

Nectar in a Sieve Study Guide

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor

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Plot Summary

The story follows the life of the narrator and heroine, Rukmani, who grows and matures through the clashing of the east and the west in post-independence India. Her tale begins when she is married at the age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer. The youngest of four daughters, Rukmani is left without a large dowry, and is therefore given in marriage to what society considered a man “beneath” her. However, despite having little and not owning his own land, her husband, Nathan, is very kind and loving towards her. Rukmani considers herself lucky to have been blessed with a kind and loving husband.

Embracing her new life as the wife of a farmer, Rukmani’s early days are remembered as happy and plentiful. The women of the village patiently teach her the ways of the land—how to grow vegetables, milk the goat, churn milk into butter and how to mull rice. While Rukmani and her husband want for little in the early days of their marriage, the first tragedy, and test comes when Rukmani bears a baby girl, and is unable to conceive again for the next seven years. Desperate to provide her husband with a male heir, Rukmani finally secretly visits a western doctor, Kenny, who had helped her mother in her final days. Kenny becomes a prominent figure in Rukmani’s life after she gives birth to five sons following a visit to Kenny for his assistance.

However, with each new mouth to feed, there is less and less for the family to put away and save towards both their only daughter’s dowry and towards buying the land upon which they live and depend. Rukmani learns to be creative in having enough to fill everyone’s stomach; however, monsoons, droughts and them building a large tannery serve to send the family into starvation and hardship after hardship.

Together with her husband, Rukmani endures a seemingly endless series of tragedies, which begin, as she states, when the tannery is built and the small village in which she lives is transformed into a bustling, dirty, immoral metropolis. Poverty, starvation, and death ensue as the worlds of the east and west collide in this once rural town. Rukmani watches as the crops, the livelihood and food source for her family, are destroyed by monsoons and drought, leaving them unable to eat or pay rent to the landlord. Her two eldest sons, having become fed up with unfair wages and poor treatment at the tannery, decide to leave and seek work hundreds of miles away. Her daughter Ira, married at age 14 for five years, is returned home to the family after being unable to conceive a child. Finally driven to desperation to try to save her youngest brother from starvation, Ira becomes a prostitute, only to finally conceive and give birth to an albino child. A former neighbor, Kunthi, uses the only secrets Nathan and Rukmani have from each other to blackmail them both into giving her all the grain they have to feed their family. The youngest son dies of starvation. Another son is killed in a misunderstanding at the tannery. And finally, after skating by year after year, the land upon which they have lived and farmed for thirty years is sold to the tannery, and lost and confused Rukmani and her husband head for a strange city to seek their third born son to take them into his house.



After traveling nearly 100 miles by bullock cart, Rukmani and Nathan arrive in the large city where their third born son moved several years before and married. Carrying very few possessions and still possessing a trusting and simple-minded attitude, they are quickly robbed of what little money and material items they have as they wander through the streets of unfamiliar territory, in search of a son, no one seems to know. After a full day of searching, and a sleepless night in a temple surrounded by the homeless and less fortunate, Rukmani and her aging husband find help from a young boy, Puli, who leads them to the house where their son had gone to work years earlier. They are greeted with the news that their son had left to seek a higher wage elsewhere nearly three years ago. The owner of the house, a female doctor to whom Nathan and Rukmani have a hard time relating, shows them kindness after learning they are familiar with Kenny, the doctor whose help Rukmani sought to conceive her sons, offers them their first meal that day and kindly points them in the direction of the house to which their son went.

Finally reaching a large house employing many servants, Rukmani and Nathan are led to their son's hut, where they meet for the first time his young wife. Almost immediately, their hopes of finding a home with their son and his wife are destroyed. The source of the icy attitude of their daughter-in-law is soon laid out in the open as she reveals their son left her two and half years before and she had no idea where he went. Working as a servant in the house to feed herself and her two small children, Rukmani realizes quickly that there is no place for herself and her husband with their daughter in law. As they take their leave of her, the reality of their situation becomes clear. They are homeless, penniless and without any friends or relations in a large and unfamiliar city. Not knowing what else to do, and wishing they had been better about keeping in touch with their son, they return to the only place they do know, the temple where they are at least guaranteed one meal a day and a place to sleep.

