

## **Rukmani (Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*) 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.