

The Portrait of a Lady

Introduction

The Portrait of a Lady is a beautiful autobiographical story written by **Khushwant Singh**. The author describes his close relationship with his grandmother and how their relationship changes as he grows older. The story also presents the themes of **love, ageing, changing relationships, tradition and modernisation**.

The Grandmother

Physical Appearance

The author's grandmother was an old woman. She was short, fat and slightly bent. Her face was covered with **wrinkles**, and she always wore spotless white clothes.

She constantly recited prayers while counting the beads of her rosary. She appeared calm, peaceful and deeply religious.

The author had always seen her as an old woman. He could never imagine her as young and beautiful.

The Author's Childhood

Life in the Village

During the author's childhood, he and his grandmother were very close. They lived together in the village.

Every morning, the grandmother woke him up, got him ready for school and accompanied him to the temple. While the author studied, she read the scriptures inside the temple.

She also helped him with his studies and took care of him lovingly.

The Village School

The author studied in a village school attached to a temple. His grandmother accompanied him there because she went to the temple every day.

On the way back, she fed stale bread to the village dogs.

Moving to the City

Change in Their Relationship

When the author and his grandmother moved to the city, their relationship began to change.

The author joined an **English school** and travelled there by bus. His grandmother could no longer accompany him.

She was unhappy because the author was learning subjects like **English, science and music** instead of religious knowledge.

The Music Lessons

The grandmother strongly disliked the author's music lessons. She believed that music was not suitable for respectable people and was associated with beggars.

This showed the difference between her traditional beliefs and the modern education the author was receiving.

The Grandmother's Loneliness

Spinning the Wheel

As the author grew older, he went to university and was given a separate room. His grandmother's role in his daily life became smaller.

She spent most of her time sitting in her room and **spinning the wheel**. She rarely talked to anyone.

Her only constant companions were her **prayer beads** and the **sparrows** that visited her.

The Sparrows

A Special Bond

The grandmother had a special relationship with the sparrows. Every afternoon, she sat in the verandah and fed them breadcrumbs.

Hundreds of sparrows gathered around her. They sat on her head, shoulders and hands without fear.

The grandmother enjoyed their company, and the sparrows seemed to love her.

The Author's Departure

Going Abroad

The author went abroad for higher studies. His grandmother came to the railway station to see him off.

She did not show any emotional excitement. She silently kissed his forehead and continued praying.

The author thought that this might be the last time he would see her, but she remained calm and composed.

The Grandmother's Death

The Final Prayer

When the author returned after five years, his grandmother was extremely happy to see him.

She celebrated his return by singing and beating a drum with other women. This was unusual because she had not sung for years.

The next day, she became ill. She realised that her death was near and spent her final hours praying.

She died peacefully while holding her rosary.

The Sparrows' Mourning

A Silent Farewell

After the grandmother's death, thousands of sparrows gathered around her body.

The author's mother threw breadcrumbs for them, but the sparrows did not eat anything. They sat silently and flew away only after the grandmother's body was taken away.

Their silence suggested that they too were mourning her death.

Themes

Love and Attachment

The story shows the deep bond of love between the author and his grandmother. Although their relationship changes over time, their emotional connection remains strong.

Changing Relationships

The story shows how relationships can change as people grow older and move from traditional surroundings to modern environments.

Tradition and Modernity

The grandmother represents **traditional values and religious beliefs**, while the author represents **modern education and changing lifestyles**.

Ageing and Loneliness

The grandmother gradually becomes lonely as the author grows older and becomes independent. Her life becomes centred around prayer, spinning and feeding sparrows.

Death and Acceptance

The grandmother accepts her death peacefully. She spends her final moments praying and remains calm until the end.

Symbolism

The Sparrows

The sparrows symbolise the grandmother's loving and peaceful nature. Their silent gathering after her death represents their grief and respect for her.

The Rosary

The rosary represents the grandmother's deep faith and devotion to God. She is almost always seen praying with it.

The Village Dogs

The dogs represent the grandmother's caring and generous nature. Feeding them was part of her daily routine.

Important Points

- The story is written by **Khushwant Singh**.
- It is an autobiographical account of the author's relationship with his grandmother.
- The grandmother was deeply religious and always carried a rosary.
- She accompanied the author to school in the village.
- Their relationship changed after they moved to the city.
- She disliked the author's modern education and music lessons.
- She spent her later years spinning the wheel and feeding sparrows.
- She remained calm when the author went abroad.
- She died peacefully while praying.
- The sparrows gathered silently around her dead body and refused to eat the breadcrumbs.
- The story highlights love, tradition, ageing, loneliness and changing relationships.

Chapter Summary

The Portrait of a Lady is a touching story about the author's relationship with his grandmother. During his childhood, they were very close and spent most of their time together. However, their relationship gradually changed when they moved to the city and the author received modern education. The grandmother became increasingly lonely but remained devoted to prayer and her daily routine. Despite the changes in their relationship, the bond of love between them remained strong. She died peacefully while praying, and the silent mourning of the sparrows showed the special place she held in the natural world around her. The story beautifully portrays the love between a grandmother and her grandson and the effects of time and modernisation on human relationships.