

## **POEM- MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX - KAMALA DAS**

### **ABOUT THE POETESS**

Kamala Das (1934 – 2009) started her career as a poet writing under the name of Madhavi Kutty. The renowned Indian author was bilingual and wrote in her mother tongue, Malayalam, as well as in English.

Born in Punnayurkulam, India as Kamala Surayya, she was better known in her home state of Kerala for her short stories and her autobiography, and in the rest of the country, for her English poetry.

Her explosive autobiography, *My Story*, written in Malayalam (her native tongue), gained her both fame and notoriety. Later, it was translated into English.

Kamala attended literary events in Germany, Jamaica, London and Canada, where she was invited to read her poetry. She also held literary positions in her state of Kerala and for a national daily. In 2009, the Times called her the “mother of modern English poetry.”

Among her many notable achievements are the Pen Asian Poetry Prize in 1963 and a nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1984. She also became a syndicated columnist expressing her views on women, children, and politics. Kamala lived by her own terms all of her life, which is clearly visible in her writings.

### **SUMMARY**

My mother at sixty-six is a poem whose author is Kamala Das. The writer is famous for capturing the complications of relationships between human beings. This poem is one of the best examples of bonding in humans. Especially the bond between a mother and a daughter. This poem defines the fear of the author of losing her mother. My mother at sixty-six summary will elaborate on the feelings of the author and will also define the meaning of the poem.

Ageing is an inescapable phase of every human's life. A person enters their childhood, experiences adolescence when they are energetic and have so many dreams. Finally, every person approaches their old age and then they die. Relationships between people become much stronger in every phase of life. No one can't bear the separation from their loved ones just because of ageing.

Firstly, when the author is going to the Cochin airport with her mother she looks at her carefully and presents before us her image. As she looks at her mother's soft and whitish face, she gets stuck with the fear of losing her mother. Her mother with a sleepy face and open mouth is comparable to a corpse. Here, the author shows love and affection in a relationship between a mother and a daughter.

The poet is hurt and sad and shifts her attention outside the car for driving out the undesirable feelings. She changes her bad mood. The scene from the window of the car is of rising life and energy. The fast sprinting green and huge trees alongside the cheerfully playing kids represent life, youth, and vitality. The poet here is remembering her own childhood. In her childhood, her mother was young and beautiful. Whereas now her mother is surrounded by the fear of losing her life and that made her insecure and sad.

She reaches the airport to take her flight. It shows departure and parting which makes her sad. As she said goodbye to her mother, the image of the old mother in the dusk of years strikes her. Here again, a simile is comparable with her mother with a late-night moon of the winters. The light of the moon is an obstacle by the fog and haze as she appears older now.

The poet is now feeling the pain of getting separated because of leaving her mother. Her childhood fear of losing her loving mother now became so terrifying. Now her mother could die of old age anytime unexpectedly. She is so sad that she starts crying slowly without control but keeping a brave heart she hides her tears and starts smiling. Thus, she offers her farewell to her old mother and keeps her hope of seeing her mother alive again. She says “see you soon, Amma”. She hides her tears and sorrow as she does not want to make a painful and emotional environment. Moreover, she doesn’t want her mother to cry and shows her that she is enjoying her life. She expects her mother to be happy and enjoy her life just like her.

To conclude, my mother at sixty six summary revolves around the beautiful relationship between the poet and her mother. The summary shows the theme of the advancing age of the mother of the author and the fear of separation. This apparently short poem touches upon the theme of a beautiful bond between the mother and the daughter. It shows how beautiful a relationship a mother and a daughter can have.

### **POETIC DEVICES USED IN THE POEM**

#### **RHYME SCHEME:**

The poet does not use any identifiable rhyme scheme in this poem. It’s a blank verse.

#### **RHETORICAL/POETIC DEVICES:**

**SIMILE:** This rhetorical device is used when an overt comparison is made between two different things. In this poem, the poet uses the device of simile on two instances. When she compares her mother’s face with that of a corpse and also uses the word “like” while making that comparison. She again compares her mother with the moon in wintertime and also uses the word “as” while making this comparison.

**PERSONIFICATION:** This rhetorical device is used to bestow human qualities on something that is not human. In this poem, the poet uses the device of personification with respect to trees. She imagines the trees to be figures that are running alongside her car.

**APOSTROPHE:** This rhetorical device is used when a poet addresses his or her poem to an absent audience. In this poem, the poet uses the device of apostrophe, when she speaks directly to her mother, addressing her as “Amma”, even though we never see the mother replying to the poet.

**METAPHOR:** This rhetorical device is used when a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. In this poem, the poet uses the device of metaphor in line when she speaks ‘Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out of their homes’ to show the contrary image of her mother’s age and approaching end.

