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# Blood



Kamala Das
1934-2009

*One of the greatest literary figures in Malayalam, Kamala Das was born in the year 1934 in Punnayurkulum, in South Malabar, Kerala. Her work, in poetry and in prose, has given her a permanent place in modern Malayalam literature as well as in Indian writing in English. She is best known for her feminist writings and focus on womanhood.*

*She has been the recipient of such famous awards as the Poetry Award for the Asian PEN Anthology, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best collection of short stories in Malayalam, and the Chaman Lal Award for fearless journalism.*

When we were children
My brother and I
And always playing on the sands
Drawing birds and animals
Our great-grandmother said one day,
You see this house of ours
Now three hundred years old,
It's falling to little bits
Before our very eyes
The walls are cracked and torn
And moistened by the rains,
The tiles have fallen here and there
The windows whine and groan
And every night
The rats come out of the holes
And scamper past our doors.
The snake-shrine is dark with weeds

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And all the snake-gods in the shrine
Have lichen on their hoods.
O it hurts me she cried,
Wiping a reddened eye
For I love this house, it hurts me much
To watch it die.
When I grow old, I said,
And very very rich
I shall rebuild the fallen walls
And make new this ancient house.
My great-grandmother
Touched my cheeks and smiled.
She was really simple.
Fed on God for years
All her feasts were monotonous
For the only dish was always God
And the rest mere condiments.
She told us how she rode her elephant
When she was ten or eleven
Every Monday without fail
To the Siva shrine
And back to home again
And, told us of the jewel box
And the brocade from the north
And the perfumes and the oils
And the sandal for her breasts
And her marriage to a prince
Who loved her deeply for a lovely short year
And died of fever, in her arms
She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
A blood thin and clear and fine
While in the veins of the always poor
And in the veins
Of the new-rich men
Flowed a blood thick as gruel
And muddy as a ditch.

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Finally she lay dying
In her eighty sixth year
A woman wearied by compromise
Her legs quilted with arthritis
And with only a hard cough
For comfort
I looked deep into her eyes
Her poor bleary eyes
And prayed that she would not grieve
So much about the house.
I had learnt by then
Most lessons of defeat,
Had found out that to grow rich
Was a difficult feat.
The house was crouching
On its elbows then,
It looked that night in the pallid moon
So grotesque and alive.
When they burnt my great grandmother
Over logs of the mango tree
I looked once at the house
And then again and again
For I thought I saw the windows close
Like the closing of the eyes
I thought I heard the pillars groan
And the dark rooms heave a sigh.
I set forth again
For other towns,
Left the house with the shrine
And the sands
And the flowering shrubs
And the wide rabid mouth of the Arabian Sea.

* * *

I know the rats are running now
Across the darkened halls
They do not fear the dead
I know the white ants have reached my home
And have raised on walls

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Strange totems of burial.
At night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death
The noise of rafters creaking
And the windows' whine.
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness
O mother's mother's mother
I have plucked your soul
Like a pip from a fruit
And have flung it into your pyre
Call me callous
Call me selfish
But do not blame my blood
So thin, so clear, so fine
The oldest blood in the world
That remembers as it flows
All the gems and all the gold
And all the perfumes and the oils
And the stately
Elephant ride...

## Responding to the Poem

1. What makes the depiction of a crumbling village house so authentic in the poem? Is this a common feature of most village houses in the context of rapid urbanisation? Is the poet speaking from actual experience?
2. What aspects of Indian society and history get highlighted in the poem?
3. Does the poem bring out the contrast between tradition and modernity? Illustrate your answer with examples from the poem.
4. While the poet respected her grandmother's sentiments of royal grandeur, we can also see that she revolts against it. Identify the lines which bring this out.
5. Which lines reveal the poet's criticism of class distinctions?
6. Is it 'selfishness' and 'callousness' that makes the poet break her childhood promise to her grandmother of renovating the house? Why does she do nothing about rebuilding the house?

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7. What do you understand of the conflict in the poet's conscience?

## Language Study

Comment on the changes in poetic expression in English from the time of Donne to that of Kamala Das with reference to

- prosodic features (rhyme, rhythm and metre)
- vocabulary
- language
- themes.

## Suggested Readings

*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* by Kamala Das

*Summer in Calcutta* by Kamala Das

*The Descendants* by Kamala Das.

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