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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



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?



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.