

# ENGLISH



# 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.