

FLAMINGO: POETRY

MIND MAP

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poem, “My Mother at Sixty Six” by Kamala Das explores the feelings of melancholy and pain that a daughter experiences while leaving her mother, all by herself, at a ripe old age.

In the first stanza, the poet begins with telling that the last Friday morning, she was driving to Cochin. She saw her mother who was sitting beside her. The use of the phrase “Last Friday Morning” is not just to depict a day but also to show that it is past now. In other words, the poet uses this phrase in order to tell that time never stops. Everything in the world moves into the past.

The poet probably tries to compare her mother with “Last Friday Morning” as both had their springtime (mother was young and the day had its morning) but now they are in the past (the day has gone and her mother’s youth has also gone). She found that her mother was dozing with her mouth open. Her face was as pale as that of a corpse. The poet painfully realized that her mother is not going to live long. This painful thought haunted her. Here, the poet shows the typical love and affection which is present in a mother-daughter relation. Thus in the very first lines, the central theme of the poem is revealed.

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.

She is at the airport to take a flight. It indicates departure and separation which creates melancholy. As she bids goodbye to her mother, the image of the old, worn out mother in the twilight of years strikes her again. Here again a simile is used to compare her mother with a late winter’s moon whose light is obstructed by fog and mist. She looks old as, her personality is dimmed by age. The poet is feeling the pain of separation, leaving her mother and going. Also, her childhood fear of losing her mother which she feels that earlier was temporary but now, could be forever as she could die of old age, is haunting her. She is so pained that it is natural for her to cry but keeping a brave front she hides her tears and smiles. She bids farewell to her mother and keeping her hope of seeing her again alive, says “see you soon, Amma”. She hides her sorrow as she does not want to create a painful environment for her mother and conveys to her that as she is enjoying her life similarly her mother should also be happy and enjoy her life.

1. MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

ABOUT THE POET

The poet, Kamala Das also wrote by her pen-name ‘Madhavikutty’. She was born in Kerala and is one of India’s first poets. Her writings reflect exploration of a wide range of relationships from a woman’s point of view – as a daughter, a wife and a mother. Her works are filled with a woman’s desire for self-expression and freedom. External factors do not reflect in her writings, her writings bring out her true inner feelings.

Her five poetry books *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and other Poems*, *The Anamalai Poems*, and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* are some of her well-known works. Her novel, *Alphabet of Lust* and her collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* are also some of her well-known works.

In the poem ‘My Mother at Sixty-Six’, she talks about her mother. This poem is based on mother-daughter relation and the poet shares her feelings for her mother.

POETIC DEVICES/FIGURES OF SPEECH IN THE POEM

1. Simile: This rhetorical device is used when an overt comparison is made between two different things with the use of ‘as’ or ‘like’. In this poem, the poet uses the device of simile on two instances. In lines 5 – 7, she compares her mother’s face with that of a corpse and uses the word “like” while making that comparison. In lines 15 – 16, she again compares her mother with the moon in wintertime and uses the word “as” while making this comparison.

Example:

- Her face ashen like that of a corpse.
- Wan, pale as a late winter’s moon.

2. 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 in line 12 with respect to trees. She imagines the trees to be young figures that are running alongside her car.

Reference to Context

Read the extracts given below and answer the questions that follow.

- I. **“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 realized with pain That she was old as she looked but soon put that thought away...”**
- Where was the poet coming from? Where was she driving to?
 - How does the poet describe her mother and what did she notice about her?
 - Why was her mother’s face looking like that of a corpse?
 - Why was the realisation painful?
- II. **“and looked out at young trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out of their homes...”**
- What was the poet ‘looking’ at? What did she notice?
 - Why did the poet start ‘looking out’?
 - What did the poet see when she looked out the moving car?
 - What does the phrase ‘trees sprinting’ signify?
- III. **“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 away, I looked again at her, wan, pale as a late winter’s moon and felt that old familiar ache...”**
- Why did the poet look at her mother again? What did she observe?
 - What did the images of ‘young trees’ and ‘merry children’ symbolize?
 - How can the trees sprint?
 - Identify the figure of speech used in these lines.
- IV. **“ but after the airport’s security check, standing a few yards away, I looked again at her, wan, pale as a late winter’s moon...”**
- Where was the poet standing?
 - Who does ‘her’ here refer to?
 - What does the poet compare her mother’s face to and why?
 - Explain ‘wan, pale as a late winter’s moon’.
- V. **“ 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.”**
- What is the poet’s old, familiar ache? How did that ache return at the airport?
 - What was the poet’s parting words?
 - Did the poet share her thoughts with her mother? Why do you think so?
 - Why did the poet only ‘smile’?

