimes ritual) framework for the dialogue between the two main characters. Interestingly, Sobti identifies Sikhism as her mother's faith but not as her own. Although she is not actively rejecting this or any religious tradition, she is not either giving it a prominent place in the novel, even when, in face of death, spiritual questions arise or intensify for many people. The form of spiritual mothering that emerges through the dialogues between mother and daughter transcend any formal religious affiliation because it focuses on concrete and practical life lessons rather than on speculations about God or the afterlife. Care work is a practical matter often alluded to, in particular maternal and domestic care work that teaches measure, patience, contentment, and self-control.

Lessons in Care and Freedom: Dealing with Disruptions of Traditional Expectations

Throughout the dialogues, the mother reminds her daughter that she is not following what she and most of society in this context consider as a woman's

proper path or *strī-dharma*, that is wifehood followed by motherhood, as well as following specific rules that are appropriate for one's age, gender, and rank. Readers understand that, instead, the unmarried daughter is pursuing a career in literature or perhaps in music. (Her specific artistic path is never clearly defined.) This is the principal point of contention between them: the mother views her daughter as having failed at engaging⁸ in what society views as a traditional and proper path. The daughter is no longer a young woman, and this situation is no longer temporary. She is now too old to change her status.

Ai Larṅī explores how the old lady deals with the disruption of traditional expectations, which consist of raising a daughter for a "life of service" (*Listen Girl!* 83) in another household, that of her in-laws, and of preparing herself emotionally and financially to separate from her daughter when she moves out after marriage. Sons, along with the daughters-in-law who join the multigenerational household, usually take care of the aging parents, not daughters. The intensive and extended presence of the daughter during the ultimate period of her mother's physical (and mental) decline is significant. Her care and presence are possible precisely because the daughter is free from the burden of caring for her own husband and family, in contrast with her sisters who were married off.

In the following excerpt, the mother identifies what she views as the principal failure of her daughter, as she compares her to dried vegetation:

I know exactly what you are waiting for these days. That your mother be gone and you at leisure [*phurasat*]. And then, tell me, whom will you go to once you are independent? There is nobody in the queue behind you. You are neither a mother nor a grandmother to anyone! Girl, you are but vegetation, reed, grass, straw! Do you understand what I am saying? (*Ai Larṅī* 27, my translation)

This failure to conform is repeatedly highlighted in the conversation, which, sometimes, prompts the daughter to leave the room. Moreover, nothing in the dialogues suggests a reason that would have made it objectively difficult for the daughter to find a spouse through the predominant custom of arranged (or at least approved) marriage in this context (e.g., a physical deformity or a disability). Homosexuality also is never alluded to in the dialogues as a potential reason for refusing to marry. Moreover, the mother or other family members have not coerced the daughter into marriage, and she has not entered a marriage of convenience to alleviate her family's pressures. This is a family with a comfortable socio-economic status (they used to travel, and they can afford to pay a maid and a doctor, for example), although they are not extremely wealthy. The children, including daughters, have received an education. As such, the daughter's situation is the choice of a woman with education and agency, who

is exercising her free will and refusing what Adrienne Rich calls the institution of “compulsory heterosexuality” (219) and one of its consequences—the institution of motherhood. However, in *Ai Larḳī*, the daughter never defends her choices and adopts a rather passive attitude (remaining silent or leaving the room). Furthermore, the daughter’s lack of potential for being a mother, besides the social fact that she is not married,⁹ also remains largely unexplored in *Ai Larḳī*. Being “caring” is an expected quality of a mother in this context as well. The daughter is portrayed as “caring” for her elderly mother, but nothing is explicitly said about her capacity to care for children (her own or someone else’s).

