My Grandmother’s House

**Introduction:**My grandmother’s house is a poem written by Indian poet Kamala Das. The poem first appeared in an anthology of verse entitled ‘Summer Time in Calcutta 1965). It is an autobiographical poem in which the speaker’s nostalgic desire for home reflects through the inability to visit the happy past.

The poem describes the speaker’s happy life before her grandmother’s death and sad life after her grandmother’s death. The speaker of the poem is a married woman. She is reminded of her parental home which is the symbol of immense love. The poem describes the clear difference between past and present. In past, the life was full of activity whereas now it has turned into deadly silence. The intensity of sadness is expressed by dark and negative imagery.

Kamala Das is one of the three most popular Indian poets writing in English today, the other being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Her poetry is all about herself, her deeply felt desire for love, her emotional involvement, and her inability to achieve such a friendship. In this poem, “My Grandmother’s House,” Kamala Das remembers her ancestral home and her deceased grandmother. This poem takes the form of a confession that contrasts her current fractured state with that of being unconditionally loved by her grandmother.

**My Grandmother’s House: Short Summary**

The poem starts with the reference of a grandmother as ‘that woman’ which is particular and who is no more now. The house is now far away and the past happy condition is irretrievable. The house represents the feeling of love which the speaker could get from her grandmother. But, now the house is silent. The poem moves through the happy past and sad present.

The poet uses the image of snakes moving among the books now for which she was too younger in her childhood. Now very often she thinks to revisit the house but now it is very difficult now to peep through the blind windows. Here, the image of blind windows may represent the eyes which are now visionless. The air is frozen and now she wants to bring the handful of darkness.

The poet uses the simile where she compares herself with the brooding dog who is helpless. The sudden reference to the reader as a ‘darling’ is striking. The speaker again mentions the love which she once received but now her condition is like a beggar asking the change of love.

The poet in intense terms expresses the sadness. The use of language represents the strangeness and unhealthy relationship between people and this woman. Note the words- House, that woman, asking love as a change etc.

**Analysis of th**e **poem**

Kamala Das’ s childhood reminiscences are linked to Nalapat House, her family home in Malabar, and her grandmother, whom she loved dearly. These memories are often connected to feelings of nostalgia and wit. In My Story she writes, “from every city, I have lived I have remembered the noon in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a homesickness.” Her family home and her ‘presiding deity’- her grandmother, symbolise the poetry of ‘joy,’ ‘innocence,’ ‘respectability’ and ‘Traditional values’ .

The house is viewed in this poem with care and pathos, and the poet shares her poignant feelings of yearning for this house. She needs to get back to it.

The terms ‘windows’ and ‘air’ are qualified by the two prefixes ‘blind’ and ‘frozen.’ There is a rich ambiguity of the expression which makes the suffering of the poetess very real. Her heart is itself like a dark window where the. ‘fresh air does not blow. Images working on several layers of response, or enrich the poem’s texture. One of the favourite images is that of the window where she sits and enjoys the cool refreshing breeze of the past. This recurs to the extent of becoming an obsessive image.

The image highlights the lingering longing of the poetess for a sentient peep into her past, resurrecting her hopes and desires. With the destruction of the old building, the windows were blind, only the heat of the reunion with the house would melt the ice, and the window would be returned to old life. The crumbling of the old house and the death of the old woman also leave their mark on the poet. With them, her own life of innocence and beloved ideals crumbles.

**Themes in the Poetry of Kamala Das**

The poetry of Kamala Das is the quest for the essential woman, and hence the woman, the individual of her poems, assumes the numerous roles of the unhappy woman, the unhappy lady, the mistress of the lustful men, the reluctant nymphomaniac, the mute Devdasi and the love-lorn Radha. Kamala Das was also named a confessional poet. Confessional poets struggle with emotional experiences that are usually tenuous. There is a merciless self-analysis and a tone of total honesty. As E.V. Ramakrishnan appropriately points out, “In her poetry, Kamala has always dealt with private humiliations and sufferings which are the stock themes of confessional poetry.”

**Critical Appreciation of Poems My Grandmother’s House**

‘My Grandmother’s House’ is one of the finest poems in Kamala Das’s maiden publication “Summer in Calcutta”. Though short, it touches upon many favourite themes of her favourite. It is a poem of nostalgia, up rootedness and the poet’s eternal quest for love in a ‘loveless’ world. Relationship with her grandmother is the poet’s favourite relationship and grandma is a symbol of harmony, affection and security in her poetry. In her poem ‘Composition’ Kamala Das discloses two of her guarded secrets:

“I am so alone  
And that I miss my grandmother”

The poem also brings out the poet’s loneliness and her fondness for her grandmother. Both the old lady and the ancestral home at Malabar brought to Kamala Das the feeling of belongingness.

The poet has provided detailed information about the origin of this poem in her autobiography My Story (Chapter 33): After the sudden death of my granduncle followed by that of ‘my dear grandmother,’ the old Nalapat House was locked up and its servants disbanded. The windows were shut, gently as the eyes of the dead are shut… . The rats ran across its darkened halls and the white ants raised on its outer walls strange forms–totems of burial.

After growing up, the poet shifted to another house which was far away from her beloved ancestral house. She still misses the place ‘where I received love’ with great intensity.

