

My Grandmother's House

- Kamala Das

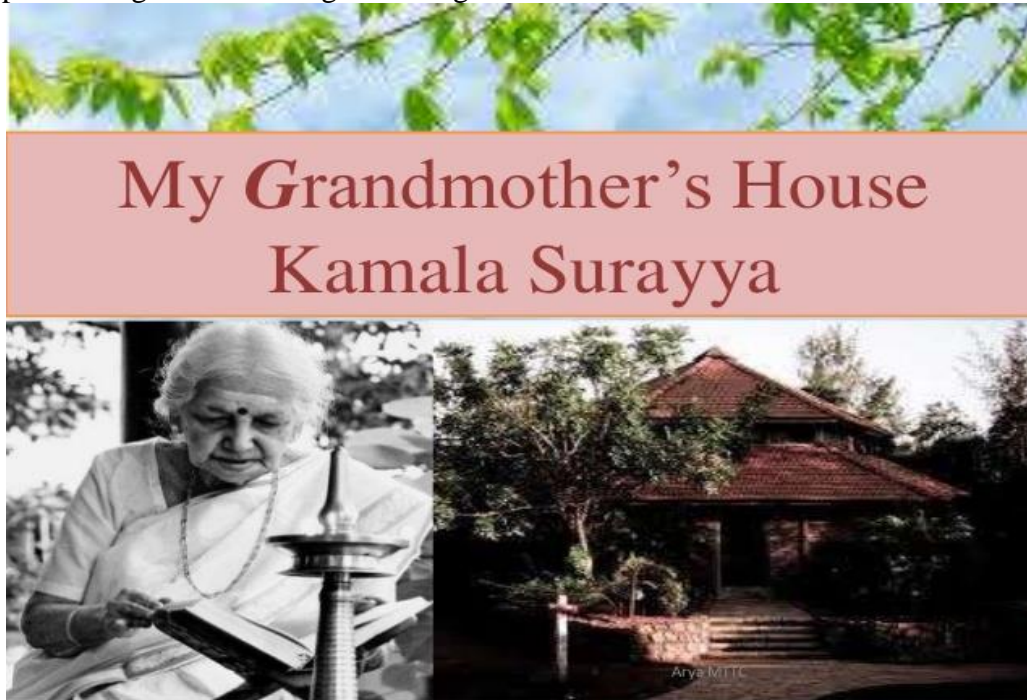
The Poet:

Kamala Das is one of the three most significant Indian poets writing in English today, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Her poetry is all about herself, about her intensely felt desire for love, for emotional involvement, and her failure to achieve such a relationship. In this poem, "My Grandmother's House" Kamala Das, recalls her ancestral home and her dead grandmother. This poem takes the form of a confession comparing her present broken state with that of being unconditionally loved by her grandmother.

An overview of the poem:

"My Grandmother's House" is a nostalgic poem written by Kamala Das (Kamala Surayya). Though it's a short poem its meaning is vast and wide. The undercurrent of the poem is Kamala Das's childhood life with her grandmother where she felt more love and peace than she enjoys in her present life. The poem My Grandmother's House has only 16 lines, very short poem. The opening line tells the readers about her grandmother's house, where she lived when she was very young.

This is a constituent poem of Kamala Das's maiden publication *Summer* in Calcutta. Though short, the poem wraps within itself an intriguing sense of nostalgia and uprootedness. In her eternal quest for love in such a loveless world, the poet remembers her grandmother which surfaces some emotions long forgotten and buried within her— an ironical expression of her past which is a tragic contrast to her present situation. It is a forcefully moving poem fraught with nostalgia and anguish.



*There is a house now far away where
once I received love
That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence,
snakes moved
Among books, I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold
like the moon
How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes
of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog...you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors
to
Receive love, at least in small change?*



Kamala Surayya (1934-2009) formerly known as Kamala Das , (also known as Kamala Madhaviikutty, pen name was Madhaviikutty) was a major Indian English poet and litterateur and at the same time a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India. Her popularity in Kerala is based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography, while her oeuvre in English, written under the name Kamala Das, is noted for the fiery poems and explicit autobiography.

The poem is a reminiscence of the poetess' grandmother and their ancestral home at Malabar in Kerala. Her memory of love she received from her grandmother is associated with the image of her ancestral home, where she had passed some of the happiest days of her life, and where her old grandmother had showered her love and affection. With the death of her grandmother the house withdrew into silence. When her grandmother died, even the house seemed to share her grief, which is poignantly expressed in the phrase "the House withdrew". The house soon became desolate and snakes crawled among books. Her blood became cold like the moon because there was none to love her the way she wanted.

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.depicts her love towards grandmother

.poem wraps within itself a sense of nostalgia

.poet's eternal quest for love in such a loveless world

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.Poet says her grandmother's home was a place where she felt secure and loved by everyone

. After her grandmother's death the house was filled with silence and she is begging for love

The poet says that there is a house, her grandmother's home, far away from where she currently resides, where she "received love". Her grandmother's home was a place she felt secure and was loved by all. After the death of her grandmother, the poet says that even the House was filled with grief, and accepted the seclusion with resignation. Only dead silence

haunted over the House, feeling of desolation wandering throughout. She recollects though she couldn't read books at that time, yet she had a feeling of snakes moving among them— a feeling of deadness, horror and repulsion, and this feeling made her blood go cold and turn her face pale like the moon. She often thinks of going back to that Old House, just to peek through the “blind eyes of the windows” which have been dead-shut for years, or just to listen to the “frozen” air.

