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# Introduction

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**The Portrait of a Lady** is an autobiographical essay written by Khushwant Singh. It presents a vivid perception of the author's grandmother, whom he recalls as an eternally old and deeply religious lady. Despite her aged appearance, Khushwant Singh reflects on the fact that she was once young and beautiful like other women. The stories about her childhood and games seemed like fairy tales to him, highlighting the contrast between her youthful past and her present old age.

## Summary

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### Appearance of Grandmother

Khushwant Singh describes his grandmother as short, fat, and slightly stooped in stature. Her silvery white hair framed her wrinkled face. She was often seen hobbling around the house dressed in spotless white clothes, balancing her stoop with one hand on her waist while the other hand moved the beads of her rosary. This image portrays her as a devout and serene figure.

### Religious and Kind Hearted

Her lips were almost always moving in inaudible prayers, reflecting her deep spirituality. Although she may not have been beautiful in the conventional sense, her peacefulness, serenity, and contentment made her appear extremely beautiful. Her kind heart was evident in her actions and demeanor.

### Life in Village

During Khushwant's early childhood, he lived in a village with his grandmother while his parents sought opportunities in the city. In the village, she took care of all his needs with great dedication. She was active and agile, waking him up, preparing him for school, plastering his wooden slate, making his breakfast, and escorting him to school. They

enjoyed feeding street dogs with stale chapattis on their way to school, which was a source of joy for both. She also helped him with his lessons, acting as the sole guardian, mentor, and creator of the young Khushwant.

## Turning Point in the Relationship

The relationship changed when they moved to the city to live with Khushwant's parents. He joined an English school and traveled by motor bus, which limited his grandmother's role in his upbringing. Although she was interested in his studies, she could not help with subjects like English, the law of gravity, or Archimedes' principle, which she did not understand. This made her unhappy and caused her to feel at a loss. She was also disturbed by the fact that the school did not teach about God and scriptures but instead offered music lessons, which she disapproved of, associating music with beggars and prostitutes. Feeling unable to influence these changes, she withdrew somewhat and realized that her role in shaping Khushwant was ending, which saddened her deeply.

After finishing school, Khushwant went to university and was given a separate room, further distancing their relationship. His grandmother confined herself to self-imposed seclusion, spending most of her time praying and sitting beside her spinning wheel. She rarely spoke to anyone, finding solace only in feeding sparrows in the afternoon. This phase marked her isolation, which she faced with grace and dignity.

## Pastime in City

In the city, her only happy pastimes were feeding birds, spinning the wheel, and saying her prayers. However, the day before her death, she broke this routine by singing songs celebrating her grandson's return from abroad with the neighborhood ladies. The next morning, she fell ill. Although the doctor diagnosed a mild fever, she sensed her end was near. She was upset for having omitted her prayers before her final departure. She lay peacefully in bed, praying and moving her rosary beads until her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers.

## Result of Love and Affection – Sparrows Mourning her Death

After her death, hundreds of sparrows gathered silently around her body, mourning her loss. They ignored the bread crumbs offered to them and only flew away after her body was taken for the last rites. This touching scene symbolizes the deep affection and bond she shared with the creatures she cared for.

## Character Sketch of Grandmother

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The grandmother is portrayed as a deeply religious, kind-hearted, and strong-willed woman. She is devoted to her faith, spending much of her time in prayer and spiritual activities. Despite her physical frailty and old age, she maintains dignity and grace. Her love extends beyond family to animals, as seen in her care for street dogs and sparrows. She is also a symbol of traditional values and spirituality, which contrasts with the modern, westernized education and lifestyle of her grandson. Her character reflects patience, resilience, and unconditional love.

## Themes

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### Religion and Spirituality

The essay highlights the importance of faith and spirituality in the grandmother's life. Her constant prayers and religious practices symbolize her deep connection with God and traditional values.

### Generational Gap

The story explores the differences between the traditional worldview of the grandmother and the modern, westernized education and lifestyle of Khushwant Singh. This gap leads to a change in their relationship and the grandmother's sense of isolation.