**REPETITION:** This rhetorical device is used when a word or phrase is repeated. In this poem, the poet uses the device of repetition in last line ‘all I did was smile and smile and smile.....’ when she had to subdue her feelings and tried not to show her emotion to her mother. She says she believes that she will meet her mother again.

**ANAPHORA:** It is the repetition of a word or phrase to create a poetic effect in a poem. e.g., the poet repeats these words, —smile and smile and smile.

**ALLITERATION:** It is the repetition of the consonant sounds in a line of a poem. e.g., — “my mother”, “I said was, see you soon.”

### **CENTRAL IDEA OF THE POEM**

On her way to the airport from her parents’ house as she is leaving for Cochin, the poet is driving in her car with her mother beside her. When she chances upon her mother sleeping, she notices how old her mother has grown for the first time. She is disturbed and turns her eyes away to focus on young trees and younger children instead. Again after the security check at the airport, she notices her mother’s aging face. This fills her with the fear she had experienced since childhood – that of her mother dying. But she does not let that fear show on her face. She smiles and bids her mother goodbye, promising to see her soon.

### **THEMES OF THE POEM**

**COMPARISONS:** The poet compares her mother’s pale face with two things – the white face of a corpse, and the moon on a winter night. The first comparison is made chiefly on the basis of the similarity of hue between the two objects. When a person dies, blood stops being pumped out of the heart and circulating through the brains. In the absence of the flow of blood, the body loses its healthy glow and takes on an unnatural white pallor. When her mother is sleeping, the poet’s mother also has reduced heart function. As a result the life-giving flow of blood is also reduced and her skin appears paler than usual. After their arrival at the airport, her mother has woken up, but the creases on her skin that have appeared due to aging are still there. These creases look like the craters on the moon’s surface that disrupt its otherwise immaculate appearance. Hence they take away some amount of the moon’s beauty, but certainly not all of it. Similarly, age does show on her mother’s face, but it cannot really mar her beauty.

**CONTRASTS:** When the poet notices how old her mother has grown, she tries to focus her attention on other things. She ends up noticing only those things that are not old. She notices the trees that her car is going past and they appear to be moving at an equally fast pace by themselves. This leads the poet to feel that the trees must be very young to be filled with such invigorating energy. She also notices children pouring out of their houses excitedly. It is not possible that on an average day there are no adults out on the street. However, the poet's attention does not fall on adults, but only on children, who are just starting out on their journey of life. Both these images serve as a contrast to her mother who is almost at the end of that journey. Another instance of the poet using a contrast to express herself clearly comes at the very end of the poem. The sorrow in her heart is in contrast with the smile she has bravely put on her face as she says goodbye to her mother.

### **TONE OF THE POEM**

The tone of this poem is predominantly pensive and sorrowful. The poet suddenly notices that her mother looks as old as she is. This could have surprised her since she only sees her mother during holidays and not on a daily basis. However, it does not surprise her because she has always been aware of the certainty of her mother's death. As she does when she turns away from her mother to look at the tress and the children, she has simply chosen not to think about losing her mother anytime soon. Yet that fear has always plagued her and it plagues her still. This saddens her and one can see her silent tears even when she has forced herself to smile.

### **MAIN POINTS**

- Poetess is travelling back to Cochin airport with her mother in a car.
- Looks at the wan, pale face of her dozing mother.
- Her face has a dull, colorless appearance and reminds her of a corpse.
- Thought is very painful; realizes she is now an old woman and could be nearing death.
- Turns to look at Sprinting trees outside; sees merry children running out of their homes.
- A welcome change from the gloomy thoughts that grip her.
- Reaches the airport, after the security check looks at the mother again.
- Sees her pale and ageing face; is reminded of the winter moon with all the vitality and brightness gone.
- Feels pained at being reminded of a childhood fear---had always been scared of losing her mother one day.
- Does not want to show her agony and fear to her mother now.
- Tells her that she would see her soon and bids her goodbye with a bright smile on her face

### EXTRACT-BASED QUESTIONS

Read the lines given below and answer the questions that follow:

I.       *“Driving from my parent’s home to Cochin last Friday  
Morning, I saw my mother.....  
Put that thought away, and Looked out at young  
Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling  
Out of their homes,”*

1. What did the poet see?
2. What is the mother’s face compared to and why?
3. Why does the poet look out at the sprinting trees and the merry children spilling out of their homes?
4. Identify and elaborate the figure of speech.
5. Why are the trees spoken of to be sprinting?

