

## HORNBILL

### 1. *The Portrait of a Lady*

(Khushwant Singh)

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khushwant Singh – a famous Indian writer of English was born in 1915 and received his education in Lahore, Delhi and London. He is often referred to as a versatile raconteur, humorist, commentator, editor, shortstory writer and a novelist. He has an easy narrative style. His syndicated columns – "With Malice towards One and All" and "This Above All" are extremely popular. Among his famous books are the two volume 'History of the Sikhs'.

His novel 'A Train to Pakistan' – based on turmoil and trauma of the partition of India and Pakistan has been made into a full length feature film.

#### ABOUT THE LESSON

Khushwant Singh primarily writes about his perceptions and interactions with places and people he has come in contact with. "The Portrait of a Lady" is autobiographical in nature as it describes the author's association with his grandmother and changes that come about in their relationship. It is a loving tribute from a grandson to his grandmother where he reminisces about the emotional bond he shared with her. On reading it the readers are forced to evaluate their own relationships with their grandparents and to reflect on the reasons for the growing isolation of elders in families.

#### NOTES

##### Author's Reminiscence of his Grandparents

- Grandmother
  - old, wrinkled, short, fat, slightly bent

- walked with one hand on waist, other hand telling rosary beads, lips moving in inaudible prayer
- difficult for author to believe she was ever young
- spotless white clothes, silver hair
- exuded serenity, peace and contentment
- an expanse of purity and peace as in snow covered winter landscape with mountains
- Grandfather
  - portrait hanging above mantelpiece
  - looked hundred years old with white flowing beard, wore big turban and loose fitting clothes

#### **Early bonding with grandmother in village**

- Author's parents moved to city – left him behind in the village with grandmother – both became good friends
- Daily routine:
  - grandmother woke up author in the morning, bathed, dressed and got him ready for school and plastered his slate. Also sang morning prayers all the while to make author imbibe them.
  - fed him breakfast of stale chapatties with butter and sugar
  - accompanied author to the village school attached to the temple where priest taught the children
  - grandmother read holy scriptures in the temple while author studied alphabet and morning prayer in the school.
  - both walked back home together feeding stale chapatties to the village dogs

#### **Turning Point in friendship**

- author and grandmother shifted to city from village to be with author's parents

- both shared a room but grandmother got isolated because:
  - author admitted to an English medium school, travelled to school in a motor bus
  - grandmother unhappy at author being taught English, Science and Music
  - grandmother distressed at lack of religion-based education in city school
  - grandmother showed displeasure by ceasing to talk to the author
  - no street dogs to be fed in the city

### **Common link of friendship snapped**

- author given separate room on joining University
- grandmother quietly accepts her seclusion - devotes herself to spinning the wheel, reciting prayers from morning till evening
- happiest half hour of the day - when she fed bread crumbs to scores of sparrows every afternoon
- author goes abroad for higher education - grandmother accepts this with quiet stoicism
- grandmother sees off the author at the railway station and kisses his forehead, author cherishes it as last physical contact between the two
- author returns after five years - grandmother there to receive him at the station
- next day grandmother gathers neighbourhood women and sings songs beating an old drum - first time skips prayers
- taken ill the next day - aware of her approaching end - regretted her folly of giving up prayer the previous day - insisted on praying - dies with prayer on lips and rosary in hands
- with setting sun, grandmother's city friends the birds arrive to pay their last respect

- sit silently without chirruping
- refuse bread crumbs offered by author's mother
- fly away quietly when grandmother's body is carried away

### CHARACTERS

#### *Grandmother*

- a picture of beauty, peace and contentment
- old, wrinkled, slightly bent, short and fat
- White hair, always clad in white
  - a picture of winter landscape in the mountains (*in the winter of her life*)
- Religious
  - her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer and one hand always telling the beads of a rosary
  - visited the temple and read holy scriptures daily
- Responsible, affectionate and caring
  - = looked after the author in the village in his parent's absence
- Kind and generous
  - fed dogs in the village with stale chapatties and sparrows in the city with bread crumbs
- Benevolent and gentle
  - never shooed away the birds who sat on her head and shoulders
- Concerned and caring
  - personally accompanied the author to school in village
  - took interest in what was taught at school
- Conservative and traditional
  - disappointed at the author's receiving music in the city school
  - distressed at lack of teaching about God and scriptures in city school

