

# NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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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.

### 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.'

## **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.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### **RUKMANI** (Survivor)

**Character** Rukmani is the fourth daughter of a father who was the village headman but fell on hard times and was forced to marry her to a poor, landless farmer, named Nathan. Rukmani is a conventional south Indian Hindu woman: religious, devoted to her husband and children and a hard-worker. She, however, has ambition, which has been nurtured in her by her father, who also taught her to read and write (unusual for a woman in rural India at the time). Although she is judgemental at the beginning, she adjusts to her married life, learning to be frugal, and brings up seven children. When things go wrong, she does not give up hope. She is a survivor, who has weathered the storms of poverty and near starvation, marital shocks and village blackmail. She watches as her sons desert her and her daughter becomes a prostitute. She does not give up hope, however, even when she and her husband are evicted from their home and are forced to wander abroad. She may appear idealised, to be too much of a saint (indeed, many critics have likened her to Sita, the long-suffering but constant wife of Rama), but there is no doubt that most readers identify with her and are moved by her suffering and her brave refusal to give in to negative thoughts.

**Activities** Rukmani spends most of her time raising her seven children and preparing food. She pounds the rice to remove their husks, she winnows the grains and she cooks them in boiling water. She pounds red chillies into powder, she cleans fish and she chops vegetables. She also enjoys tending to the vegetables in her little garden and going to festivals and ceremonies, such as weddings and rituals. She regularly goes to the village temple and visits her mother in a nearby town.

### **Illustrative moments**

Hope The novel has an epigram from Coleridge: 'Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve; and hope without an object cannot live.' A dramatic illustration of Rukmani's eternal optimism occurs midway through the story when a terrible drought hits the village and there is no crop and therefore no money. In desperation to get money to pay the land rent, Rukmani and Nathan begin to sell their few possessions. When that is not enough, Nathan proposes to sell their remaining seeds, but Rukmani argues that such a move would be short-sighted. She points out that without seeds they won't be able to plant a new crop, but he says that if they don't pay the rent, they won't have any land in which to put the seeds. He shouts at her: 'Do you think I am blind and don't see, or so stupid as to believe that crops are raised without seed?' Rukmani explains, 'he was not shouting at me but at the terrible choice forced upon us; I knew this but could not prevent the tears rolling down my face.' Then she says, 'Let us only try. Let us keep our hope for the next harvest.'

Frugal Hope is not the only tactic in her survival strategy. Rukmani is also very frugal. This is all the more impressive because she was brought up in a once-wealthy family and is shocked when she goes to live with her landless husband in a two-room hut. We get some idea of the family's poverty when Rukmani tells us how frugal she has been: 'To the children I handed out two annas [roughly two pennies] apiece, to be spent on fireworks. I had never been able to do so before --in previous years we had contented ourselves with watching other people's fireworks, or with going down to the bonfire in the village, and even now I felt qualms about wasting money on such quickly spent pleasures; but their rapturous faces overcame my misgivings. It is only once, I thought, a memory.'

Censorious If Rukmani has a flaw it is her tendency to judge people, including her sons and husband. This might be explained by her higher status background, but it nevertheless causes friction in the family. A good illustration of this occurs in a scene, wonderfully described by the author, when the village celebrates an annual festival. There is dancing and drinking, and Nathan does not restrain himself from participating. In the frenzied activity, Rukmani loses contact with him (in more than one sense) and then finds him swaying around with one of the children on his shoulders. 'Have you lost your senses?' she asks sharply, in front of onlookers. 'No, only my cares,' he says and dances away. Here, for once, Nathan's simple, emotional approach to life triumphs over Rukmani's more complex, thoughtful personality.

### **NATHAN** (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.

### **KUNTHI (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 slowly 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?