

Defining ‘Grandmother’ in the Light of Eco-humanism: A Reading of Khushwant Singh’s “The Portrait of a Lady”

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Abstract

The proposed work concentrates upon an eco-humanistic reading of the grandmother in Khushwant Singh’s “The Portrait of a Lady”. It canvasses how ecological humanism substantiated by the grandmother ascertains that human beings should develop a culture, which encourages and promotes the flourishing of both humanity and Nature. It demonstrates how grandmother’s philosophy indicates an ethical system that focuses on humans and their values, needs, duties, rights, interests, abilities, dignity and genuine freedom unblemished by any dogmatic or parochial religiosity and pseudo-sciences as well. The study expresses through the medium of grandmother that eco-humanists aim at maintaining harmony between humanistic and eco-centric policies without eclipsing or marring each other. It simultaneously depicts how the grandmother’s beliefs and activities suggestively emphasize upon the necessity of transforming maleficent materialistic rationalism into eco-humanistic sensibility to render one’s habitat stable by bearing a benevolent approach.

Keywords: eco-humanism, grandmother, dignity, eco-rationality, adaptability

I

Humanism is a rational perspective which views and adjudges humanity as a primarily significant virtue instead of pedagogically divine or supernatural matters. It centres upon the idea of wise, autonomous and organically secular self, and ignores the pre-conditioned nature of an individual. It is inclusive of the study of ancient classical texts of immense importance to the culture, minimal adherence/ conformation to orthodox, rigid religious dogmas, and an absolute focus on life, human values and our deeds in this world rather than caressing the after-life syndrome. Humanism is a thought that manifests the preservation and promotion of human values that enable a wholesome human growth, which can be attained only through reason, empathy, mutual respect, and a true understanding of human dignity and human rights. Humanism is an intellectual movement that places human beings, rather than man-made stereotype concept of God, at the centre of meaningful life. “Ecological humanism /eco-humanism takes the view that human beings are capable of transforming their societies so as to promote the flourishing of both humanity and nature. Ecological humanism is, in essence, a communitarian view of human culture.” (Ecological Humanism)

II

““The Portrait of a Lady” is a heart-warming pen picture of Khushwant Singh's grandmother who brought him up. The author describes his association with his grandmother and the changes that came about in their relationship with the passage of time. Her simplicity and beauty left an indelible imprint on the poet's mind.”(The Portrait of a Lady-summary) Here, we get acquainted with all delicately beautiful, emotional and memorable moments he has spent with his grandmother in his childhood. She, an old and slightly bent lady of short stature, hobbles around the house in spick and span white clothes, and chants the beads on her rosary simultaneously, while her silver hairs lay scattered messily on her wrinkled face. She looks the same for twenty years to him and it appears as if she is exceedingly old and could not grow older anymore. The writer says that he thinks of her as not very pretty but constantly beautiful all the time. The word pretty stands for the physical or carnal beauty, which is ephemeral, hence subject to decay, while the word beautiful stands for the sublime sanctity that the grandmother possesses. Her serene disposition along with her white locks of hair has made the author compare her to a tranquil winter landscape. It is difficult for him to conceptualise that she had a husband because he never sees her suffering from insecurity and identity crisis. She neither feels helpless nor allows herself to be at the mercy of others or be abandoned by anybody. She surpasses the patriarchal orthodoxy and prejudice that a woman gets paralyzed and lost after the demise of her husband who metaphorically represents support system for her. This self-emancipation has been possible for her because of her self-sufficiency, sense of dignity, wisdom, liberal outlook and independence, witnessed by the author since childhood. So, his grandfather's portrait that hangs on the wall of the drawing room is no more than an object like other commodities placed in the house to the child. He never sees his grandmother anguished by the thought of any such loss, and this shows her bold acceptance of the truth regarding the inevitable mortality as per Nature's law.