ANSWER KEY

- I. (a) The poet had gone to her parents’ home to visit them. She was now going to Cochin airport on a Friday morning.
 (b) The poet describes her mother as old, pale, cold and senile. She noticed that her mother was sleeping with her mouth open and her face was the colour of ash, just like that of a dead body.

- (c) The poet's mother had lost all its glow due to ageing. As she dozed off beside her, the mother looked almost like a corpse, for her face looked pale, colourless and seemed to have lost the fervor of life.
 - (d) The realisation that her mother had grown very old was painful because it brought with it the distressing thought that she was nearing her death, whose cruel hands would separate the poet from her mother and she would not be able to see her again.
- II.**
- (a) The poet was looking at her mother. She noticed the mother's ashen and almost lifeless face distraught with pain.
 - (b) The poet started looking out of the window because she wanted to drive away the pain and agony she experienced on seeing her aged mother. She wanted to drive away her helplessness in the wake of her mother's ageing and approaching death.
 - (c) The poet saw young trees running past her moving car and also the children rushing out of their homes to play. Both the trees and children were full of life in comparison to her pale and lifeless mother.
 - (d) Here, the phrase 'tress sprinting' signifies time, which has passed at a fast pace.
- III.**
- (a) The narrator looked at her mother once again for the last time before she left to reassure herself about the well-being of her mother. She had tried to drive away the pain she had felt on seeing her weak and aged mother. One last time she looked at her to wish her goodbye. She observed that her mother looked lifeless and dull like a late winter's moon.
 - (b) Trees and children symbolize the spring of life, its strength, vigour and happiness which contrasts with the lifelessness and helplessness that sets in with age.
 - (c) The car was moving when the poet looked out, so the tress appeared to be running in the opposite direction. Thus, the trees have been described as 'sprinting'.
 - (d) The figure of speech used in these lines is simile; her mother's pale appearance is compared to that of a late winter's moon.
- IV.**
- (a) The poet was at the Cochin airport waiting to board the plane after the security check.
 - (b) 'Her' here refers to the poet's mother.
 - (c) The poet compares her mother's face to a late winter's moon. Just as a 'late winter's moon' looks colourless and dull because of mist and fog, the poet's mother's face looks pale and lacks brightness due to old age.
 - (d) 'Late winter's moon' refers to the moon during the late winter season, which appears pale and lusterless because of mist and fog. In this simile, the poet compares the mother's pale and withered face with the winter's moon. The mother's face also seemed to have lost its radiance which was now misted by age. Winter symbolizes death and the waning moon symbolizes decay which is also reflected on the mother's face.
- V.**
- (a) The poet used to separate from her mother in her childhood. Those separations were painful to her. After so many separations this pain and separations were familiar to the poet. It was an ache of helplessness. At the airport she faced another separation from her mother and it reminded her of the number of separations in the past. It was also the fear of separation of mother's death.
 - (b) The poet's parting words were, "See you soon, Amma", suggesting hope to herself and her mother that they will meet again.
 - (c) The poet did not share her fears and agony with her mother. She only bid goodbye to her with the hope of seeing her soon. I think the poet did not share her thoughts with her aged mother because it would have unnecessarily disturbed her frail old mother. Moreover, her thoughts were caused by the fear of the unknown.
 - (d) The poet only smiled to hide her guilt, anxiety and fear of the unknown. Also, she wanted to bid a cheerful farewell to her mother before boarding the flight.