

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 1: THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY



THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

~Summary~

-by Khushwant Singh

The Author Remembers his Grandmother and Grandfather

The author recalls his grandmother as a very old lady. For the twenty years that the author had known his grandmother, he had found her old and wrinkled. It was hard for him to believe that she had once been young and pretty and she had a husband. Khushwant Singh's grandfather's portrait hung on the wall of the drawing room. He wore a big turban. His clothes were loose. He looked at least a hundred years old. Looking at his portrait, one could not imagine him in his youth with his wife and children.

The Author's Grandmother

The thought of the grandmother being young and pretty was almost revolting to him. She was short, fat and slightly bent in stature. Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles. Her silvery white hair was scattered over her wrinkled face.

The author remembered her hobbling around the house in spotless white clothes with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other hand busy counting the beads of her rosary. Her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer.

To the author, she could never have been pretty, but she reflected a divine beauty. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains.

The Author's Childhood with his Grandmother

The author and his grandmother were good friends. His parents left him to stay with her when they shifted to the city. In the village, his grandmother took care of all his needs. She was quite active and agile. She used to wake him up in the morning and get him ready for school.

She said her morning prayers in a sing-song manner while she bathed and dressed him in the hope that her grandson would learn them by heart. The author listened to the prayers because he loved her voice, but never bothered to learn them.

Then she would fetch his wooden slate which, she had already washed, and plastered it with yellow chalk. She would take an earthen inkpot and a reed pen and tie them in a bundle and hand it to author. After having a thick, stale chapatti with a little butter and sugar spread on it for breakfast, they used to leave for school. The author's grandmother always accompanied him to the school as it was attached to the temple.

The Author at School

The priest taught children the alphabet and the morning prayer. The children sat in two rows in the verandah. They would sing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus. While the author learnt his lessons at school, the grandmother would read scriptures in the adjoining temple. On their way back, they would feed stale chapattis to the dogs.

The Turning Point in the Relationship of Grandmother and the Author

The turning point came in their relationship when they moved to the city to stay with Khushwant Singh's parents. In the city, the author went to an English school in a motor bus. The grandmother could not accompany him to the school. As there were no dogs in the streets, the grandmother took to feeding the sparrows. As the years rolled by, they saw less of each other. In spite of her immense interest in his studies, she could not help him in his lessons as he was learning English, the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle and many more such things which she could not understand, and this made her unhappy. Sometimes she would ask him what the teacher had taught him.

Grandmother Distressed and Disturbed

Grandmother didn't believe in the things taught at the English school and was distressed to learn that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures in the school. Moreover, she was very disturbed at the idea of music lessons being given at the English school. To her, music had lewd associations and she considered music to be unsuitable for gentle folk.

The Common Link of Friendship gets Snapped

The common link of friendship between the author and the grandmother was broken when the author went to the University and was given a room of his own. The grandmother accepted her loneliness and rarely spoke to anyone. All day long, she sat spinning the wheel and reciting her prayers.

Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. They perched on her shoulders and some even on her head but she never shooed them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

The Author Leaves for Higher Studies

The author decided to go abroad for higher studies for five years. He was sure that his grandmother would be upset at his departure, but she was not even sentimental. She came to the railway station to see him off. She showed no emotion. She was absorbed in praying and

counting the beads of her rosary. Silently she kissed his forehead. The author thought that perhaps it was the last sign of physical contact between them.

The Grandmother Celebrates the Author's Return and Falls Sick

After five years, the author found his grandmother at the station when he returned. She held him in her arms. He found her more religious and more self-contained. He could hear her reciting prayers. Even that day, the happiest moment for her was feeding the sparrows herself. However, something strange happened to her in the evening.

For the first time ever, she did not pray. Instead, she collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing songs of the homecoming of warriors. They tried to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining herself. But she didn't listen. She fell ill the next morning.

Grandmother's Death

The grandmother was diagnosed with a mild fever by the doctor but she insisted that her end was near. She told everyone that she did not want to talk to anyone and would rather spend her last moments praying. She ignored everyone's protests and started counting the beads in her rosary while praying.

After a short while, the author noticed that his grandmother's lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. She died a peaceful death. She was covered with a red shawl.

The Sparrows Mourn her Death

When the author and others came to take away the grandmother's body, they met a strange sight. To mourn her death, a lot of sparrows had surrounded the grandmother's body. They were all silent. When the author's mother offered the sparrows some bread, they refused to eat and quietly flew away after the grandmother's body was carried away for the last rites.

