

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX



-Kamala Das
(1934-2009)

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MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX



-Kamala Das (1934-2009)

About the Poet : Popularly known by her one-time pen name Madhavikutty and Muslim name Kamala Surayya, was an Indian English poet as well as a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India. Her works are known for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavour of the soil. Kamala Das published many novels and short stories in English and Malayalam under the name 'Madhavikutty'. Some of her works in English include the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), in addition to five books of poetry. She is a sensitive writer who captures the complex subtleties of human relationships in lyrical idiom, *My Mother at Sixty-six* is an example.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

Introduction : In the poem poet Kamala Das captures complexities of human relationships. Once the poet visited her mother and she was on her way back to the airport to return to Cochin. The poet gives a vivid description of her mother inside the car and also at the airport before her departure. She expresses the fear of losing her mother as well as her constraints augmented by the harsh realities and complexities of life. However, she tries to suppress her pain and instill hope in her mother through her parting words and smile.



Kamala Das



Mother Balamani Amma (1909 – 2004)
a prolific writer and was known as
the "poetess of motherhood"

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

Theme – Pain of separation due to ageing & decay

Sub-Theme – Complexities of human relationship

Characters – The poet and her mother



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

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

SUMMARY

The poetess explains that once when she visited her parent's house in Cochin. It was a Friday when she was driving back to the airport, her mother was sitting beside her at the back of the car. The poet looked at her mother. She saw that her mother was sleeping and her mouth was open and her mother's face resembled that of a corpse; pale and cheerless. She was as old as she looked but soon put that thought away, and looked out at young trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out of their homes. The poetess realised that her mother had grown old. She felt pain for her. But soon she tried to get rid of this sad thought by diverting her thoughts towards the trees outside. The young trees although stationary seemed to be running very fast as though they were sprinting. She also saw children running out of their houses, into the playground. All these things were full of life and energy, contrary to her mother who sat next to her. The poet continues that when she reached the airport, she finished with the security check and stood a few yards away from her mother. She noticed her mother's ageing face which looked so dull, weak and pale.



away, I looked again at her, wan,
pale
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.....

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

SUMMARY

The poet compares her mother to a late winter's moon that looks hazy. Similarly, her mother's face too lost her youth and shine due to ageing and decay. The poet feels the fear of separation and she calls it a familiar ache; a pain that she is accustomed to as she would feel the same during her childhood too. As a child, she could not bear the pain of separation from her mother. But now as it seemed that her mother had grown older and was about to die, it might perhaps be the last that she was seeing her mother. However, through her parting words "see you soon, Amma", the poet tried to instill hope and console her mother and also give her the assurance that she would come back soon though she herself tried to hide her own pain through her smile.

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KEY POINTS

- ❑ When the poet is on her way to the cochin airport with her old mother sitting beside her, she looks at her closely and presents before us her image.
- ❑ She compares her with a corpse. As she looks at her mother's pale and pallid face, she is struck with the horror and pain of losing her. The mother with the dozing face and open mouth is compared to a corpse. Here, the poet shows the typical love and affection which is present in a mother-daughter relation.
- ❑ The poet is pained and shifts her attention outside the car in order to drive out the negative feelings. She changes her sad mood. The scene outside the window is of growing life and energy. The rapidly sprinting trees alongside the merrily playing children symbolize life, youth and vitality.
- ❑ The poet here is reminded of her own childhood when her mother had been young whereas now she is encircled with the fear of losing her and that has made her insecure.
- ❑ The poet encourages her mother through her parting words.
- ❑ The poet tries to hide her pain through her smile

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REFERENCE TO THE CONTEXT

- doze, open mouthed, her face ashen like that of a corpse
- but soon put that thought away
- Young Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out of their homes
- as a late winter's moon and felt that old
- familiar ache, my childhood's fear
- **Parting words** - see you soon, Amma,
- all I did was smile and smile and smile.....

VOCABULARY

Doze- a short, light sleep; ashen- very pale, like ash; corpse- a dead body; sprinting- *here*, shooting out of the ground; spilling- *here*, to move out in great numbers

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Poetic Device/Figure of Speech –

Simile –

her face ashen *like* that of a corpse
wan and pale *as* a late winter's moon

Imagery- Contrasting images –

poet's mother inside the car & merry children/young tree outside the car

Rhyme Scheme –

The poem does not follow any rhyme or rhythm. It has been written in free verse.

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ASSIGNMENT : QUESTIONS TO TEST COMPREHENSION

Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)

1. How does the poet describe her mother?
2. What do you infer from 'dozed and open mouthed'?
3. Why does the poet compare her mother to a corpse?
4. How old was the poet's mother?
5. Which thought does the poet refer to and why did she put her thought away?
6. Why are the young trees described as 'sprinting'?
7. Why has the poet brought in the image of the merry children 'spilling out of their homes'?
8. What are the thoughts of the poet as she is driving from her parent's home to the airport?
9. Why has the mother been compared to the 'late winter's moon'?
10. What is the kind of pain and ache that the poet feels?
11. Why does the poet call her pain a familiar ache?
12. What is the kind of pain and ache that the poet feels?
13. What is the childhood fear of the poet?
14. What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify?
15. What are the fears that the poet is overcome with?
16. What were the fears of the poet as a child? Why do they surface at this stage?
17. How does the poet's mother look like and why?
18. Why did the poet put that thought away?
19. Mention the poetic devices used in the poem 'My Mother at Sixty Six'.
20. Justify the title of the poem 'My Mother at Sixty Six'.