



About the Poet



KAMALA

DAS

Kamala Surayya (born **Kamala**; 31 March 1934 – 31 May 2009), popularly known by her one-time pen name **Madhavikutty** and married name **Kamala Das**, was an Indian poet in [English](#) as well as an author in [Malayalam](#) from [Kerala](#), India. Her fame in Kerala primarily stems from her short stories and autobiography, [My Story](#), whereas her body of work in English, penned under the pseudonym Kamala Das, is renowned for its poems and candid autobiography. Her works are known for originality, versatility and indigenous flavour of the soil. She was also a widely read columnist and wrote on diverse topics including women's issues, child care, politics, etc. Her liberal treatment of female sexuality, marked her as an [iconoclast](#) in popular culture of her generation.^[1] On 31 May 2009, aged 75, she died at [Jehangir Hospital](#) in [Pune](#).^[2]

Summary

‘My mother at sixty-six’ is a poem by Kamala Das. The writer is famous for capturing the complications of relationships between human beings. This poem is one of the best examples of bonding in humans. Especially the bond between a mother and a daughter. This poem defines the fear of the author of losing her mother.

The poet 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. 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 / Competency Based Questions

Q. *home morning, beside doze, ashen of that looked put that thought away...*

No. *to I open-mouthed, a she*

1) *Driving Cochin saw like and was*

from my last my her realized old with as

parent’s Friday mother, me, face that pain she soon

i. Choose the option that best applies to the given extract.

1. a conversation
2. an argument
3. a piece of advice
4. a strategy
5. a recollection
6. a suggestion

Options

- a. 1, 3 & 6
- b. 2, 4 & 5
- c. Only 5
- d. Only 1

Ans. Option (c)

ii. Choose the book title that perfectly describes the condition of the poet’s mother.

Title 1	Title 2	Title 3	Title 4
You're Only Old Once! by Dr. Seuss	The Gift of Years by Joan Chittister	The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read by Philippa Perry	You're Only Old Once! by Dr. Seuss

- a. Title 1
- b. Title 2
- c. Title 3
- d. Title 4

Ans. Option (c)

iii. Choose the option that applies correctly to the two statements given below.

- Assertion: The poet wards off the thought of her mother getting old quickly.
- Reason: The poet didn’t want to confront the inevitability of fate that was to dawn upon her mother.

a. Assertion can be inferred but the Reason cannot be inferred.

- b. Assertion cannot be inferred but the Reason can be inferred.
- c. Both Assertion and Reason can be inferred.
- d. Both Assertion and Reason cannot be inferred.

Ans. Option (c)

iv Choose the option that displays the same literary device as in the given lines of the extract.

her *face*
ashen *like* *that*
of a corpse...

- a. Just as I had this thought, she appeared and...
- b. My thoughts were as heavy as lead that evening when ...
- c. I think like everyone else who...
- d. I like to think aloud when ...

Ans. Option (b)

Q. No. 2) 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...

- i. What is the most likely reason the poet capitalized 'Young Trees'? This was to
 - a. convey a clearer meaning.
 - b. highlight the *adj.-noun* combination.
 - c. enhance the contrast.
 - d. draw a connection with the title.

Ans. Option (c)

ii. Choose the option that appropriately describes the relationship between the two statements given below.

- Statement 1: The poet knows her mother has aged.
- Statement 2: The poet feels the pain of separation.

- a. Beginning – Ending
- b. Cause–Effect
- c. Question – Answer
- d. Introduction – Conclusion

Ans. Option (b)

iii. Choose the option that completes the sentence given below.

Just as the brightness of the winter's moon is veiled behind the haze and mist, similarly,

- a. the pain of separation has shaded the mother's expression.
- b. age has fogged the mother's youthful appearance.
- c. growing up has developed a seasoned maturity in the poet.
- d. memories warm the heart like the pale moon in winter.

Ans. Option (b)

iv. Choose the correct option out of the ones given below.

Simile the merry children spilling	Metaphor old familiar ache
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(1)

Metaphor pale as a late winter's moon	Imagery Young Trees sprinting
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(2)

Imagery all I did was smile	Personification the merry children spilling
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(3)

Personification Young Trees sprinting	Simile pale as a late winter's moon
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(4)

- a. Option 1
- b. Option 2
- c. Option 3
- d. Option 4

Ans. Option (d)

v. The sight of young trees and merry children, on the way to Cochin, is _____ the poet's aging mother.

