

Student name

Instructor name

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Date

Nectar in a Sieve

The novel Nectar in a Sieve is brilliantly written to cover several different themes including the concepts of tradition, hope and love. The story opens in the voice of Rukmani, a young woman born into the upper crust of her Indian society, but this birth status does not automatically guarantee her the prosperous future it might suggest. Her arranged marriage does not provide to the same degree as those of her sisters, who came of age when their father still held some prestige within the community. What it doesn't provide in material comforts, though, this marriage provides a strong and abiding love as Rukmani and Nathan's family begins to grow. The hint of change provided in the lower status of Rukmani's marriage is carried forward with the building of the tannery in her husband's village. Conflicts of tradition and the outside world begin to insinuate themselves into Rukmani's life, bringing change almost faster than she can adjust. Struggling through poverty and heartbreak, as well as the changing socioeconomic culture of their village, Rukmani demonstrates a quiet, pragmatic dignity that is concerned with life. By telling the story of a young Indian woman as she weds her husband and grows old with him, raises a family and suffers several hardships along the way, author Kamala Markandaya strives to present a picture of a changing world and how it is the love of a family that overcomes these tremendous challenges.

Markandaya's novel is a fictional account of an Indian woman's experience in the rural villages of India presented in first-person narrative voice from Rukmani's perspective. Because she never provides a village name or date, it is impossible to determine exactly when the story is taking place, giving it a timeless quality that speaks equally today as it did when it was written, shortly after India became independent of Britain. "Some readers of Nectar in a Sieve see Kamala Markandaya's portrayal of Indian peasants as mythlike. One figure often mentioned as a model for Rukmani is the goddess Sita. Sita emerged from the earth into life when her stepfather was plowing his fields and became the wife of the Hindu god Rama. In the great epic poem Ramayana, Sita is a symbol of devotion, never-ending patience, and self-sacrifice. In art, she is often shown gazing at Rama with blissful happiness" ("Study Guide", n.d.). Rukmani is indeed presented as the epitome of self-sacrifice and patience within the novel, consistently working to uphold the traditional beliefs of her Hindu heritage, a background that was well-known by the author who grew up within the Hindu world.

Although the author was born and bred in the cities of India, it is reported that her work as a journalist while attending college brought her into close contact with the rural villages in which the majority of all Indians live. This experience is reflected within the pages of the book as the author explores the inner conflict of a woman trapped between her old ideals and the incoming ideas of progress. At the same time, she is able to see how progress, as it is defined by the outside world in terms of factories and industries, is actually the cause of much of the suffering among the indigenous people of the region. Some of the events in the story, such as the existence of a temple in the city to which Rukmani and Nathan flee when they lose their farm, are based on real-life events as well.

The famous Mother Teresa became famous because of her efforts to help the starving and dying of Indian cities. “In 1948, she came across a half-dead woman lying in front of a Calcutta hospital. She stayed with the woman until she died. ... In 1952, she founded the Nirmal Hriday Home for the Dying in a former temple in Calcutta. It was there that they would care for the dying Indians that were found on the streets” (“Mother Teresa”, 2004). “Though she lived most of her life in London, she was never alienated from her Indian roots; though she shunned literary limelight, her humanity and vision was widely admired” (Kumar, 2004).

Told from the perspective of Rukmani, Markandaya gives the impression that she most closely identifies with the confusion and persistence of the peasant woman struggling to survive and cling to her values amid a rapidly changing world. Although Rukmani loses her birth family to the passage of time and her many of her sons to progress, she retains a quiet dignity in her acceptance of what life throws at her and her ability to carry on in spite of it. Although she gives in to despair occasionally, it never lasts long as is shown in a quick exchange between Rukmani and her husband upon her third son’s departure to be a servant in a city two days’ traveling away. “‘You brood too much,’ Nathan said, ‘and think only of your trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look at our land – is it not beautiful? The fields are green and the grain is ripening. It will be a good harvest year, there will be plenty.’ ... Thus he sought to comfort me, and after a time I was with him, thinking pleasurably of harvesting, and of plucking the pumpkins swelling on the vine, and visiting our son – and so we made our plans” (Markandaya, 1955, p. 98). Throughout the novel, although the things that have been lost are lamented as the beauty of a bygone day, the characters continue to look to the future,

making plans and taking actions that will lead to a new tomorrow. That that tomorrow never seems to arrive does not dissuade them from the pursuit. After her two oldest sons have left for a faraway land for unknown fortunes or destruction, another son has been killed at the tannery plant under suspicion of theft, a fourth leaves to be a servant in a faraway city and a fifth dies of starvation while still an infant, Rukmani seems to have little left to be thankful for. Her daughter, likewise, suffers her own injustices, being brought back to her parents after not being able to produce a son as heir for her husband and disgraced further after being forced to take up prostitution in order to try to save her youngest brother from the starvation that is claiming him. The loss of their land seems to be the final straw, but when they arrive in the city to seek refuge from what they consider to be their most successful son, they find he, too, has disappeared from their lives forever. Struggling to earn enough money to return home, Rukmani loses her last pillar of support when Nathan dies of illness brought on by their destitute living conditions, she finds new support in the young boy they'd met in the city, managing to bring him with her back to her remaining son and daughter.

In the end, Markandaya indicates it is only the love of family that is able to sustain Rukmani as she survives the transition between one culture and another. Everything else has been stripped from her. She has lost many of her sons. Her daughter has lost any shred of status in the town since Ira's days as a prostitute and the birth of the albino child, Sacrabani. Rukmani's husband is gone and she was not even successful in bringing him home. However, Rukmani is able to bring the child Puli with her. "[O]ut of my affliction I called to Puli. I do not know what words I used, when I think of what I may have said I shiver. ... And he, compassionate creature, who drew from me the

arrows of sorrow one by one, listened, and when I came home I was not alone” (Markandaya, 1955, p. 253). Describing her actions as violent in nature, using the term ‘arrows’ to indicate her rage at the injustice of her husband’s parting, Rukmani still manages to turn this anger to the positive, bringing the child home to the only way in which he could receive medical care for the illness that had eaten away his fingers and therefore prevented him from being able to obtain gainful employment. The love that has been shown by Rukmani as they were growing up is then returned and extended immediately to Puli by Rukmani’s children, who invite him to “Come with me and rest, I will prepare the rice” (Ira) and tell her “Do not worry, ... We shall manage” (Selvam) (Markandaya, 1955, p. 254), making this concept rather explicit.

I have to agree with this conclusion. Although the family never seemed to have anything, Rukmani still managed to lose a lot by the end of the story. It is well demonstrated how this is true in the world in which Rukmani lives, but Markandaya never provides a date or a village name or any other form of identification that might indicate where in India Rukmani and her family lived. Because of this, her story takes on a timeless quality, which means that this conclusion must be as true now as it was when the story was written. This seems to be the case as the country just went through a time of economic trouble and natural disasters, making us realize that even those who seem to have nothing have managed to lose something in the turmoil. Those who managed to survive these events are those who were able to support themselves on their love for family enough to quickly overcome their grief and move on with the business of living.

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