

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

by Khuswant 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.

A PHOTOGRAPH

– Shirley Toulson

Nostalgically recollecting fond memories, the poet looks at a very old photograph of her mother who has been dead for nearly twelve years. The poet is consumed with grief but is left with no words to express the loss.

The poem begins with the poet looking at a very old photograph of her mother at twelve years of age. The photograph, on a cardboard frame, shows the poet's mother, with her two girl cousins each holding one of her hand. She was eldest of the three and had a 'sweet face'. In the snapshot, all the three girls stand still, smiling with their hair falling on their faces, to get clicked by the camera of their uncle, on an occasion when they went paddling. The sea, which has apparently undergone no change, washed their 'transient' feet. This image of transience provides a sharp contrast to the eternal sea.

Some twenty or thirty years later, the poet's mother laughed at the picture pointing how she, Betty and Dolly (the two cousins) were made to dress for the beach holiday. That sea holiday was a thing of past for her mother at that time, while her mother's laughter is the poet's past now. Both signify their respective losses and the pain involved in recollecting the past.

Her mother is dead for nearly twelve years now. And for the present 'circumstance' the poet has nothing left to say. She is absorbed in the memories of her dead mother. The painful 'silence' of the situation leaves the poet silent, with no words to express her grief. Thus, the 'silence silences' her.

“WE'RE NOT AFRAID TO DIE...IF WE CAN ALL BE TOGETHER”

by Gordon Cook and Alan East

A dream to duplicate the round-the-world voyage

The narrator, a 37 year old businessman and his wife Mary have dreamt to voyage around the world like the famous Captain James Cook. For the voyage, they have been perfecting their seafaring skills for the past 16 years. They have got a professionally built, 23 metre and 30 ton wooden-hulled boat, *Wavewalker*. The boat has been tested for months in the roughest of the weathers.

The beginning of the voyage

In July 1976, the narrator, together with his wife and kids (son Jonathan, 6 and daughter Suzanne, 7) sets sail from Plymouth, England. The initial period of the three-year journey (from the west coast of Africa to Cape Town) proves to be quite pleasant. Before heading east, they employ two crewmen, namely, Larry Vigil and Herb Seigler to help them tackle one of the world's roughest seas, the southern Indian Ocean.

The second day they encounter strong winds and alarming waves. By December 25, they manage to reach 3,500 kilometres east of Cape Town. Despite the bad weather, the family celebrates Christmas on the boat. However, the weather worsens with the passing time.

A catastrophe- the attack of the huge wave

On the early morning of January 2, the family faces strong, mighty waves and screaming winds. They attempt to slow down the boat by dropping the storm jib. They carry out life-raft drill and prepare themselves for the worst case scenario by donning life jackets and oilskins.

Later in the evening, a "perfectly vertical", huge, tremendous wave hits the deck of the boat throwing the narrator off the boat. He accepts his 'approaching death' and begins to lose consciousness. The boat is just about to overturn when another huge wave comes and turns it right back. The narrator grabs the guard rails and sails into the boat's main boom. He suffers injuries in his ribs and mouth.

Fight for survival

Realising that the ship had water in its lower parts, he instructs Mary to take the wheel, while Larry and Herb pump out the water. He checks on the children in their cabin, where Sue informs him about a bump on her head to which he does not pay much attention.

The narrator begins waterproofing the gaping holes. Most of the water now deviated to the side. However, their hand-pumps block due to debris and the electric-pump gets short-circuited. Fortunately, he finds a spare electric pump and connects it to an out-pipe in order to drain out the water.

They keep pumping and steering all night long. Even their Mayday calls are not answered as they are in a remote corner of the world.

Injuries of Suzanne

Sue's head swells, her eyes go black and has a deep cut on her arm. On being asked about her injuries, she replies to her father that she did not want to bother him when he was trying to save them.

Desperation to reach the land

The family manages to survive for 15 hours since the wave hit the boat. The water levels are controlled to a considerable level but they still have leaks below the waterline. They decide to rest and work in rotations.

