

Kunthi (in Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*) Opportunist

Character Kunthi is described as a 'slight, thin girl' who is 'different from the other women, quieter, more reserved.' People, we are told, are not 'at ease with her, because there was some barrier.' Later on, this innocent-looking girl becomes 'sly and secretive' and is described as 'waiting like a vulture.' That image of the patient predator makes more sense as the novel develops. Of all the women in the village, Kunthi is closest to Rukmani. Rukmani helps to deliver her first baby, and after that they are in constant contact. But Kunthi is Rukmani's nemesis. She is an opportunist, a malicious gossip and a prostitute, who seduces Nathan, Rukmani's husband into a momentary sexual encounter. Kunthi is a clever woman and an attractive woman, whose husband deserts her and leaves her to fend for herself.

Activities We first meet Kunthi when she becomes a young mother, although we don't hear much about her bringing up her children. She spends more time gossiping in the village, watching others and waiting to take advantage of them. When her husband leaves her, she begins to frequent the new 'town' that springs up after the factory is built. She earns extra cash for her children as a prostitute

Illustrative moments

Opportunist Kunthi is a shrewd woman, always aware of the situation and sharp-eyed enough to see an opportunity when it presents itself. A good illustration of this quality comes in a conversation with Rukmani, who is always her nemesis. The factory has just opened its doors, and Kunthi has sent her sons to work there. Rukmani says she wishes the factory had never come to the village, and Kunthi declares, 'The factory is a boon. My sons are earning a man's wages there. We are no longer a village, but a growing town.' Rukmani repeats her disapproval of the changes: noise and rude behaviour, hooligans and greed. 'Words and words,' Kunthi says. 'Stupid words. No wonder they call us senseless peasant women.' Although Kunthi proves to be a thoroughly dislikeable person, a malicious gossip, blackmailer and cheat, her open attitude toward inevitable change can be seen as positive and complicates our understanding of her character.

Malicious Kunthi the opportunist is also Kunthi the malicious gossip. One night, Rukmani is returning from a visit to the English doctor's house, where she has gone to seek treatment for her childless daughter. The atmosphere is vivid: '...a full moon was shining, golden and enormous, very low in the sky. Bats went swooping silently by. I kept to the narrow footpath, clear and white in the moonlight, absorbed in my thoughts. I heard no footsteps only a voice calling my name.' It is Kunthi, who then asks why she is coming back very late at night and very secretly. Kunthi cleverly turns every word of Rukmani's answer into the suggestion that she has something to hide, something with the doctor, something with bodies. 'Your husband would no doubt like to know where you have been,' Kunthi says. And later, she will plant the seed of doubt in Nathan's mind concerning his wife's fidelity.

Blackmail Perhaps the low point in Kunthi's behaviour occurs when she blackmails Nathan into stealing food from the little that Rukmani has stored up. A drought has hit the region and no one has much food. Rukmani, ever the thoughtful one, has been slowing building up a store of rice for precisely this situation. She has counted out the days left in the dwindling supply of grains, and one day sees that half of it is gone. Kunthi has told Nathan that if he does not steal the food and give it to her, she will tell Rukmani about their brief sexual encounter some years ago. With this cunning and heartless strategy, Kunthi manages to secure extra food for her children. Do the ends justify the means?