My Mother at Sixty-Six

NOTES & ASSIGNMENTS
My Mother at Sixty-Six

By Kamala Das

About the Poet

The poet, Kamala Das also wrote by her pen-name of ‘Madhavikutty’. She was born in Kerala and is one of India’s first poets. Her subject matter is basically related to her personality-beautiful, sensitive, bold and tormented. External factors do not reflect in her writings, her writings bring out her true inner feelings. 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.

Central Idea / Message

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.
Summary

This is a touching poem written by Indian poet Kamla Das who wrote under the pen name of ‘Madhavikutty’. In this poem, she describes her feeling of love and attachment towards her ageing mother.

Once the poet went to visit her mother. She was on her way back to the airport to return to Cochin. She looked at her mother who was seated beside her in the car. Her mother had dozed off to sleep and her ageing face - was smoky in colour like ash. Her mouth was open and she resembled a dead body. The poet realized that her mother was old. She felt pain and sympathy for her. Her mother needed love, affection and care.

In order to come out of the gloom, the poet shifted her glance and looked out of the car’s window. There she saw young trees pass by. Little children were running out of their houses into the playgrounds. These things were contrary to the ageing face of her mother. They symbolised energy, life and happiness.

As they reached the airport and the poet was about to leave for the aeroplane, she glanced at her mother one more time. Her mother appeared weak and pale just like the moon in the winter season which seems to have lost all its strength. The poet felt the pain and fear of losing her mother. She was reminded of her childhood when she used to fear losing her mother. As a child she could not bear to be separated from her mother even for a few moments. Now the loss would be permanent as her mother was about to die and she would lose her forever. The poet did not express her feelings. She smiled and said “see you soon, Amma” because she wanted that her mother should live and they could meet again.
Firstly, when the poet is on her way to the cochin airport with her old mother sitting beside her, she looks at her closely and presents before us her image.

She compares her with a corpse. (simile is a figure of speech to show comparison between her mother’s face and a corpse.) As she looks at her mother’s pale and pallid face, she is struck with the horror and pain of losing her. The mother with the dozing face and open mouth is compared to a corpse. Here, the poet shows the typical love and affection which is present in a mother-daughter relation.

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, wan, worn out mother in the twilight of years strikes her again. Here again a similie is used to compare her mother with a late winter’s moon whose light is obstacle by fog and mist. As she looks old now, her personality is affected by it.

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 her that as she is enjoying her life similarly her mother should also be happy and enjoy her life.

(The poem revolves around the theme of advancing age and the fear that adheres to its loss and separation. It is a sentimental account of the mother’s approaching end through the eyes of the daughter. The seemingly short poem touches upon the theme of the filial bond between the mother and daughter smeared in the backdrop of nostalgia and fear. Nostalgia of the past (the time spent with the mother) and fear of the future without her.)

It is a short poem, without a full stop, the poem is like a long sentence, over flowing thought process. The poet uses the device of comparison and contrast, simile and repetition.
New / Difficult Words

1) doze: a short, light sleep
2) ashen: very pale, like ash.
3) corpse: a dead body.
4) sprinting: here, shooting out of the ground.
5) spilling: here, to move out in great numbers.
6) wan: unnaturally pale, as from physical or emotional distress.
7) ache: pain.

Poetic Devices

Following poetic devices have been used in the poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*.

1. **Simile**: it is the comparison of two things by using *as* or *like*. e.g. “her face ashen like that of a corpse”, “as a late winter’s moon”.
2. **Metaphor**: it is the direct comparison of two things without the use of *as* or *like*. e.g. “the merry children spilling”.
3. **Personification**: When we give human characteristics to animals or plants or non-living things. e.g. “trees sprinting”.
4. **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”.
5. **Alliteration**: It is the repetition of the consonant sounds in a line of a poem. e.g. “my mother”, “that thought”, “I said was, see you soon”.
ASSIGNMENT

Extract Based Questions

I. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

“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 as old as she looked …”

Q1. Name the poem and the poet.
Q2. Where was the poet driving to?
Q3. What did she notice about her mother?
Q4. Why was her mother’s face looking like that of a corpse?

II. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

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, ............

Q1. What worried the poet when she looked at her mother?
Q2. Why was there pain in her realisation?
Q3. Why did she put that thought away?
Q4. Identify the figure of speech used in these lines.
III. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

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, ……..

Q1. How can the trees sprint?
Q2. Why did the poet look at her mother again?
Q3. What did she observe?
Q4. Identify the figure of speech used in these lines.

IV. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

…but soon
put that thought away, and
looked out at young
trees sprinting, the merry children spilling
out of their homes,…

Q1. What thought did the poet drive away from her mind?
Q2. What did she see when she looked out of the car?
Q3. How do you know that the joyful scene didn’t help her drive away the painful thought from her mind?
Q4. What does the phrase trees sprinting signify?

V. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

I looked again at her, wan, pale
as a late winter’s moon and felt that old
familiar ache, my childhood’s fear, …………. 
Q1. Who is ‘her’?
Q2. Why did the poet look at ‘her’ again?
Q3. What was the poet’s childhood fear?
Q4. Identify the figure of speech used in these lines.

VI. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

“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.”

Q1. Who went for security check and who is ‘her’ in the above lines?
Q2. What does the poet compare her mother’s face to and why?
Q3. Explain ‘late winter’s moon’.

VII. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

I looked again at her, wan, pale
as a late winter’s moon and felt that did,
familiar ache, my childhood’s fear,
but all I said was see you soon, Amma,
all I did was smile and smile and smile

Q1. What was the poet’s childhood fear?
Q2. What were the poet’s parting words?
Q3. What is the poetic device used in these lines?
Short Answer Type Questions

Q1. How does Kamala Das try to put away the thoughts of her ageing mother?
Q2. What was the poet’s childhood fear? Or
What were the poet’s feelings at the airport? How did she hide them? Or
What were Kamala Das’ fears as a child? Why do they come back when she is going to the airport?
Q3. What do the parting words of Kamala Das and her smile signify?
Q4. Why has the poet’s mother been compared to the ‘late winter’s moon’?
Q5. Why are the young trees described as ‘sprinting’?
Q6. What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify?
Q7. Why has the poet brought in the image of the merry children spilling out of their homes?
Q8. What is the kind of pain and ache that the poet feels?
Q9. Ageing is a natural process; have you ever thought what our elderly parents expect from us?

Value Based Question

Q1. Analyse the concept of losing our dear ones on account of old age in the context of the poem.