

GENERAL ENGLISH

CLASS XI

(Under AHSEC Curriculum)

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The Portrait of a lady

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About the Author

Khushwant Singh one of the best-known Indian writers of all times, was born in 1915 in Hadali (now in Pakistan). He was educated at the Govt. College, Cambridge University, and the Inner Temple in London. He practiced law at the Lahore High Court for several years before joining the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in 1947. He began a distinguished career as a journalist with the All-India Radio in 1951. Since then he has been the founder-editor of *Yojana* (1951-1953), the editor of the *Illustrated weekly of India* (1979-1980) and the editor of the *Hindustan Times* (1980-1983). He has been conferred with various awards such as the Rockefeller grant, 1966 and Punjab Government grant 1970.

Word-meanings

Portrait: painting

Mantelpiece: shelf above a fireplace

Turban: a man's head gear

Absurd: ridiculous

Fables: old stories

Prophets: those who carried God's message to common people

Hobbled: to walk with difficulty

Stoop: to bend the body forward

Beads: small balls of wood

Rosary: a string of beads used for counting prayers as they say them

Serenity: calm and peaceful

Inaudible: which cannot be heard

Monotonous: unchanging

Stale: not fresh

Chorus: singing in a group

Courtyard: an open space in a part of the house

Archimedes: an ancient Greek scientist

Lewd: indecent

Harlots: prostitutes

Bedlam: confusion

Thumped: beat hard

Dilapidated: falling to pieces

Pallor: pale colouring of the face

Shroud: a piece of cloth used to cover a dead body before cremation

Crude: made in a simple manner

Scattered: lying here and there

Took no notice of: did not care

Meanings of expressions in the text:

- **the thought was almost revolting:** an unacceptable thought or idea
- **an expanse of pure white serenity:** referring to the white dress of the grandmother along with her silver hair which made her look calm and peaceful.
- **a turning point:** a point in life of the author from where a new phase of relationship with his grandmother began.
- **accepted her seclusion with resignation:** the grandmother did not complain and accepted the inevitable changes in her life and the separation from her grandson willingly.
- **A veritable bedlam of chirrupings:** referring to the endless chirping sounds made by the sparrows, which created confusion.
- **Frivolous rebukes:** light hearted scoldings.

- **The sagging skins of the dilapidated drum:** referring to the poor condition of the leather skins on both sides of the old drum.

Summary:

In “The Portrait of a Lady” Khushwant Singh an eminent writer and a journalist recalls his grandmother and elaborates on the relationship he shared with her at various phases of his life. The writer introduces his grandmother as an old woman. That is how he remembers her and it was hard to believe for him that she was, once upon a time, young and pretty. Even it was hard for him to believe that she had a husband once. He gives a brief description of his grandfather’s portrait, which ‘hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing room.’ In the portrait, his grandfather looked at least a hundred years old with his oversized turban and clothes. As a child, his grandmother used to play games, a proposition, which was equally unbelievable for him. Singh describes his grandmother as a short statured woman with a wrinkled face and silver hair. She was fat and slightly bent and looked quite old. Singh also remembers that she hobbled about the house in spotless white clothes with one hand on her waist to balance her stoop. With a rosary in the other hand chanting prayers constantly, she was always a picture of peace and contentment.

The author’s relationship with his grandmother developed when his parents who shifted to the city left him in the village with her. In their village home, she was his caretaker and companion and they were always together. She got him ready for school, fed him with stale chapattis (with a little butter and sugar), washed his wooden slate and plastered it with yellow chalk, and accompanied him to school. She carried with her stale chapattis and together they fed the street dogs and had great fun. The school that he went to was attached to the temple and the temple priest taught them alphabets and the morning prayer. She helped him in his lessons as well.

The turning point came when the narrator and his grandmother were taken to the city to live with the parents. The intimacy that developed during their stay in the village could not remain the same due to various reasons. Their daily routine also underwent a change. As there were no dogs to feed in the streets, the grandmother took to feeding sparrows. In the city, the author joined an English school and went to school in a motor bus. The grandmother lost access to the child as he developed a life away from her fold. Even after he returned

home from school, he did not have adequate time to spend with her. Despite willing to help him in his lessons, she could not, as his lessons were difficult and in English, and this made her unhappy. His grandmother did not know anything about law of gravity, Archimedes' principle and many more such concepts. She wanted him to learn more about God and the scriptures but that was no longer possible. She was horrified to learn that kids were given music lessons at school as, according to her, music was not meant for gentlefolk but only for beggars and prostitutes. As she could not do anything about it, she just withdrew and became lonelier.

