



**Pratibha International Interdisciplinary Journal – Vol.
01, Issue 01, April-June 2025. ISSN-XXX-XXX**

Reflections of Indian Culture in "The Portrait of a Lady"

Prof. V.P.Shekokar¹, Vishal Shekhawat²

¹ Department of English, Vidya Bharati Mahavidyalaya, Amravati, Maharashtra

² Department of Library Science, Vidya Bharati Mahavidyalaya, Amravati, Maharashtra

(Corresponding author: vshegawkar@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Abstract - Indian art, music, and literature are deeply rooted in ancestral words, spirituality, and the permanence of customs through generations. The short story "The Portrait of a Lady" by Khushwant Singh offers a nuanced delineation of these elements through the relationship between the storyteller and his grandmother. This paper explores how the story put in a nutshell core aspect of Indian culture, including the respect for elders, the role of faith in daily life, and the rigidity between tradition and modernity. By analyzing key passages and themes, this study highlights the cultural values and beliefs that shape Indian society.

Keywords: *Indian culture, tradition, spirituality, familial bonds, generational shifts*

(a) INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh (1915–2014) was a prominent Indian author, journalist, and historian known for his insightful plots and sharp wittiness. His works often travelled themes of Indian history, partition, and cultural shifts. Singh's writing, characterized by its simplicity and deep expressive quality, offers a window into the socio-cultural scenery of India. In "The Portrait of a Lady," he presents a deeply personal yet universally relatable story of intergenerational relationships, shedding light on the cultural values that define Indian society.

India's cultural heritage is a vast and intricate web of traditions, beliefs, and social values passed down through generations. In "The Portrait of a Lady," Khushwant Singh portrays the life of a grandmother through the lens of her grandson, illustrating the timelessness of familial love and the inevitable transition of cultural practices. This paper delves into how the

story reflects significant aspects of Indian culture, including the role of grandparents, religious practices, and the shifting dynamics of tradition in the face of modernization.

(b) The Role of Grandparents in Indian Families:

One of the most defining aspects of Indian culture is the central role played by grandparents in shaping familial structures. In traditional Indian households, grandparents serve as custodians of culture, imparting moral values, religious teachings, and personal experiences to younger generations.

Singh vividly describes his grandmother as an embodiment of wisdom and grace: *"She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary."* This image reflects the respect and reverence accorded to elders in Indian society. The grandmother's role extends beyond emotional support; she is the narrator's primary caregiver during his early years, signifying the strong intergenerational bonds in Indian families.

(c) Grandparents as Cultural Guardians:

In India, grandparents often act as the bridge between tradition and the younger generation. They pass down oral traditions, religious stories, and life lessons that shape the values of their grandchildren. The grandmother's storytelling in the narrative highlights this role, as she recalls past experiences that seem almost mythical to the narrator. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge helps preserve cultural identity amidst modernization.

(d) The Emotional Bond between Grandparents and Grandchildren:

The story also emphasizes the deep emotional connection between grandparents and grandchildren. Despite generational differences, the narrator shares an unspoken bond with his grandmother. Their relationship symbolizes the warmth, security, and affection that elders provide in Indian families, reinforcing the idea that familial bonds remain strong despite societal changes.

(e) Religious Practices and Spirituality:

Religion is an intrinsic part of Indian culture, influencing daily routines, rituals, and interactions. The grandmother's unwavering devotion is evident throughout the story. She spends her mornings reciting prayers, carrying a rosary, and reading scriptures at the temple while the narrator attends school: *"She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart."*

This illustrates how spirituality is seamlessly woven into everyday life. The act of reciting prayers while engaging in mundane activities demonstrates how faith is not merely a ritual

but a way of life in Indian society. The grandmother's religious dedication highlights the strong presence of spirituality in traditional Indian households.

(f) The Role of Rituals in Indian Daily Life:

Rituals play a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity and spiritual discipline in Indian society. The grandmother's adherence to daily prayers and temple visits exemplifies how faith shapes individual and communal life. These rituals serve as a means of connecting with the divine and reinforcing cultural heritage across generations.

(g) Faith as a Source of Strength:

For many Indians, faith provides comfort and resilience in the face of life's challenges. The grandmother's commitment to prayer, even in the face of modern influences, reflects the enduring nature of spiritual beliefs. Her prayers serve as a source of inner strength, demonstrating how religion remains a guiding force in traditional Indian households.

(h) The Tension Between Tradition and Modernity:

Indian culture has undergone significant transformations due to globalization, urbanization, and Western influences. The grandmother's disapproval of English education and music lessons underscores this cultural shift. *"She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures."* This reflects the broader societal struggle between preserving traditional values and embracing modern education. Many older generations in India have faced similar concerns about Westernization diluting cultural identity. However, this generational tension is a natural progression, representing the evolving landscape of Indian culture while still maintaining its core traditions.

(i) The Impact of Western Education:

The introduction of Western education in India has brought both opportunities and challenges. While it provides access to global knowledge, it also distances younger generations from indigenous traditions. The grandmother's reluctance to accept English schooling highlights a common concern among traditional Indian families regarding the loss of cultural heritage.