**Answers:**

1. The poet noticed her mother sitting beside her, dozing open-mouthed, her face pale like that of a corpse.
2. The pale face of the mother is compared to that of a corpse, dull and lifeless.
3. The poet is filled with pain, looking at the ashen face of her mother. To distract her mind from these deadly thoughts, she looks out at the sprinting trees and the merry children spilling out of their homes.
4. The figure of speech is simile. The ashen face of the mother is compared to a corpse.
5. Looking out of the window of the moving car, the poet experiences a visual illusion. The trees seem to her to be racing back.

II.                       *“after the airport’s  
security check,  
  
standing a few yards  
  
away, I looked again at.....  
  
.....smile.”*

1. What is the mother’s face compared to?
2. What is the poet’s childhood fear?
3. What is the ‘familiar ache’ the poet refers to?
4. Why does the poet smile?

**Answers:**

1. The face of the poet’s mother looked wan and pale. It looked dull like a late winter moon.
2. The childhood fear which the poet refers to is the fear of being distanced from the companionship of the mother.

3. The 'familiar ache' is the poet's childhood fear of being separated from her mother. This ache now haunts her in another way. The current fear is that the mother is very old and that she is inching closer to death.
4. The 'childhood fear' threw the poet into disillusion. She tries to compensate her wan mood by flashing a deliberate smile.

### **III. Short answer type questions: (40-50 words)**

1. What did the poet do to recover from the death thoughts about her mother?
2. How is death contrasted with life in the poem?
3. What is the 'childhood fear' which the poet speaks of?
4. How do you explain the 'smile' on the lips of the poet when she waits at the airport?

#### **Answers:**

1. The wan and pale expression on the face of her mother, floods her mind with thoughts of her impending death. She succeeds the necessity of switching her mind, by looking out of the window of the car. Outside the car, she sees the trees racing back in a direction opposite to the movement of the car.
2. The poet indirectly introduces symbols to contrast life with death. The pale and corpse-like appearance of the mother is analogous with death. On the contrary, life is demonstrated by the introduction of the racing trees and the merry children spilling out of their homes.
3. When she was a girl, the poet too had the customary fear of being separated from her mother through marriage or through other circumstances. This is a subconscious fear which lurks within and haunts her without warning.
4. Thoughts of having to bade good bye to her aged mother, throws the poet into inhibition. She finds it difficult to accomplish the formalities associated with parting. Instinct tells her it is probably that last time she sees her mother alive. She tries to compensate her incapacity and depression, by flashing a deliberate smile on her lips.

### **III. Long answer type questions: (120-150 words)**

1. In the last line of the poem, 'My Mother at Sixty-six', the word 'smile' is repeated three times. What is its significance ?
2. What are the main ideas combined in the poem 'My Mother at Sixty- six'?
3. In the poem "My Mother at Sixty-six," how does the poet convey the nuance of human relationships?

#### **Answers:**

1. Even after attempting to distract her from the fact that her mother was aging, the poet couldn't help but notice her mother's fading face. She is afraid that this is the last time she will see her mother. However, the poet chose to conceal her fear from her mother. The poet uses the word "smile" three times in the final line to emphasize that, while she is afraid of losing her mother and is distressed by their separation, she does not let it show on her face. She smiles to persuade herself and her mother that they will meet soon.

2. In this poem, the poet details what her mother looks like at the age of 66. She also shares her pain at seeing her deteriorate so much. It was her last Friday morning at home when she looked up at her mother as she drove to the airport. The poet was not only injured but also shocked to see her sleeping with her mouth open. She became all the more worried as she looked pale, shriveled and withered like a corpse. To distract himself from this pain and suffering, she looked outside and saw young trees and children. She understood in them life, vigor and vitality. Then to airport security. A similar old age was reflected in her pale body. She compared her to a late winter month and realized that it was due to old age. The poet smiled at her to see her again and left. The poem was an example of the pain caused by old age and separation.

3. In the poem 'My Mother at Sixty-six,' the poet Kamala Das depicts a close relationship between a mother and a daughter with such sensitivity that the reader is moved by similar emotions. The poem is written in one continuous sentence and depicts a single thread of thought interspersed with real-world sights and sounds that connect to the main idea of old age and death. The poet is about to leave the airport with her elderly mother. Her heart is gripped by the agony of losing her mother to death, but she suppresses it. The fear in her heart is hidden by a smile on her face, and she leaves knowing she will see her mother again.

#### **IV. Extra Questions: Unsolved**

1. What were the poet's feelings at the airport? How did she hide them?
2. The poem talks of a commonplace experience which has deep significance. Comment.
3. What familiar ache and childhood fear did Kamala Das feel?
4. Why are the young trees described as 'sprinting in the poem 'My Mother at Sixty- six'?
5. What did Kamala Das think when she looked at her mother?
6. Why does Kamala Das compare her mother to a late winter's moon?