The memory of those days when she was loved chokes her with emotion. The poet recalls the death of her dear ancestress – “That woman died” dwells on the  
difference the death made to the house and the poet’s life. Grandma was the very life and soul of this house. When  
she passed away, even the house could not take the grief and ‘withdrew into silence’. It was an atmosphere of  
all-round mourning and desolation. At that time the poet was a very young child who could not read books but even at that age, she had a feeling of ‘snakes’ moving among books – a feeling of deadness, horror and repulsion. She recollects how the death of her grandmother had affected her as a child. It had a benumbing and chilling impact on her. Her blood lost all its invigorating power and its colour came to resemble the colour of the pale lifeless ‘moon’.

Her grandmother’s house always had a special significance for Kamala Das. During one of her serious illnesses, she had taken shelter in Malabar and was nursed back to health by her caring grandmother. The grandmother is no more, yet the poet often yearns to visit her beloved house. She would once again look through its windows. The windows are ‘blind’ -shut, covered with coloured windowpanes and with the overpowering sense of death. Death haunts the house and even the air is ‘frozen air’. A visit to this house would revive memories of her childhood and grandmother in the poet.

Her grandmother’s house has been a citadel of security and protection which is conspicuously missing from the poet’s  
later life. For her, even the darkness of this house is not terrifying in its impact. It is rather a faithful companion  
providing comfort and security. The poet wishes to transport some of this comforting darkness and memories of this house to her new house. These memories will be her constant assuring companions in her married life. In his article on Kamala Das, O.J. Thomas has observed, “Memory of that house at Nalapat comes back to her as a soothing  
thought. The very thought created a sort of energy in her and inspiration to live and love.”

As the poet remembers her present life, she is once again filled with grief over her loveless state. She badly misses  
her grandmother, the ancestral house and her secure and loved childhood:

*You cannot believe, darling*  
*can you, that I lived in such a house and*  
*was proud and loved*

That early stage is in painful contrast with her present state sans love and sans pride. The ‘proud’ and ‘loved’ child is  
now a beggar, begging at the ‘stranger’s doors’ for love “at least in small change” i.e. a little measure. Since love is not  
to be found in the company of people close to her, she knocks at the stranger’s doors and begs for it. In her quest for true love, she has ‘lost her way’ and wanders here and there. This wistfully nostalgic poem thus ends on a tragic note.

For Kamala Das, her grandmother was her [mother](https://smartenglishnotes.com/2019/01/04/summary-of-my-mother-at-sixty-six-jk-bose-class-10th/)-substitute. “She was the first I loved,” says the poet in her poem  
‘Captive’. None of her later relationships could match the warmth and tenderness given by her grandmother. The oft-repeated desire to be with her, to be in her house, is an expression of Kamala Das’s natural desire to be one with the  
mother in the womb.

In its overall impact the, poem is a forcefully moving poem fraught with nostalgia and anguish. The poet has intensified the emotion by presenting the contrast between her childhood and her grown-up stages. The fullness of the  
distant and absent 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 windows’, ‘frozen air’ evoke a sense of death and despair. The house itself becomes a symbol – an Ednic world, 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.

Kamala Das has resorted to her favourite technique of using an ellipsis to convey the intensity of emotion. Ellipsis also  
serve another purpose of suggesting a shift in mood and tone. She has used a variety of sound patterns, assonance,  
alliteration and especially consonance. Consonance (e.g. line-1 house, once: /s/) and assonance (e.g. line-11 – bedroom,  
brooding: /u/) create the drowsy somnolence apt for the atmosphere. Frequent alliteration (e.g. behind, bedroom, brooding) gives emphasis to the poet’s meaning. The rhetorical question spread in the last four lines underlines the emotional state created by the absence of love. The poem is remarkable for its utter simplicity of diction and intensity of emotion.

Reminiscent of the Poet’s Ancestral Home

The poem is reminiscent of the poet’s grandma and her ancestral home in Malabar, Kerala. Her memory of the love she had received from her grandma is associated with the image of her ancestral home, where she had spent some of the happiest days of her life, and where her old grandma had showered her love and affection. The house withdrew into silence with the death of her grandma. When her grandma died, even the house seemed to share her sorrow, which is poignantly reflected in the sentence “the House withdrew”. The house soon became desolate, and the snakes crawled through the books. Her blood was cold like the moon because there was no one to love her the way she wanted to.

**Yearning for the Past: Choked with Grief**

The poet now lives in another city, a long distance away from her grandmother’s home. But the memories of her ancestral home make her sad. She’s almost heart-broken. The intensity of her emotions is demonstrated by the ellipses in the form of a few dots. Now, in another city, living another life, she’s longing to go home. She knows that she can’t redeem the past, but she wants to go back home, to look through her windows again, and to bring back a handful of darkness – sad and painful memories that she would have made her daily companion, a reminder of her past happiness. For some time, the poet is unable to continue with his thoughts, as shown by the ellipses (dots).

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The poet is now choked with the intensity of his sorrow. She yearns for love like a beggar going from one door to another asking for a little change of love. Her desire for affection and acceptance is not met in marriage, and she follows strangers for love, at least in limited amounts. But even in small changes or coins, she doesn’t get it. Her love-hunger remains unsatisfied, and there is a great loneliness, a void inside her, she tries to fill herself with love, but in vain. The window image is a connection between the past and the present. It means the poet’s urge for a nostalgic peep into his history and to revive his dreams and desires.

**Conclusion**

The poem springs from her own disillusionment with her expectation of unconditional love from the one she loves. In the poem, the image of the ancestral home stands for the strong support and unconditional love she received from her grandmother. The imagery is personal and beautifully articulates her plight in a loveless marriage. Thus, the old house was for her a place of symbolic retreat to a world of innocence, purity and simplicity, an Edenic world where love and happiness are still possible.