The wave had left *Wavewalker* in a considerably bad state. Since it is not in a condition to make them reach Australia, they decide and hope to reach the nearest island, Ile Amsterdam, a French scientific base. Unfortunately, the chances to reach the island are very slim unless the wind and seas subside. Besides, their supporting engine had also been damaged.

January 4 and 5

After pumping out the water for 36 hours continuously, they take a sigh of relief as just a few centimetres of water is left to be pumped out. They decide to hoist the storm jib as the main mast is destroyed and head towards the supposed location of the islands.

Having found some corned beef and crackers, they eat their first meal in two days.

However, their relief is short-lived. The weather starts changing for the worse and by the morning of January 5, they are again left desperate.

Courageous Jonathan

As the narrator goes to comfort the children, he is left spellbound to see the fearlessness of his son, Jonathan, who says that he does not fear death as long as they all are together. This fills the narrator with determination and courage to fight the sea.

The ongoing struggle

He tries his best to protect the weakened starboard side. That evening, the narrator and his wife sit together holding hands, feeling hopeless and thinking that their end is approaching. But still with all the moral support that he receives from his children, he continues his efforts.

Fortunately, *Wavewalker* sails through the storm. He works on the wind speeds in order to calculate their exact position. While he is thinking, Sue gives him a greeting card expressing her love, gratitude and optimism.

Though he is not very convinced, he instructs Larry to steer a course of 185 degrees saying that if they are lucky they can hope to find the island by the evening. He then goes to sleep with a heavy heart.

Ultimate victory

Fortunately, they sail on and manage to find Ile Amsterdam by evening. On being informed about this, the narrator's joy knows no bound. Jonathan calls him the "best captain" and the "best daddy" in the whole world. Soon, they get off-shore and struggle to reach the island with the help of its inhabitants.

Stepping on the land after such turmoil fills the narrator's thoughts with cheerful and optimistic Larry and Herbie; supportive Mary; a brave seven-year-old girl who did not want her parents to worry about her head injuries and a six-year-old boy who is not afraid to die.

Discovering Tut: the Saga Continues

by A.R. Williams

The mummy of King Tut

As the mummy of King Tut was glided for performing a CT scan, angry winds stirred and dark clouds covered the stars. His scan was being done to unearth the mysteries that had surrounded his death.

Tourists had lined to pay their respects to the 'mummy' of the famous Egyptian king Tutankhamun and made speculations about his untimely death.

"Funerary treasures"

The mummy was in a very bad state, according to Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of Egypt's

Supreme Council of Antiquities. King Tut's tomb was first discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter, a British archaeologist. Tut was found buried with numerous "funerary treasures" in a coffin made of pure gold. The treasures found included precious collars, inlaid necklaces and bracelets, rings, amulets, a ceremonial apron, sandals and sheaths for his fingers and toes. These treasures are till date the richest royal collections ever found. Some everyday items considered to be needed in the afterlife, like board games, bronze razor, linen undergarments, cases of food and wine were also found. This revealed that the ancient Egyptians believed in the idea of resurrection and hoped to take their riches with them.

Carter's investigations and the problems faced

Carter investigated the three nested coffins. In the first, a shroud adorned with garlands of willow and olive leaves, wild celery, lotus petals and cornflowers were found. This gave vague evidence that the death might have taken place in the month of March or April.

Carter faced difficulty in extracting the mummy of the king out of the coffin. The ritual resins had hardened resulting in cementing of Tut to the bottom of the solid gold coffin. Though Carter unsuccessfully tried to use sun to loosen the resins, there was no other way left to separate the mummy from the adornments than to chisel it away. Its head had to be removed and the major joints had to be detached.

The only ground for Carter to defend himself for chiselling Tut was that thieves would have ripped the body apart to rob the gold, if he had not chiselled it.

Another revelation

As the archaeology changed with the advent of time, it focused more on details of life and mysteries of death than on treasures. Some 40 years after Carter's discovery, in 1968 a startling fact was revealed, in the discovery of an anatomy professor who had X-rayed the mummy. He claimed that the breast-bone and the front ribs of the mummy were missing.

