

FLAMINGO: MY MOTHER AT SIXTY-SIX

KAMALA DAS

WORKSHEET/STUDY MATERIALS

In a Nut-Shell : The poet is driving from her parent's home to Cochin by car, her mother by her side—sleeping—open mouthed very pale, colorless and frail-like a dead body indicating that her end was near. The poet looks at her and feels intense pain and agony to realize that soon death will cast her mother away from her. She tries to divert her mind, looks outside at the young trees and happy children bursting out of their homes in a playful mood (a contrasting image). After the security check at the airport she looked again at her mother's face - pale and cold. 'Familiar ache-My childhood fear' – the poet has always had a very intimate and close relationship with her mother and she has always felt the fear of being separated from her mother hence it is familiar. The poet reassures her mother that they will meet again.

Theme: My Mother at Sixty Six by Kamala Das brings out the reality of inescapable ageing, decay and death through a simple incident. She feels worried at the thought of her separation from her mother. She realizes how much her mother and she herself have aged when she looks at the 'young trees sprinting' and 'merry children spilling out of their homes'. She smiles and bids farewell saying that she would soon meet her again.

Title: The title, 'My Mother at Sixty-six' is an excellent example of showing an ever unfailing relationship between a daughter and her mother. The title is apt as the subject of the poem is the poet's aged and frail mother. 'My Mother' at once establishes the context in which Kamala Das is writing – the mother's unexpected 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.

Understanding the poem: On a grey day, the speaker leaves her mother as well as her home to win her bread, while her mother with a long face stands and stares. The poet was now going to Cochin from where she had to board an aeroplane for her journey back home. The poet's mother was sitting beside her in the car. She was travelling with the poet to see her off at the airport. As they were travelling, the old woman dozes off and the poet looks at her intently. She notices that her mother is now old and pale. She looked almost like a corpse, for her face was colourless and seemed to have lost the fervour of life.

The poet is moved to tears when she sees her mother. A fear of separation from her mother and a sense of guilt for having neglected her mother cross her mind but the compulsions of her own life made her drive that thought away. The poet started looking out of the window because she wanted to drive away the pain and agony she experienced on seeing her ageing mother. She saw trees running past her car and merry children sprinting out of their homes to play. The trees described as sprinting is an optical illusion created when the car is moving forward. Moreover the trees which are symbolic of youth and vigour are described as sprinting to contrast the old age of the mother. The children spilling out of their houses are also in the spring of their life in contrast to her mother who is at the age of sixty-six. Trees and children symbolize the spring of life, its strength, vigour and happiness which contrasts with the lifelessness and helplessness that sets in with age.

When she reaches the airport and the security check is done, the last moments of togetherness tick by. She once again glances at her mother's pale and colourless face which resembles a winter's moon, for it is foggy, ready to wither away any moment. In this simile, the poet has compared her mother's face to the winter's moon because the moon seems to lose its brightness in the winter season as it is veiled behind fog and mist. The mother's face also seemed to have lost its radiance and was now misted with age. The poet's childhood fears of leaving her mother alone unattended and of losing her haunts her once again. Her apprehension that her mother may not live long grips her mind but she has no choice but to continue her journey. Even her words 'see you soon' seem ironical for she is not sure how soon she would be able to see her. She only bid a formal adieu and smiled and smiled to hide her guilt, anxiety and fear of the unknown.

The repetition of the word 'smile' indicates the rather long and artificial smile the poet had to put on to cheer up her mother and to hide her own anxiety and guilt. Time has its toll on all human relationships.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

1. *"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"*

- a) Where was the poet coming from? Where was she going?
- b) How does the poet describe her mother?
- d) Who does 'she' refer to in the last line? What thoughts had she driven away?

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

- a) What was the poet 'looking' at? What did she notice?
- b) What thought did she try to drive away?
- c) Why did the poet start 'looking out'? What does her gesture suggest?
- d) What did the poet see from the window of the car?
- e) What did the images of 'young trees' and 'merry children' symbolize?

3. *"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"*

- a) Where was the poet standing?
- b) Who does 'her' here refer to? How did she look like?
- c) Why does the narrator 'look at her again'?
- d) Explain: 'wan, pale as a late winter's moon'.

4. “ *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 ‘familiar ache’ did the poet feel?
- b) What could have been the poet’s childhood fears?
- c) Did the poet share her thoughts with her mother?
- d) Why do you think, the poet did not share her thoughts with her mother?
- e) Why did the poet only ‘smile’?

QUESTIONS:-

- 1. What is the kind of pain and ache that the poet feels?
- 2 What does the poet do to shrug off the painful thought of her mother’s approaching end?
- 3. Why does the poet draw the image of sprinting trees and merry children?
- 4. Why have the trees been described as sprinting?
- 5. Why has the mother been compared to the late winter’s moon?
- 6. What is the ‘familiar ache’?
- 7. What do the parting words of the poet and her smile signify?