When Khushwant Singh is a kid, his parents shift to the city leaving him in the caring shelter of his grandmother in the village. Here, we come across her non-complaining/ non-grudging, understanding, and adaptable temperament. She wakes him up every morning, bathes him, dresses him, plasters his wooden slate, arranges his breakfast which consists of a stale, buttered chapatti with sugar dusted on it and then she finally walks him to school, which is abutted to a temple. When Khushwant Singh and the other children learn the alphabets and morning prayers at school, his grandmother sits inside the temple reading Holy Scriptures, a form of classical text, which uniquely represents the unification of humanitarian and eco-congenial elements indeed. She meticulously and happily follows this daily routine without failing single-handedly. Here, we come across her kindness, time management, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, spirit of commitment and spiritual devotion adequately. Besides, her willingness to help him in his lessons as a result of her immense interest in his studies

evinces her inquisitiveness to learn. Thus, her active participation in various enterprises, positive demeanour reveal her non-stagnancy and capability of regenerating herself, the rudimentary features of eco-humanistic prosperity. After both of them finish their routine tasks, on their way back home, she feeds the street dogs each day with the stale chapattis she carries with her. Here we come across her loving, caring, tender and sharing nature blended with her impartial disposition and equal treatment towards all entities, both human and non-human. She shares an intense mutual bonding with her grandson and is devoted to him entirely, yet she is neither obsessed with him nor is possessive about him. Her love and affection for him means imparting freedom and space to him. It appears as if it gives her a kind of self-satisfaction in her altruistic serviceability. She spends both quality life and time with her grandson in the village. Thus, she follows a philosophical tradition founded upon faith in human values, organic sanity, naturalism and compassionate morality. She has a free mind, traditionally and culturally profound taste and complete faith in the omniscient universe.

Their beautiful relationship arrives at crossroads when they start living in the city where lifestyle is mostly mechanical. Now, since the writer starts going to the city school by a school bus, she could no more accompany him to school. Despite her massive interest in his studies and keen desire to help him, she could not do so, as she could neither understand English nor Mathematics and Science, which teaches the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle and many more such discoveries and inventions, but this does not lower her spirit or make her suffer from any complex; rather we encounter her perception that any field of knowledge, which she feels a medium for exhibiting unnecessary pedantry and power through audacious pursuit of unravelling the enigma of Nature, and ransacking the same incessantly and inordinately for the sake of sheer eco-antipathetic materialistic prosperity, is futile in reality. Also, the fact that they are not taught about "God" disappoints her enormously. The word "God" here actually refers to deep ecology suggesting the existence of Trinity, i.e. the perpetual cycle of creation, preservation and destruction, and the unification of earth, atmosphere and the cosmos, the ultimate truth beyond all mechanized sciences. Telling beads on her rosary or reciting prayers produce a mystical and sacred sound pronouncing the greatest mantra i.e. 'to be good' and 'to be with the higher self', the basic elements of humanism. The grandmother, being a personification of honesty, moral integrity, truthfulness, right conduct, tradition, secure shelter providing respite, will-power, universalism, panacea and benevolence, observes and elevates authentic religiosity that includes an all-embracing justice, patience, consistency, pragmatism, sensitivity and natural sapience, and specifically rejects grotesque religious dogmas and spurious pseudoscience as the pedestal of ethics and decision making.

"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." (The Portrait of a Lady) It is certain that the music that the author is being taught in the English

school is totally different from the conventional prayers or the eulogies sung of valorous deeds of patriots and fearless countrymen that the grandmother knows about. Here we certainly confront her aversion, discomfort and prejudice against English music, a consequence of creeping westernization, yet her silence though interpreted as a gesture of her disapproval, sufficiently justifies that she never tends to impose her likes, dislikes or tantrums upon others. In contrast, she is found beating the drum and singing of the homecoming of warriors for hours with a group of neighbourhood women in the later section of the story, thereby evincing her repeated indication of the importance of one's adherence to his own country's valiant history, simplicity, dignity, tradition and culture through properly understanding and absorbing them, rather than getting carried away by superfluous ostentations.

Her communication with him declines further: "When I went up to University, I was given a room of my own. The common link of friendship was snapped. My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation." (The Portrait of a Lady) It illustrates her docile conforming to the demand of the time and ways of Nature related to the cycles of rise and fall, of replacement and displacement, and the predestined change irrespective of the place one dwells in.

