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## Reading Ageing as Lived Experience: A Medical Humanities Approach to Kamala Das's *My Mother at Sixty-Six*

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### Abstract

The field of Medical Humanities directs great interest and attention in studying the lived experience of diseases, disability, suffering and care giving. It usually puts great emphasis on understanding the subjective experiences of patients in an objective and scientific environment. But Medical Humanities gives comparatively lesser importance to explore the lived experiences of ageing. The study of lived experiences of an aged person, his struggles, challenges and experiences remains comparatively unexplored. This same call is made in a Research article by Martina Zimmermann titled *An Agenda for the Medical Humanities and Ageing* published on July 9, 2025, in Journal History of Human Sciences volume 39. In this research article, she argued that Medical Humanities needs to expand itself to incorporate the study of ageing narratives. This Paper aims to closely analyze Kamala Das's *My Mother at Sixty-Six* to understand ageing, its emotional, physical, and psychological effects on the aged person and on his caregivers and associates. This paper undertakes a medical humanities approach to close read the poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*.

**Keywords:** Ageing, Medical Humanities, Kamala Das, Poetry, Ageing Studies.

### INTRODUCTION

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that attempts to study the illness and disease in a subjective manner. Medical Humanities goes beyond the traditional understanding of human illness and suffering. Instead of understanding human suffering through only biomedical lens, it tries to understand the lived experiences, patient doctor relationship, caregivers and their roles and to develop an attitude of sympathy and understanding among the medical practitioners as well as general audience. Thomas R. Cole, Nathan S. Carlin, and Ronald A. Carson in *Medical Humanities: An Introduction* defined Medical Humanities as, "an inter- and multidisciplinary field that explores

contexts, experiences, and critical and conceptual issues in medicine and health care, while supporting professional identity formation" (12). They state that this definition has four elements: Context, Experience, Conceptual and Critical Analysis and Formation.

Ageing is not simply getting older, it comes with a lot of struggles, challenges, and different changes. It accompanies with itself not only physical pain but also emotional and psychological pain. The fear of death, vulnerability, dependence, and changing relations with the family all these are basic constitutes of the ageing process. The lived experiences of ageing require special attention in the field of Medical Humanities. A study of these experiences and challenges can help in the overall development of Human Health Sector. The field of Medical Humanities should not solely focus on diseases and their lived experiences but also invest enough attention to understand this important phase of ageing in the life of human beings.

Martina Zimmermann in her research article *An Agenda for the Medical Humanities and Ageing* published on July 9, 2025, in Journal 'History of Human Sciences' volume 39 states, "The Medical Humanities, by comparison, have not sufficiently engaged with ageing to date". Literature is great medium to understand the lived experiences of ageing. Literary narratives offering insights into suffering, challenges, problems, changing attitudes, physical pain, psychological and emotional pain during the ageing phase can assist in a great way to understand lived experiences of ageing which in turn can help to develop the attitudes of empathy and understanding among young people towards older people. This can also help to develop more empathy, patience, softness among healthcare practitioners while treating older people. Ageing is usually connected with inevitable decline and death, resulting in little or no attention given to the diverse physical, psychological, emotional and social challenges faced by older people. Analyzing Literary texts through Medical Humanities approach can help in understanding the lived experiences of ageing.

Kamala Das was an Indian poet who wrote in English as well as Malayalam, born in Kerala in 1934 and died in 2009. A bold poet, works known for originality, and diversity. *My Mother at Sixty-Six* is a very emotional poem written by Kamala Das and is concerned with the themes of ageing, growing up, love, separation and mother daughter relationship. This poem is emotional in tone effecting a person profoundly. This research paper aims to study the poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* by Kamala Das through a Medical Humanistic approach.