As the author grew up, he joined the University and was given an independent room. The only surviving link in their relationship was snapped and the grandmother confined herself into a self-imposed seclusion. She no longer sought anyone else's company. She busied herself in her spinning wheel and in feeding the sparrows that came to visit her every afternoon. These innocent birds were her only companions and that was the time of the day she enjoyed the most. Sitting on the verandah, she would break the bread into tiny little bits and throw them to the sparrows. Hundreds of them would gather around her chirping endlessly. When the narrator decided to go abroad for higher studies, she was no longer upset. In fact, she bravely faced her isolation and accepted this phase of her life with dignity. He recollects with affection that she accompanied him to the railway station, busy telling the beads of her rosary and chanting profusely but silently and bid him goodbye by kissing him on his forehead. The narrator feared that perhaps it was the last sign of any physical contact between them. He also feared that he might not see her again.

However, he returned five years later to find his grandmother just the same as he had left her. She did not look a day older and he found that she retained her old habits of chanting prayers and feeding her sparrows. In the evening, however a change came over her and she suddenly stopped praying. She collected all the women of the neighbourhood and began playing an old drum and singing the songs of the homecoming of warriors to celebrate the return of her grandson with whom she was so attached. The next morning she fell ill. Though the doctor said it was a mild fever, which would leave her soon, she did not agree. She felt that her end was near and she cursed herself for having stopped praying. She was in a hurry to stop talking and start praying. She lay peacefully on her bed praying, telling the beads until her lips stopped moving, and the rosary fell from her lifeless hands.

The family members laid her body on the ground and covered it with a red shroud as was the custom. Thousands of sparrows came to the courtyard that afternoon. They gathered around the lifeless body of the grandmother and sat there without chirping as if to mourn her death. The narrator's mother brought breadcrumbs and threw those towards them. However, the birds took no notice of these crumbs lying on the ground. After her body was carried away, the sparrows too flew away quietly.

Very short answer type questions:

1. Who is the author of “The Portait of a Lady”?

Ans: Khushwant Singh is the author of “The Portait of a Lady.”

2. What did the grandmother do with her hands?

Ans: She rested one hand on her waist to balance her stoop and with the other hand, she kept on telling the beads of her rosary.

3. What did the grandmother carry for the streets dogs in the village?

Ans: She carried several stale chapattis with her to feed the street dogs on the way to school.

4. What did the grandmother do by accompanying him to school?

Ans: She sat inside the temple adjoining the author's school and read scriptures.

5. What did the priest teach at the village school?

Ans: The priest taught the children alphabets and the morning prayer at the village school.

6. What was the significant turning point in their friendship?

Ans: Their shifting to the city to be with the author's parents was a significant turning point in their friendship.

7. What was the “happiest half-hour of the day” for the grandmother?

Ans: The “happiest half-hour of the day” for the grandmother was when she fed the sparrows with breadcrumbs.

8. What happened when the author joined the University?

Ans: He was given a room of his own resulting in the snapping of the common link between them.

Short answer type questions (2 to 3 marks each)

9. Why did the author find it difficult to believe that the grandmother was once young and pretty?

Ans: The author had always seen his grandmother as an old woman with silver hair and a wrinkled face. That is why he found it difficult to believe that she was once young and pretty. He also could not imagine that she was at some point in the past a child who played games.

10. How did the author and his grandmother become good friends in the village?

Ans: Khushwant Singh's relationship with his grandmother developed when his parents shifted to the city leaving him in the village with her. They became good friends because of their closeness and the moments they shared together. She took care of him and got him ready for school. She fed him with stale chapattis, prepared his school bag and accompanied him to school. She helped him in his lessons as well.

11. How did the grandmother spend her time in the city home?

Ans: The grandmother after having realised that she could no longer help her grandson in his studies devoted her entire time to the spinning activity and in feeding sparrows, which came to her in the late afternoon. She also continued her daily prayers, which she chanted endlessly along with telling or counting her beads.

12. How did grandmother react to the news of Khushwant Singh going abroad?

Ans: His grandmother was not upset when she heard the news. She even accompanied him to the railway station to bid him goodbye. She planted a kiss on his forehead but did not talk or display any emotion. Her mind was lost in prayers and she kept on telling her beads.

13. How did the grandmother celebrate the return of her grandson?

Ans: She collected all the women of the neighbourhood and began playing an old drum and singing the songs of the homecoming of warriors to celebrate the return of her grandson with whom she was so attached. She also stopped praying altogether.

14. How do you know that the grandmother was a very religious woman?

Ans: The grandmother always carried a rosary in her hand. She kept on telling her beads and chanting prayers silently. She always said her morning prayers while doing the daily chores. She wanted her grandson to learn the prayers as well. Even when she came to know that, the English school in the city did not teach him about God or the scriptures she was totally upset.