Not the types to lose hope or give up, Rukmani and Nathan quickly devise a plan to earn the money they need to return to their village and their son and daughter. Rukmani, who was taught to read and write by her father, begins writing and reading letters for a small fee and earns enough money to save a little and add some more sustenance to the meager meals at the temple. However, accumulating the money to return home is slow going. Then one day, their luck turns for the first time in many months. Puli, the young boy who showed them the way to the doctor's house where they believed their son to be, reappears to collect payment for his kindness. Attaching himself to them as a kind of son, under the pretense of collecting what is due to him, Puli helps Rukmani start earning more money by cutting stone in the quarries. By this time, Nathan's health has deteriorated substantially. Having lived through months of starvation, homelessness, and loss, he finally crosses over into the next world with Rukmani by his side. Not knowing what else to do, Rukmani takes the money Puli had helped them to earn and save, and returns to her home village, bringing Puli with her as an adopted son. The story ends where it begins, with Rukmani reflecting on her life as an old woman at the end of her days.



Chapter 1-2

Summary

The book begins with the narrator, Rukmani, as an old woman briefly describing her current life before launching into her story. Married at the age of twelve, she was the youngest of four sisters. While her first two sisters had large weddings to which the entire village and all the relatives came, and they took with them large dowries and many jewels, her third sister Thangam and herself had very small weddings and small dowries. When it came time for her to marry, many whispered that the marriage was beneath her, as her family had almost nothing left to give her for a dowry. Not but a child, a fearful Rukmani leaves her mother and father to go live with her new husband in a world unknown to her.

Traveling six hours by bullock cart, Rukmani leaves the comforts of her once prosperous father's house, and trades it for life in a two-room mud hut with a man who at this point is a complete stranger. Nearly collapsing from exhaustion and distress at the reality of her new life, Rukmani quickly discovers that what she might be lacking in material comforts, is more than made up for in a kind, caring and attentive husband. As Rukmani travels back into the deep recesses of her memory, she is able to recall her first week as a bride, learning for the first time where the best part of the river to wash clothes was. While at the river doing her washing, she first becomes acquainted with the other women of the village in which she now resides. Kali, Janakai and Kunthi, the three women who lived closest to Rukmani and Nathan, initially take much interest in the newcomer. Kali is quickly depicted as big and boisterous, Janakai as the kind but homely mother of many, and Kunthi, the youngest next to Rukmani and most beautiful. Kunthi is also with her first child. With the help of these women, and the support of her husband, Rukmani quickly settles into life as a farmer's wife, learning to plant vegetables, mull rice, make milk and cheese, and how to save and plan ahead for the future. As she learns, she also matures from a child into a wife, and is very quickly also with child.

Of her new friends, the one person who remains cold and at a distance is Kunthi. In chapter two, Kunthi goes into labor with her first child, and Rukmani is the only one at home to be with her while the midwife is fetched. Yelling and screaming Kunthi tries her best to get Rukmani to leave, saying she does not want her there. Rukmani stays, and Kunthi's son is born before the midwife is able to reach the house. Having lost track of time, Rukmani returns home to her husband and finds him cross with her for the first time since they were married. While at first surprised by his reaction, Rukmani understands that he is angry out of worry for the safety of their own child. She begins doing less and less work around their land as her pregnancy progresses. Rukmani uses her new leisure to write, something her father taught her to do. She also works in the small garden she has planted, leaving the fieldwork for her husband. However, one day as she is weeding she pulls back some leaves and accidentally touches the skin of a



cobra that had sought shelter in the garden. The snake does not strike, but it does scare her near to death and she screams and sprints into the house despite her large belly.

