

Critical Analysis of My Mother at Sixty Six—

Kamala Das's poetry is most often identified as confessional poetry. "My Mother at Sixty Six" can also be identified as such. She is as open and uninhibited in this poem as she is in her other famous confessional poems such as "An introduction". She describes her mother's aging face and her reaction to it without the slightest bit of hesitation. She compares her mother's face to that of a corpse. This is a rather morbid image, but that shouldn't surprise us. As we have said before, Kamala Das is not afraid to put off her readers a little if it serves the overall purpose of making her poem as honest as possible. And so makes this stark comparison to show how the process of aging immediately brings up the fear of losing her mother in her mind.

She also describes how that fear disturbs her so much that she is forced to turn her attention away. This turning away doesn't symbolize a turning away from her responsibility towards her mother, but only a turning away from her own pain-filled emotions. Even though her mother is no longer a young woman, she is still beautiful. That is why the second time around, she compares her mother's face with that of the moon on a winter night. This image is not morbid, but pleasant. However, both images are used to signal the end of something. The corpse more directly addresses the issue of human life coming to an end.

But the fact that the poet has specified that the moon which her mother's face resembles is the moon seen in winter shows that winter is also used here to signal the end of a year – one more year that a man has lived, and one that is drawing him closer to the end of his life as well. Thus, even though the two images seem to be dissimilar, they symbolize the same thing. They together symbolize the brevity of human life and the certainty of death. This is the poet's biggest fear – that her mother will die, and she will not have the power to stop it from happening.

As a child, it is natural that one should feel powerless. However, as an adult, as a strong and independent woman, as an eminent poet, Kamala Das is by no means powerless. But where death is concerned, there is nothing she can do. She fears that the loss of her mother can never be replaced in any way. However, she is determined not to dishearten her mother. So she smiles and says goodbye. But one can literally hear her heart breaking. It is this covering up of her pain that makes the poem beautiful and relatable.

Poetic Devices in My Mother at Sixty Six

-Rhyme scheme:

The poet does not use any identifiable rhyme scheme in this poem. It's a blank verse.

Rhetorical/Poetic devices:

Simile: This rhetorical device is used when an overt comparison is made between two different things. In this poem, the poet uses the device of simile on two instances. When she compares her mother's face with that of a corpse and also uses the word "like" while making that comparison. She again compares her mother with the moon in wintertime and also uses the word "as" while making this comparison.

Personification: This rhetorical device is used to bestow human qualities on something that is not human. In this poem, the poet uses the device of personification with respect to trees. She imagines the trees to be figures that are running alongside her car.

Apostrophe: This rhetorical device is used when a poet addresses his or her poem to an absent audience. In this poem, the poet uses the device of apostrophe, when she speaks directly to her mother, addressing her as “Amma”, even though we never see the mother replying to the poet.

METAPHOR: This rhetorical device is used when a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. In this poem, the poet uses the device of metaphor in line when she speaks ‘Trees sprinting, the merry children spilling out of their homes’ to show the contrary image of her mother’s age and approaching end.

REPETITION: This rhetorical device is used when a word or phrase is repeated. In this poem, the poet uses the device of repetition in last line ‘all I did was smile and smile and smile.....’ when she had to subdue her feelings and tried not to show her emotion to her mother. She says she believes that she will meet her mother again.

Central Idea of the Poem–

On her way to the airport from her parents’ house as she is leaving for Cochin, the poet is driving in her car with her mother beside her. When she chances upon her mother sleeping, she notices how old her mother has grown for the first time. She is disturbed and turns her eyes away to focus on young trees and younger children instead. Again after the security check at the airport, she notices her mother’s aging face. This fills her with the fear she had experienced since childhood – that of her mother dying. But she does not let that fear show on her face. She smiles and bids her mother goodbye, promising to see her soon.

Themes of the Poem

Comparisons: The poet compares her mother’s pale face with two things – the white face of a corpse, and the moon on a winter night. The first comparison is made chiefly on the basis of the similarity of hue between the two objects. When a person dies, blood stops being pumped out of the heart and circulating through the brains. In the absence of the flow of blood, the body loses its healthy glow and takes on an unnatural white pallor. When her mother is sleeping, the poet’s mother also has reduced heart function. As a result the life-giving flow of blood is also reduced and her skin appears paler than usual. After their arrival at the airport, her mother has woken up, but the creases on her skin that have appeared due to aging are still there. These creases look like the craters on the moon’s surface that disrupt its otherwise immaculate appearance. Hence they take away some amount of the moon’s beauty, but certainly not all of it. Similarly, age does show on her mother’s face, but it cannot really mar her beauty.

Contrasts: When the poet notices how old her mother has grown, she tries to focus her attention on other things. She ends up noticing only those things that are not old. She notices the trees that her car is going past and they appear to be moving at an equally fast pace by themselves. This leads the

poet to feel that the trees must be very young to be filled with such invigorating energy. She also notices children pouring out of their houses excitedly. It is not possible that on an average day there are no adults out on the street. However, the poet's attention does not fall on adults, but only on children, who are just starting out on their journey of life. Both these images serve as a contrast to her mother who is almost at the end of that journey. Another instance of the poet using a contrast to express herself clearly comes at the very end of the poem. The sorrow in her heart is in contrast with the smile she has bravely put on her face as she says goodbye to her mother.

Tone of the Poem-

The tone of this poem is predominantly pensive and sorrowful. The poet suddenly notices that her mother looks as old as she is. This could have surprised her since she only sees her mother during holidays and not on a daily basis. However, it does not surprise her because she has always been aware of the certainty of her mother's death. As she does when she turns away from her mother to look at the trees and the children, she has simply chosen not to think about losing her mother anytime soon. Yet that fear has always plagued her and it plagues her still. This saddens her and one can see her silent tears even when she has forced herself to smile.

SUMMARY

Lines 1– 4:

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

In these lines, the poet recalls a trip back to Cochin from her holiday in her parents' house the previous week. It was a Friday, and that morning, she was driving with her mother next to her on the front seat.

Lines 5 – 10:

doze, open mouthed, her face

ashen like that
of a corpse and realised with pain
that she was as old as she
looked but soon
put that thought away, and

In these lines, the poet says that she was observing her mother who had fallen asleep on the front seat with her mouth slightly open. Her mother's face was pale, and it reminded her of the nearly white faces of dead bodies. It is then that she comes to realize that her mother was not young any longer, and that her appearance had caught up with her age. This was very hard for the poet to accept, and so she was determined to focus her attention on something else.

Lines 11 – 15:

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

In these lines, the poet says that she turned away from her aging mother and decided to look outside the windows of the car in which she was driving. Outside, her eyes fell on the trees that the vehicle was passing by. The car was moving so fast that by way of relative motion, it seemed to the poet that all the trees she could see were also running at full speed past her. It seemed that those trees must have been quite youthful if they had the energy to move at such a fast pace. The poet's eyes also fell on the children who were coming out of their houses, brimming over with their excitement to get outside. The poet passed all these sights and reached the airport. Till then, her mind was distracted by the sights. However, after the security check, she was standing a short distance away from her mother and again she chanced to notice the old woman. Just as before, her mother appeared very pale and insipid.

Lines 16 – 20:

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.....

In these lines, the poet compares her mother's face with the sight of the moon on a night towards the end of winter. This made her recall the thing she had been most afraid of during her childhood – the fear that her mother would die one day. This was a fear that had plagued her many times before, and it was plaguing her again now. However, she did not let that fear show itself on her face. Instead she put up a brave face and waved goodbye to her mother. She assured her mother that they would be seeing each other again soon, and all the while, even though she was in great agony, the smile never left her face.