

# MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

- *Kamala Das*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamala Surayya (born Kamala; 31 March 1934 – 31 May 2009), popularly known by her one-time pen name Madhavikutty and married name Kamala Das, was an Indian English poet as well as a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India. Her popularity in Kerala is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography, while her oeuvre in English, written under the name Kamala Das, is noted for the poems and explicit autobiography. She was also a widely read columnist and wrote on diverse topics including women's issues, child care, and politics among others.

Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power and she got hope after freedom, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation. On 31 May 2009, aged 75, she died at a hospital in Pune.

## SUMMARY

Driving from my parent's  
home to Cochin last Friday  
morning, I saw my mother,  
beside me,

In these lines, the poet recalls a trip back to Cochin from her holiday in her parents' house the previous week. It was a Friday, and that morning, she was driving with her mother next to her on the front seat.

Lines 5 – 10:

doze, open mouthed, her face  
ashen like that  
of a corpse and realised with pain  
that she was as old as she  
looked but soon  
put that thought away, and

In these lines, the poet says that she was observing her mother who had fallen asleep on the front seat with her mouth slightly open. Her mother's face was pale, and it reminded her of the nearly white faces of dead bodies. It is then that she comes to realize that her mother was not young any longer, and that her appearance had caught up with her age. This was very hard for the poet to accept, and so she was determined to focus her attention on something else.

Lines 11 – 15:

looked out at Young  
Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling  
out of their homes, but after the airport's  
security check, standing a few yards  
away, I looked again at her, wan, pale

In these lines, the poet says that she turned away from her aging mother and decided to look outside the windows of the car in which she was driving. Outside, her eyes fell on the trees that the vehicle was passing by. The car was moving so fast that by way of relative motion, it seemed to the poet that all the trees she could see were also running at full speed past her. It seemed that those trees must have been quite youthful if they had the energy to move at such a fast pace. The poet's eyes also fell on the children who were coming out of their houses, brimming over with their excitement to get outside. The poet passed all these sights and reached the airport. Till then, her mind was distracted by the sights. However, after the security check, she was standing a short distance away from her mother and again she chanced to notice the old woman. Just as before, her mother appeared very pale and insipid.

Lines 16 – 20:

as a late winter's moon and felt that old  
familiar ache, my childhood's fear,  
but all I said was, see you soon, Amma,  
all I did was smile and smile and  
smile.....

In these lines, the poet compares her mother's face with the sight of the moon on a night towards the end of winter. This made her recall the thing she had been most afraid of during her childhood – the fear that her mother would die one day. This was a fear that had plagued her many times before, and it was plaguing her again now. However, she did not let that fear show itself on her face. Instead she put up a brave face and waved goodbye to her mother. She assured her mother that they would be seeing each other again soon, and all the while, even though she was in great agony, the smile never left her face.

### **CRITICAL COMMENTARY**

In the poem "My Mother at Sixty-Six," the Indian poet Kamala Das expresses her love towards her mother. She describes her love attachment for her mother who is aging day by day. She realized that her mother has turned pale and old. The realization of losing her mother one day started to hurt the poet but she was not able to express her feelings to her. When she went inside the airport she greeted her mother goodbye and smiled at her continuously so as to hide her feeling of losing her mother one day. The smile is also a positive feeling which the poet wants to express at the end of the poem. She wants to say goodbye to her mother with a smile so that they can meet again in the future. The poet uses the imagery of a "corpse" to signify the aging of her mother. The line which denotes the aging of the mother in the poem is:

"her face ashen like that of a corpse"

The poet compared the scene inside the car with the activities going on outside in the poem "My Mother at Sixty-six." The poet analyses her mother's aging and growing old and then when she looks outside she sees the young trees. These trees looked very happy and fresh and the moving car was leaving them behind. This highlights the issue that youth and age have to decline someday.