Conclusion of The Portrait Of A Lady

To sum up, in the portrait of a lady summary, the writer and his grandmother had a beautiful bond between them and loved each other a lot. The story tells us how beautiful a relationship can become between a grandson and his grandmother.

NCERT SOLUTIONS

Questions (Page No. 6-7) (Understanding The Text)

Mention

Question 1. The three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad.

Answer: The three phases of the relationship of the author with his grandmother before leaving the country to study abroad are –

- i. Childhood – His grandmother helped him while getting ready and went to the village school along with him.
- ii. Boyhood – He shared a room with his grandmother when he studied at the city school. She was not able to help him in his studies.
- iii. Early youth – The link of friendship was snapped when he was provided a separate room at the university.

Question 2. Three reasons why the author's grandmother was disturbed when he started going to the city school.

Answer: The three reasons why the grandmother of the author was disturbed when he went to the city school are –

1. She did not like Western learning and Science.
2. She was hurt when she came to know that there were no scriptures and teachings of God there.
3. She did not like music and thought that it was not for gentlefolk and decent people. It was the monopoly of beggars and prostitutes.

Question 3. Three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up.

Answer: Three ways how the grandmother of the author spent her days after he grew up are –

1. She accepted the loneliness and lived unaccompanied in the room.

2. She would recite prayers while sitting at the spinning wheel.
3. For half an hour she fed the sparrows in the afternoon.

Question 4. The odd way in which the author's grandmother behaved just before she died.

Answer:

The grandmother of the author did not speak to them before her death. The previous night she did not pray while singing homecoming songs and beating the drum, as she was not ready to waste time. She laid peacefully in her bed praying and telling beads and ignored the protests of her family members.

Question 5. The way in which the sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.

Answer: The dead body of the author's grandmother was surrounded by thousands of sparrows which did not chirrup. They did not even notice the bread crumbs which were thrown by the author's mother to feed them. They quietly flew away once the corpse of the grandmother was carried away. Hence, this way the sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.

Questions (Page No. 7) (Talking About The Text)

Talk to your partner about the following.

Question 1. The author's grandmother was a religious person. What are the different ways in which we come to know this?

Answer: The grandmother of the author was a deeply religious person. This can be known from the different ways of her behaviour. Every morning she visited the temple and read the scriptures. She mumbled inaudible prayers at home always and kept telling the rosary beads. She constantly repeated prayers like a song while helping the author get ready for school. She wished that the author would learn it by heart. She did not like English school as there was no teaching of scriptures and God.

She would recite prayers even while spinning in her spinning wheel. She once forgot to say her prayers. Prior to her death she felt over excited in the evening while celebrating her grandson's arrival with beatings of drums and songs. She continued telling beads of rosary and praying till her last breath.

Question 2. Describe the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother. Did their feelings for each other change?

Answer: The author was entirely dependent on his grandmother during his boyhood. She was an important part of his life. However, a turning point came in their friendship when they moved to the city. As he went to school by bus, she was not able to accompany him. She could not help him in his studies though they shared the same room. She used to ask him what his teachers taught him and did not believe in the things which were taught at school. She was pained that he was not taught about scriptures and God. As music was being taught, she felt offended and expressed her disapproval silently. She rarely spoke to the author after this. The link of friendship was snapped as he was given a separate room when he went to the university. However, their feelings towards each other did not change. They loved one another deeply. When he left the country and moved abroad for higher studies, she went to the railway station to send him. She quietly kissed his forehead and showed no emotion. This was valued by the author as it was the last sign of physical interaction between them. After five years when the author returned, she received him at the station. She clasped the author in her arms and celebrated his homecoming in the evening by beating an old drum and singing songs.

Question 3. Would you agree that the author's grandmother was a person strong in character? If yes, give instances that show this.

Answer: Yes, I agree that the grandmother of the author was a person with strong character. She was a woman with strong beliefs. Though she was not educated formally, she was more serious about the education of the author. She was not able to adjust herself to the western lifestyle, English and Science education. She did not like music and disapproved of its teaching in schools.

She was a religious woman whose lips were always moving in a silent prayer and was telling the beads of her rosary. She daily went to the temple and read scriptures. When she got to know that there was no teaching of scriptures and God at New English School of Khushwant, she was distressed.

She was a kind woman who used to feed the dogs in the village. She was feeding sparrows in the city. Though weak in body and old in age she had a strong mind. She refused to talk to the family members before her death as she was not ready to waste her time. She wanted to make up the time she did not pray to God the previous evening. She laid peacefully in bed telling the beads of rosary and saying prayers until her last breath.

