

Fear of Loss and Separation in Kamala Das's Poem *My Mother at Sixty- Six*

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on intimate feelings about the mother's aging and the fear of losing her. This is a poem by Kamala Das. The poet felt very sad to see her mother's colorless lifeless and pale face. This poem demonstrates a deep bond between a daughter and her ageing mother. The poem explores her mother's aging and the inevitable separation that time brings. Ageing is an inescapable phase of every human's life. This paper highlights the realization of her mother's aging and the fear of loss that comes with it. The poem captures the strong emotional bond between the poet and her aging mother.

Key words: Bond between Mother and daughter, colorless, lifeless, fear, loneliness, separation, vigour and happiness

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das is one of the versatile writers writing in Indian English Literature. She was born on March 31, 1954. She grew up in a joint family at Nalappat, a world filled with uncles and aunts, and grandmother, who had a great influence on her. The writings of her uncle Nalapat Naravan Menon and mother Nalapat Bolamani Amina had a great impact on her. She took to writing at an early age and continued even after marriage; as she was encouraged by her husband to write. Her writings reflect exploration of a wide range of relationships from a woman's point of view-a daughter, a wife, a mother. Her works are replete with a woman's desire for self-expression, freedom and nostalgic experiences.

Kamala Das wrote many of her novels and short stories in English and Malayalam under the pen name. "Madhavikutty". Her autobiography, *My Story*, gave her literary fame and name. Her five poetry books-*Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and her Poems*, "The Anamalai Poems", and 'Only the Soul Knows How to Sing' are some of her well-known works. Her novel, *Alphabet of Lust* and her collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* are also some of her well-known works. She has a collection of poetry in collaboration with the media personality and filmmaker, Pritish Nandy, to her credit

The theme of ageing is a natural process and yet the fear of separation from your loved and near ones is explored at its best. The poem also talks about the feeling of loneliness that aged people experience and the feeling of guilt which their offspring experience for not being able to be with their parents in their old age. The poem also explores the feelings of melancholy and pain that a daughter experiences while leaving her mother, all by herself, at a ripe old age. The agony of separation is brought forward in this poem very explicitly. The poem, in a way, 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 elderly parents when they need you the most at times.

Kamala Das had been on a maternal visit. She is returning to Cochin to the airport, to catch a flight back to her home. She is going to Cochin in a car and accompanied by her sixty-six year old mother, to the airport. While the poetess is returning to Cochin in the car, she looks intensely at her face. Her pale face looks as lifeless as a dead body. She sees her mother take a nap and doze off with her mouth one of pain borne out of fear of separation and old age.

In order to drive her thought away from the agony and pain on looking at her mother's colorless pale face, Kamala looks outside the car. She looks at young children spilling out of their homes in the open play. The green trees racing past the speeding car are grim reminders of the time which is passing. The joyous children represent youth, energy and life. The images outside the car are in stark contrast to the atmosphere inside the car.

On reaching the airport and after the security check the importance at her mother's face to have a nice look. The second glance at her mother's pale and colourless face reminds her of moon which is misty and foggy. At that very moment, the narrator with the fear of losing her mother and being separated from her. "The poet experiences a quiet, emotional pain: a mix of fear, anxiety, and nostalgia, as she realizes her mother is aging. This ache is deeply personal, reminding her of the inevitability of time and mortality, and evokes memories of her childhood fear of losing her mother" (Ankita Singh)

She always had this apprehension that her mother might not be there for long time, due to social and other obligations could not discontinue her journey but bids her mother a cheerful farewell. She puts on a brave front with a smile and sent her mother back with an optimistic note, "see you soon, Amma" although she is not very sure when she will be able to see her mother next time healthy and happy.

"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 but soon
put that thought away, and looked out at Young
Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling
out of their homes" (Das, Kamala, 1991) .

The poetess was going from her parent's home to Cochin airport. She was accompanied by her mother who was sixty-six years old. She noticed her mother looking pale and dull and as lifeless as a dead body. She was dozing and her mouth was open. The parting words of the poet see you soon. In reality these words are something she is not sure of even herself. Her smile is elongated and superficial merely to give some kind of reassurance to her mother so that she cannot get even a glimpse of her daughter's inner fears and anxieties.

"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, my childhood's fear.
But all I said was see you soon. Amma,
All I did was smile and smile..." (Das, Kamala, 1991) .

The poet looks at her mother for the last time before boarding the flight. She reassures herself about the well being of her mother. She wished here goodbye in order to comfort her and leave on an optimistic note. The poet did not share her thoughts with her aged mother because it would have unnecessarily disturbed her frail aged mother. The pale and aged visage of the mother is compared to late a winter which looks hazy, obscure and lacks shine and strength. Hence the comparison is quite appropriate and the simile used is apt and effective. The mother has also lost the glow, vigour and vitality of her youth as she is sixty- six years old now. The significance of the parting words is that the poet is not sure whether she would be able to see her mother again or not. Kamala Das's apprehension was that her mother would leave her alone.

"She looked but soon
Put that thought away, and
Looked out at young
Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling
Out of their homes" (Das, Kamala, 1991) .

The poet was on her way to the airport when she realized that her mother was nearing her old age, and this feeling was hard for her to accept. She tried to divert her thoughts by looking out of the car window. She noticed that some joyous children were playing outside which gives her some respite from the thoughts of her ageing mother. The children represent energy and life. The young trees are quite opposite to the poet's old mother who is pale and aged. A tree symbolizes youth and is full of life; trees seem to be sprinting while her mother is in the last stage of her life. The trees appear to be running when seen from the moving car. The sprinting trees are symbolic of life, youth, energy, vigour and continuity of life. The poet wants to prove that there can be life under apparent stillness. The poet invokes the earth as a living symbol to prove his point. The earth never attains total inactivity. Nature remains at work even under apparent stillness. "The poet analyses her

mother's aging and growing old and then when she looks outside she sees the young trees. These trees looked very happy and fresh and the moving car was leaving them behind. This highlights the issue that youth and age have to decline someday" (www.scmemorial.org).

"But soon
Put that thought away, and
Looked out at young
Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling
Out of their homes" (Das, Kamala, 1991).

The poet has put the thought of new way of looking at her mother. It is our common experience, whenever we travel by a fast-running vehicle the standing objects appear to be running back very fast. These sprinting trees in the poem signify how the young age of the poet's mother passed so fast. The childhood fear of separation and the sadness associated with the thought of losing her mother is what the poet feels. While leaving her native place, the poetess feels the guilt of not being able to take good care of her mother in her old age and hence she is sad and unhappy. The mother's aged, weak and pale frame is of great concern for the daughter and the nagging fear of her old mother departing in her absence ravages her mind. "My Mother at Sixty-Six" is an emotional poem that describes a daughter's feelings towards her mother. Kamala Das has written this poem. She is an acclaimed Indian woman writer in English. She expresses her concern over her mother's aging in this poem. Through the lines of this poem, the poet has poured her fear of losing her mother as a daughter. This is a confessional poem that presents the common feelings daughters have for their mothers. In this regard, this poem is a representational work" (Poem Guide by Kevin Ram).

The poet's mother who is sitting beside her is dozing. Her face looks lifeless pale like a corpse. On the other hand, children are gay and happy. They are moving out of their homes in large numbers. There is happiness and joy of life.

"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" (Das, Kamala, 1991).

The poet compares her mother's face to dull colour of a corpse; the grayish color of the skin is usually associated with a dead body. It indicates her mother's last days of age old life and her frail health and the fear of her approaching death.

"As a late winter's moon and felt that old
Familiar ache my childhood's fear,
But all I said us see you soon Amma" (Das, Kamala, 1991).

Her mother needed love, respect, affection and togetherness, which the poet is unable to give her in plenty hence to cover up her agony and pain of separation and loss she puts on a long and cheerful smile on her face. Before leaving, she says to her mother, we will meet very soon. Amma, which definitely brought a faint ray of hope on the face of mother that she would survive long enough to meet again.

The term familiar ache refers to the pain which has become synonymous with the poet over her growing years. It is the fear of losing her mother and then ever being able to see her. The mother is being compared to the late winter's moon which is symbolic of death. Her mother who is frail and lifeless seems pale and dim like the winter moon.

"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" (Das, Kamala, 1991)

The poet is Kamala Das and the 'she' in the above lines refers to the poet's mother. The poet put away the thought that she would lose her mother soon. She put away this thought by looking out of the window and distracting herself by seeing lively images. The trees seem to be running past them as they were moving at a high speed in the car. The fast-moving trees and merry children are symbolic of the spring of life, vigour and happiness and are in sharp contrast to the lifelessness and weakness that set in with old age. The poet sees merry children coming out of their homes when she looks out of the moving car. These children signify the onset and spontaneous vigour of life which is in sharp contrast to her mother's pale and limp face which signifies her ageing and decay.

CONCLUSION

Kamala Das revolves her writing around the themes of nostalgia, ageing, love, separation, and the inevitable passage of time. Kamala Das captures complexities of human relationships. This poem is the inevitable process of aging and the fear of loss and separation. This poem focuses on the intimate relationship and bonding between mother and daughter. She challenged societal norms and explored themes of female sexuality, love, and the quest for personal freedom. She is reminded of her childhood fear of getting separated from her mother. It is an emotionally power packed poem full of spateful of delicate emotions telling the tale of the emotional attachment of a daughter and mother.

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