

My Mother at Sixty Six

About the poet

Kamal Das is a well known English and Malayalam author and poet, who wrote under the pen name Madhavikutty. She was born in 1934 in Thrissur to a well known poetess, Balamani Amma and editor of a national daily, V.M.Nair. She chiefly wrote of love, its betrayal and its consequent anguish. At the age of 42, she published a daring autobiography, "My Story" wherein she explored a woman's desire for self expression and freedom. She has been a proud recipient of Kerala Sahitya Academy Award and even got nominated and shortlisted for Nobel Prize for Literature in 1984. During her last phase of life, she embraced Islam and came to be known as Kamala Surayya.

About the poem

This is a touching, emotional and confessional poem, where Kamala Das explores the bond shared between the mother and daughter and their sensational separation. The poem revolves around the theme of ageing, fear of loss and separation, sense of guilt, nostalgia, helplessness and love for her mother.

The poem is a free verse with no division into stanzas and rhyme pattern. This form of free verse is used to highlight the continuity of life and uninterrupted thoughts of the poet,

Explanation of the poem

The poem begins with a journey from the parents' home to Cochin airport by car with her mother sitting beside, dozing with her mouth open. She looked pale, dull and colourless like that of a corpse. The thought of her mother advancing towards death greatly disturbed her. So, to put her thoughts away from this agony, she looked outside the car. The young trees were racing past and children were merrily spilling out of their homes. The young, energetic and vibrant children and the sprinting trees were in utter contrast to the dull, lifeless and passive life of her aged mother. This turning away doesn't symbolize turning

away from her responsibility towards her mother, but only turning away from her own pain-filled emotion

When she glanced at her mother again after the security check in the airport, her face reminded her of a late winter's moon that has lost all its brightness, lustre and vitality. Winter is also symbolic of the last cycle of the season just like her mother, who is in the last phase of her life.

She is suddenly gripped by the familiar childhood fear of losing her mother. It was a reality which she found hard to accept. A phase, where, with ageing, separation and death become unavoidable. She feels guilty for not being able to take care of her mother in her old age. Her mother needed affection and togetherness which the poet is unable to give.

While bidding farewell to her mother at the airport, all that she said was, "See you soon, Amma", with a smile. Her smile at the end was a way of reassuring herself and her mother that they would meet again. She suppresses her true feelings and puts a brave front to hide her fear behind a smile. One can see her silent tears even she passes a smile.

The poem also sends a very strong message to the youth of today- 'Do not be so busy in the fulfillment of your desires and wishes that you forget to take care of your parents when they need you the most.'

Poetical Device

- (a) **Personification:** This 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. "Trees sprinting" signify vigour and freshness. It also refers to the passage of time which is moving fast
- (b) **Simile:** "her face ashen like that of a corpse" and "wan, pale as a late winter's moon"
- (c) **Repetition (Anaphora):** It is a repetition of phrase or a word to create a poetic effect, just like, " all I did was smile and smile and smile...."
- (d) **Contrasts:**
 - (a) Inside the car, it was dull, gloomy and lifeless. On the contrary, life outside was full of life, freshness and vigour. She notices the trees that her car is going past and they appear to be moving at an equally fast

pace by themselves. She also notices children pouring out of their houses excitedly

(b) 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.

(e) **Imagery:** "Young trees sprinting, merry children spilling" symbolize happiness, strength and vigour. It signifies continuity of life.