The poet also shows the ironical contrast between her past and present and says that her present has been so tormenting that even the Darkness of the House that is bathed in Death does not horrify her anymore and it is a rather comforting companion for her in the present state of trials. The poet says that she would gladly (“in wild despair”) pick up a handful of Darkness from the House and bring it back to her home to “lie behind my bedroom door” so that the memories of the Old House and its comforting darkness, a rather ironical expression, might fill assurance and happiness in her present life.

She wraps up the poem saying that it is hard for one to believe that she once lived in such a house and was so loved by all and lived her life with pride. That her world was once filled with happiness is a sharp contrast to her present situation where she is completely devoid of love and pride. She says that in her desperate quest for love, she has lost her way; since she didn't receive any feelings of love from the people whom she called her own, she now has to knock “at strangers' doors” and beg them for love, if not in substantial amounts, then at least in small change i.e. in little measure at least.

The poet has intensified the emotions of nostalgia and anguish by presenting a contrast between her childhood and her grown-up stages. The fullness of the distant and absence and the emptiness of the near and the present give the poem its poignancy. The images of “snakes moving among books”, blood turning “cold like the moon”, “blind eyes of window”, “frozen air” evoke a sense of death and despair. The house itself becomes a symbol of a cradle of love and joy. The escape, the poetic retreat, is in fact, the poet's own manner of suggesting the hopelessness of her present situation. Her yearning for the house is a symbolic retreat to a world of innocence, purity and simplicity

Themes in the Poetry of Kamala Das:

The poetry of Kamala Das is a search for the essential woman, and hence the woman persona of her poems plays the various roles of unhappy woman, unhappy wife, and mistress to lusty men. Kamala Das has also been called a poet in the confessional mode. The confessional poets deal with emotional experiences which are generally taboo. There is a ruthless self-analysis and a tone of utter sincerity.

Reminiscent of the Poet's Ancestral Home:

The poem is a reminiscence of the poetess' grandmother and their ancestral home at Malabar in Kerala. Her memory of love she received from her grandmother is associated with the image of her ancestral home, where she had passed some of the happiest days of her life, and where her old grandmother had showered her love and affection. With the death of her grandmother the house withdrew into silence. When her grandmother died, even the house seemed to share her grief, which is poignantly expressed in the phrase “the House withdrew”. The house soon became desolate and snakes crawled among books. Her blood became cold like the moon because there was none to love her the way she wanted.

Yearning for the Past: Choked with Grief:

The poet now lives in another city, a long distance away from her grandmother's house. But the memories of her ancestral house make her sad. She is almost heart-broken. The intensity of her emotions is shown by the ellipses in the form of a few dots. Now, in another city, living

Another life, she longs to go back. She understands that she cannot reclaim the past but she wants to go back home, look once again through its windows and bring back a handful of darkness – sad and painful memories, which she would have made her constant companion, to keep as a reminder of her past happiness. The poet is unable to proceed with her thoughts for sometime as is indicated by the ellipses (dots).

The poet is now choked with the intensity of grief. She yearns for love like a beggar going from one door to another asking for love in small change. Her need for love and approval is not satisfied in marriage and she goes after strangers for love at least in small quantity. But she does not get it even in small change or coins. Her love-hunger remains unsatisfied, and there is a big void, a blank within her, she seeks to fill up with love but to no avail. **The image of the window** is a link between the past and the present. It signifies the desire of the poet for a nostalgic peep into her past and resurrect her dreams and desires.

Blind eyes of windows



- ❖ Do you think that window have eyes?
- ❖ Aren't "eyes" a feature of living beings?
- ❖ Is the poet attributing human qualities to "windows"? How?

Personification

It is a figure of speech where a thing, an idea or an animal is given human attributes. Example The flowers danced in the breeze.

With the death of the Grandmother, her life that was hitherto filled only with emotions becomes numb. Her veins thus become cold rather than warm. It is as cold as the moon, the moon being an emblem of love. The worms on the books seem like snakes at that moment, in comparison to the size of the little girl; and in keeping with the eeriness of the situation.

The poetess also implies that the deserted house is like a desert with reptiles crawling over. The poetess now longs to "peer" at a house that was once her own. She has to peek through the "blind eyes" of the windows as the windows are permanently closed. The air is frozen now, as contrasted to when the grandmother was alive-the surroundings were filled with the warmth of empathy. Kamala Das pleads with us to "listen" to the "frozen" air; that is impossibility. Neither is the air a visual medium, nor can air cause any displacement because it is "frozen". It is an example of synesthesia.

In the final lines, the poet is in conversation probably with her husband or her readers. The poet says that one won't believe that she had some of the best memories of her grandmother's house and she is quite proud of it. Now that she has lost her grandmother, she begs at strangers' doors for love. She knows well that you won't be able to get that much love but she still hopes for at least a part of it. Hence the poet ends with hope and despair.