The mother rarely engages in self-blame about her daughter’s non-conformity. She does not view it as her own failure to meet the third demand of maternal thinking as defined by Ruddick (17, 21-23), who understands this demand as the shaping of social acceptability through training, which means, in this case, preparing a daughter for marriage, for living with her in-laws, and for motherhood. The mother considers this as her daughter’s failure, not as her own failing in caring for her. Mother-blame is thus not a central theme in *Ai Larḳī*, and the text does not hint at how others talk about the unmarried grown-up daughter (for instance the deceased husband, distant relatives, or neighbours). Sobti focuses the dialogues on this bubble of the mother-daughter relationship and does not explore what would otherwise be a prominent theme, that of blaming the mother for a non-conforming daughter.

Ironically, the mother is blaming her daughter for her lack of understanding of the implications of care work at the time when she engages in it the most. Although their maid takes care of many practical tasks, such as preparing and bringing food or changing the bed’s sheets, the daughter is the one who provides emotional support to her mother who has also started to lose some of her mental capabilities. The daughter is the one who has to listen to her mother’s mostly happy memories, but also to painful or regret-laden ones.

Lessons in Family Life: Mothering and Nurturing as Positive Experiences in spite of Patriarchal Motherhood

In the contrasted memories of the mother in *Ai Larḳī*, motherhood studies scholars can clearly distinguish the “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control,” in Adrienne Rich’s famous terms (13, emphasis in original). For instance, the mother evokes the capacity to endure the pain and the empowerment that childbirth gives a woman, and she regrets that her daughter will never be able to know this experience (*Listen Girl!* 55-56, quoted below). She also recalls

breastfeeding her children as pleasant moments of nurturing intimacy and not as drudgery or a discomfort to her body (18-19, see below). With a child at the breast, “all the three worlds,” the entire universe according to the prevailing Hindu cosmogony, “seem steeped in the sweetest, most heavenly syrup!” (*Listen Girl!* 20). Breast milk is not an impure bodily fluid, but it is viewed as a sacred substance. With her use of such positive metaphors, the mother situates her experience as *mothering*. Nevertheless, and despite having been married off into a rather liberal family that did not “discriminate between boys and girls” (83; also see 56), the old lady remains aware of how patriarchy has rendered the institution of *motherhood* oppressive to her. For instance, when she says:

The mother produces. Nurtures with love and care. Then why is she alone sacrificed? The family divides her into fragments and scatters her to the four winds. Why? So that she may not remain whole, may not stand up in her own authority. A mother is kept either like a cow or a nursemaid. She should keep working, catering to the comforts of its members; that is all she is good for. She can conjure any image she wants of herself, but for her children she is no more than a housekeeper. (*Listen Girl!* 91)

The hard motherwork is performed at the in-laws’ house, under permanent scrutiny. With time, this environment may become familiar, but it will never feel like a family home. The mother in *Ai Larḳī* speaks to her daughter of her deceased spouse and in-laws as “*your* family,” (my emphasis, *Listen Girl!* 89), not “my family” or “my new family.” She remains alienated and feels that the maternal link derived from her position as mother is rendered fragile. However, she recognizes the potential authority of the mother, which is undermined by the pressures and demands of a family. What may remain solid at the very end of her life is her mothering experience, in particular nurturing acts done “with love and care” (91), such as breastfeeding. The reader can wonder if the mother is “no more than a housekeeper” to the children only, or rather to her husband and other members of the multigenerational household that she is married into. This is what other works written by Indian women authors (writing in Hindi, but also in English) suggest, as is the case in *Māī* by Geetanjali Shree, where the grown-up children are shown trying to save their mother from the domination of other relatives in the joint household.

In *Ai Larḳī*, traditional roles determined by generation (parent-child) and gender (woman-man and daughter-son) are reversed.¹⁰ Both main protagonists are aware of this, as in this passage where the mother evokes her daughter’s care work to her benefit in her old age and, immediately afterwards, recalls their happy breastfeeding relationship:

Ladki. You've looked after me in my last days, made it comfortable. As your mother, I suckled you and you, my own little one, you delighted in my milk. But our relationship isn't just one of flesh and blood, is it? It's of the soul, right? Isn't it, all connected, intertwined... Arri? I don't know why your life's turned out to be so different. Why... Where are you going? Why have you got up? Sit with me for a while. Don't go, ri. (*Listen Girl!* 18-19)

