

INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH: 2021-22
CLASS XII
MY MOTHER AT 66 (Poetry)– KAMALA DAS

Summary

Kamala Das, an Indian poet, in her poem, 'MY MOTHER AT 66', presents a daughter's anguish at the realization that her mother was growing old and that one day she would die. The poem brings out the pain of separation. It is a poem on death. While going to the airport to board a flight to a distant country, with her mother in the car, the poet suddenly grows aware of her mother's ageing and the possibility of death in her absence.

Pain of separation

While the poet was deeply thinking about this separation, she painfully thought of the possibility of their meeting again, the possible demise of the aged mother, as she happened to look at her mother.

An attempt to encourage the mother

Now that the poet knew that her mother had been reading her troubled mind, the poet wanted to convince the mother that she had not been thinking about her death. To convince her mother, the poet changed her expression on her face. So the poet looked out of the car's window and tried to brush away her sadness.

An attempt to forget pain

In an attempt to look cheerful, the poet now looked out of the car. But what she saw outside didn't cheer her up. On the contrary she grew sadder looking out. What she saw there sharply contrasted with the expression on her mother's face. It seemed to her that the young trees were running cheerfully. Young children were in their jolly mood, playing and having fun and frolic. Everything looked cheerful and lively outside while the mother remained almost lifeless and the poet sad. The security check-in was completed. The daughter was left with a few seconds to see her aged mother. She turned back to look at the mother who stood a few feet away.

Childhood fears return

In her childhood, the poet had to separate from her mother innumerable times. It was quite painful for the poet to separate from her mother those days. She used to fear these occasions as she thought they would never meet again.

Smiles that mean pain

The poet was overcome by the intense pain of separation. She could not speak many words at this time. Controlling her overwhelming emotions she managed to bid her mother farewell. She had the least hope of meeting her mother again. Yet she struck a note of optimism by saying they both would meet again soon.

See you soon, mother...

The poet is attempting to ease the situation with a long smile that meant consolation to her mother. She smiled with the expectation that her mother would translate it that the daughter was not worried about anything and therefore there was no need to worry about their union. They would definitely meet.

Possible Figures of speech / Poetic Devices

1. Simile – “Like a late winter’s moon”, “like a corpse”
2. Personification – “Sprinting trees”, “Trees spilling”
3. Repetition – “Smile and smile and smile.”
4. Juxtaposition – Life outside the car and death inside the car.
5. Alliteration – “She was as...”

Reference to context

Question.1. 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,
but all I said was see you soon, Amma,
all I did was smile and smile and smile (Foreign 2014; Modified)

- (a) What was the poet’s childhood fear?
- (b) What were the poet’s parting words?
- (c) What is the poetic device used in these lines?
- (d) Why did the poet smile and smile?

Answer. (a) In her childhood, the poet was insecure about losing her mother, just as all young children often are.

(b) The poet’s parting words were, “See you soon, Amma”, which are suggestive of the hope that they will meet again.

(c) The poetic device used in these lines is simile, where the mother’s dull and lifeless face is compared to a late winter’s moon.

(d) The poet smiled and smiled (meaning that she smiled continuously) because she was trying to hide her real feelings. She feared the fact that she might not see her mother again, which left her almost in tears.

Question.2. Read the extracts 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.....

(a) What thought did the poet drive away from her mind?

(b) What did she see when she looked out of the car?

(c) How do you know that the joyful scene didn't help her drive away the painful thought from her mind?

(d) What are the merry children symbolic of? (Compartment 2014; Modified)

or

(a) Which thought did the poet put away?

(b) What do the 'sprinting trees' signify?

(c) What are "the merry children spilling out of their homes", symbolic of?

(d) Why does the poet make use of the images of 'young trees sprinting' and 'merry children spilling'? (Delhi 2014; Modified)

or

(a) Who looked out at the young trees?

(b) Which thought did she put away?

(c) What do young sprinting trees signify?

(d) Why are the trees described as sprinting? (Delhi 2008)

Answer. (a) The poet drove away the painful thought of the distressing reality that her mother was getting old and she might die anytime.