- Reserved and non-interfering
  - kept her thoughts to herself and spent spare time in the city on her spinning wheel
- Practical, stoic and realist
  - accepted grandson's decision to go abroad for higher studies
- Control over emotions and sentiments
  - calm and controlled; did not break down as expected at the station while seeing off her grandson
- Patient and blessed with strong will-power
  - accompanied family members to see-off grandson and after five years was there at the station to receive him
- Intuitive
  - knew when her end was near and accepted it
  - eased her passage to the other world by praying continuously on death bed

#### TITLE

The title of the chapter, "The Portrait of a Lady" is apt and appropriate. Besides being a pen sketch of his grandmother, the passage is Khushwant Singh's loving tribute to her, his relationship with her and the emotional bond he shared with her. He graphically describes the person and personality of the grandmother who had all the attributes of a lady.

#### GLOSSARY

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| • wrinkled    | - shrivelled, full of creases   |
| • portrait    | - a painted or photographed picture of someone.<br>A written description of someone's personality |
| • mantelpiece | - a shelf above a fire place  |
| • revolting   | - disgusting; hard to accept  |
| • absurd      | - completely illogical or ridiculous  |

- fables - old stories with morals
- prophet - religious teacher, spiritual leader, seer
- silverlocks - curled white or grey hair
- scattered - thrown or spread randomly  
(Here undone or loose hair)
- puckered - contracted, wrinkled because of age
- inaudible - which can't be heard
- monotonous - level / tone of voice; unchanging tone
- lewd - vulgar; lascivious
- growling - say something in a low voice
- monopoly - sole or exclusive right or control
- harlots - (*archaic*) prostitutes; singing and dancing women of indecent character
- seclusion - isolation; loneliness
- resignation - (here) reluctant acceptance of the inevitable
- veritable - real; true
- bedlam - noisy uproar and confusion
- frivolous rebukes - non-serious or affectionate scolding or criticism (grandmother often indulged in)
- cherished - keep in one's mind
- clasped - grasp tightly with one's hand
- sagging - becoming loose & hanging; bulging downward; curving in middle
- dilapidated - in disrepair; worn out
- pallor - paleness
- shroud - coffin cloth; cloth in which a dead body is wrapped
- crude - not refined

**SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

*(to be answered in about 40 words each)*

- Q1. Mention three reasons why the author's grandmother was disturbed when he started going to the city school. (Textual)**

*Or*

**Why was the grandmother distressed at the teachings imparted to the author in the English school?**

The author told his grandmother the English words and little things of western science and learning e.g. the law of gravity, the world being round, which he learnt at school. She did not believe in all this and was distressed. She was worried that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures in the city school. Moreover, she was also disturbed when she came to know that her grandson was also being given lessons in music.

- Q2. Mention the three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up. (Textual)**

*Or*

**Grandmother became a lonely figure in the city. How did she adjust and adapt to this loneliness?**

The grandmother always remained busy with the spinning wheel. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. It was only in the afternoon that she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. Besides these, she was always busy in praying and telling the beads of a rosary.

- Q3. Mention the odd way in which the author's grandmother behaved just before she died. (Textual)**

*Or*

**What could have been the cause of grandmother's falling ill?**

When the author returned from abroad, the grandmother collected the women of the neighbourhood to celebrate his home-coming. She took a drum and started thumping it and

singing. Her family persuaded her to stop to avoid overstraining. That was the first time that she did not pray. And the following day she fell ill and died.

- Q4. Mention the way in which sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.** (Textual)

*Or*

**What was the sparrows' reaction on the grandmother's death? What was this indicative of?**

Hundreds of sparrows paid a silent tribute to the grandmother on her death. They collected and sat quietly around her dead body. They did not chirrup as usual. They also did not accept the bread crumbs thrown to them by the author's mother. When the grandmother's body was carried off they flew away quietly.

The sparrows' reaction shows that a deep bond of affection had developed between them and the grandmother.