Question 4. Have you known someone like the author's grandmother? Do you feel the same sense of loss with regard to someone whom you have loved and lost?

Answer: Yes, my grandfather had looked after me and loved me deeply. Before retirement he served in the army 20 years ago as a Colonel. He was still smart and active when I was a school going kid. He was more interested in jogging, walking and playing games outdoors. He used to inspire us by waking up early in the morning. He believed that a healthy body comes from a healthy mind. He taught us a few physical exercises followed by nourishing food and milk and asked us to study for some time before going to school. He used to enquire about what we had been taught at school, in the afternoon. He helped us while doing our homework and supervised our writing, reading and solving problems. He was gentle but firm and stressed on the building of good character and habits. When I left the country for higher studies, he passed away. When I see his photograph on the wall, a sense of loss fills my heart. But his looks cheer me to stay strong and fight the struggles of life.

Questions (Page No. 7) (Thinking About Language)

Question 1. Which language do you think the author and his grandmother used while talking to each other?

Answer: The grandmother of the author was not educated. I think the author and his grandmother used Punjabi, which was their mother tongue while talking to each other.

Question 2. Which language do you use to talk to elderly relatives in your family?

Answer: The elderly relatives in my family are well versed in Hindi and English. I greet them in English and converse with them in Hindi.

Question 3. How would you say 'a dilapidated drum' in your language?

Answer: 'Phata-purana dhol' is the expression used to say 'a dilapidated drum' in my language.

Question 4. Can you think of a song or a poem in your language that talks of homecoming?

Answer: There are numerous poems and folk songs that sing of the exploits of the brave warriors. All these talks of the homecoming of the warriors after winning a war.

Questions (Page No. 7-8) (Working With Words)

Question 1. Notice the following uses of the word 'tell' in the text.

1. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary.
2. I would tell her English words and little things of Western science and learning.
3. At her age one could never tell.
4. She told us that her end was near.

Given below are four different senses of the word 'tell'. Match the meanings to the uses listed above.

1. make something known to someone in spoken or written words
2. count while reciting
3. be sure
4. give information to somebody

Answer:

Phrases	Meaning
1. telling the beads	count while reciting
2. tell her	give information to somebody
3. one could never tell	be sure
4. told us	make something known to someone in spoken or written words

Question 2. Notice the different senses of the word 'take'.

1. to take to something: to begin to do something as a habit
2. to take ill: to suddenly become ill

Locate these phrases in the text and notice the way they are used.

Answer:

In the text, these phrases are used as –

1. to take to: She took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.
2. take ill: The next morning she was taken ill.

Question 3. The word 'hobble' means to walk with difficulty because the legs and feet are in bad condition.

Tick the words in the box below that also refer to a manner of walking.

haggle
wriggle

shuffle
paddle

stride
swagger

ride
trudge

waddle
slog

Answer: The words in the box that also refer to a manner of walking are –

shuffle

stride

swagger

waddle

slog

trudge

Questions (Page No. 8) (Noticing Form)

Question 1. Notice the form of the verbs italicised in these sentences.

1. My grandmother was an old woman. She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. People said that she had once been young and pretty and had even had a husband, but that was hard to believe.
2. When we both had finished we would walk back together.
3. When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me.

4. It was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.
5. The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a golden light.

These are examples of the past perfect forms of verbs. When we recount things in the distant past we use this form.

Answer:

Notice the form of verbs highlighted in the sentences below:

1. They **had already reached** their destination when the rain came.
2. Before she left me, we **had worked** together for six months on that project.
3. The teacher **had explained** the poem twice, to help students understand it well.
4. Since I **had lived** there it was the first time it began to rain.
5. The full moon in the sky **had scattered** its light everywhere.

Questions (Page No. 9) (Things to do)

Question 1. Talk with your family members about elderly people who you have been intimately connected with and who are not there with you now. Write a short description of someone you liked a lot.

Answer:

My grandfather

I was eleven years old when I lost my grandfather, but I still remember him. I liked him a lot and he loved me affectionately. Though he was old, he was able to move with ease. During his visits to the market, temple, garden or friends and relatives house, I was his constant companion. I was made fun of by my family members as grandpa's watch dog. I ran to his arms when my mother or father were angry or tried thrashing me. I miss the stories which he used to tell me during bedtime that included deeds of adventure or bravery. He was also careful about my studies and health. In order to maintain a good physique, he would make me eat fruits and drink milk. He helped me to write alphabets and was good at drawing. He gave quick solutions to all my problems. When I got success in sports, studies, poetic recitation, song, fancy dress competition or poster making, he would bless me. Sometimes I miss him a lot.