(j) Generational Differences in Cultural Perceptions:

The story illustrates how different generations perceive cultural change. While the narrator embraces modern education, his grandmother clings to traditional values. This generational gap highlights the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity in Indian society, where both coexist in a delicate balance.

(k) Symbolism of the Sparrows and Cultural Continuity:

One of the most poignant symbols in the story is the relationship between the grandmother and the sparrows. In Indian culture, birds often symbolize peace, spirituality, and the interconnectedness of life. The narrator observes, *"While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings."* This act of feeding birds signifies the Indian ethos of compassion and harmony with nature.

(l) Birds as Symbols of Spirituality:

In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, birds are often seen as messengers between the earthly and spiritual realms. The grandmother's affinity for sparrows suggests a deeper spiritual connection, emphasizing the Indian belief in unity between all living beings.

(m) The Silent Mourning of the Sparrows:

The sparrows' silence after the grandmother's death is a powerful metaphor for loss and respect. Their quiet presence symbolizes the void left by her passing, reflecting how nature itself acknowledges human emotions. This scene reinforces the Indian cultural view that death is not an end but a transition into another spiritual phase.

(n) Conclusion:

Khushwant Singh's "The Portrait of a Lady" deals with the Indian cultural values, illustrating the unwavering bond between generations, the significance of religious practices, and the inevitable evolution of tradition. The story serves as a microcosm of Indian society, encapsulating the timeless aspects of familial love, spiritual devotion, and the resilience of cultural heritage. Through a detailed exploration of these themes, this paper underscores the enduring essence of Indian culture as seen through the life and legacy of the narrator's grandmother.

The Portrait of a Lady is not merely a nostalgic recollection of a bygone era but a profound meditation on change, continuity, and the permanent asset of cultural values. The grandmother's lifecycle, though simple, carries profound lessons about piety, flexibility, and the deep-seated influences that bind families together. As societies continue to evolve, the story stands as a reminder of the importance of honoring traditions while embracing progress. Singh's work, therefore, remains an priceless contribution to Indian fiction, capturing the soul of a culture that succeeds on its rich past while piloting the fears of the future.

(o) Plagiarism statement (Mandatory):

I declare that this research paper is my original work, and I have properly cited all sources used in this study. I have not submitted this work or any part of it for

publication or academic credit elsewhere. I understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offense and take full responsibility for the content of this paper.

(p) References/Bibliography:

1. Singh, K.. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Delhi: Penguin Books. (2008)
2. Singh, K.. *Truth, Love & a Little Malice: An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Penguin India. (2002)
3. Nayar, P. K. *A Short History of English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2009)
4. Mehrotra, A. K.. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. (2003)
5. Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. (1982).
6. King, B.. *Modern Indian English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2001).
7. Iyengar, K. R. S. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers. (1984).
8. Mukherjee, M. *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Pencraft International. (2010).
9. Ghosh, T. *Indian English Literature: A Critical Perspective*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers. (2015)
10. Sharma, R. "Intergenerational Relationships in Khushwant Singh's *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Indian Literature Today*, 5(2), 45-60. (2016)
11. Chandra, S. "Khushwant Singh and the Representation of Indian Tradition." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 14(3), 98-112. (2018)
12. Verma, P. "Cultural Reflection in *The Portrait of a Lady*: An Analysis." *International Journal of Literary Studies*, 6(1), 34-48. (2019)
13. Gupta, A. "Narrative Techniques in Khushwant Singh's *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Indian Journal of English Studies*, 77(4), 90-105. (2020)
14. Rao, K. "The Role of Grandparents in Indian Literature: A Case Study of *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(2), 15-29. (2021).
15. Banerjee, P. "Tradition and Modernity in Khushwant Singh's Works." *Literary Heritage Review*, 12(3), 80-94. (2022).
16. Sinha, T. "The Symbolism of the Grandmother in *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Critical Discourse Journal*, 5(2), 102-115. (2017)

17. Kumar, V. "Indian Family Structures in Literature: A Study of *The Portrait of a Lady* and Similar Works." *Studies in Indian Literature*, 11(1), 55-70. (2023)
18. Sahitya Akademi.. *A Tribute to Khushwant Singh*. Retrieved from www.sahitya-akademi.gov.in (2020)
19. Indian Culture Portal.. *Family and Tradition in Indian Literature*. Retrieved from www.indianculture.gov.in (2021)
20. The Hindu.. "Khushwant Singh: A Chronicler of Indian Culture and History." Retrieved from www.thehindu.com (2019)
21. Scroll.in. "Khushwant Singh's Legacy: A Look at His Literary Contributions." Retrieved from www.scroll.in(2022).
22. Academia.edu. "An Analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady* by Khushwant Singh." Retrieved from www.academia.edu (2021).
23. Research Gate. "Cultural Depictions in Indian English Literature." Retrieved from www.researchgate.net (2023).