15. How does the author describe his grandfather?

Ans: The author gives a brief description of his grandfather's portrait, which 'hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing room.' In the portrait, his grandfather looked at least a hundred years old with his oversized turban and clothes.

16. She rarely talked to me after that". What had happened that made her react in this manner?

Ans: When the grandmother came to know that the author was being given music lessons in his school, she became very upset. She did not have high opinions about music as she associated it with prostitutes and beggars. She knew she could not do anything about it so she rarely talked after that.

17. Did the grandmother enjoy her time with the sparrows?

Ans: Yes, the grandmother enjoyed her time with the sparrows, feeding them and being with them all around her with their chirping sounds. In fact, that was the happiest half-hour that she spent during the course of her entire day.

18. Why did the author think that his grandmother's parting kiss would be the last physical contact between them? Was it so?

Ans: The author thought that he may not be able to see or meet her alive as he was going abroad for higher studies. That was not so as five years later she was waiting for him at the railway station the day he returned from abroad and kept clasping his hand without muttering a word.

19. What did the author's mother do when she saw the sparrows? How did the sparrows respond to her?

Ans: When she saw the sparrows surrounding the dead body without a sound she went inside and brought some breadcrumbs to feed them exactly in the manner the

grandmother used to do. However, they took no notice of those crumbs and after the dead body was taken away, they too left silently.

20. What is the difference between village school and urban school education as elaborated in “A Portrait of a Lady”? (HS I Examination, 2015)

Ans: The village school taught alphabets as well as morning prayers. It was all about simple learning in a simple way. However, the urban school based in the city had a difficult and advanced curriculum. Apart from advanced science and mathematics, there were also music lessons.

Long answer type questions: (5 to 10 marks)

1. Draw a character sketch of Khushwant Singh’s grandmother as portrayed by him in the lesson.

Ans: Singh’s grandmother was a true picture of love, affection, and care. She had all those virtues, which are usually liked and admired by grandchildren. The author describes her as an old woman who remained so during all those years he knew her. Her spotless white dress and her silver hair reflected her inner beauty and that is why for the author she was beautiful without being pretty. She was an active old woman who did her daily chores without hesitation. She was a deeply religious woman and spend her days chanting prayers and telling her rosary which she always held in one hand. She also wanted her grandson to learn the prayers. They were always together in the village home and a deep bonding grew between them, which, however, changed when they were taken to the city.

The shift to the city brought about many changes to the daily routine of the grandmother and she grew lonelier as the author remained busy with his school and studies. She was upset to see her grandson gradually moving away from her and from lessons on God and scriptures, which were not taught in his new school. She was troubled to know that he was being given music lessons at school as according to her music was not meant for gentlefolk but only for beggars and prostitutes. This actually projects her conservative attitude and her belief in superstitions. However, being a

strong-willed woman, she did not allow this to dampen her spirits and she searched for newer chores, which could keep her occupied. She spent her days on her spinning wheel and feeding hundreds of sparrows who came to her every afternoon.

2. Describe the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother.

Ans: “The Portrait of a Lady” deals with the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother. The first phase of the relationship deals with friendship that grew between them during their stay in the village. The author’s parents went off to the city leaving him with his grandmother who took care of him. In the village, they were constantly together and shared every single moment of their lives. She got him ready for school, fed him with stale chapattis (with a little butter and sugar), washed his wooden slate and plastered it with yellow chalk, and accompanied him to school. The grandmother, herself a religious woman also took him to school, stayed there at the temple reading scriptures, and came back with him.

However, when the narrator and his grandmother were taken to the city to live with the parents the intimacy they shared could not remain the same due to various reasons. As he joined an English school and began travelling to school in a motor bus, he hardly had time for his grandmother. They still shared the same room but his grandmother could no longer help him with his lessons, which made her unhappy. When she learned that, he was taking music lessons she was even more upset. As she could do nothing about it, she withdrew into herself and became very silent. This was the second turning point in their relationship.

The third phase began when he was given an independent room of his own when he joined the University. The only surviving link in their relationship broke and the grandmother underwent a phase of self-imposed seclusion. She no longer sought anyone else’s company. She busied herself in her spinning wheel and in feeding the sparrows that came to visit her every afternoon. She did not display any emotion even when the author decided to go abroad for further studies. It was as if she stopped bothering about anyone else.