- Q5. Why was it hard for the author to believe that his grandmother was once young and pretty?**

*Or*

**"It was hard to believe." What was hard to believe about the grandmother and why?**

It was hard for the author to believe that his grandmother was once young and pretty because she was very old, her face was covered with wrinkles, her hair was white and her back was bent. It was difficult for the author to imagine her as a young woman as he had always seen her in the same physical condition for the last twenty years.

- Q6. The grandmother had a divine beauty. How does the author bring this out?**

*Or*

**The author said that grandmother had always been beautiful. Explain the above statement.**

*Or*

**Bring out the significance of the phrase 'winter landscape' in the context of author's grandmother.**

Author's grandmother was always attired in spotless white clothes. She had silver hair and her lips constantly moved in an inaudible prayer. She presented a picture of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment. Her inner beauty radiated on her face, making her an epitome of peace and contentment. Age wise also, she was in the 'winter of her life.'

- Q7. "That was a turning-point in our friendship." What was the turning-point?**

*Or*

**What changes occurred between the author's and his grandmother's relationship when they shifted to the city?**

Shifting of the grandmother and the author to the city became a turning point in their friendship. The author joined an English medium school in the city. Although they shared the same room, his grandmother no longer accompanied him to school. Moreover, she was unable to help him in lessons that were taught at school. Thus, a sort of distancing occurred in the relationship.

- Q8. Draw a comparison between village school education and city school education.**

The city school education was quite different from the education imparted in the village school. In the village, the students were taught alphabet, prayer and religious texts. But in the city the students were taught English language, Western Science and Music. The children were not given any lessons on religion and scriptures. In the village, the temple priest doubled up as the teacher while in the city there were specialist teachers to teach different subjects.

**Q9. What stories of the grandmother did the author treat as 'Fables of the Prophets'? Why?** Or

**What type of tales did the grandmother tell the children about her childhood?**

The author treated grandmother's stories about her childhood and the games she used to play to be as old as the 'Fables of the Prophets.' He had always seen his grandmother as an old, wrinkled, stooped woman and could not imagine her as a young child. Thus, he considered her stories about her childhood to be a fantasy and a myth.

**Q10. How can you say that the grandmother and the author were good friends?** Or

**What proof do you find of the friendship between grandmother and grandson in the story?**

Grandmother took over the role of surrogate mother to Khushwant Singh when his parents left him in the village with her and moved to the city. She used to wake him, bathe him and get him ready for school. She also accompanied him to the village school and brought him back home safely. She fulfilled all his needs. They were constantly together and a support to each other. Thus, they became good friends also.

**Q11. What was "the last sign" of physical contact between the author and the grandmother? Why did the author think that to be the last physical contact?**

When the author was to go abroad for further studies, his grandmother came to the station to see him off. She kissed his forehead and he cherished this imprint as the last sign of physical contact with her because she was extremely old and he feared that she may not survive for the five years he was to stay away.

**Q12. How did the grandmother prepare the author for going to school when they were staying in the village?**

*Or*

**Write about grandmother's daily routine in the village.**

The grandmother bathed and dressed the author and got him ready for school. Thereafter she tied a wooden slate, an earthen ink-pot and a pen, in a bundle and handed it to him. She then gave him breakfast consisting of stale chapattis with a little butter and sugar spread on it. Then the two would set out for the temple – the author for studies and she for prayers and reading scriptures.

**Q13. Describe the grandmother's association with the sparrows.**

*Or*

**With whom did grandmother develop a deep bond of friendship in the city? How did they satisfy their mutual needs?**

When the author's grandmother was in the city she took to feeding sparrows. In the afternoon she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits. Hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some even sat on her head. She always smiled and never shooed them away. Grandmother fed the sparrows and sparrows gave her company in her loneliness.

**Q14. The author's grandmother celebrates his homecoming after five years and dies the next day? What is it indicative of?**

The author had spent his formative years under the care and tutelage of his grandmother. Though circumstances had created a distance in their relationship, yet they were indescribably bound to each other. Despite extreme old age, sheer will-power makes the grandmother await the return of her grandson from abroad. Her sudden death the next day is an outcome of her

overstraining herself by singing and dancing to celebrate the return of her grandson. It is as if she was waiting for his return before she could die.

