

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

-by Khuswant Singh

In this story, the author draws a pen portrait of his grandmother. He beautifully unfolds his relationship with her, while describing her appearance and daily activities.

Appearance of the grandmother

The author recalls his grandmother as a very old lady with a wrinkled face. She appeared so old that it was hard for him to believe that she had once been “young and pretty”. She was short, fat and a little stooped in appearance. The author remembers her moving about the house in “spotless white”, counting the beads of her rosary while her lips moved constantly in silent prayers. She was not “pretty” in the traditional sense, yet her serenity made her “beautiful”.

Initial years of togetherness: Life in the village

In the initial years of his life, the author lived with his grandmother in the village, sharing a good friendship. His grandmother used to wake him up in the morning and get him ready for the school. She would hand over to him the things he required in the school. After having thick, stale chappatis with butter and sugar for breakfast, they used to leave for school. The author's grandmother always accompanied him to school as it was attached to the temple. It was her habit to carry several stale chappatis for the village dogs, which they used to feed while returning from the school. The grandmother used to sit inside the temple reading holy books while the narrator learnt alphabets and prayers in the school.

Turning point of their friendship: Life in the city

The ‘turning-point’ of their friendship came when they moved to the city to stay with the author’s parents. Though they shared the same room, his grandmother no longer accompanied him to the school since the author started going in a bus. As years rolled by, they “saw less of each other”.

Meanwhile, as there were no dogs in the streets, she took to feeding the sparrows.

Unlike the village school, the author was not taught about God and the scriptures

which troubled his grandmother. She did not believe in what was being taught at his school and was unhappy as she could not help him with his lessons. Moreover, she was disturbed at the idea of music lessons being given at school as she considered music to be unsuitable for gentlefolk. Her disapproval was conspicuous in her silence.

The grandmother combats her loneliness by feeding the sparrows

When the author started going to the university he was given a room of his own. It resulted in a further gap between them. She accepted her loneliness and rarely spoke to anyone. All day long, she sat spinning the wheel and reciting her prayers. She relaxed for a short time, only in the afternoon, to feed the sparrows who came in large numbers. The bond and level of comfort they shared with her is evident in the fact that they perched even on her legs and head. She used to be at her happiest-self while feeding the sparrows.

Author leaves for higher studies

The author decided to go abroad for further studies. He was sure that his grandmother would be upset at his departure. On the contrary, she came to the railway station to see him off but did not show any emotion. She was absorbed in her prayers, telling the beads of her rosary. She silently kissed the author's forehead, which the author considered to be (supposedly) the last sign of their physical contact.

Author's homecoming

On his return after five years, the author did not find any change in his grandmother. She was as old as ever and remained absorbed in her prayers. Even that day, the happiest moment for her was feeding the sparrows.

In the evening, for the first time ever, she did not pray. She collected several ladies of the neighborhood and sang songs related to the home-coming of the warriors. She had to be persuaded to stop singing in order to avoid overstraining. However, the next day she was taken ill.

Grandmother's death

Though diagnosed with a mild fever by the doctor, grandmother knew that her end was near. She decided to spend the last few hours of her life reciting prayers

and telling her beads. Soon, her lips stopped moving and she died.

A silent tribute by the sparrows

The family went to make arrangements for the grandmother's funeral. As they came with a stretcher, they stopped mid-way to find thousands of sparrows scattered around her dead body. The sparrows mourned the death of the grandmother in utter silence. They ignored the bread crumbs thrown at them by the author's mother and flew away silently after the body was carried away for cremation. The bread-crumbs were swept away by the sweeper next morning.