In this passage, the mother is aware that the “roles have been reversed” (*Listen Girl!* 65). As she is dying, the face of her daughter reminds her of her own mother (65). Previously, the mother evoked a memory of when she was a little girl, and her own mother was breastfeeding her baby sister. Her mother rejected her request to suckle “just once more” (20) and explained: “once you stop drinking your mother's milk, you stop. Can't turn that clock back. Now it's your little sister's turn. Don't be greedy. That's the first law of nature. You'll understand it all by and by...” (*Listen Girl!* 20). This idea that one cannot return to a previous state of development or to one's younger self is related through an expression that is difficult to translate, literally, “you may never as much again get it” (*dubārā muṃh nahīm lagtā*) (*Ai Larḳī* 11).

At the very end of her life, this woman is attempting to, indeed, “turn the clock back” through evoking the many memories of her life. She rapidly shifts from the present to the past, and then to the future, to after her own death. She says “all things from the past and future mesh and meld before my eyes” (*Listen Girl!* 25). She also feels that motherhood inscribes the birth-giver into the future or even in eternity, in a cultural context with a marked preference for sons: “by giving birth to a daughter, a mother is made immortal [*mām sādājīvi ho jātī hai*]. She never dies” (*Ai Larḳī* 56).

The dialogue suggests that the daughter sometimes is upset by her mother's discourse. She leaves the room while the mother starts dozing. At other times, rather than recalling her daughter, the mother expresses her understanding of how much of a burden she might be:

Listen girl. In the beginning parents hold infant fists and teach their children to walk. Then they grow old and become children of their children. I understand your burden. I must have tired you out. Why don't you go away for a few days? (*Listen Girl!* 22)

If the daughter goes away, though, the mother will be left alone. No one else is there to emotionally care for her. Her other daughters are married, and the status of her (apparently only) son remains unclear. The mother worries that this son, whom she calls for repeatedly, may not arrive on time to perform the

funeral rites. The son, in fact, never comes—the reader may even suspect that the son is only a living memory in the mother’s mind (*Ai Lar̥ki* 41–43) and that, in reality, he is dead. His absence contrasts with his sister’s constant presence.

The mother worries about her daughter’s loneliness, as a woman who is not even partnered. At the same time, she realizes that she, too, feels alone on her deathbed, despite the presence of her daughter. Being a mother and having raised a family are no guarantee against loneliness in old age and at the time of death:

See, I have a son and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, a whole family and yet I’m alone. And you? You’re outside that timeworn tale in which there is a husband, children and family. You don’t have the hassles of a family life, you are you, full [*puram*] in yourself. Ladki, to be yourself is the ultimate, the best. If you too had to run a family, you would’ve realized by now that all the glory of a family life lies in the superficials—as someone’s wife, daughter-in-law, mother, nani, or dadi.¹¹ And again the same everydayness of food, clothes, jewellery. Ladki, a woman is queen only in name. Sheltered and ensconced, she is wiped out of individuality. (*Listen Girl!* 72)

This type of discourse participates in the moral or spiritual lesson that the mother is trying to impart to her daughter, which I will now detail below.

Lessons in Life through Spiritual Mothering

Regarding her daughter as deprived from the opportunity to learn through her own experience in motherhood, the old lady tries to give her a spiritual lesson. The mother advises through her own memories. This is more than just a legacy; it is an interactive and repetitive process between the two protagonists. Even if she recurrently underlines her daughter’s failing at becoming a mother (and more than merely just a wife), she suggests that this socially unconventional status (that of unmarried woman) could be made acceptable—or could even be enviable—under certain conditions. If her daughter used the freedom afforded by the absence of family responsibilities to get rid of her ego, she may achieve some sort of mental or spiritual perfection by just being herself and fulfilled.

