

## Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities of Old Age: A Study of Krishna

### Sobti's *Listen Girl!*

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**Abstract:** *Listen Girl!* is a novel filled with a range of human emotions, love, care and hidden loneliness experienced by the protagonist, Ammu and her daughter. Through this novel, Krishna Sobti masterfully invites reader to immerse themselves in the lives of the mother and daughter, feeling their happiness and pain and witnessing the poignant drama of an old woman's final moments. Ammu refuses to yield to her illness and old age. Her resilience and indomitable spirit compel her to embrace life, despite its adversities. Instead of succumbing to despair, she opts to cherish the moments left with her daughter. Her internal musings and introspective contemplations serve as a testament to the spiritual journey of ageing. This research paper aims to provide an insightful exploration of old age. It delves deep into the novel's characters, themes, and narrative style to examine how it represents the experiences and societal perspectives of old age.

**Key Words:** Old age, illness, spirit, introspection, insightful, experience, knowledge, wisdom.

India's remarkable status as an incredible country is deeply rooted in its rich culture and traditions. These profound cultural and social values emphasize respect for every individual. In this diverse land, children are cherished as the embodiment of divinity itself, while women are venerated as distinct forms of Goddesses. Equally, the elderly are revered as reservoirs of knowledge and wisdom. There was a time when the joint family system prevailed across India. Under a single roof, extended families thrived, and older family members held positions of authority and garnered immense respect. However, in the shadow of modernization, Indian culture has undergone significant transformations, with families transitioning from joint to nuclear units. While these changes have altered the societal status of elders, they continue to hold a significant place within the family structure. This research paper aims to provide an insightful exploration of old age through the lens of Krishna Sobti's novel, *Listen Girl!* It delves deep into the novel's characters, themes, and narrative style to examine how it represents the experiences and societal perspectives of old age. Through a literary analysis, this paper uncovers how the novelist masterfully captures the multifaceted dimensions of old age, offering a profound insight into the process of growing old in Indian society.

*Listen Girl!* is hailed as a masterpiece originally published in Hindi as *Ai Ladki* in 1991 and later translated into English by Shivanath. The narrative of this novel is centred around the relationship between an elderly woman named Ammu and her daughter. Ammu, in the twilight of her life, battles both the old age and illness, which instils in her a profound anxiety. This anxiety is intertwined with a deep desire to confront an intensely personal grief, an experience she believes one must have to face alone. In the days leading up to her inevitable passing, Ammu becomes a prisoner to her ailment, but remarkably emerges as a survivor who adamantly refuses to surrender to her circumstances. Her prolonged journey through life endows her with profound insights into the human condition. *Listen Girl!* was penned shortly after Krishna Sobti's mother's death. She witnessed the final journey of her own mother, an experience that she poignantly mirrors through the character of Ammu. Sobti recalls, "When my mother was in the intensive care unit, I remember her repeating the words, 'the light will keep burning.' These words haunted me for many days and nights and found their place in *Ai Ladki*, this very novel" (7). As her mother's health declined, she began addressing Krishna as 'Ai ladki' instead of her name. This choice of address was perceived as an intentional effort to create a distance between the realms of the dying and the living. In this novel the emotional depth and poignancy of Ammu's journey mirror the author's own intimate experience, making it a powerful exploration of mortality, resilience, and the enduring human spirit. Ammu's prolonged battle with illness has left her bedridden, her body bearing the scars of time. She articulates her pain through these lines, "All my life, my body enjoyed the bed and now that very bed is doing me in time! Ladki, listen, listen. When all resources are exhausted, this storehouse of energy too packs up. That's what they call old age" (43). Yet, Ammu refuses to yield to her illness and old age. Her resilience and indomitable spirit compel her to embrace life, despite its adversities. Instead of succumbing to despair, she opts to the moments left with her daughter. Her internal musings and introspective contemplations serve as a testament to the spiritual journey of aging. Ammu emerges as a formidable figure who gracefully acknowledges the physical changes that accompany the years. In numerous instances, she exhibits resilience and personal growth, confronting her own mortality and reevaluating the choices she made in her life. In her unwavering determination to live life to the fullest, Ammu exemplifies the strength and courage found in the face of aging and adversity.

Experience and wisdom are the hallmarks of old age. Throughout their journey from birth to death, human beings go through various stages of life, each brimming with opportunities for learning and growth. These stages serve as crucibles of personal experience, wherein individuals accumulate a wealth of knowledge, honing their wisdom and skills. Experience is a key that unlocks the limitless chambers of life's mysteries. In the narrative, the author paints a vivid portrait of Ammu, a veritable reservoir of knowledge and wisdom, painstakingly earned through her rich tapestry of life experiences. Her insatiable appetite for learning and her uncanny ability to derive wisdom from every encounter have shaped her thinking into something of immense value. Notably, her wisdom transcends the mere superficial understanding of the external world; it delves deep into the realms of introspection, enabling her to comprehend the inner workings of things. Ammu's journey is a testament to the profound transformation that life's experiences can bestow upon an individual, enriching them with a wellspring of insight and sagacity.