Either due to the fright or the running, Rukmani's first child is born a few days after the snake incident. Her heart sinks as a small but healthy baby girl is placed in her arms. Disappointed at not having provided her husband with a son, it takes her some time to warm to her child. Kali, despite her tendency to be a loud mouth and gossip queen, proves invaluable to Rukmani during and after the birth. She cooks, cleans, and even waters the garden as mother and baby recover. After telling her of the snake fright, Kali warns Rukmani that cobras are sacred and her husband should not have killed it. Rukmani and Nathan disagree about Kali's point of view and ultimately, the snake is forgotten as Rukmani settles in to being the mother of her happy, beautiful, and well-behaved daughter, Irawaddy.

Analysis

The first two chapters of the story set the tone with which the narrator, Rukmani, will tell her life's story. Told in the past tense, it is clear from the very beginning, as Rukmani awakes from a dream that her husband was with her again, that she and her husband shared a happy life together; despite the hardships they would endure. Rukmani makes it clear that despite people's remarks or beliefs that the marriage was beneath her, she could not disagree with them more. "How little they knew, any of them!" She exclaims as she remembers the comments of a poor match being made between herself and her husband.

However, despite the clear manner in which Rukmani claims marital bliss, there is also some foreshadowing of the one act of silence Rukmani will commit towards her husband and he will commit towards her that will ultimately nearly cost them their lives. The foreshadowing comes in the form of Kunthi, the other young wife living in the village who gives birth a few months before Rukmani. As Rukmani states, Kunthi had "a barrier which we could not surmount". (9) However, when Kunthi gives birth and begs and pleads for anyone but Rukmani to be present, to the point of wanting to go through labor completely alone, the reader becomes aware that there is more behind Kunthi's dislike of Rukmani than perhaps even Rukmani understands. Stubborn and courageous, Rukmani stays, and stays longer than she originally planned. Upon returning home, she finds her husband cross with her for the first time. As he chastises her for staying so long, justifying it as a concern for the child she is carrying, the first (and presumably only) lie Nathan tells Rukmani is produced in their first few months of marriage. As it will later be revealed in a time of desperation, Nathan had actually fathered Kunthi's son. As is revealed in later chapters, Kunthi becomes not only the keeper of this secret, but also of the one secret Rukmani keeps from her husband.

Vocabulary

homely, consequence, vessel, jauntily, grove, thatched, garland, veil, vivid, disdain, futility, clamor, surmount, zealous, irrigation, tranquility, assert, fanciful



Chapter 3-5

Summary

In Chapter three, the first signs, and worry and fear, begin for Rukmani and her husband. After giving birth to a baby girl, they both fear that Ira will be their only child, and that there will be no sons to work the land with their father. To add to her stress, Rukmani's mother falls ill. On her deathbed, her mother tells Rukmani, "You will yet bear many sons. I see them, and what the dying see comes to pass." (18) In caring for and staying with her mother during her illness, Rukmani meets Kenny, a Western doctor with a rough but ultimately deeply caring attitude. A bond develops between Rukmani and Kenny as she watches the care and respect he shows to her mother as she finally passes.

In a moment of weakness, Rukmani opens up to Kenny about her fear and frustration at not having born another child since her first. He invites her to come visit him, telling her he can make no promises, but will do what he can. Rukmani continues to wait, but when her mother's dying prophesy fails to come true she finally goes to see Kenny. Seven years after the birth of her daughter, Rukmani bears her first son, Arjun. She does not tell her husband of her visit to Kenny, fearing what he might think of her putting herself in the hands of a foreigner. And so begins a series of moments in which she wishes she had told him, but continues to keep silent. Following the birth of her first son, Rukmani gives birth to four more boys within four years—Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam. With every new child, the food supply becomes less and less and Rukmani is forced to begin selling the majority of the vegetables she grew in the village, keeping only the small and rotting ones for her family. Despite the hard times, the harvest was still good and she was still able to store and save some money for her daughter's dowry.

