

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.

Before you read

Ageing is a natural process; have you ever thought what our elderly parents expect from us?

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 yard

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.....

sprinting : short fast race, running

wan : colourless

VOCABULARY

1. **Versatility**: having many different styles or qualities

The chef's **versatility** lets him cook both spicy foods and sweet desserts.

2. **Indigenous**: belonging to a particular place or culture

The song has an **indigenous** sound because it uses folk lyrics.

3. **Complex**: made of many parts or not simple

The maths problem was so **complex** that it took hours to solve.

4. **Subtleties**: small but important details

He noticed the **subtleties** in her tone that showed she was upset.

5. **Ageing**: getting older

The **ageing** tree still stood strong despite the storms.

6. **Doze**: to sleep lightly for a short time

He began to **doze** off during the long meeting.

7. **Open mouthed**: with mouth wide open

She stood **open mouthed** when she was surprised by her friends.

8. **Ashen**: very pale, like the colour of ash

His face turned **ashen** when he heard the bad news.

9. **Corpse**: a dead body

The police found the **corpse** in the old warehouse.

10. **Realised**: understood something clearly

She **realised** she had forgotten her keys at home.

11. **Sprinting**: running very fast for a short distance

The athlete was **sprinting** towards the finish line.

12. **Merry**: happy and cheerful

They sang **merry** songs during the festival.

13. **Spilling**: something falling out

The water is **spilling** out of the bottle.

14. **Wan**: looking pale and weak

After the long illness, she looked **wan** and tired.

WATCH AND LISTEN TO THE POEM

Click on the link below to watch a video of the poem being read. Note the pronunciations of the words and read along.

[Class 12 | My Mother at Sixty-six | Kamala Das | Audiobook](#)

BACKGROUND

My Mother at Sixty-Six is a moving poem by Kamala Das which deals with the themes of aging, a person's love for her mother, separation, uncertainty and death.

Image of trees sprinting by.



Image of children running.



Summary

In the poem *My Mother at Sixty-six*, Kamala Das explores the loving relationship between a mother and a daughter. The poet's mother was old, and she felt sad at the thought of losing her.

In the poem, the poet described her ride to Cochin from her parent's home. Her mother, who was sitting beside her, was asleep in the car. The poet looked at her closely and realised that her mother had grown old.

She found this thought troubling and looked out of the window to distract herself. The world outside presented a contrast to her recent thoughts and observations.

At the airport, after the security check, the poet looked at her mother again. Her face looked colourless and pale. The poet could relate this to a childhood fear she used to have – the fear of losing her mother. She controlled her feelings and waved her mother goodbye with a smile.

The poem ends on a note of sad acceptance of reality.

THINK IT OUT

Q.1. What is the kind of ache and pain that the poet feels ?

Q.2. Why are the young trees described as 'sprinting'?

Q.3. Why has the poet brought in the image of the merry children 'spilling out of their homes'?

Q.4. Why has the mother been compared to the 'late winter's moon'?

Q.5. What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify?

Literary Devices

1. Simile

'Her face ashen like that of a corpse'

-compares mother's face to a corpse, indicating fear of old age and death.

2. Imagery

'Trees sprinting , the merry children spilling out of their homes'

-visual imagery of the world outside which contrasts with the mother's stillness.

3. Personification

'Trees sprinting'

-trees are given human-like quality of running, seen from a moving car.

4. Enjambment

Used throughout the poem.

-lines continue without a pause, this shows the continuous flow of thoughts.

5. Repetition

'smile and smile and smile'

-emphasizes the poet's effort to hide her sadness and fear.

6. Contrast

'Young trees sprinting' vs 'her ashen face'

-youth and movement vs old age and stillness

7. Symbolism

'Airport's security check'. And 'Distance'

-symbolize emotional and physical separation, and fear of permanent loss.

8. Alliteration

'My mother at sixty-six'

-repetition of the 'm' sound adds musical quality.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not follow any rhyming scheme. It has been written in free verse.

EXTRA QUESTIONS

Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow: (Delhi 2009)

1.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 ...

1. What was the childhood fear that now troubled the poet?
2. What do the poet's parting words suggest?
3. Why did the poet smile and smile?

2. ...but soon

put that thought away and

looked out at young

trees sprinting, the merry children spilling

out of their homes, ...

1. Which thought did the poet put away?
2. What do the 'sprinting trees' signify?
3. What are 'the merry children spilling out of their homes', symbolic of?

3. 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....

1. Where was the poet driving to?
2. Why was her mother's face looking like that of a corpse?
3. What did the poet notice about her mother?