## Literature Review

Existing scholarship provides an important foundation for understanding ageing, Medical Humanities, and Kamala Das's *My Mother at Sixty-Six*, while also revealing a gap that the present study seeks to address. Martina Zimmermann (2025), in *An Agenda for the Medical Humanities and Ageing*, argues that ageing has received insufficient attention within Medical Humanities and calls for greater engagement with ageing-related experiences and concerns. Desmond O'Neill (2015), in *Geriatric Medicine and Cultural Gerontology*, discusses the emergence of cultural, humanistic, and narrative approaches to gerontology that move beyond the biomedical understanding of ageing and examine its cultural, emotional, and experiential dimensions. Focusing specifically on Kamala Das's poetry, B. Sivapriya and G. Immanuel (2012), in "Mother – An Invincible Infinite Variety: Based on Kamala Das's Poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*," examine the poem primarily through the mother-daughter relationship and the emotional bond between them. Similarly, Padmalochan Hansda (2025), in "Longing for the Past: Nostalgic Elements in Kamala Das's Selected Poetry," analyses four poems, including *My Mother at Sixty-Six*, with particular attention to memory, loss, identity, nostalgia, and the passage of time. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that ageing can be understood not only as a biological process but also through emotional, relational, cultural, and experiential perspectives. However, limited attention has been given to *My Mother at Sixty-Six* specifically through a Medical Humanities framework that conceptualizes ageing as a lived experience, particularly in relation to psychological

vulnerability, bodily decline, familial caregiving, emotional distress, and the daughter's confrontation with mortality. The present study addresses this gap by bringing Medical Humanities and literary analysis together to examine how the poem represents ageing as an embodied, emotional, and relational experience.

The existing scholarship indicates that the reading of Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* is not done through Medical Humanities Approach, and the study of ageing is not well explored in the field of Medical Humanities.

A comprehensive study of research papers and articles establish the fact that study of ageing as a lived experience is underexplored in the field of medical Humanities. Moreover, Kamla Das's *My Mother at Sixty-Six* is usually analyzed through the lens of Mother Daughter relationship, memory, nostalgia, identity, loss and the passage of time, leaving behind the reading of the poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* through Medical Humanities approach specifically examining ageing as a lived experience and how ageing effects the family and caregivers of the old person.

The research objectives of this paper are to examine the representation of ageing as a lived experience in Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*; to analyse the poem through a Medical Humanities approach; to understand the effects of ageing on family members and caregivers; and to explore ageing not merely as a biological process associated with death and physical decline, but as an experience involving psychological, emotional, social, and physical dimensions. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: How is ageing represented in Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*? How does the poem portray ageing as a lived experience? How does the mother's ageing affect the daughter psychologically and emotionally? And how can a Medical Humanities approach contribute to a deeper understanding of ageing, caregiving, vulnerability, familial relationships, and the experience of confronting mortality?

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis and close reading of Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* to understand ageing through a medical humanities approach, giving special attention to the poem's imagery, contrast and other poetic devices. It analyzes the poet's descriptions of the state of mother as well as daughter to understand the effects of ageing.

### Analysis of Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*.

- A. **The Ageing Body:** In the opening lines of the Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*, the poet describes the visible physical signs of ageing and later presents the emotional effects of ageing on daughter, who is the prime witness of her mother's ageing in the poem. Kamala Das in her poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* says, " her face ashen like that of a corpse." (Lines 5 -7) The physical effects of ageing on Mother's face are quietly visible, indicating towards physical transformation of the body during the process of ageing. The body becomes the first site of ageing. Moreover, the poet compared it to a corpse connecting ageing with mortality. The interlinking of the face with a corpse indicates the possibility of death. Here, in this poem the physical sign of ageing is not presented in biological or medical sense but as a medium through which daughter witness her mother's ageing and its relational, emotional and psychological effects.
- B. **Daughter's realization of ageing:** In Kamala Das's poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six*, the daughter realizes of her mother's ageing through her ashen face and tries to divert her attention. Kamala Das in her poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* says, " ...and realised with pain that she was as old as she looked but soon put that thought away" (Lines 7-10). The physical signs of ageing makes the daughter realizes of her mother's ageing, filling her with so much anxiety and fear that she tries to divert her attention to get rid of that thought. The physical signs of ageing act as a medium through which ageing becomes a lived and emotionally perceived experience, rather than merely a

biological process. Ageing has the capacity to emotionally overpower or overburden the family members or care givers witnessing the ageing. It produces within them, a fear of losing, anxiety leading them to suppress the painful thoughts. So, ageing has emotional and psychological effects on those who witness it as shown in the poem, through daughter's emotional reaction. One such emotional reaction was to suppress the painful thoughts.