(b) When she looked out of the car, she saw young trees on the roadside, which appeared to be moving. She also saw a group of children, merrily rushing out of their homes to play.

(c) As the poet passed through security check at the airport and happened to look at her mother, she was again haunted by the same fear of losing her to death. This shows that the joyful scene earlier didn't help drive away the painful thought from her mind.

(d) The merry children are symbolic of the exuberance of youth. The energetic and lively children present a contrast to the poet's mother who has grown old and pale.

or

Answer. (a) The poet put away the thought of the-distressing reality of her mother getting old and of her impending death.

(b) The 'sprinting trees' signify time that has passed at a fast pace.

(c) The merry children epitomise bubbly youth. They represent the exuberance and liveliness of young age.

(d) The poet makes use of these images to emphasize the contrast between old age and youth.

or

Answer. (a) The poet Kamala Das looked out at young trees.

(b) Seeing her aged mother, she felt insecure about the fact that she might be separated from her mother. The poet was also feeling guilty for neglecting her. She wondered if she would see her mother alive next time. However, she soon put these thoughts away.

- (c) The young sprinting trees symbolise happiness, strength and vigour which are the characteristics of youth in contrast to the dullness of old age.
- (d) As the poet looked outside the window of her moving car, the trees appeared to be moving fast in the opposite direction. So, they are described as sprinting.

Question.3. 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 realised with pain .
that she was as old as she looked ...**

- (a) Where was the poet driving to?
(b) Why was her mother's face looking like that of a corpse?
(c) What did the poet notice about her mother?
(d) Why was the realisation painful? (All India 2013; Modified)

Answer. (a) The poet was driving to Cochin airport from her parent's home.

(b) Her mother's face had lost all its glow and colour. It was nearly lifeless. That is why it was looking like a corpse's face.

(c) The poet noticed that her mother was sleeping with her mouth open. Her face looked like that of a corpse. She suddenly realised that her mother had become very old.

(d) The realisation that her mother had grown very old was painful because it brought with it the distressing thought that she was also nearing her death, whose cruel hands would separate the poet from her mother.

Question.4. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

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

- (a) Name the poem and the poet.
(b) What did the poet realise? How did she feel?
(c) What did she do then?
(d) What did she notice in the world outside?

Answer. (a) The name of the poem is 'My Mother at Sixty-Six' and the poet is Kamala Das.

(b) The poet realised that her mother was getting old and was nearing her impending death. She felt afraid of losing her mother, the same fear which she used to face in her childhood.

(c) The poet at once turned her face away from the harsh reality and looked out of the window to divert her mind.

(d) The poet saw green trees sprinting by. She also saw a group of children who were exuberant, enthusiastic and were merrily coming out of their houses.

Question.5. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

.....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

- (a) What was the childhood fear that now troubled the poet?
- (b) What do the poet's parting words suggest?
- (c) Why did the poet smile and smile?
- (d) Explain, "that old familiar ache." (Delhi 2009; Modified)

Answer. (a) As a child the poet was insecure about losing her mother and the same fear has come again now when her mother has grown old.

(b) The poet, while parting, smiled and said to her mother that she would see her soon. This expression of her suggests that though she was aware that her mother was quite old and weak, yet she could not do anything about it. She could not even communicate her true feelings to her mother.

(c) The poet smiled and smiled only because she wanted to hide her fears from her mother. She was reassuring herself and also her mother that they would meet again.

(d) "That old familiar ache" refers to the agony and pain of separation from her mother that the poet felt in her childhood, as she feared that she might lose her mother.

Short Answer Type Questions (3 Marks, 30-40 Words)

Question.1. How does Kamala Das try to put away the thoughts of her ageing mother? (Delhi 2014; Modified)

Answer. Kamala Das finds the thoughts of her ageing mother very painful and disturbing. It is hard for her to accept the fact of her mother growing old, as it brings back to her mind her childhood fear of losing her mother. She makes a deliberate effort to drive or put away such thoughts by looking out of the moving car, at the trees 'sprinting' and the joyful young children rushing out of their homes.

