

Nathan (in Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*) Practical

Character Nathan is a hard-working, landless farmer, a man of few ideas and strong emotions. He has little self-awareness and accepts the world as it comes to him. There is no point, he believes, in fighting against the laws of society or of nature. That way leads to disappointment. Better, he says, to adjust and get on with your work. He marries Rukmani, who comes from a higher-status family that has lost its money (otherwise they would not have married her to him). Nathan learns to respect her, for her literacy and clever ideas, and over time he is good husband and father to their many children. He is a stoical person, who admonishes Rukmani when she laments the changes brought by the factory. 'There is no going back,' he says. 'Bend like the grass, so you do not break.' It is somewhat difficult, however, to understand his thoughts and emotions since these are seen through the eyes of the narrator, his wife.

Activities As a farmer, Nathan spends most of his day in the fields, working according to the agricultural season. Sometimes he is ploughing with two oxen; then he sows the seeds, weeds the fields and later harvests the crop. During the months of the monsoon, he often has to repair the house, building up the mud walls and cutting palm fronds to lay on the roof. He enjoys the annual temple festivals, where he can let loose and grab momentary pleasures.

Illustrative Moments

Admiring One of Nathan's qualities is his admiration for his wife, Rukmani, who is literate, whereas he can neither read nor write. This respect is shown in an early scene, a few months after their marriage. Again, we observe this through Rukmani's words: 'Nathan used to come and sit beside me when I was writing. The first time he came to see what I was up to, he sat in silence with his brows drawn together and meeting; but after some watching he went away, and when he came back, his face was clear. "It is well, he said, stroking my hair. "You are clever, Ruku, as I said before." I think it cost him a good deal to say what he did, and he never varied his attitude once. That was typical of my husband: when he had worked things out for himself, he would follow his conclusions at whatever cost to himself.' Other men, Rukmani is suggesting, might have forbid a wife to indulge themselves in something that they themselves did not understand.

Practical Nathan is extremely practical, as is necessary for someone whose large family is teetering on the edge of starvation. At the same time, he is a loving father and wants to give his children a good life. This tension is illustrated in the scene describing the wedding ceremony for their only daughter, Ira. Nathan nearly bursts with pride when he sees his daughter in a beautiful sari and glittering jewellery (which he had borrowed) sitting beside the bridegroom. He feels regret, however, when he realises that he has not hired the right kind of musicians and in the right number. Rukmani had pleaded with him to spend more money but he had been adamant. 'No debts, no debts,' he had repeated. But now he half-wishes that he had broken his rule and given his only daughter a proper wedding.

Jealous The uncomplicated emotions of Nathan sometimes get the better of him. His love for his wife, and the realisation that she is 'better' than him, preys on his mind. When she visits the English doctor in order to get treatment to help her give birth to a boy, the village gossip suggests that she is having a sexual affair with the doctor. At first, Nathan refuses to believe this but cannot stop his suspicions from growing. In one scene, Rukmani says she will go to the doctor to get his assistance in finding a job for one of her sons. When Nathan tells her not to go, she replies, 'But white men have power.' And he says, 'Yes, especially over women.' Rukmani is furious, but Nathan, ever the strong silent type, will not spell out what he has insinuated.