- C. **Psychological Dimensions of Ageing:** Ageing is not an isolated process affecting only the aged person but it also emotionally and psychologically effects and disturbs those who witness ageing. So ageing has relational effects too. In the poem, Mother's ageing is not an isolated biological process effecting her only but has emotional and psychological effects on the daughter too who is witnessing her mother's ageing through her pale face. In the poem, *My Mother at Sixty-Six*, Kamala Das says, "I looked again at her, wan, pale as a late winter's moon, and felt that old familiar ache, my childhood's fear" (Lines 15-17). The mother visible signs of ageing is creating emotional distress in the daughter and inciting her deep childhood fear of losing her mother. The winter also symbolically indicates to later stages of life that is old age. The poem doesn't presents ageing as an isolated biological or physical process but also hows how ageing is witnessed and perceived by both the ageing mother and her daughter. It also indicates that how ageing like any other disease shares a lived emotional, physical, and psychological experience and effects. This makes the inclusion of study of ageing as a lived experience in the field of Medical Humanities crucial and important.
- D. **Emotional Labour within Familial relations:** The family members and caregivers witnessing ageing of another person also go through deep emotional distress and anxiety, but they are supposed to manage their emotions while comforting the aged person. They have to manage their emotional distress to keep things functional and normal for the ageing person to keep normalcy. So, Medical Humanities must study and explore ageing narratives to understand the emotional labour of familial relations and care givers which will lead to enhancement in well being, and better emotional management. Kamla Das in her poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* says, " but all I said was, see you soon, Amma, all I did was smile and smile and smile..." (Lines 18-20). Although, daughter is going through extreme emotional distress as well as fear of losing her woman, she keeps all her anxieties behind her and simply smiled concealing her internal disturbances and distress. She did not let her emotional state overpower her, and managed it accordingly. The emotional labour of people witnessing ageing is revealed through the reading of this poem through Medical Humanities approach. The repeated phrase 'smile and smile and smile' shows the speaker's attempts to hide her inner feelings and emotional distress. Ageing effects not only the person but family relations too.
- E. **Patient centred perspective:** In the poem, mother is not reduced to a biological entity undergoing a biological process, showing visible signs of ageing but as a person who shares emotional connection with her daughter. The portrayal of emotional connection reminds us that behind the ageing body is a living person.

**Table 1. Medical Humanities Reading of Ageing and Mortality in *My Mother at Sixty-Six*.**

| Poetic Evidence             | Medical/physical aspect        | Emotional/Lived aspect                     | Medical Humanities Interpretation                        |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Wan, Pale                   | Visible signs of ageing        | Daughter's anxiousness                     | Ageing body is a witness of physical decline and ageing. |
| "Like a late winter's moon" | weakness                       | A sense of Entering the last stage of life | Ageing represented through imagery of decline.           |
| "her face ashen like        | Physical Resemblance to death. | Sense of approaching death.                | Bodily appearance makes mortality visible.               |

|                             |                                                                                             |                                       |                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| that of a corpse”           |                                                                                             |                                       |                                                                                    |
| “that old familiar ache”    | ---                                                                                         | Psychological and emotional distress. | Emotional and psychological effects of witnessing ageing.                          |
| “my childhood’s fear”       | Awareness of mortality.                                                                     | Fear of Mother’s death.               | Ageing has a relational effect too.                                                |
| “Smile and smile and smile” | Daughter hides her emotional distress and gives reassurance to mother, saying see you soon. | Daughter’s attempt to cope.           | Emotional management done by care givers and familial relations witnessing ageing. |

## CONCLUSION

Clinical Gaze differs from Familial gaze. Clinical gaze brings down an individual to merely a biological entity and look for symptoms and cure. It does not take into account the lived experience, challenges, struggles, emotional, psychological, and relational effects of ageing. Looking at ageing only through clinical gaze is not the right approach. Treating ageing only as an inevitable biological process and simply linking it with traditional narratives of decline and mortality increases the chances of ill effects among old aged people and their associates. The poem *My Mother at Sixty-Six* presents the familial gaze. The poem helps to understand that ageing is not merely a biological process linked with mortality but is also relational. The portrayal of emotional coping as well as emotional suppression in the poem gives another concern of how family members and care givers manage their own emotions while witnessing ageing and mortality. The integration of ageing studies in the field of Medical Humanities can enhance our understanding of ageing as a lived experience. The analytical study of literary representations of ageing can help the people understand the emotional challenges faced by aged people and by their families. Medical Humanities through indepth study of these literary representations can reveal various ways of coping with fear and anxiety and can introduce various emotional management techniques. Such understanding can help in overall enhancement of well being among aged people and their families.

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