**Q15. Why did the grandmother stop talking before her death?**

The author's grandmother was deeply intuitive. She knew that her end was near. She regretted not praying on the day her grandson arrived from abroad. She wanted to make amends for her omission and devote the rest of the time in praying to God. Thus, she stopped talking in order to pray just before her death.

**Q16. The grandmother was a kind-hearted woman. Give examples in support of your answer.**

The author's grandmother was really a very kind woman. She had a noble soul with great affection for all the creatures of God. During her stay in the village, she fed stale chapattis to the stray dogs. When she came to live in the city, she took to feeding sparrows as there were no dogs in streets. She broke the bread into little bits and fed it to hundreds of little birds who collected round her. Some perched on her legs and others on her shoulders, but she never shooed them away.

**Q17. What was grandmother's concept of proper education of children?**

*Or*

**Why did the grandmother disapprove of music being taught at school.**

The author's grandmother was of the firm view that a child should be taught the basics of his religion besides counting and alphabet. He/She should be given knowledge of God and made to read scriptures. According to her, music had lewd associations and was the monopoly of beggars and harlots and so there should be no teaching of music. She did not understand anything of English and Western science. She was upset because she could not help the author in his studies.

**LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS (BASED ON VALUES)**

*(to be answered in about 100 – 150 words each)*

**Q1. Would you agree that the author's grandmother was a person strong in character? If yes, give instances that show this. (Textual)**

*Or*

**Khushwant Singh's grandmother was a person of strong values. Discuss.**

Endowed with several positive values like kindness, benevolence, generosity and compassion, Khushwant Singh's grandmother emerges as a strong character in this biographical sketch. Though simple, uneducated and rustic lady, she has an indomitable spirit and charismatic character. When the author's parents move to the city, she single-handedly takes over the responsibility of raising and educating the little child. She raises him with a lot of love, affection, care and spirituality and lays a strong foundation of his character by instilling these qualities in him.

When Khushwant joins his parents in the city, a change comes over her relationship with him but the values governing it remain constant. She is distressed at the emphasis on science and English and lack of teachings about God in his new school. But being reserved and non-interfering, she keeps her thoughts to herself and remains occupied with her prayers and her pastimes of running the spinning wheel and feeding sparrows. She does not allow her feelings to stifle her grandson's aspirations and quietly resigns herself to her separation from him due to his studies abroad. Thus, the values of strong will-power, patience, resilience, love, spirituality and compassion for animals and birds form the core of her character and make her calm, controlled and stoic in all situations. Little wonder then that Khushwant describes her as 'an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment'.

- Q2. Have you known someone who conducted his/her life with the values that form the core of Khushwant Singh's grandmother's character? Do you feel the same sense of loss with regard to someone whom you have loved and lost? *(Textual, Modified)*

Grandparents today are the first casualty in the modern world's nuclear family system. But I was lucky enough to be brought up in a family where I was blessed with both a grandfather and a grandmother. Out of the two, I was more attached to my grandmother who has left an indelible mark of her personality, views and values on my life. Like Khushwant Singh's grandmother, my grandmother too was a petite woman with an indomitable spirit and a strong will power.

Being very kind-hearted, sympathetic and compassionate, she endeared herself not only to her grandchildren but everyone else who came in contact with her. Looking back, I give her sole credit for infusing in me an open minded attitude and a quest for Truth. Being educated and erudite, my grandmother was a great advocate of education, especially that of women and ensured that all her grandchildren received good education. She was an epitome of sincere, silent hard work sans a desire for any appreciation or reward.

If I can emulate even a fraction of her philosophy and values, I would prove to be a very good human being. Her loss was a terrible blow to me. The void created by her departure would never be filled in my life.

- Q3. Imagine you are Khushwant Singh's grandmother. Write a letter to a friend of yours back in the village describing your disappointment with your grandson's English school teaching, where education only provides information but does not instill any values.

H.No.142

Green Park

New Delhi

6th July 20xx

Dear Shanti

Ever since I arrived here, I have been missing you and all other friends very much. It will take quite some time for me to adjust to the city life.