The grandmother rarely talks to anyone in the house now. "From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers." (The Portrait of a Lady) It is an effort on her part to cope up with her own distress and emotional upheaval in her own way without disturbing others. Also, her continuous working at the spinning wheel signifies her "attending to a work that appeared boring without any sense of boredom, of labouring for a pleasure without privilege, of simply doing one's work that consists of a single motion, of doing a work as monotonous and singular as spinning." (A Bizarre Spin on the Spinning Wheel) "The Spinning Wheel is synonymous with the power of self-reliance, perseverance, and determination" (Charkha-A History Spun from Revolution to Liberation) for the grandmother. In the process, she spins her own deliverance and self-liberation from the automated world in which there is dearth of room for deep ecological values and pure emotions. Apart from the element of self-control, the act of spinning also contributes to her, a calm and soothing effect, peaceful restraint against any sort of provocation, and an astounding sense of responsibility and commitment towards preserving harmony and pacifism.

She feels like an alien in the urban ambiance as opposed to the simplicity and freedom that she has imbibed from her rustic environment, yet she tries to survive amidst the powerful forces of society and Nature. She accepts and adapts to retain peace in her immediate surroundings. "When the writer left for abroad for his further studies, his grandmother did not get disturbed at all and kissed his forehead instead. Rather, she saw him off at the station. When he came back home after a duration of 5 years, his grandmother was there to welcome him back and celebrate his return. He found her more religious and more self-contained." (The Portrait of a Lady) Her behaviour as reflected during the course of these events

ascertains her respect towards other's decisions, understanding of other's rights, belief in true democracy, acceptance, consideration, appreciation, openness, affection, empathy and love towards all alike. She is a paradigm of eco-humanistic ideology, the core elements of which are experience, ecological sapience, practical ethics guided by righteous reason, individualism, and abounding faith in the universal human nature. "She started feeding the sparrow birds in the afternoon. They perched on her shoulders and some even on her head but she never shooed them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her." (The Portrait of a Lady) Her compassionate treatment of the stray dogs and the sparrows portrays her as a paradigm of unfeigned and transparent eco-humanistic philosophy, which advocates a more humane, just and compassionate society that believes in heterogeneity and judges the consequences of human actions by the well-being of all life on Earth:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (Coleridge)

When she falls ill, the doctor says that it was a slight fever and would go away very soon, yet still she insists that her end was near. This prophetic attribute in her is the outcome of her eco-spiritual wisdom, an essential element of eco-humanism, which enables her to foresee that her time to leave this world has arrived. "She died a peaceful death" suggests her non-agitated state of mind, a consequence of absolute spiritual-contentment. "Thousands of sparrows came and sat quietly all around her body. The writer's mother threw breadcrumbs but the sparrows took no notice of them. After her cremation they flew away without touching the crumbs." This gesture of the sparrows not only mirrors their gratitude and grief born of their attachment and loyalty to the grandmother who has been delivering nurturance to them, but also attests their unadulterated acknowledgement and spontaneous reciprocation of the same. The entire episode simultaneously exemplifies how grandmother's eco-humanistic kindness transcends the human domain and touches the non-human entities too.

III

Grandmother is an icon of eco-centric humanism that neither entertains artifices in the name of religion nor rejects religion as a harbour of superstitions or a bundle of absurdities as claimed by modernistic science and technology. She represents those energies of instinct and emotions, which have got contaminated and degraded in man due to his declining kinship with nature and ignoring organic ways of living. She subtly embodies disagreement against exerting and demonstrating power through any means because she is cognizant of the fact that by earth's geological time scales human race/species is in its infancy, hence negligible in

front of the cosmic omnipotence. Her temperament shows continuous rejection of anthropocentric superficiality since she considers that all life on earth has an elemental value, hence, significant. She integrally typifies that life impregnated with eco-affable qualities is akin to the spiritual enlightenment, which one should realize and strive for, because life becomes meaningful only when we start striding on altruistic and philanthropic paths that lead to the destination of wholesome progress in the environment. In the modern times when at every step we have fallen into a habit of looking up to the mechanized sciences for unanimity and compliance because only they can facilitate our corporal existence, the grandmother epitomizes hope in the methodologies of non-human sciences, that allow our perceptions to get motivated and determined by the natural phenomena instead of being overly governed by gross technology just to save us from ruination, an inevitable aftermath of alienation from the organic vitality. Therefore, in “The Portrait of a Lady”, the grandmother incarnates the philosophy of humanism that prioritizes human dignity and the love of nature simultaneously, emphasizes man’s solving problems eco-rationally without being influenced by pretentious secular or religious institutions, supports individual liberty as well as human rights, and highlights responsibility towards sustaining a glorious relationship between mankind and earth .

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