

Maintext Hornbill

Chapter-1 The Portrait Of A Lady (Summary)

By- Khushwant Singh

In this story, the author draws a pen portrait of his grandmother. He beautifully unfolds his relationship with her, while describing her appearance and daily activities.

Appearance of the grandmother

The author recalls his grandmother as a very old lady with a wrinkled face. She appeared so old that it was hard for him to believe that she had once been “young and pretty”. She was short, fat and a little stooped in appearance. The author remembers her moving about the house in “spotless white”, counting the beads of her rosary while her lips moved constantly in silent prayers. She was not “pretty” in the traditional sense, yet her serenity made her “beautiful”.

Initial years of togetherness: Life in the village

In the initial years of his life, the author lived with his grandmother in the village, sharing a good friendship. His grandmother used to wake him up in the morning and get him ready for the school. She would hand over to him the things he required in the school. After having thick, stale chappatis with butter and sugar for breakfast, they used to leave for school. The author's grandmother always accompanied him to school as it was attached to the temple. It was her habit to carry several stale chappatis for the village dogs, which they used to feed while returning from the school. The grandmother used to sit inside the temple reading holy books while the narrator learnt alphabets and prayers in the school.

Turning point of their friendship: Life in the city

The ‘turning-point’ of their friendship came when they moved to the city to stay with the author's parents. Though they shared the same room, his grandmother no longer accompanied him to the school since the author started going in a bus. As years rolled by, they “saw less of each other”.

Meanwhile, as there were no dogs in the streets, she took to feeding the sparrows.

Unlike the village school, the author was not taught about God and the scriptures which troubled his grandmother. She did not believe in what was being taught at his school and was unhappy as she could not help him with his lessons. Moreover, she was disturbed at the idea of music lessons being given at school as she considered music to be unsuitable for gentlefolk. Her disapproval was conspicuous in her silence.

The grandmother combat's her loneliness by feeding the sparrows

When the author started going to the university he was given a room of his own. It resulted in a further gap between them. She accepted her loneliness and rarely spoke to anyone. All day long, she sat spinning the wheel and reciting her prayers. She relaxed for a short time, only in the afternoon, to feed the sparrows who came in large numbers. The bond and level of comfort they shared with her is evident in the fact that they perched even on her legs and head. She used to be at her happiest-self while feeding the sparrows.

Author leaves for higher studies

The author decided to go abroad for further studies. He was sure that his grandmother would be upset

at his departure. On the contrary, she came to the railway station to see him off but did not show any emotion. She was absorbed in her prayers, telling the beads of her rosary. She silently kissed the author's forehead, which the author considered to be (supposedly) the last sign of their physical contact.

Author's homecoming

On his return after five years, the author did not find any change in his grandmother. She was as old as ever and remained absorbed in her prayers. Even that day, the happiest moment for her was feeding the sparrows.

In the evening, for the first time ever, she did not pray. She collected several ladies of the neighbourhood and sang songs related to the home-coming of the warriors. She had to be persuaded to stop singing in order to avoid overstraining. However, the next day she was taken ill.

Grandmother's death

Though diagnosed with a mild fever by the doctor, grandmother knew that her end was near. She decided to spend the last few hours of her life reciting prayers and telling her beads. Soon, her lips stopped moving and she died.

A silent tribute by the sparrows

The family went to make arrangements for the grandmother's funeral. As they came with a stretcher, they stopped mid-way to find thousands of sparrows scattered around her dead body. The sparrows mourned the death of the grandmother in utter silence. They ignored the bread crumbs thrown at them by the author's mother and flew away silently after the body was carried away for cremation. The bread-crumbs were swept away by the sweeper next morning.

Give reasons for the following :-

Question 1:

The three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad.

Answer:

The three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad are:

1. childhood – when he went to the village school and the grandmother helped him to get ready and went to school with him.
2. boyhood – when he went to the city school in a bus. He shared a room with grandmother but she could no longer help him in his studies.
3. early youth – when he went to the university and was given a room of his own. The common link of friendship was snapped.

Question 2:

Three reasons why the author's grandmother was disturbed when he started going to the city school.

Answer:

The three reasons why the author's grandmother was disturbed when he started going to the city school are:

1. She hated western Science and learning.
2. She was pained to know that there was no teaching of God and the scriptures there.
3. She was allergic to music. She thought it was not meant for decent people and gentlefolk. It was the monopoly of prostitutes and beggars.

Question 3: Three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up.

Answer:

The three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up are:

- She lived alone in her room as she had accepted her loneliness quietly.
- She sat at her spinning wheel reciting prayers.
- In the afternoon, she would feed the sparrows for half an hour.

Question 4:

The odd ways in which the author's grandmother behaved just before she died.

Answer:

Just before her death, the author's grandmother refused to talk to them. Since she had omitted to pray the previous night while she was singing songs of homecoming and beating the drum, she was not going to waste any more time. She ignored their protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling beads.

Question 5:

The way in which the sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.

Answer:

Thousands of sparrows sat silently surrounding the dead body of the author's grandmother. There was no chirruping. The author's mother threw some crumbs of bread to them. They took no notice of them. As soon as the grandmother's corpse was carried off, they flew away quietly. Thus the sparrows expressed their sorrow.

Talking About the Text

Question 1:

The author's grandmother was a religious person. What are the different ways in which we come to know this?

Answer:

The author's grandmother was a deeply religious lady. We come to know this through the different ways of her behaviour. She visited the temple every morning and read scriptures. At home she always mumbled inaudible prayer and kept telling the beads of rosary. She would repeat prayers in a sing-song manner while getting the writer ready for school. She hoped that he would learn it by heart. She didn't like English school as there was no teaching of God and scriptures.

Even while spinning at her spinning-wheel she would recite prayers. Perhaps it was only once that she forgot to say her prayers. It was on the evening prior to her death when she felt over excited while celebrating the arrival of her grandson with songs and beatings of drum. She continued praying and telling beads of her rosary till her last breath.

Question 2:

Describe the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother. Did their feelings for each other change?

Answer:

During his boyhood, the author was completely dependent on his grandmother. She was a part of his life. The turning point in their friendship came when they went to city. She could no longer accompany him to school as he went there by bus. They shared the same room but she could not help him in his studies. She would ask him what the teachers had taught. She did not believe in the things that were taught at school. She was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures. She felt offended that music was also being taught. She expressed her disapproval silently. After this she rarely talked to him. When he went to university, he was given a room of his own. The common link of friendship was snapped.

However their feelings for each other did not change. They still loved each other deeply. She went to see the author off at the railway station when he was going abroad for higher studies. She showed no emotion but kissed his forehead silently. The author valued this as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between them. When the author returned after five years, she received him at the station. She clasped him in her arms. In the evening she celebrated his homecoming by singing songs and beating an old drum.

Question 3:

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

Answer:

Yes, I agree that the author's grandmother was a person strong in character. She was a strong woman with strong beliefs. Although she was not formally educated, she was serious about the author's education. She could not adjust herself to the western way of life, Science and English education. She hated music and disapproved of its teaching in school.

She was a deeply religious lady. Her lips were always moving in a silent prayer. She was always telling the beads of her rosary. She went to temple daily and read the scriptures. She was distressed to know that there was no teaching about God and holy books at Khushwant's new English school.

She was a kind lady She used to feed dogs in the village. In the city she took to feeding sparrows. Although old in years and weak in body she had strength of mind. Just before her death, she refused to talk to the members of the family as she did not want to waste her time. She wanted to make up for the time last evening when she had not prayed to God. She lay peacefully in bed saying prayers and telling the beads of her rosary till she breathed her last.