Tut's family history

Amenhotep III (Tut's father or grandfather) ruled for almost four decades during the 18th dynasty golden age. He was succeeded by his son Amenhotep IV who pioneered one of the odd periods in the history of ancient Egypt. He made some drastic and unpleasant changes. He promoted the worship of the Aten, the Sun disk, and changed his name to Akhenaten. He moved the religious capital to the new city of Akhetaten. He made some drastic unpleasant changes. He destroyed the images and temples of Amun, a major god. After his demise, a ruler named Smenkhkare reigned for a brief time. Finally, Tutankhaten (the name was later changed to Tutankhamun) took the throne and restored the old order destroyed by his predecessors. He reigned for about nine years.

The death of King Tut

Tutankhamun or King Tut as he's widely known today, died as a teenage pharaoh (ancient Egyptian king) and buried laden with gold. He was the last heir of the family of rulers who had ruled Egypt for centuries. His unexpected demise was a big event and the reasons for his death remained unclear. Two of the biggest questions are still unanswered about him – "how did he die, and how old was he at the time of his death?"

The CT scan

In the year 2005, (more than 3,300 years after his death), King Tut's mummy became one of the first mummies to undergo a CT scan—"in death, as in life, moving regally ahead of his countrymen." The CT scan was led by Zahi Hawass and done with a portable CT machine. The scan came up

with new clues about his life and death. It provided precise data for an accurate forensic reconstruction of King Tut. Due to sand in the cooler fan of the CT machine, they had to use two plastic fans to complete the scanning process.

Tut's body was examined over a computer screen with the help of the CT scan. It showed a grey head, neck vertebrae, a hand, several images of the rib cage and a transection of the skull. After collecting the data for scan, the Pharaoh is sent back to the place he belonged, i.e. his coffin. It was a relief for Zahi Hawass as "nothing had gone seriously wrong" with the mummy.

After their observations, when they left, the wind had stopped and the surrounding came to a deathly silence. In the sky, just above the entrance to Tut's tomb stood Orion, the constellation, also called by the Egyptians as the soul of Osiris, the God of afterlife, watching over the boy king.

THE VOICE OF THE RAIN

– *Walt Whitman*

The Voice of the Rain is a poem that celebrates rain and its natural-cycle for the benefit of earth and the life it supports.

The poem begins with the poet asking for the identity of the soft-falling rain shower. Much to the surprise of the poet, the rain replies to his question. And, the poet translates this 'voice' of the rain for his readers.

The rain identifies itself as the 'Poem of Earth'. It says that it rises from the land and the deep sea, in the form of the intangible water vapours, and goes up to the immeasurable sky. It then takes the form of clouds with various shapes. Although it changes in its form and shape, its core existence remains the same.

It descends or falls on the surface of the earth to eliminate droughts, wash away the tiny particles and settle down the dust-layers. It reinvigorates the dry lands and gives life to the seeds that, otherwise, would have remained dormant and unborn. Thus, the rain drops rise in the form of vapours only to come back to its origin in the form of rain. During this cycle, it purifies and beautifies (by nourishing the unborn seeds) the planet.

The last two lines of the poem are the poet's reflection upon the answer given by the rain. The poet observes that the life of rain is similar to that of a song. A song originates from the heart of the poet, travels to reach others and after fulfilling its purpose (whether acknowledged or not), it returns to the poet with all due love. Similarly, the rain rises from the land and oceans, wanders, fulfills its purpose of nourishing life and purifying the planet, and then returns to its birth-place.

THE AILING PLANET: THE GREEN MOVEMENT'S ROLE

By Nani Palkhivala

The chapter comments on the deteriorating condition of our planet. It speaks of the problems faced by our planet, reasons for its poor condition and the changing view of the world for the planet.

The Green Movement

The author begins by commenting on the great attention received by the Green Movement that began some 25 years ago. The world's first nationwide Green party was founded in New Zealand in the year 1972 and the movement has been a great success since then.