My Mother at Sixty-Six is a poignant poem by Kamala Das which deals with the themes of aging, a person's love for her mother, separation, uncertainty and death. A sensory and deeply sensitive poem, My Mother at Sixty-Six is a first person confessional poem that captures the reader's attention and provides a glimpse of the subtle intricacies of a mother-daughter relationship. The poem captures the speaker's train of thought and the entire poem is written in a single sentence. The poem makes use of a natural unaffected rhythm, striking imagery and a sense of movement to convey the insecurities and apprehensions of the poet-persona about her rapidly ageing mother and the inevitable separation that must follow.

Because this poem follows a single line of thought and switches between the physical and emotional realms with great fluidity, it is neither necessary nor desirable to differentiate the poem in separate segments. However for the sake of understanding we will divide the analysis into two parts while dealing with the poem. The first part of the analysis will deal with the sensory and emotional experience of the poet-persona while travelling in the car and the second will deal with her experience at the airport before separating from her mother.

This confessional poem is as intense in its feeling as it is subtle in its approach. The poem engages with a plethora of mingled emotions ranging from love, pain, nostalgia, sadness and despair. Furthermore, action and emotion are beautifully intertwined in this poem.

The idea of movement is central to understanding the poem: the physical movement to the airport, the emotional journey of the poet and the movement of her mother towards old age are all intermingled in this poem about love, longing and separation. Notice the very first word of the poem is a verb for movement in the present continuous tense:

Driving from my parent's home...

The poet was driving from her parent's house to Cochin Airport the previous Friday. While inside the car, she happens to see her mother beside her doze off ... The striking image of a woman weakened by age, dozing off with her mouth open leaves a very strong impression on the speaker who feels that her mother's face resembles the pale face of a dead body (like that of a corpse). The thought of her mother rapidly advancing (quite like them in the car) towards death deeply disturbs her and she attempts to put the thought away by looking outside the window where she sees:

...young

trees sprinting, the merry children spilling  
out of their homes.

This transition from the stillness of the dozing mother to the frivolity and movement of youth through a single glance is simply remarkable. The literary device of contrast is used to bring out the distinctive features of the two different worlds separated by a window pane – one with the infirmity of old age and the other tinted with the frolic of youth. The device of personification is used to describe the trees 'sprinting' outside. They are likened to children "young trees sprinting" while describing their apparent movement as seen from inside the car. The merry children on the other hand, are said to be "spilling" out of their homes, thus providing a fluid nature to their happy movement. The literary device used in this case describes the human subject (children) in terms of an inanimate object. Such a technique is known as chremamorphism and can be understood as being opposite of personification. The movement of the trees and children is in sharp contrast to the dozing posture of her mother.

When the speaker looks at her mother standing a few yards from her at the airport security check, the mother's face is described by the simile "wan, pale as late winter's moon". A brilliant imagery of the winter moon is used in this part of the poem. "Winter" is used to evoke a sense of an ending (like the ageing mother), a certain frigid, inert state (like that of a corpse) and the inevitable darkness (death) that is to follow. Also, moon has stereotypically received a feminine treatment and the simile "as a pale moon" is quite apt to describe the round, pale face of the aged mother. On seeing her mother, the poet persona experiences "that familiar old ache, my childhood fear". Though she doesn't specifically state what it actually is, we can safely infer that it is the fear of losing her mother.

Despite being deeply thoughtful of her mother's present and future, the speaker can neither stop herself from going away from her mother nor can she stop her mother from going away from her forever. All she can do is part with the hope of seeing her mother again. The parting is made all the more poignant by the fact that though she hopes to see her mother, she fears that she might not.

This intermingling of emotions of love, hope, longing, nostalgia, fear and a sense of helplessness at the face of the inevitable seems to find its way in the repetition of the final words of the poem: all I did was smile and smile and smile...

### **POETIC DEVICES USED**

#### A. Simile:

1. her face ashen like that of a corpse

2. wan, pale as a late winter's moon

#### B. Metaphor

the merry children spilling out of their homes

#### C. Personification

young trees sprinting

#### D. Repetition

I did was smile and smile and smile.....

#### E. Imagery

The imagery used in the poem is suggestive of both death and youth. The image of 'young trees' and 'merry children' are in sharp contrast to the old and frail mother.

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