Khushwant has joined an English school here. I no longer accompany him to school as he goes by a motor bus. I don't mind that but I am very much perturbed that no religious teaching is imparted to him in the school. Education here is all about providing information about Western Science and English and there is nothing about God and scriptures. That's very disturbing, isn't it? These are the formative years of the child and the values he imbibes at this stage are going to shape his character and quality of life, but nobody seems to be bothered about it.

Did you know that children here are taught music rather than scriptures? I find that utterly disgusting and don't approve of it but choose to keep quiet. I don't interfere even in such vital matters as it would be a futile exercise and would spoil the peace of the family. What do you say?

It is time for me to feed the sparrows, my new companions here.  
Bye for now.

Yours

XYZ

**Q4. Grandmother's kindness and piety extended even to birds and animals. Discuss.**

Khushwant Singh's grandmother led a very simple life full of

piety and noble values. She was really a very kind and compassionate soul with great affection for all the creatures of God.

During her stay in the village, she remained busy looking after her grandson but she never failed to feed stale chapattis to the stray dogs. When she came to live in the city, her habit of showing kindness to animals and birds persisted. She now took to feeding sparrows as there were no dogs in the streets. She broke the bread into little bits and fed it to hundreds of little birds who collected round her. Some perched on her legs and others on her shoulders, but she never shooed them away. So deep was their mutual love for each other that these creatures were absolutely sorrow-stricken when she died. They thronged her room and paid their tribute to her by observing silence and flew away only after the old lady's corpse was carried away for cremation.

**Q5. The author's grandmother was a very religious woman. What instances of this noble value do you find in the story?**

*(Textual, Modified)*

The author's grandmother was a very pious lady. Her lips constantly moved in an inaudible prayer. She was always telling the beads of her rosary with one hand. Even while bathing and dressing up Khushwant Singh for the school, she recited prayers in the hope that he would also get to learn them. She accompanied her grandson to school, for it was attached to the temple where she would read scriptures every day while he received his daily lessons. On their way back, the duo would feed stale chapattis to the street dogs.

When she went to live with her family in the city, she was quite perturbed to learn that her grandson was not being taught anything about God and scriptures. Her habit of reciting scriptures

and saying prayer continued unabated in the city, too. She would sit by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Even when she welcomed the author back from abroad, she was busy saying prayers. She died with a prayer on her lips and a rosary in her hand.

These instances clearly show how pious and spiritually awakened Khushwant Singh's grandmother was.

**Q6. Describe the three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad. (Textual)**

The first phase of the relationship between Khushwant Singh and his grandmother took place in the village where both stayed together as constant companions and best friends. Grandmother would wake up the author and get him ready for school. She even went to his school with him. While he received his lessons, she sat in the adjoining temple to read scriptures.

The second phase started when both were sent for by the author's parents to live with them in the city. Though she and Khushwant Singh shared a room, the distance between them grew more and more as years passed by. She was upset that she could not help him with his studies as he started going to an English medium school where he studied things that were all Greek to her. She strongly disapproved of the subjects taught in the city school and bemoaned the lack of teaching about God and scriptures.

The third phase started when the author joined University and was given a separate room. This broke the last common link between them and left the grandmother totally secluded and isolated.

**Q7. The grandmother herself was not formally educated but was serious about the author's education. How does the text support this?**

Despite being unlettered and conservative, the author's grandmother had a progressive outlook. She understood the demands of the changing times and wished the best for her grandson. Although she herself was uneducated, she believed in the sanctity of education and took keen interest in her grandson's education. Khushwant Singh spent his formative years with her in the village. She got him admitted to the village school where he was taught the alphabet and prayers. Everyday she washed and plastered his wooden slate with yellow chalk and readied his earthen ink-pot and red pen. She escorted him to and from school everyday and was happy with the education being imparted in the village school.

On shifting to the city, Khushwant Singh joined an English medium school and was introduced to the world of English language and sciences. She still showed keen interest in education and enquired everyday about what he was taught in the city school. She did not understand much about Science and English and was distressed at the lack of religious teaching in city school. She did not like the idea of her grandson receiving music lessons, for in her view music had lewd associations.

Since she realized the value of education and its role in making a child a successful man, she quietly and gracefully accepted the author's decision to go to University and later abroad for higher studies. This clearly shows that though formally uneducated herself, she was serious about the author's education.

