

POEM – 1

MY MOTHER AT SIXTY SIX

About the poet

Kamala Das: (1934) was born in Malabar, Kerala. She is recognised as one of India's foremost poets. Her works are known for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavour of the soil. Kamala Das has 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.



GIST OF THE POEM

- Poetess travelling to Cochin airport with her old mother in a car.
- Looks at wan, pale face of her dozing mother.
- Old fear of losing her mother returns.
- Sprinting trees and merry children provide the scene of childhood full of vigour.
- After the security check the old familiar ache returns.
- Tries to hide her emotions by smiling.
- Bids good bye to her mother with a hope to see her again.

Enrich your vocabulary

Doze	: a short, light sleep
Ashen	: very pale, like ash.
Corpse	: a dead body.
Sprinting	: <i>here</i> , shooting out of the ground.
Spilling	: <i>here</i> , to move out in great numbers.
Wan	: unnaturally pale, as from physical or emotional distress.
Ache	: pain.

IN A NUT-SHELL

The poet is driving from her parent's home to Cochin airport by car, her mother by her side—dozing –open mouthed very pale, colorless and frail-like a dead body indicating that her end was near. The poet looks at her and feels intense pain and agony to realize that soon death will cast her mother away from her. She tries to divert her mind, looks outside at the young trees and happy children bursting out of their homes in a playful mood (a contrasting image). After the security check at the airport she looked again at her mother's face - pale and cold. 'Familiar ache-my childhood fear' – the poet has always had a very intimate and close relationship with her mother and she has always felt the fear of being separated from her mother hence it is familiar. The poet reassures her mother that they will meet again.

THEME

My Mother at Sixty-Six by Kamala Das brings out the reality of inescapable ageing, decay and death through a simple incident. She feels worried at the thought of her separation from her mother. She realizes how much her mother and she herself have aged when she looks at the 'young trees sprinting' and 'merry children spilling out of their homes'. She smiles and bids farewell saying that she would soon meet her again.

TITLE

The title, 'My Mother at Sixty-six' is an excellent example of showing an ever unfailing relationship between a daughter and her mother. The title is apt as the subject of the poem is the poet's aged and frail mother. 'My Mother' at once establishes the context in which Kamala Das is writing – the mother's unexpected pain and the poet's worry about her mother's frail health, old age and perhaps, inevitable death. The title prepares us for the frail old mother and her daughter's concern for her.

CENTRAL IDEA

Aging is an important phase of human life. A person enters his childhood, experiences youth when he is full of energy and dreams to have luxury of life. Finally, he approaches his old age and encounters death. Relationship between people becomes stronger at every aspect of life and they can't bear separation due to aging.

In this poem, the poet relates a personal experience. She brings out a common paradox of human relationships and portrays a sensational separation of a mother and a daughter. She has been able to capture almost all the emotions which a daughter is filled with, on bidding farewell to her beloved mother. Sometimes we do feel deep sympathy for someone but we fail to express it in a proper manner.

Answer the following questions in 30 to 40 words.

1. How does the poet describe her mother in the poem?

Ans. The poet describes her mother as an old lady who has become pale, weak and worn out. She often dozes and remains unconscious about herself like a dead body.

2. Why does the poet look outside? What activities does the poet see outside the car window?

Ans. The poet feels very sad thinking that her mother is nearing death. This painful thought makes her worried and anxious. So in order to divert her attention from her mother, she looks outside. The poet sees young trees running past them. She also sees little children coming out of their homes in a merry mood. She sees life and vitality in the outside world.

3. Why are the young trees described as 'sprinting'?

Ans. The young trees are described as 'sprinting' as the movement of the racing car makes the trees appear as if they are running along.

4. Why is the mother compared to the late winter's moon?

Ans. The mother is compared to the late winter's moon because like the moon of winter season, the poet's mother also looks pale, dull and grayish.

5. What childhood fears do you think; the poet is referring to in the poem?

Ans. The poet feels uneasy and unprotected with the thought of losing her mother. She does not expect to see her mother again on her return. So she shows a childish unwillingness to leave her mother.

6. Why has the poet brought in the image of the merry children 'spilling out of their homes'?

Ans. The poet, Kamala Das, has used the image of merry children spilling out of their homes to bring a contrast between the old age and childhood. Her mother's pale, colourless face stands for old and fading age. Merry children symbolise the spring of life, vigour and happiness. They also symbolize spontaneity of life in contrast to the passive and inactive life of her aged mother.