A change in the human perception

A revolutionary change has come in the perception of the human beings bringing in a "holistic and ecological" view of the world. There has been a shift from the understanding developed by Copernicus to the people's belief that the earth is a living organism whose needs must be respected and preserved by us. According to the writer, our earth is like a "patient in declining health". Thus, we have to realise our ethical responsibility of guarding the planet.

Sustainable Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development propagated the concept of “sustainable development” in 1987. Sustainable development calls for a well-balanced development so as to meet the demands of the present and not to deprive our future generations from the natural world of resources.

Man and the other living-species

Man has been considered as the most dangerous being on the planet. However, due to the efforts of a number of agencies all over the world, man is learning to live in harmony with the other living species on the planet. Man's existence is shifting from the system of domination to that of partnership.

The depletion of the principal biological systems

There are still many millions of living species that have not been catalogued. The author mentions the ecological concern pointed out by Mr. Lester R. Brown in his book “The Golden Economic Prospect”. Mr. Brown points out four principal biological systems- fisheries, forests, grasslands and croplands. These form the foundation of the global economic system as they supply food and provide raw materials for industries except minerals and petroleum-derived synthetics.

The demand of the human beings on these systems is increasing to such an ‘unsustainable’ extent that the productivity of these systems is being hampered. The excessive demand results in deterioration and depletion of resources leading to the breakdown of fisheries, disappearance of forests, deterioration of croplands and turning of grasslands into barren lands.

Deforestation

The forests are being destroyed in large proportions to obtain firewood in poor countries. Depletion of tropical forests has led to the extinction of several species. In fact, the tropical forests or “the powerhouse of evolution” are eroding at the rate of forty to fifty million acres per year. Besides, the increasing use of dung for burning deprives the soil of important natural fertilisers.

According to our Parliament's Estimates Committee, a near “catastrophic depletion” has been marked in the number of the forests of India over the last four decades. Ironically, article 48A of the Indian Constitution states that the state shall “protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country”. However, India is losing its forests at the rate of 3.7 million acres a year.

The condition of the environment is ‘critical’ as per a study conducted by the United Nations.

The problem of over-population

One of the major factors adding to the deforming future of the human society is the fast-growing world population. The present world population is estimated at 5.7 billion. With this ever-increasing population, development seems a far-fetched dream.

As per the author, the best contraceptive to control the population is development. Voluntary family planning with an element of coercion is the only alternative. Rise in income, spread of education and improved health would lead to fall in fertility. Population and poverty are directly proportional to each other. Thus, control of the population should be our top-most priority.

“Era of Responsibility”

The author now re-mentions the “holistic view” of the basis of our existence. He points that it is an “Era of Responsibility” that calls for “seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts”. Industry plays an important role in this responsibility. Excellence in environmental performance is required for the manufacturers to continue their existence. Our earth belongs as much to the future generation as much to us. We should soon realise our duty towards our planet and should not treat it solely as our property.

The chapter concludes with the beautiful lines of Mr. Lester Brown, “We have not inherited this earth from our forefathers; we have borrowed it from our children.”

The Browning Version by Terence Rattigan

The play presents a conversation between a lower fifth grade science student, Taplow and Frank, a teacher.

A chance meeting between Taplow and Frank

The scene of the play is set in a school. The play opens with a sixteen year old boy, Taplow who has come to do extra work for his teacher, Crocker-Harris. He is waiting for his teacher, who has not yet arrived. Another teacher, Frank, finds Taplow waiting in the room and strikes a conversation with him.

Taplow awaiting his result

From the conversation between Frank and Taplow, we are informed that Taplow is waiting for his result to be declared on the following day. He is keen to specialise in science provided he gets a favourable result. The uniqueness of Mr. Crocker-Harris is hinted as he does not tell the results like the other teachers do. He follows the rule of the headmaster declaring the results on the last day of the term.

Taplow's views on art and science

Their conversation provides us an insight into the mind of Taplow. He lets Frank know how much he dislikes the play ‘Agamemnon’. He is more interested in science. He admits that though the play is not that bad, the way it is taught is terrible- “Just a lot of Greek words strung together and fifty lines if you get them wrong”.