3. Describe the grandmother’s end. How did the sparrows mourn her death?

Ans: Though the author went abroad with the thought that perhaps he might not meet his grandmother alive again, he was surprised to find her the same as he had left her on the day he arrived. Even after these five years when she met him at the railway

station, she did not speak to him. She merely clasped him in her arms chanting her prayers as usual. In the afternoon, she fed her favourite sparrows like on any other day. However, by evening there was a change in her. She suddenly stopped praying, gathered the women of the neighbourhood, beat a drum and sang songs on the homecoming of warriors. She exhausted herself thoroughly by beating the drum and singing for several hours. The next morning she fell ill and the doctor diagnosed her with a mild fever. However, she declared that her end was near and condemned herself for having stopped praying. She began praying once again ignoring the protests of her family members. She lay peacefully on her bed praying, telling the beads until her lips stopped moving, and the rosary fell from her lifeless hands.

As her dead body lay on the ground covered with a red shroud, thousands of sparrows came and surrounded her. The author and other family members noticed that these sparrows were scattered all over the verandah and there was no chirping. The author's mother brought some breadcrumbs to feed them but they did not touch them. They flew away the moment the body was taken away for funeral. It was indeed a touching moment to observe the birds mourning the death of the old woman who fed them and loved them immensely.

4. What opinion did the grandmother form of the English school in the city?

Ans: The grandmother did not have a good opinion of the English school in the city. Unlike the village school, this school had a motor bus for transportation of the students, which made him inaccessible to her. The grandmother lost access to the child as he developed a life away from her fold. Even after he returned home from school, he did not have adequate time to spend with her. Despite willing to help him in his lessons, she could not, as his lessons were difficult and in English, and this made her unhappy. His grandmother did not know anything about law of gravity, Archimedes' principle and many more such concepts. She wanted him to learn more about God and the scriptures but that was no longer possible. She was horrified to learn that kids were given music lessons at school as, according to her, music was not meant for gentlefolk but only for beggars and prostitutes. As she could not do anything about it, she just withdrew and became lonelier.

5. Describe in brief the character of the grandmother highlighting her noble qualities.

Ans: Singh describes his grandmother as a short statured woman with a wrinkled face and silver hair. She was fat and slightly bent and looked quite old. In spotless white clothes with rosary in one hand chanting prayers constantly, she was always a picture of peace and contentment. The author's relationship with his grandmother developed when his parents who shifted to the city left him in the village with her. In their village home, she was his caretaker and companion and they were always together. The turning point came when the narrator and his grandmother were taken to the city to live with the parents. The intimacy that developed during their stay in the village could not remain the same.

The grandmother after having realised that she could no longer help her grandson in his studies devoted her entire time to the spinning activity and in feeding sparrows, which came to her in the late afternoon just as she used to feed the street dogs in the village. She was an epitome of kindness and love. She was also a strong woman always willing to adapt herself to change.

6. Give reasons whether the distancing of the relationship between the author and his grandmother was deliberate or due to the demand of the situation. (HS I Examination, 2015)

Ans: The distance that came about in their relationship was not at all deliberate but the demand of the situation. In the village, they were always together and had a fixed routine where they did everything together. However, when they shifted to the city to live with the author's parents the situation demanded that they lead separate lives in spite of sharing the same routine. Their daily routine also underwent a change. As there were no dogs to feed in the streets, the grandmother took to feeding sparrows. In the city, the author joined an English school and went to school in a motor bus.

The grandmother lost access to the child as he developed a life away from her fold. Even after he returned home from school, he did not have adequate time to spend with her. Despite willing to help him in his lessons, she could not, as his lessons were difficult. When he joined the University as a grown up boy he got a separate room. All these changes were inevitable as her grandchild was growing up. It was but natural that they become distanced and involved with their own daily activities. He became busy with his studies and career and she became even lonelier. She began spinning, continued with her prayers and feeding the sparrows that came to her every day.

7. How did the grandmother react to the changing status of her relationship with her grandchild? What aspect of her character is highlighted through her reaction?

Ans: Initially the grandmother was very upset that he had joined an English school and he could no longer accompany him to school or help him in his lessons. She was horrified to hear that they had music lessons at school. However as she could do nothing she just withdrew herself from his life and stopped talking altogether. She busied herself with other activities like spinning, feeding sparrows, and praying. When the author joined the University and got a separate room for him, their relationship snapped even further. Now they had nothing in common but she faced her loneliness very bravely. She continued with her daily activities, chanting prayers silently and telling her beads profusely. She developed an intimacy with the sparrows that kept her happy and contented. When the narrator decided to go abroad for higher studies, she was no longer upset. In fact, she bravely faced her isolation and accepted this phase of her life with dignity. She accompanied him to the railway station, busy telling the beads of her rosary and chanting prayers and bid him goodbye by kissing him on his forehead.