### Love and Affection

The grandmother's love is evident in her care for Khushwant during his childhood and her affection for animals. The sparrows mourning her death symbolize the love and respect she earned.

## Literary Devices

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### Imagery

Khushwant Singh uses vivid imagery to describe his grandmother's appearance, actions, and surroundings, such as her silvery white hair, spotless white clothes, and the sparrows that gather around her.

### Symbolism

The rosary beads symbolize her spirituality and devotion. The sparrows represent the love and affection she received from nature and the community.

### Contrast

The essay contrasts the grandmother's traditional lifestyle with the modern education and lifestyle of Khushwant Singh, highlighting the generational and cultural differences.

## Important Quotes and Explanation

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**"Her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayers."** – This quote emphasizes the grandmother's deep religious devotion and constant connection with God.

**"She was the queen of her kingdom."** – This metaphor highlights the grandmother's authoritative and caring role in Khushwant's early life.

"Hundreds of sparrows flew in and sat scattered around her body in utter silence." – This imagery symbolizes the respect and love the grandmother earned from all living beings.

## Practice Set

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### Level 1 – Easy

- Who is the author of "The Portrait of a Lady"?
- Describe the grandmother's appearance as recalled by Khushwant Singh.
- What were the grandmother's favorite pastimes in the city?

### Level 2 – Moderate

- Explain the turning point in the relationship between Khushwant Singh and his grandmother.
- How does the author depict the generational gap in the essay?
- What is the significance of the sparrows in the story?

### Level 3 – Challenging

- Analyze the theme of religion and spirituality in "The Portrait of a Lady" with examples from the text.
- Discuss the character of the grandmother as a symbol of traditional values in the modern world.
- Explain how Khushwant Singh uses literary devices to enhance the portrayal of his grandmother.

## Answer Key

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### Level 1 – Easy

- Khushwant Singh is the author of "The Portrait of a Lady." (1 mark)
- The grandmother was short, fat, slightly stooped, with silvery white hair and wrinkled face. She wore spotless white clothes and was often seen moving her rosary beads. (2 marks)
- Her favorite pastimes in the city were feeding sparrows, spinning the wheel, and saying her prayers. (2 marks)

## Level 2 – Moderate

- The turning point came when Khushwant moved to the city and joined an English school. The grandmother could no longer accompany him or help with his studies, which made her unhappy and led to a distance in their relationship. (3 marks)
- The generational gap is shown through the grandmother's traditional beliefs and the modern education Khushwant received, which included subjects she did not understand and activities like music lessons that she disapproved of. (3 marks)
- The sparrows symbolize the grandmother's love and kindness. Their silent mourning at her death shows the affection and respect she earned. (3 marks)

## Level 3 – Challenging

- Religion and spirituality are central to the grandmother's life. She is constantly praying and devoted to her faith, which provides her peace and contentment. This theme is evident in her daily rituals and the way she faces isolation with dignity. (5 marks)
- The grandmother represents traditional values such as faith, kindness, and simplicity. In the modern world, these values are challenged by western education and lifestyle, leading to her isolation. She symbolizes the fading traditional culture. (5 marks)
- Khushwant Singh uses imagery to describe her appearance and actions, symbolism through the rosary and sparrows, and contrast between tradition and modernity to deepen the reader's understanding of her character. (5 marks)

## Quick Reference

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- **Author:** Khushwant Singh

- **Genre:** Autobiographical Essay
- **Main Character:** Grandmother
- **Themes:** Religion, Generational Gap, Love and Affection
- **Literary Devices:** Imagery, Symbolism, Contrast
- **Important Symbols:** Rosary beads, Sparrows

## Glossary

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- **Autobiography:** A self-written account of the life of oneself.
- **Stooped:** Bent forward and downward.
- **Rosary:** A string of beads used in prayer, especially in Christianity and some other religions.
- **Seclusion:** The state of being private and away from other people.
- **Generational Gap:** Differences in opinions, values, and behaviors between different generations.
- **Symbolism:** The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities.