

MOTHER-AN INVINCIBLE INFINITE VARIETY: BASED ON KAMALA DAS' POEM 'MY MOTHER AT SIXTY SIX'

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MOTHER – AN OVERVIEW

Mothers encompass of a bundle of emotions that sometimes defy reason. This seems applicable to all the mothers who keep awake all night with their sick toddlers in their arms, constantly uttering those compassionate words, "It's OK honey, Mommy's here. Mothers run carpools and make cookies and sew Halloween costumes. They show up at work with milk stains on their dress and diapers in their handbags. Mothers cannot restrain tears from trickling down their cheeks when they hold their babies for the first time in their arms; and mothers give birth to babies they'll never see. Mothers scream at their kids who clamour for ice cream before dinner and confront all odds just to watch her kid perform and repeat to themselves "That's my child!!" mothers teach their children to tie the shoelaces even before they started going to school. Mothers incontinently turn their heads when they hear the word "Mom", even though they know that their kids are nowhere around. Mothers silently shed tears for their children who have gone astray. Their heart aches to watch her son or daughter disappear down the street, walking to school alone for the very first time.

- The paper is a study on the poem *My Mother at Sixty-six* by Kamala Das. This paper envisages the qualities of the mother and tries to bring out the eternal bond the term 'MOTHER' echoes between mother and the child.

WHO IS KAMALA DAS?

Kamala Das is a famous Contemporary Indian writer who is called Kamala Suraiyya who wrote in English and Malayalam her native language. She is called by the name A.K.A. Madhavikutty. Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur District in Kerala, on March 31, 1934, to V. M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely-circulated Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi*, and Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess. She spent her childhood between Calcutta, where her father was employed as a senior officer in the Walford Transport Company that sold Bentley and Rolls Royce automobiles, and the Nalappatt ancestral home in Punnayurkulam. Like her mother, Kamala Das also excelled in writing. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalappatt Narayana Menon, a prominent writer. However, she did not start writing professionally until she got married and became a mother. Her popularity in Kerala is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography. Kamala wished to begin writing, her husband supported her decision to augment the family's income. She would often wait until nightfall after her family had gone to sleep and would write until morning: *"There was only the kitchen table where I would cut vegetables, and after all the plates and things were cleared, I would sit there and start typing"*. This rigorous schedule took its toll upon her health. She was noted for her many Malayalam short stories as well as many poems written in English. Das was also a syndicated columnist. She once claimed that *"poetry does not sell in this country [India]"*, but her forthright columns, which sounded off on everything from women's issues and child care to politics, were popular. Das' first book, *Summer In Calcutta* was a promising start. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love. At the age of 42, she published her autobiography, *My Story*, which was later translated into many foreign languages. Kamala Das wrote on a diverse range of topics, often disparate- from the story of a poor old servant, about the sexual disposition of upper middle class women living near a metropolitan city or in the middle of the ghetto. Some of her better-known stories include *Pakshiyude Manam*, *Neypayasam*, *Thanuppu*, and *Chandana Marangal*. She wrote a few novels, out of which *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam*, which was received favourably by the reading public as well as the critics, stands out. (taken from Wikipedia)

My Mother at Sixty-six by Kamala Das

*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 thought away, and
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 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 and
Smile.

MOTHER – CHILD RELATIONSHIP

In life, we generally come across various forms of relationships like Father-son, husband-wife, love, friendship etc but the most dearest, nearest and hearty relation of all is of a mother and her child relationship. The [bond](#) of [mother and child](#) is purest, truest and holy. Mother is next to GOD. She is the Gem who knows everything. A warm and affectionate touch of mother gives immense delight to feel heaven on earth. The relationship of a mother and a child entails deep emotions and feelings within it and it is always nurtured by love, affection and care. Mother guides her child in taking right decisions, stands against crowd and favors her child if he/she is right, always stands behind her/him in his thick and thin, biggest sharer, suffers a lot of pain from the time of birth of a child till he/she becomes adult but never expects anything in return. Whenever the child feels sad and tensed, mother's love and affection embraces and wipes off all worries.

A SHORT GLIMPSE OF THE POEM

While driving from her parent's home to Cochin, the poetess notices her mother sitting beside her drowsy, her face pale like a dead body and her thoughts far away. This reminds her painfully that her mother is old and could pass away leaving her alone. Putting that thought aside she looked out at the young trees speeding by and children running out of their homes happily to play. These remind her probably of youth and life, her own younger days and her mother when she was young. But after the security check at the airport, looking back at her mother standing a few yards away, she finds her looking pale like the winter moon. She feels that familiar pain and childhood fear of the thought of losing her mother and of being lonely just as she had been when she was young because she was different from other children. She could only keep smiling and tell her 'see you soon' knowing full well that she might not see her.

ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

*Driving from my parent's
home to Cochin last Friday
morning, I saw my mother,*

(Kamala Das, 1-3)

The opening word in the poem 'Driving' highlights that life is a journey that keeps moving. The means to move may differ but its undeniable fact that life moves. As we travel in our journey of life, the life to moves along with us. To some it's a happy journey and for some it may not be so. But there is an ultimate power, the driver of life driving us towards one direction. In the journey of life we tend to move far and away. The term 'Driving from' suggests that on the way towards destination one tends to separate and detach oneself from the routine of life. It can also be said that a journey from familiarity to strangeness. From attachment to isolation. It's very strange in the case of a mother. Though a child wants to depart, the mother always tends to cling onto the child whatever may be the significance, the child attaches to the departure. In India, as tradition compels, the daughter has to stay with the mother-in-law. In general, though there are mother-in-laws, mothers cannot be replaced. The poetess is departing from her parent's house.

PARENT always means

Prepared Always to Render Enough Nurture and Trust.

PARENT'S mean

Prepared Always to Render Enough Nurture, Trust and Security.

So Kamala Das is driving away from the Parental Care Zone towards an Alien Hostile Zone. As the term Parental Care Zone reminds that it is a nerve centre for love and care.

The term “*Driving from my parent's home*” also means that once the child reaches the stage of adolescence, his/her passion, desires, motifs and dreams tends to grow and makes one feel that staying with mother will not create a vent to fulfill all. Hence the child always feels to drive from the parent’s home. A child may depart but mother stays similar. The growth in child crafts him or her to change but growth in mother makes her younger and younger, tender and fragile. Here the poetess’ psychology echoes the psychology of all children beside the point of the question of gender.

Driving from my parent's home to Cochin last Friday morning

This line suggests that the poetess is leaving her home to Cochin. She left her parent’s house by Friday morning. In the poem it is referred to as “*last Friday morning.*”

The word ‘Friday’ indicates ‘end of the week’ and

‘Last’ indicates ‘No more again’ and also ‘Forever’

‘Morning’ refers to ‘New hope, new dreams, new ambitions and new goals.’

The above stated meaning for the term proposes that the poetess is entering into the world of new hopes departing from the long lasting relationship of mother. Though the poetess is leaving mother but mother still the same in the inward being. The speaker's perception of her mother at the age of sixty-six, would be indeed one of enriched experience; as it would be coloured with the speaker's individual maternal experience as with her own children. It would be a different one, with indication to the past when she was single. She could possibly review her better as a wife, and mother now.

*.....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*

(Kamala Das, 3-10)

Here the poetess is having a very close glance at her mother with a possessive attitude. Kamala das is able to visualize a very sad state of ageing in turn the shadow of death that is prevalent on the mother’s face. Though the journey of life leads to death ultimately still mother tends to grow tender and innocent. As Shakespeare in his poem “All the world’s a Stage” states that

*Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,*

*Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

(Shakespeare :24-28)

every individual has to turn again into childish treble which signifies the fact that the evolution of life is in revolving in nature- a human being comes into this in form of a child and exits the world as a child. This is what Shakespeare terms it as “Second Childishness.” It’s strange but true.

So fixing this parameter to the Das’ context, the mother of the poetess is old and she is in her last scene acting i.e., she is in the stage of Second Childishness. The mother of the poetess is sitting near Kamala Das like corpse, open-mouthed, which shows that the old mother is very ripe in age and she is in the state of mere oblivion may be. She is unaware that her daughter is going to depart and will never see her again nor will she be able to see her daughter again. The term ‘Doze’ refers to sleep and sleep in turn refers to death. The poetess is able to feel the death of her mother in her sub-conscious state. The description is very clear in suggesting death. “*open mouthed, her face ashen like that of a corpse..*” There is a proverb that reads so

Face is the Index of Mind and

Out of the fullness of Heart the Mouth Speaks.

The mother’s face reflects her nature’s call though she is child within. Ageing is a universal aspect. All minds know it and the faces index it. Likewise Kamala Das’ mother’s face is reflective of the universal natural process of ageing. Kamala Das captures the picture of her mother in a significant moment of comprehension. The speaker in a fast-forward life, pauses for a moment to regard her mother, with reference to time and space. The speaker is very close to her mother and her vision of her mother’s state is explained keenly with all minute details. Words like 'doze' point to the torpidity that old age has imposed upon her. The phrase 'open--mouthed' connotes the lack/ignorance of etiquette and circumstances, echoing that the end is just about the corner. This is affirmed with the word 'ashen' coupled with her countenance. She realizes in a distressing moment that her mother now looked as old as she was. The hollowness of Life and inevitability of Death is sounded here as echoed in Philip Larkin's "Ambulances". Kamala Das is a receptive writer who captures the fears and fantasies implanted deep in the feminine psyche. What pains her more than the idea of Death, is the fear of Death. The irony is that though she was 'beside' her, the writer is contemplative of the death of the mother.

“.....*but soon*

put that thought away, and

looked out at young

trees sprinting, the merry children spilling

out of their homes..”

(Kamala Das, 11-15)

Kamala Das realizes with great disinclination the heartbreaking truth writ large on her mother's face. Her "ashen face" reminded her of a corpse both metaphorically and literally. Ageing is usually considered the penultimate stage of a person's life. It is a pointer to the proximity of the one feared for. The thought kindles fear in the poet's heart, not for just one reason but two.

“.....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,..”

(Kamala Das, 15-19)

The apprehension that her mother is moving towards the final truth of life worries her as her childhood fears, " a familiar ache". Any child is vulnerable and associated with insecurity, as soon as the child is in a situation/place divorced from the mother. The speaker senses the similar anxiety here, as though she is going to lose her mother. Kamala Das brushes off these wild thoughts and turns her view towards images filled with greenery and energy. The image of the children and the 'sprinting trees are juxtaposed against the idea of predestined Death. Yet the idea continues to preoccupy her .After the airport security-check, the poetess turns her gaze again towards her pallid Mother. Note that the act of seeing her off at the airport comes across as a metaphor of seeing her off to Death. The comparison is evoked by the speaker's fears as she continues to associate her mother to a "late winter's moon."

“..but all I said was, see you soon,

Amma, all I did was smile and smile and

Smile.”

(Kamala Das, 20-22)

The fact that the poet is on her way to her next phase forces her for a moment to contemplate. With great stoicism, she accepts the intimidating milestones of life and all she did was "smile and smile and smile" She tells her mother positively "see you soon", because separation always precedes reconciliation. Bidding farewell means or designates the birth of new hopes and dreams. See You Soon may mean that the poet will see her mother with flying colours either on earth or in heaven, that makes her smile, smile and smile.

Though the poem talks more about the experience of the poet still it accounts how the mother would have brought up the poet. The reminiscence makes the poet feel desperate before departure. The mother's nature, stature and features are so noble that it is strongly painted on the poet's heart. The poet finds it hard to brush off the thoughts of childhood days embraced by the inimitable warmth of the mother. The poet calls her mother as "My", "Mother" because of the following traits as written by *Joanna Fuchs (a professional writer)* in her poem 'Super Mom.'

Mom, you're a wonderful mother,
So gentle, yet so strong.
The many ways you show you care
Always make me feel I belong.
You're patient when I'm foolish;
You give guidance when I ask;
It seems you can do most anything;
You're the master of every task.
You're a dependable source of comfort;
You're my cushion when I fall.
You help in times of trouble;
You support me whenever I call.
I love you more than you know;
You have my total respect.
If I had my choice of mothers,
You'd be the one I'd select!
- JOANNA FUCHS

The poet has made use of possessive pronoun "My" which echoes the imprints that the presence of mother has left behind in the deeper most part of the poet's heart. There would have been so many unheard melodies apart from the heard lullabies that mother used in bringing up her daughter. What are those unheard melodies? The silent prayers whispered by the noble lips at all times. This has made Kamala Das so eminent in the field of writing and has enabled all those unheard melodies into readable lyrics. The unconquerable qualities in the mother were replicated by the daughter enabling Kamala Das to conquer the unconquered and also to conquer the conquered.

The poet though much feared and jolted due to the ageing factor but still she is thoughtful about her younger days when her mother brought her up. In this connection if Kamala Das would have been asked to write about her mother definitely I hope she could have sounded the way Joanna Fuchs did. Joanna Fuchs in her poem enumerates the qualities of the mother. The mother is wonderful, gentle, strong, caring, patient, guiding, master of every task, dependable, source of comfort, a cushion in fall, helper, supporter, a lover and respect earner.

Joanna fuchs has written another mother daughter poem named "A Sonnet for my incomparable mother" which reverberates the same passion and fashion exhibited by Kamala Das in her poem "My Mother at Sixty-Six."

A Sonnet for My Incomparable Mother

*I often contemplate my childhood, Mom.
 I am a mother now, and so I know
 Hard work is mixed together with the fun;
 You learned that when you raised me long ago.
 I think of all the things you gave to me:
 Sacrifice, devotion, love and tears,
 Your heart, your mind, your energy and soul--
 All these you spent on me throughout the years.
 You loved me with a never-failing love
 You gave me strength and sweet security,
 And then you did the hardest thing of all:
 You let me separate and set me free.
 Every day, I try my best to be
 A mother like the mom you were to me.*

- Joanna fuchs

A Sonnet for My Incomparable Mother also expresses the same feeling like that of My mother at Sixty Six. As fuchs contemplates and remembers her childhood days and feel that she is ageing and she considers herself as mother now. The same way kamala Das is also doing the similar thing. She is in her motherhood stage and whenever she does something, remembers those that her mother did in bringing her up. Kamala Das is also afraid about the fact that –Will she be able to be like her mother? Mothers are incomparable hence invincible.

*Sacrifice, devotion, love and tears,
 Your heart, your mind, your energy and soul--*

(Joanna fuchs, 6-7)

The mother conquered her own heart, mind, energy and tears to sacrifice, devote, love and shed tears. The mother invested her heart, mind, and energy for to teach the poet what is meant by heart, mind and energy? The mother has been a great role model for the daughter to follow. This is the reason why kamala Das wanted to cling to her mother even at the time of departure. Though she departs from her mother, mother cannot be removed from her inner spirit.

It would be more appropriate to quote Shakespeare

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
 Her infinite variety.....*

(Antony and Cleopatra, Act II. Scene II. 271-272)

Shakespeare uses this for another context but the author of this paper feels that these lines would be more fitting to the qualities of the mother. Age has no role to play when it comes to a person's

behavior and nature. Mother is always considered to be of a benign nature and also expected to be. Some fall out of place but not all. Age may wither her skin beauty but not her rich innate quality bestowed by God to mothers. Generally the outward beauty is given much importance but a real human being is identified by his or her inward beauty. Age cannot determine anybody's inner unseen qualities. In the poem too, the poet is scared of the ageing that is witnessed or visualized but the speaker did not deny the inner beauty of her mother anywhere. The fear of ageing too reminded her to equip herself to carry out the duties and responsibilities vested by nature to her like her mother. The foresight into the future made her scared but not the unheard melody of mother saying "Honey, be safe." The poet did not write about the mother's response. As it is said that heard melodies are sweeter than unheard melodies- for the sweetness of it the speaker did not reveal the mother's response.

Indians are known for their custom and culture. Customs are followed all over in India. As per the custom, the girls in the house are not allowed to go by their own choice. Striving against it, if the mother gives way for the daughter to choose her own dreams and new hopes, it's in no way going to spoil her reputation because the mother's natural reputation is infinite and to the variety mother belongs to is esteemed. Nothing in this world can ever stale a mother's infinite variety because she is infinite and god-created, god-driven and god-moulded. Separation is bitter but the good-will of the mother should have made the poetess Kamala Das happy. The good will in the mother did not make her strive for her right of asking the daughter to stay with her to take care of her in her old age. But here we see a different picture- mother instead of being selfish and I – oriented, she gives rooms for the passions, desires, hopes and dreams of the daughter even at the old age. Though old people are likely to be discarded and disliked for their kiddish behaviours of ruthlessness that the age has age and physique has gifted them, still there are few who can visualize the enormity of strength and courage the old people possess when others feel they are worn out. Such courageous mother is the poet's mother. Thus mother is an invincible infinite variety of all God's creation.

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