

Nectar in a Sieve (1954)

Story *Nectar in a Sieve* tells a sad story of poverty and struggle in a rural village in south India. The main character is a young woman, Rukmani, who marries a farmer with the unusual name of Nathan and gives birth to a daughter, Ira. She is disappointed because she wanted a son and goes to an English doctor (Kenny) to ask for fertility treatment for a son. It works and (over time) has six sons. She and her husband are happy, tending the fields, growing vegetables, raising their children, going to the local temple and gossiping with neighbours. All this changes when an Englishman opens a tanning factory in the village. Rukmani watches with despair as her quiet, traditional village becomes a noisy, dirty town. More and more problems arise. First, her daughter is married but fails to conceive and returns home a failure. Then a powerful monsoon season ruins the crops and two of her sons take jobs in the factory. Their salary helps the family avoid starvation and enables Rukmani to seek out the English doctor for treatment to help Ira. Her visits, however, prompt the village gossip to say she is carrying on an affair with him. When Ira does give birth, Rukmani visits Ira's husband but finds he's already married another woman. Then three of her sons leave for work, two to Ceylon and one to a far-away city. A drought threatens her family with starvation, and although she has saved food, half of it is given away by her husband to a neighbour Kunthi. Rukmani then discovers why: her husband has been blackmailed into giving her food otherwise Kunthi will reveal that he is the father of two of her children. Rukmani is devastated but they make up and carry on. Then she learns that her daughter, Ira, has turned to prostitution to make money to feed her young brother, who nevertheless dies of malnutrition. One of Rukmani's sons working at the factory also dies in an 'accident.' Her only remaining son leaves farming to become an assistant at the English doctor's hospital. Now Ira's daughter develops albinism and is mistreated by the villagers. Next, it transpires that the factory has bought the land that Nathan rents and the family must move. In old age, they leave and try to find their son in the city but only discover that his wife has become a prostitute. They meet a street urchin named Puli, who then adopts them and the three of them form a 'family' working in a stone quarry. When Nathan dies of fatigue, Rukmani returns to the village, where she finds one of her sons still alive. Poor and having lost most of her family, Rukmani manages to find a meagre happiness in the end.

Characters

Rukmani Rukmani is the main character and the narrator of this story. She is the daughter of a former village headman who fell on hard times and had to marry her to a poor, landless farmer. Before that, however, her father taught her to read and write, an ability that raises Rukmani above the ordinary woman in her village. She marries and raises seven children, then loses nearly all of them and her husband, in an unending series of tragedies. By the end, she seems defeated but still manages to muster some hope.

Nathan Nathan is her husband, a hard-working man, who works on rented land. He loves her and is proud of her literacy, but he is crushed by the poverty they endure and by the departure of his sons. In the end, he is forced off the land and dies working in a stone quarry.

Kunthi Kunthi is a sly, secretive and unhappy woman, who turns out to be Rukmani's worst enemy, even though Rukmani served as midwife during the birth of her first child. She also differs from Rukmani in welcoming the economic boom brought by the factory. Her worst act is to blackmail Nathan into stealing food from his wife's kitchen. We feel some sympathy when her husband leaves her and she turns to prostitution as a means to feed her children.

Kenny (Kennington) Kenny is a 'tall gaunt English doctor with pale skin and sunken eyes the colour of a kingfisher's wing.' He comes to the village as an outsider and, with Indian and foreign aid, builds a hospital, but he shows a westerner's disdain and lack of understanding for the 'natives' he wants to help. His friendship with Rukmani gives rise to scandalous rumours, and he later provides some comfort to the family by offering a job to one of Rukmani's sons. By the end, he achieves a modicum of cultural understanding of the people whom he wishes 'to serve.'

Puli Puli is a street-wise and fearless orphan whom Rukmani and Nathan meet in the city after they have been forced to leave the village penniless. He forms a deep bond with them and they become a sort of family. He is practical and helps them find work in stone quarry. He watches over the aging

couple like a son, guiding them to the quarry and safeguarding their meagre earnings. After Nathan's death, Puli goes back to the village with Rukmani as her adopted son.

Themes

Poverty The unrelenting suffering of a landless family pervades this story from start to finish. That misery is tied to the fact that the husband owns no land and in India land equals money. Nathan, the husband, is hard-working, as is his wife, Rukmani, but he only rents the land and, in the end, he is evicted from his land and house because it is sold to the new factory owners. The family's poverty forces five of her six sons to abandon agriculture and leave for work elsewhere. Rukmani questions her sons' motivation by asking them, 'What is it that calls you? Is it gold? Although we have none, remember that money isn't everything.' And they answer: 'It [money] is an important part of living, and work is another. There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it.'

Industrialisation The tanning factory built in the village represents the large-scale industrialisation that overtook India in the 1950s and 1960s as part of Nehru's famous 'five-year plans'. Rukmani, as the author's spokeswoman, laments the changes to the environment: 'At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more—except crows and kites and such scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal...' It is not only the land but also the family that is destroyed by the factory (which is especially loathsome to a Hindu because it works with leather); the better salaries for the factory workers attracts her own sons and leaves the family with fewer hands to do the agricultural work. Rukmani sees the factory as symbolic of a wider corruption in society: '...the tannery had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way... it had the power that money brings, so that to attempt to withstand it was like trying to stop the onward rush of the great juggernaut.'

Family Family is another major theme. Rukmani and her husband form a tight family unit, into which seven children are born. The numerous tragedies of their lives are family-based: poverty forces her sons to leave the village; her daughter is childless; her husband fathers children by another woman (before his marriage to Rukmani). Other families in the village suffer similar dismemberment caused by separation, infidelity and death from disease. The importance of family is emphasised at the very end of the novel, when Rukmani returns penniless to the village. Her husband has died and five of her seven children have gone away. She brings with her a young boy whom she met during her wanderings and who helped her get through the toughest times. When she leads him into the house, her remaining son looks at the stranger and asks, 'Who is this?' She answers immediately, 'He is my son.'