The mother also appreciates the value of her daughter’s situation when she tells her “to be yourself is the ultimate, the best” (72). However, some sense of jealousy on the part of the mother can be felt: she clearly sees that her daughter is having opportunities that she, enmeshed in family life, did not have. The mother does not consider writing or intellectual work (spending “her time with

books” [37]) as a valid path. In her view, books cannot teach the empowerment that she felt going through the pain of childbirth (see below) or her positive feelings about breastfeeding a child (mentioned above): “Books can’t tell the first thing about it” (20). Her daughter’s intellectual or artistic approach to life is viewed as insufficient, and the old mother does not view herself as deficient in knowledge. She says: “Girl, your mother has not read Patanjali,¹² and so what? Knowledge (*vidhyā*) lets itself be heard, seen and lived” (*Ai Larkī* 57, my translation).

This lesson about the value of opportunities will be the only heritage that the daughter will get, as there is no significant amount of wealth or material possessions to inherit (except the apartment in which the dialogues take place, which the mother owns). Moreover, in contrast with the personal support worker, Susan, who gets paid a salary, the daughter performs her care work out of filial piety and without expecting any immediate or later reward (except that of again having more time for herself). The feelings of the daughter towards her mother are never clearly outlined by Sobti. They may even be ambivalent, but respect for her mother is certainly present, along with some irritation. Through her intensive and disinterested care work, the daughter is, indeed, threading a path towards self-perfection, and she is leaving aside her ego by focusing on her mother’s memories, always shifting the conversation away from herself. Even if the word *sevā* appears only twice in the Hindi text,¹³ this form of care work could be read against the concept of *sevā* or disinterested service, which fits well with the Sikh religious framework alluded to by the author in the foreword. *Sevā*, generally understood as the performance of community service, is valued in both Hinduism and Sikhism and is understood by some as a way to set aside ego and pride.

The mother becomes a spiritual teacher for her daughter through offering her an individual opportunity for such service and the spiritual benefits it produces. Moreover, she offers her childless daughter the possibility to take on a maternal role, which might be why the reversal of generational roles in care work is underlined several times in the dialogues. That which life will not teach her, through personal experience, the mother will teach through recounting her memories and the lessons that she has learned first-hand. She makes explicit what being a mother, managing a household, and being “enmeshed in family responsibilities” (*Listen Girl!* 91) teach an individual about “the virtue of measure” (37), self-control, and, in particular, being content with life’s simple pleasures.

Even while valuing them as transformative practices or experiences, the mother is not downplaying the pain of the physical experience of childbirth, or the difficulties of motherhood more generally. This is the case in the following excerpt:

– Ammu, you have tremendous control over yourself. I couldn't have borne so much suffering. – Ladki, giving birth to a child alone makes one familiar with the finer shades of pain. – Ammu, why such hurtful words? – Pain too comes in many shapes and forms. Slight pains, sharp pains, piercing pains. Ladki, the game of life is contained in it. *Seeing the daughter smile.* – Once a woman's body passes through the storm of childbirth, her nerves and muscles get toughened. But how could you have acquired this capacity to endure such pain. – Leave me out, Ammu, tell me when you conceived your first baby... *Ammu with enthusiasm.* – I was alert. I did my daily chores with the usual attention. Ladki, making a baby is like performing a yagna. During those days, a woman draws energy from the whole cosmos to recharge herself. She feels that special kind of existence that is hers. (Italics in the original, *Listen Girl!* 55-56)

The mother compares making a baby to the practice of *yajña*, the ritual sacrificial offering to divinities. *Yajña* is not associated with the practices of women's domestic or folk traditions but rather with those of the male ritual elite. She, thus, likens pregnancy and the act of giving birth to something sacred, important, and valued. The mother also explains how making a baby is not only a work of the body but one of the mind: "The father stands outside even as the mother gives birth to their child. That's why the mother is called Janani, lifegiver [*janani*]. It is she who makes the baby's body grow *with her mind* and in her body [*tan-man mem*]" (my emphasis, *Listen Girl!* 57). Through recurring, though not central, allusions to religious themes, expressions and ideas, Krishna Sobti suggests that mothers can use religious frameworks to make sense of life paths that some of them have little control over.