The question of the “extra work”

Taplow is doing extra work as he had missed a class a week ago. Frank remarks that Taplow will certainly get his “remove” for doing the extra work. But Taplow feels the other way. He asserts such sort of rules do not work with Mr. Crocker-Harris, as he is not like other teachers who appreciate the students who do extra work.

Taplow's views about Crocker-Harris

As per Taplow, Crocker-Harris is a different kind of teacher. He is too strict and ‘hardly human’. Unlike other teachers, he does not tell his students their result before the judgement day. Taplow had asked Harris about his remove and in response Harris told him that he has given Taplow exactly what he deserves- “No less; and certainly no more”.

Frank's suggestion to Taplow

After calling Taplow for extra work, Crocker himself is late by ten minutes. Frank points that as Crocker is late, Taplow has a chance to leave and play golf. However, Taplow seems shocked at this suggestion and is scared that Mr. Crocker-Harris might follow him home.

Further contemplation on Crocker-Harris's character

Frank admits envying Mr. Harris for the effect he has on his students. He asks Taplow if Mr. Harris beats them. However, Taplow tells Frank that unlike one or two of the other teachers, Mr. Harris is not a "sadist". He is not a sort of a person who would beat students and vent his frustration. He is hard like a nut. He is heartless. He possesses no feelings at all.

Taplow's unusual liking towards Crocker-Harris

Taplow admits that in spite of all this, he still likes Crocker. The boy narrates an incident when he laughed at a classical joke cracked by Harris, though he had not understood it. It was a gesture from Taplow's side to be polite to him.

Millie Crocker-Harris

At this point, Millie Crocker-Harris enters the room. She was Mr. Crocker-Harris's wife. She suggests Taplow to run away for a quarter of an hour and come back. She advises him to leave as Harris has been at Bursar's and may take quite a time to get back.

The behaviour and attitude of Mrs. Mille Crocker Harris, baffles Taplow. He is not willing to leave for it has been the order of his teacher whom he fears to disobey. Mille assures him that she will take the blame on herself. Proposing an excuse for his absence, she hands Taplow a prescription asking him to take it to a chemist and get it made up for Harris. Convinced Taplow accepts the proposal and leaves Frank and Mrs. Crocker Harris behind.

CHILDHOOD

– *Markus Natten*

The poem *Childhood* begins with the poet pondering over 'when' was it that he lost his childhood. He wonders if it was the time when he crossed the age of eleven or the time when he started realizing that there is no real existence of heaven and hell as they could not be geographically located in maps.

He wonders if he lost his childhood the moment he realised that adults were not all they pretended to be or when he recognised that the adults, who spoke and preached of love, themselves 'did not act so lovingly'.

The poet asks if he lost his childhood when he realised that he has a mind of his own or that he can choose his own way, guided by his mind now capable of producing thoughts and opinions that are different from other people.

The poet speculates as to 'where' his childhood disappeared. Though he is not aware of the day he lost his childhood, he knows that it has gone to some forgotten place, in an infant's innocent face.

FATHER TO SON

– *Elizabeth Jennings*

Father to son is a poem describing the troubled relationship between a father and his son, in the present times. The poem emphasises the generation-gap between the father and the son and expresses the father's pain and helplessness in failing to 'understand' his child. The father realizes the distance between them and wishes to bridge the gap.

The father remarks that though they have been living in the same house for years now, he does not understand his son. As he knows nothing about his son, he tries to build the same relationship that he enjoyed when his son was a small child.

The father wonders if he is responsible for destroying the basic personality of his son or if his son

now belongs to a world to which his father does not. He regrets their talking like strangers and lack of understanding. The son is much like his father in appearance but they do not share common interest or taste.

'Silence' is what surrounds their relationship and there is a complete lack of communication between them. The father wishes his son to return to him in his own surroundings rather than see him move out to make his own different world. The father is ready to forgive his son for everything and rebuild the relationship to have a new start.

The father feels that they should live together. He admits that he himself is unable to understand how his grief gives way to anger. They wish to resolve their differences but it seems difficult to live together in harmony.