Question.2. What was the poet's childhood fear? (All India 2014)

or

What were Kamala Das, fears as a child? Why do they surface when she is going to the airport? (All India 2011)

Answer. As a child Kamala Das was insecure about losing her mother just as all young children often are. The same feelings are evoked inside her while she is on the way to the airport, as she sees her mother's pale face, which is a sign of her old age and impending death.

Question.3. What do the parting words of Kamala Das and her smile signify? (Compartment 2014)

or

What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify? (All India 2010)

Answer. The poet's parting words and her smile are a facade to hide her feelings of insecurity. The pale and senile appearance of her mother brings back her childhood fear of losing her mother. She can definitely experience the pangs of separation, yet she

bids her farewell in a pleasant manner. She reassures her mother that all will be well and they would meet again.

Question.4. Why has the poet's mother been compared to the "late winter's moon"? (Delhi 2013)

or

Why has Kamala Das compared her mother to a "late winter's moon"? (Foreign 2011)

Answer. The poet has used this simile as 'the late winter's moon' looks too hazy and lacks brightness and lustre. Similarly, the mother, who is now sixty-six, is pale and has a shrunken and ashen face. She is devoid of the effervescence and exhilaration of youth.

Question.5. Why are the young trees described as 'sprinting'? (Delhi 2012,2010)

Answer. The poet is travelling in a speeding car and the roadside trees seem speeding past or sprinting in the opposite direction. The poet has contrasted the 'young trees' which are moving fast to her mother, who is old and slow.

Question.6. What were the poet's feelings at the airport? How did she hide them? (All India 2012)

Answer. The poet was torn apart by the feeling whether she would see her mother alive the next time or not. She hid her feelings by smiling reassuringly at her mother.

Question.7. What do the parting words of the poet Kamala Das to her mother signify? (All India 2012,2009,2008)

Answer. The parting words of Kamala Das to her mother signify her anxiety and fear about her mother's frail health. They also express the hope that her mother would survive till they meet again. .

Question.8. Why has the poet brought in the image of the merry children spilling out of their homes? (Foreign 2008)

Answer. The young children spilling out of their homes represent the exuberance and vigour of youth. They are in complete contrast to the poet's mother. Perhaps the poet has used the image to bring out the pangs of old age.

9. What does Kamala Das see on looking out of the car window?

Ans. Unable to bear the pain on her mother's face, Kamala looks out of the car window and sees young trees rushing past her like sprinters. Besides, she also sees groups of children rushing out of their homes to play.

10. What is the significance of the images, 'sprinting trees' and 'merry children spilling out of their homes' in the poem "My Mother at Sixty Six"?

Ans. Both sprinting trees and merry children are happy and young. They present a contrast to the mother's pain and old age and the poet's worry and fear. They represent youth, vigour and spring whereas the mother is old, decaying, frail, inactive and passive.

11. Why could Kamala not express her thoughts to her mother at the airport?

Ans. Kamala did not express her thoughts because she was overwhelmed with worry and pain at the thought of losing her mother. Moreover, any such expression would have aggravated the mother's condition. So she just said, "See you soon, Amma" and repeatedly smiled to bid her mother a cheerful adieu.

12. Bring out the significance of the title, "My Mother at Sixty Six."

The title is very apt as the subject of the poem is the poet's aged and frail mother. It at once establishes the context in which Kamal is writing – the mother's unexpressed pain and the poet's worry about her mother's frail health, old age and perhaps imminent death. The title prepares us for the frail old mother and her daughter's concern for her.

13. What is the symbolic significance of the security checks at the airport?

The security checks represent symbolically the restrictions and limitations of the grown-up men and women, burdened by the weight of responsibilities and commitments. The checks also stand for the curbs one has to accept in one's life.

2019 CBSE : "...but soon put that thought away,...out of their homes".

- a) Name the poem and the poet.
 - b) What thought did the poet put away?
 - c) Why are the young trees described as sprinting?
 - d) How do you know that the joyful scene did not help her drive away 'that thought from her mind'?
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