If, as Miller contends, "motherhood is a spiritual practice. It is a crash course in wisdom" (6), then the mother in *Ai Larḱī* does not want to let the wisdom that she got from being a mother and raising a family go to waste. This is why she insists on teaching these lessons in life, on the verge of her own death, to her own daughter, even if she hurts her feelings by repeatedly outlining what she is missing out on by foregoing motherhood and, more poignantly, mothering.

Reading *Ai Larḱī* through the Lenses of Maternal Theory

This reading of *Ai Larḱī* through the lenses of maternal theory will be of interest to motherhood studies scholars in general and in particular to those who work on literary materials from contexts that are not those from where maternal theory emerged in the first place. In *Ai Larḱī*, Sobti focuses on the relationship between a mother on the verge of death and her daughter who

follows a path alternative to marriage and motherhood, an unconventional choice in this context. Sobti effectively conveys how motherhood—and not only wifehood—is central to the older character’s identity.

My analysis of *Ai Larḳī* has focused on elements of spiritual mothering that consist in teaching lessons in life through recounting personal experiences in motherhood and mothering. The mother is at the centre of the action and of the attention of others in the dialogues. She is in the position of a teacher, both nurturing and tough, even as she is rendered vulnerable through illness and the failing of her body and her mind. This mother is literally dying to transmit these life lessons to her daughter, who will never marry, give birth, and raise her own family. She identifies as her daughter’s challenge the fact that she is deprived of the possibility to learn through these experiences. To remediate this, she actively transmits such maternal knowledge and points to other paths through which her unmarried daughter could also achieve similar spiritual goals (such as getting rid of the ego through service), a process that I read as a form of spiritual mothering.

The tensions between tradition and modernity, at work in South Asian society at large, are played out within (extended) family relationships in *Ai Larḳī*, even if the dialogues only allow the reader to see a fragment of them. In spite of “the lasting nature of cultural practices [that] continue to hold meaning for mothers” (Sangha and Gonsalves 10), the story is set in a context in which the status of women and the expectations about marriage and motherhood have evolved considerably and continue to do so. As Raja correctly points out, “[o]pportunities and choices of lifestyles beyond marriage and motherhood have increased significantly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, widening the gap between maternal expectations (that the daughter follow the mother’s own life) and daughterly desires” (862). The conflict between mother and daughter is not just a personal one but a generational and social one as well. In addition, social norms and expectations differ for women of different socio-economic backgrounds. What was once unacceptable, such as for a daughter to refuse marriage, has become more common, but it still does not signal a “large-scale reconfiguration of cultural priorities” (Raja 862) and is still far from the norm. Worry about social acceptability, however, is not the core of the mother’s message to her daughter: neither of them seems to care about what people will say. Notions that are central for women characters in other works by Hindi writers—such as *izzat* and *lāj* (notions of honour and shame)—are not at the core of *Ai Larḳī*.

Maternal theory and the academic field of motherhood studies were developed mostly by women scholars and activists in the North American context in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Despite cultural distance, central theoretical inputs in motherhood studies—such as the distinction between

motherhood and mothering (Rich) and the concept of maternal thinking with its three demands and its practices (Ruddick)—can, nevertheless, shed new light on literature produced in contexts in which motherhood, wifehood, and womanhood in general are conceived differently, in spite of shared dominant patriarchal ideas. *Ai Larkī* has been generally analyzed either through a psychoanalytic lens or through the more general concept of “gender” and women’s role and rank in Indian society and in the family. I found some elements of maternal theory useful to read anew this significant work of Hindi literature.