7. What does Kamala Das do after the security check up? What does she notice?

Ans. After the security check up, the poet stands a few yards away from her mother and gazes at her mother. She notices the declining age and finds her pale and worn out than ever before.

8. The poet compares her mother to many things. Pick out two similes which reinforce this comparison.

Ans. (a) The two similes are: "Her face ashen like that of a corpse."
(b) "I looked again at her wan, pale as a late winter's moon"

9. Cite an example of one device of contrast that the poet uses in the poem.

Ans. The device of contrast that the poet uses in the poem is old age of her mother and the young trees and children playing merrily. The poet compares youth, energy, vitality and jubilation of childhood.

10. What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify?

Ans. The poet's parting words, 'see you soon, Amma' are expressive of the dilemma and confusion in her mind. They not only hide her anxiety and fear about her mother's rather frail health but reflect also a faint hope that the old woman would survive long enough for the two to meet again.

11. Why did the poet say "see you soon Amma"? What does the poet actually mean by "smile and smile and smile...."? What kind of smile is it?

Ans. The poet said, "See you soon Amma" in order to give her mother moral support and encouragement. She said so to give her mother hope that she would see her again. By "smile and smile and smile..." she means to make herself and her mother hopeful to see each other again. It is actually a painful smile. The poet tries to conceal the swelling emotions by smiling. By using this poetic device of repetition, the poet has made the poetic language rich by depicting many hidden emotions through "smile".

12. Discuss mother- daughter relationship as described in the poem.

Ans. Mother- daughter relationship as described in the poem is very sensitive and full of love, care and emotions. Mother has a deep emotional link to her children and does not want them to be away. In particular, when the mother reaches her old age, she becomes more concerned and worried about her children. Daughter also tends to bear a specific kind of emotional link to her mother. She tries to remain close to her mother and feels very bad and worried when separated from her. In this poem, the mother does not want her daughter to leave her; similarly, the daughter gives a mysterious and indefinable smile which is to show unwillingness and anxiety of leaving her mother.

13. "My Mother at sixty-six" is an emotional account of the poet about her old mother. Discuss.

Ans. "My Mother at sixty-six" is an emotional account of the poet about her old mother. She feels very sad and depressed on seeing her pale, weak and worn out. She tries her best to divert her thought but remains unsuccessful and this thought haunts her mind every now and then. Till the end of the poem, she feels very sad and disappointed about the declining age of her mother. She is unable to express her fears and emotions to her mother with the thought of disheartening her. She bids goodbye to her mother by just smiling in order to hide her hurt feelings and encourage her mother.

14. How does the poet's mother look like? What kind of images has the poet used to signify her ageing and decay?

Ans. The poet's mother is at sixty-six. She is sitting beside her. The mother is dozing as old people usually do during the journey. She keeps her mouth open. This is also a sign of old age. Her face looks pale and faded like ash. Actually, she is an image of decay and death. Her 'ashen' face looks like that of corpse.

15. Why does the poet feel her old familiar ache and what is her childhood fear?

Ans. The sight of her mother's corpse-like face arouses 'that old familiar ache' in her heart. Her childhood fear returns. The fear is that with ageing comes decay and death. Ageing and decay are inevitable. No one avoids them. Perhaps she herself may have to face all these things. This idea is quite painful and fearful to her.

16. Describe the contrast of the scene inside the car with the activities going on outside. Describe the use of images that poet employs to strike that contrast.

Ans. Inside the car sits an old mother beside the poet. She is sixty-six and ageing. Her 'ashen' face is pale and lifeless like a corpse. The world outside provides a stark contrast. The 'young' trees seem to be running past or sprinting. The children are making merry. The 'ashen' and 'corpse-like' is contrasted with the 'young' trees 'sprinting' outside and the merry children coming out of their houses.

17. What were the poet's feeling at the airport? How did she hide them?

Ans. The poet experienced two opposite and contrasting feelings at the airport. The ashen and the pale face of her mother brought an image of decay and death. But she immediately hid her feelings. She composed herself and tried to look normal. She smiled continuously to assure her mother that they would meet again soon.

18. Describe the poetic devices used by Kamala Das in 'My Mother at Sixty-Six'.

Ans. Kamala Das 'My Mother at Sixty-Six' is rich in imagery. The use of simile is very effective. Her face has been described as 'ashen'. The ashen face is 'like that of a corpse'. Again the 'wan, pale' face of a mother is compared to 'a late winter's moon'. The poem excels in contrasts