- a. like a divine assurance for
- b. in sharp contrast to
- c. a distraction from pain for
- d. the bridge between the poet and mother

Ans. Option (b)

vi. The phrase '*old familiar ache*' has been used to refer to a fear, in this extract. This phrase can also be used to

- a. compare physical pain with mental agony.
- b. elicit someone's unanswered queries.
- c. substantiate reasons for aches and pains.
- d. describe a longing one has been aware of.

Ans. Option (d)

Q. No. 3) The tone of the poet in the poem is primarily a combination of _____ and _____.

- 1. dauntlessness
- 2. apprehension
- 3. dejection
- 4. disappointment

Options

- a. 1, 2
- b. 2, 3
- c. 3, 4
- d. 1, 4

Ans. Option (b)

Q. No. 4) In the poem, My Mother at Sixty-six, all that the poet did was smile and smile and smile..., Her smile is

- a. sudden, in response to her mother's.
- b. meaningful and loaded with love.
- c. accompanied with tears of farewell.
- d. put on to cheer her mother

Ans. Option (d)

Q. No. 5) ...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..... (My mother at Sixty-six)

i. What is the speaker's emotional state when looking at her mother?

- a. Confused and disoriented
- b. Nostalgic and longing
- c. Empathetic and understanding
- d. Fearful and apprehensive

Ans. Option (d) [The speaker mentions feeling an "old familiar ache" and "childhood's fear" when looking at her mother. This suggests a sense of fear or apprehension that is rooted in the speaker's past experiences with her mother.]

ii. What does the use of the word "but" at the beginning of the line, 'but all I said..', suggest?

Ans. It suggests a contrast between the speaker's internal emotional response and her outward behavior.

iii. Select the word that WILL NOT complete the sentence appropriately. The description of the mother as "wan, pale / as a late winter's moon" creates a vivid image of _____.

- a. vulnerability
- b. sensitivity
- c. frailty
- d. Mortality

Ans. Option (b)

iv. State whether the given statement is TRUE or FALSE. The poetic device used in the line, 'pale as a winter's moon' is the same as the one used in the line, 'the winter wind wistfully wailed at night'.

Ans. FALSE [the poem's line holds a simile/metaphor whereas the other line is an example of alliteration - w sound]

v. What message do these lines highlight, in the context of familial relationships, and the speaker's sense of anxiety and fear at the prospect of losing her mother?

Ans. The poem highlights the importance of cherishing and appreciating the people we love, while we still can. [quality time -life is transient and similar]

vi. Complete the sentence appropriately. The repetition of the word, 'smile' suggests that _____.

Ans. ...the speaker is trying to hold back her emotions and remain composed, despite the pain she feels at parting from her mother.

vii. Which of these is true about the poet's 'childhood's fear'?

- a. It has resurfaced and is painful to experience.
- b. It has been revealed to her mother and shared openly.
- c. It has been forgotten and is a bitter-sweet memory now.
- d. It has emerged as new information and is a strange experience.

Ans. Option (a)

viii. Select the option that shows the correct relationship between (1) and (2).

1. The poet looks at her mother's aging face.
2. The poet remembers an old fear she used to have as a child.

a. (1) is the result of (2).

b. (1) is the cause of (2).

c. (2) is false but (1) is true.

d. (2) furthers the meaning of (1).

Ans. Option (b)

Q. No. 6) Why does the poetess look at ‘young trees’ and ‘merry children’?

Ans.

- To distract her mind from unhappy thoughts of her mother’s old age.
- To look at the freshness of life.

Q. No. 7) What different images does the poet use to convey the idea of her mother's old age?

Ans. i. Late winter’s moon

- Her pale, bloodless, and wrinkled face resembles that of a corpse.
- She has no vigor and energy left in her. She looks wan and pale.

ii. The 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 symbolize youth, vigor, and spring whereas the mother is old, decaying, and frail.

Short Answer Type Questions (2 Marks, 30-40 Words)

Question.1. How does Kamala Das try to put away the thoughts of her ageing mother?

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?

or

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

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?

or

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

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 2021)

or

Why has Kamala Das compared her mother to a “late winter’s moon”? (Foreign 2022)

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 shrunk and ashen face. She is devoid of the effervescence and exhilaration of youth.

Question.5. Why are the young trees described as ‘sprinting’?

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?

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?

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?

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.

Question 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.

Question 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.

Question 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.

Question 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.

Question 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.