Furthermore, I argue that an inclusive and extended notion of “spiritual mothering” is useful to avoid too quickly dismissing religion as “oppressive” (according to *some* Western feminist terms). I suggest that scholars of motherhood could look into other works of Hindi literature to see how mothers, sometimes, turn selected aspects of patriarchal religious traditions into socially respected paths for self-transformation and spiritual achievement, for instance by inscribing the embodied practices of making and feeding a baby into religious frameworks or by comparing maternal acts to sacrificial ones. Finally, even if “mother” is a socially desirable status in this context, in *Ai Larkī*, the reader clearly sees through the distinction between motherhood, an institution oppressive to women that is not context specific to North America or to Christianity, and mothering, the relationship of women with their own powers of reproduction and with their children. In *Ai Larkī*, and in her other novels and short stories, Krishna Sobti positions such relationships as part of the “bliss of life” (Verma), which is central in her work. She depicts the sweetness and positive aspects of these maternal relationships, which are “not just of flesh and blood” but “of the soul ... all connected, intertwined” (*Listen Girl!* 19).¹⁴

Endnotes

¹In this article, I use anglicised names for Indian authors (except while quoting other references). My transliteration of Hindi words follows oral pronunciation.

²In this article, *Listen Girl!* refers to the English translation by Shivanath, which I quote from except when indicated otherwise. Acknowledging that translation does not always accurately reflect nuances and style specificities, in some instances, I provide my own translation of the original Hindi work, referring to the pages in *Ai Larkī*. I also quote key terms in Hindi from the original work.

³By “maternal theory,” I mean several key reflections on motherhood, mothering, and mothers, in a variety of contexts but principally in Western ones and in particular in North America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. *Maternal Theory. Essential Readings* (O’Reilly) is an example of collection of maternal theory, or rather theories, by authors who have become

central to this field.

⁴Krishna Sobti's short stories have been the topic of many works of literary criticism (see for instance Raja; Śrīvāstava; Sārasara; Verma; Strelkova). In this article, I am less concerned about the literary quality of her work than about her treatment of motherhood and mothering in *Ai Larḳī*.

⁵I draw from Ruddick's identification of the three demands of maternal thinking (17) to read spiritual mothering as a distinctive maternal practice that satisfies these demands.

⁶In 1980, Sobti received the Sahitya Akademi Award (award from the academy of literature) for *Zindagīnāmā* (The Name of Freedom), one of her most famous novels. Sobti has also received the Shiromani Award in 1981, the Hindi Academy Award in 1982, and, in 1996, she was granted the Sahitya Akademi fellowship, the highest distinction. In 2010, she declined the Padma Bhushan, a civilian award that she was to receive from the Indian government, because she wished to keep a distance from the establishment.

⁷Sikhism, a religious tradition distinct from Hindu and Muslim (especially Sufi) spiritual paths in South Asia, emerged in the late fifteenth century. Guru Nanak (1469–1539) is considered its founder.

⁸The situation would be different, but probably no less difficult, if the daughter had at least married and remained childless, or if she had divorced. She would be, at least, a wife, and would get companionship and social insertion, even without progeny.

⁹In this context, it would predominantly be seen as socially unacceptable for a woman to have a child “on her own,” without being married to a male partner. Whether the father is present at home or not (e.g., because of business or military obligations) and forges emotional bonds with the child is not the question. Only the marital status of the mother is regarded as important: the mother must be married before—and preferably also after—she gives birth to a child.

¹⁰For a deeper analysis of this generational reversal, see Raja, who focuses on cross-generational relations throughout her article. In particular, she writes that Sobti offers “the deathbed as a site for the production of new meaning between the generations” (869).

¹¹*Nānī* designates the maternal grandmother and *dādī* the paternal grandmother. To Hindi speakers, specific terms for each family relative give clear indications about filiation and generation as well as maternal and paternal lines.

¹²Patanjali is the name of several important Sanskrit authors. The mother may be referring here either to a grammarian or to a compiler of knowledge on yoga. Both are major historical figures. This name here stands for the idea of textual knowledge and formal education and scholarship, in contrast with the feminine embodied maternal pedagogy and epistemology alluded to in this story.

¹³The first time, the mother is telling the nursemaid, Susan, that she is serving

her well (*Ai Larkī* 13). The word *sevā* is used a second time when the mother refers to how her own mother served her husband (65).

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