

WISDOM, LOVE, AND PORTRAYAL OF CHILDHOOD, IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SHORT- STORY “THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY”

Dr. (Mrs) Sujata Kumar

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English,
Government Model Science College, (Autonomous)
Jabalpur, (M.P.) 482001

Dr. Bhawna Chauhan

Guest Faculty (Department of English)
Government Model Science College (Autonomous)
Jabalpur (M.P.) 482001

Khushwant Singh is one of the greatest and most extraordinary writers, of Indian English Literature, ever flamboyant and always a pleasure to read, he has been pivotal in inspiring the many generations of Indian writers in English. With his amazing honesty, humor, and practical nuances of wisdom, he portrays various shades of life, often drawing from his rich personal experiences. This paper presents his brilliant short story, "The Portrait of a Lady" which is about his beloved grandmother, and their life in his native village in British India, Hadali, now in Pakistan, and later on their lives in the city. This beautiful story has a rare and indescribable magnificence to it, and wonderfully conveys an old-world sweetness, which has sadly, been forever lost from our lives.

Khushwant Singh's writings are vivid and versatile and often tell of stories, drawn from his own rich personal experiences. "The portrait of a Lady" is about his grandmother who was an inspiring figure during his childhood, when he attended school in his native village, before the partition of India. Singh was born in the village Hadali, now in Pakistan. His parents left him in there, in the care of his grandmother, who was wise and caring, and looked after him lovingly.

“ My grandmother, like everybody's 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”

In “The Portrait of a Lady” Singh remembers his childhood days, with his loving grandmother, who accompanied him to the village school, when he was a child. His grandmother wiped his slate clean and filled the inkpot for him. She then accompanied her grandson to school, where the children read alphabets in the verandah, and she sat close by, in the nearby temple with rosary in her hand, and reading the holy scriptures, deeply immersed in spirituality, and thoughts of God.

In the evening the grandmother and grandson returned back from school, feeding crumbs to the street dogs, who followed them back, during their pleasurable journey back home. It was an idyllic life, full of sweet and innocent adventures everyday.

“My grandmother and I were good friends....Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink-pot and a red pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me. After breakfast of a thick, stale chapatti with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school. She carried several stale chapattis with her for the village dogs”

He describes his grandmother as a frail, wrinkled lady, “her hair was white as snow” she was genuine, and always exuded warmth, and immense love for her grandson, and all the other living beings. It was difficult for him as a little child, to believe that she could have been young and pretty at some point in her life!!

Khushwant Singh says describing her, “she was like the winter landscape in the mountains and expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment “. His grandfather’s portrait hung in the house, with a long white beard, his grandfather did not look like a man who could have children, just lots and lots of grandchildren !!

When Khushwant grew up and reached the middle school, his family moved to Delhi, where he was admitted in an English medium school. Science, music, english, and subjects like physics were taught to all the students. His grandmother asked him about his new school, and was appalled when she heard that children were being taught music ! She was conservative and believed that these were not the arts, that were in keeping with the children of good families, and were only for “harlots” and “beggars”. She was also a little disappointed, as she could not help her beloved grandson with these modern-day subjects.

“ When my parents were comfortably settled in the city, they sent for us. That was a turning-point in our friendship. Although we shared the same room, my grandmother no longer came to school with me. I used to go to an English school in a motorbus. There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.... When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. I would tell her English words and little things of western science and learning, the law of gravity, Archimedes’ Principle, the world being round, etc. This made her unhappy....

One day I announced that we were being given music lessons. She was very disturbed. To her music had lewd associations. It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk. She said nothing but her silence meant disapproval. She rarely talked to me after that.”

His grandmother’s love and affection for him are evident from her deep caring for his welfare and education. When the writer settles in his new school comfortably, the grandmother becomes much more religiously inclined, busy in her divine pursuits, by chanting the name of the almighty and keeping busy with her rosary, and daily prayers.

When Singh reached the university, he was given a separate room in the house. His grandmother immersed herself in her religious activities, as she could not help him in his western education anymore. She spent her time with her religious texts, rosary, and in the afternoon after her lunch, in feeding crumbs to a number of sparrows, that gathered near her room, and also with her spinning wheel, as the influence of Mahatma Gandhi’s ideals, and the freedom movement were followed and worshipped during that period in history, when struggle for India’s independence had enthralled, and taken the whole nation by storm.

When he was leaving for England, for his higher education, the writer was not sure if he would ever see his grandmother alive again, when he would return after five long years. She came to see him off at the railway station, with the whole family, and gave her blessings to him, for his safe travel, and successful educational pursuits, with a quiet demeanour, and a heavy heart.

The writer returns from England after five years, and is surprised to find his wonderful grandmother absolutely unchanged! She appeared to be the same to him, and had not changed even a little, and her wrinkled face was as graceful as ever.

She was so exhilarated, and overjoyed at his return that she called the neighbourhood ladies, and they sang the whole evening by beating drums at his successful arrival, and completion of studies. She is reminded by her family to not strain herself, by taking any extra stress, because to her frail health, and advanced age.

“When I decided to go abroad for further studies. I was sure my grandmother would be upset. I would be away for five years.... After five years I came back home and was met by her at the station. She did not look a day older. She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayers. Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with the sparrows that she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes. In the evening a change came over her. She did not pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors. We had to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining. That was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.”

The next morning she fell ill, and being a wise woman understood, that her end was near, and for her, instead of wasting time by talking to family members, chanting the holy name of God was more important. She passed away soon, and her dead body lay lifelessly in her room. As if by a wonder of nature, her ‘friends’ the sparrows who came to visit her everyday, gathered on the terrace, as if by instinct realizing that their benefactor and ‘friend’ was no more. When they were fed crumbs that day, they refused to eat them, and stayed there as if mourning the sad demise of their beloved; of the beautiful hearted old lady, who took care to feed them crumbs everyday.

“The next morning she was taken ill. It was a mild fever and the doctor told us that it would go. But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near. She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us. We protested. But she ignored our protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.

We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud. After a few hours of mourning we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.... All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirruping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread

for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dustbin."

The story ends on a sad note and is a reminder of the genuine warmth, and loving natures of the wonderful people of yesteryears. It also depicts that the birds who cannot talk like human beings, are wiser than them, and more adept in their understanding of emotions. They have purer instincts, intensity, emotions, warmth and intelligence, and are always grateful to people, who love them. Khushwant Singh's grandmother reminds us of the simplicity, tradition, and an old-world charm, besides the pure, gentle, quiet, soft-spoken, beautiful-at-heart, people of a bygone period, which is impossible to recreate, it presents quite a contrast to the modern life, and the innocence and humanity which is sadly missing in so many, so called 'urbane', 'suave', and 'sophisticated' people of this day and age.

Works Cited

Singh, Khushwant. *The Portrait of a Lady, Collected Stories*. New Delhi : Penguin Books India, 2009. Print