Some people boldly embrace the inevitable challenges of their life's last stage, including their finite duration on this earth. They show remarkable courage to face and accept the difficulties and responsibilities that accompany with old age. They proceed with grace and gratefulness which was not visible in their early stage. Ammu is aware of her illness and the impending approach of her own death. She confesses this harsh reality through these words:

Listen child, the chain-latch on my door down. Barely one knock and I am out. But I'm not one to give in to disease and illness, man's worst enemies. They shatter the links between body and the mind, robbing the body even of its own, accustomed smell... (15)

She moves forward with a profound awareness that everything, including her own existence has a finite end. Old age is considered a journey towards death. It is not seen as an enviable state. As S.K. Lathrop says;

God has made everything beautiful in its season, the season of old age is always expected. We see no beauty in it. It has infirmity and deprivation, but no attraction. We speak of it tense of commiseration, as though, it were one of the greatest as well as the last trial of humanity. (78)

Ammu's illness intensifies her sufferings of old age as she says; "Ladki, when a patient has been ill for a long time you can diagnose everything. Really speaking, old age itself is the culprit" ( 39 ). She is aware of the condition of old people in society. She bluntly exposes the

harsh truth of a society where the elderly are often made to feel unwanted and considered useless; “Ladki there is no place for old people not in anyone’s head not in anyone’s house and here I am occupying an entire room” (18). She finds it very tough to depend on her daughter and Susan, her nurse. She reflects on her youthful years, her vibrant lifestyle and the freedom to live life on her own terms. But this final stage of her life has constrained her in ways that are unbearable. She articulates her pain in front of Susan; “Susan, listen to my words. Old age robs one of old dignity. Awful, to whosoever when so ever it comes” (21). Although her illness has left her in bed, her mind remains unyielding. Both her daughter and nurse are awed by her sharp memory and astute observation even in her current condition. She articulates her experience in these words; “I am in vanaprastha, the last days of men’s life. Ears watch and eyes listen. Old age has but empty footsteps to choose from...” (38). She is aware the fact that this phase is inescapable, and it is something everyone must encounter, regardless of their desires.

Memories plays a crucial role in the last stage of life serving as the treasured instruments through which the elderly can revisit their past life. These memories became a source of wisdom enabling individual to share their happiness, struggles, difficulties, and personal experiences with others, providing valuable insights for those in their own life journeys. In her portrayal of Ammu, Krishna Sobti captures a nostalgic essence, often longing for her youth. Memories have the power to guide individuals in two distinct directions. Firstly, they may evoke a feeling of loss for the beauty and vitality of youth that has passed. Secondly, they can serve as a resilient support system, offering courage to the elderly to confront the challenges of their age with renewed vigour. Ammu firmly belongs to the second category where nostalgia is accompanied by a genuine fondness for the past, devoid of bitterness toward the present. Ammu exhibits a resolute penchant for immersing herself in the tapestry of her past memories. She delights in sharing her life narrative from her first journey to the hill in Shimla to her childhood. She embarks on a voyage through her life prior to and after marriage and the myriad relationship she has nurtured. These memories some bitter and some sweet bestow upon her immense pleasure and inner fortitude. Each time she recounts her past, her love and affection for those movements are rekindled, creating a heart-warming narrative of a life well lived.

*Listen Girl!* is a novel filled with a range of human emotions, love, care and hidden loneliness experienced by both mother and daughter. Krishna Sobti deeply resonates with the both

characters as they mirror her own relationship with her mother. Through this novel, she masterfully invites reader to immerse themselves in the lives of the mother and daughter, feeling their happiness and pain and witnessing the poignant drama of an old woman's final moments. Her personal resonance with the novel evidence in her remark; "In *AiLadki* I know what I have done, I've mixed the different elements of life, the words mingling with very age and the body of time, the human drama of the last statement of a dying woman with stubborn resilience of the younger woman" (12) In her journey of life, Ammu emerges as a champion, even in the phase of illness and old age. She boldly confronts the challenges of life and encourages her daughter to do the same, never succumbing to despair. She can be seen as a representative of Sobti's philosophy on various aspects of life including family, the celebration of life, the Indian concepts of body and soul, liberation and the place of elderly individuals in society. Through her understanding of the world and life, Ammu embodies the essence of Indian philosophy. Krishna Sobti challenges the conventional view of old age. She finds old age not as the end of a person's life but as the beginning of another stage. She emphasizes the significance of giving birth to a daughter, as through this act a mother becomes immortal. A daughter is considered as a reflection of her mother, ensuring that the mother lives on from one generation to the next. Sobti believes that human have the power to create life and in doing so they defy death. Her approach to old age is balanced, acknowledging its limitations and challenges while highlighting it as a crucial phase in an individual's overall journey in this world. She believes old age as a graceful stage, rich in knowledge and wisdom. Sobti skilfully portrays the various aspect of old age, particularly the evolving mind set of the elderly in changing times. In a society where familial ties are often overshadowed by individualistic priorities. Sobti accurately portrays this shift through the character of Ammu. Rather than presenting a sentimental perspective, Sobti's Ammu embodies qualities of independence, self-sufficiency, determination and a spirited approach to fully experiencing life in old age. Krishna Sobti encourages individual to embrace old age as a stage of life characterised by independence and self-reliance, rather than helplessness and dependence. While the influence and authority of youth may wane, this stage of life possesses own unique radiance, as it is expressed in Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra". Rabbi praises long life because it provides one a chance to witness the unfolding of God's plan for mankind; "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first is made" (1-3). The character of Ammu exemplifies how the twilight years can be enjoyed with a positive attitude vigour and zest for life, making the most of the time remaining before the final call.

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