

The Portrait of a Lady -By Khushwant Singh

Summary

The story is written in first person and is in biographical mode. It is a perception of Khushwant Singh of his grandmother through his own eyes. Khushwant Singh recalls his grandmother as an eternally old person. She was an extremely religious person. It was difficult for him to believe that once she too was young and pretty like other women. The stories about her childhood games

were like fairy tales to him. She was short, fat and slightly stooped in stature. Her silvery white hair used to scatter on her wrinkled face. Khushwant Singh remembers her hobbling around the house in spotless white clothes with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other busy in telling the beads of her rosary. Her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayers.

Possibly she was not beautiful in worldly sense but she looked extremely beautiful with the peacefulness, serenity and the contentment her countenance displayed.

Khushwant's relationship with his grandmother went through several changes when he was a small boy. In the first stage Khushwant lived in a village with her as his parents were looking for the opportunity to settle down in the city. In village grandmother took care of all the needs of the child. She was quite active and agile. She woke him up in the morning, got him ready for the school, plastered his wooden slate, prepared his breakfast, and escorted him to the school. They fed street dogs with stale chapattis on their way to school which was a great fun for them. She helped him in his lessons also. It was her domain and she was the queen of her kingdom. In this period she was the sole unchallenged guardian, mentor, and creator of the child Khushwant. The turning point came in their relationship when they came to city to stay with Khushwant's parents. In city Khushwant joined an English School and started to go to school in a motor bus. Here the role of his grandmother in his bringing up was curtailed a little bit. Now she could not accompany him to the school. Despite taking lot of interest in his studies she could not help him in his lessons because he was learning English, law of gravity, Archimedes' principle and many more such things which she could not understand and this made her unhappy. She found herself at loss. One more thing which disturbed her a lot was that the kids were not learning about God and scriptures in the school instead they were given music lessons which was not an honourable thing in her opinion. To her music was not meant for gentlefolk. It was meant for beggars and prostitutes only. She highly disapproved this and as she could not change it she was dismayed and withdrew herself to some extent. Perhaps she had realized that in the makeover of the child her role was finished and this very thought saddened her most.

After finishing school Khushwant went to university. He was given a separate room. The common link of their friendship was snapped. His grandmother confined herself to a self-imposed seclusion. She spent most of her time in reciting prayers and by sitting beside her spinning wheel. She rarely talked to anyone. The only recreation for her was in the afternoon when she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. A kind hearted person, in village she used to feed street dogs, here in city she focused on birds and they too became very friendly with her. This was the phase when she found herself totally isolated and aloof but she braved this isolation with grace and dignity.

Khushwant's grandmother was a strong person. Whatever she went through in her heart she always restrained herself from demonstrating her emotions. He recalls that when he went abroad for further studies his grandmother was there to see him off on railway station quite calm busy telling the beads of her rosary and reciting prayers as always. When he came back after five years he found her more and more religious and more and more self-contained. She spent still

more time in prayers and spinning the wheel. Feeding the birds was her only happy pastime. But just the day before her death for the first time she broke this routine and gave up her prayers. That day she sang the songs of the home coming of the warriors on a withered drum along with the ladies of neighbourhood in order to celebrate her grandson's return from abroad. Next morning she got ill. Although the doctor said it was a mild fever and would go away she could foresee that her end was near. She was upset that she omitted her prayers just before the final departure from the world. She did not want to waste any more time talking to anybody. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling the beads till her lips stopped moving and rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. To mourn her death thousands of sparrows flew in and sat scattered around her body in utter silence. They even ignored the breadcrumbs thrown for them by Khushwant's mother. They only flew away after the corpse was carried away for last rites.

Short-Answer Questions:

Solved Examples:

a. How did Khushwant Singh portray his grandfather in the lesson?

Ans: Khushwant Singh describes his grandfather as he was painted in the portrait wearing a big turban and loose-fitting clothes, a long white beard covering the best part of his chest and looking at least a hundred years old.

b. Describe 'the happiest half-hour of the day' for the grandmother.

Ans: For Khushwant Singh's grandmother there was none other pastime and happy activity than that of feeding the sparrows in the afternoon for half an hour. The sparrows could be seen perched on her legs, shoulders and even on her head but were never shooed away by her.

Questions for Practice:

a. Why did Khushwant Singh say that the thought of his grandmother being young and pretty was almost revolving?

b. Mention the instances from 'The Portrait of A Lady' for Khushwant Singh's grandmother being called considerate for animals.

c. State any one incident from the lesson which shows that the grandmother accepted changes but did not impose them in her own life.

Long –Answer Questions:

Solved Example:

1. 'All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirruping. -----'

----- The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly.'

Animals do recognize and value a relationship established with human beings. Write an article pertaining to the above sentence keeping in mind the relationship established by Khushwant Singh's Grandmother with animals.

Ans: Animals are said to have no brains but they do have hearts for they feel and it is out of feeling, concern or love for human being that they let themselves domesticated. But do they recognize relationships too?

At least I believe that they do. Numerous examples can be stated to prove the same. The relationship between Khushwant Singh's grandmother and the dogs and the sparrows can be just one of them. The need is to revere this lovely bond of emotional attachment with the animals in one way or the other. And it is but evident that the animals and birds are more compassionate, more affectionate and more dependable than most of the human beings.

Questions for Practice:

1. Compare and contrast the routine of the grandmother in the village with that of it in the city. Value Points:

- Accompanying the writer to the school, helping in study
- Prayers at the temple
- Feeding dogs
- Frustrated at the subjects taught in English school
- Resolved to prayers
- Feeding sparrows

2. Khushwant Singh's grandmother was emotionally attached to him. Support the statement with help of instances from the story 'The Portrait of A Lady'.

Value Points:

- The grandmother's attachment with Khushwant Singh
- Her feelings when she could not help the writer
- Her prayers for the writer's safe journey

-Happiness expressed at the writer's arrival

-Continuous chanting of prayers

Long Questions

1. Bring out the spiritual elements in the character of the grandmother.
2. What light does the lesson throw on Indian family values?
3. Evaluate the writer's attitude towards his grandmother when he was a child.

Short Answer Questions:

1. What poetic words are used by the writer to bring out the physical and spiritual beauty of the grandmother?
2. Mention some incidents from the lesson that show that the grandmother loved her grandson intimately.
3. What is the difference between village school education and urban school education brought by the lesson?
4. What does the sparrow's behaviour highlight?
5. Mention some instances to show that the grandmother was highly composed and patient.