In Chapter four, the first signs of change come in the form of line of workers and townspeople who come with materials to build a large tannery. The entire village turns out to watch as these men speaking their language, but with a slight accent, begin building the brick building. The overseer of the project was dressed in a shirt and trousers, a sight never seen in the village, for all the men wore loincloths and turbans due to the heat. When the white owner of the tannery shows up, the overseer, previously happy to have the crowd of the village watching the progress of the tannery, orders everyone to disperse and leave. Several villagers take offense to being told what to do by a stranger in their own town. The workers build constantly for two months, and during that time Rukmani and others experience a brief increase in prosperity. However, as quickly as they came, the workers leave. Leaving in their wake a large empty building and a disrupted economy in the village.

It becomes clear in this chapter that Rukmani and Nathan have significantly differing opinions on the building of the tannery and the inevitable change that it will bring with it. Having their first fight in front of their children, Rukmani refuses to accept that such a change is upon them while Nathan insists that accepting it is the best thing to do.



Shortly after, their former village is again turned into a town as workers and their families come to settle the land and begin work in the tannery. Rukmani finds herself alone in despising the existence of the factory, as Kunthi expresses her joy of the increase of people and economy, and even Kali and Janakai become joyous of the employment opportunity the factory provides to their many sons. However, for Rukmani and Nathan, the tannery brings even more stress as they realize the looks their only daughter receives from the young men working in the tannery imply she is quickly growing out of childhood and that they must keep a closer watch over her.

As Chapter five opens, it brings with it the one good thing the tannery brings into Rukmani's life, the presence of her friend Kenny, the doctor who helped her conceive her five sons. Contracted as the doctor for the workers in the tannery, Kenny becomes an important friend to Rukmani and her family. After embarrassing him at their first meeting by calling him her lord and benefactor and kissing his feet, she invites him to her home and he quickly becomes a favorite friend of the whole family. Although he is not always able to disguise his disgust with the Indian way of life—such as using dung inside the house for many things, and bearing what he considers an excess of children, he begins helping the family when he can by bringing them milk or extra food.

Analysis

These three chapters mark a quick jump from Rukmani the child bride, to Rukmani the mature mother of six without the means to feed her family. While only in her early 20s as she bears her five sons, the required level of maturity required of a mother to that many makes her appear much older. This points to the fact that childhood among children in the Indian culture during this time was very short. As soon as a girl hit puberty she was married, and as soon as a boy could work he was either helping his father or doing what he could to earn a wage to help support the family.

The presence of Kenny throughout these chapters in the book also brings to Rukmani's character a shroud of mystery. While she visits Kenny to help her conceive her sons, she never provides detail as to what sort of procedure was done. It may have been she herself did not understand it—there is much evidence throughout the novel that Kenny and Rukmani exist in very different worlds with very different opinions of each other. He does not hide his disgust of the simple mindedness of the villagers (and specifically Rukmani) or their refusal to ask for help as they go through hardship after hardship. She wonders silently if he has a wife and family, and what compels him to keep returning to their village. Their mutual affection and friendship raises the questions as to the true nature of their relationship, not only for the people of the village, but also for the reader. While nothing untoward is ever implied by Rukmani and her love for her husband is genuine throughout the novel, the mystery surrounding some of their relationship and the closeness with which they interact and converse does raise thoughts and questions that come back to haunt Rukmani later in life.



Vocabulary

dung, taciturn, benefactor, kindled, rejoice, gaudy, gnawing, suckling, beckoned, furor, chaff, spawned, commotion, lavishly



Chapter 6-9

Summary

Chapter six opens with the marriage of Ira. Having reached puberty, she is married at age fourteen to a young man from another village. The match, arranged by Old Granny, an elderly woman who is a dear friend of Rukmani's, was a good match with Ira marrying above the size of her dowry due to her good looks. During the wedding and the feast that follows, it becomes apparent how economical Rukmani has been in putting aside and saving for Ira's wedding. There is more food than even Rukmani expected, and Nathan is pleased with how well she planned ahead.

One month following the wedding, the monsoon season hits in chapter seven. Having not had time to make preparations with the wedding planning, Rukmani and her family are hit hard. Their roof leaks constantly, and with every day the rice paddy becomes more and more flooded. When the rains finally cease the crops are destroyed. Hoping to buy some provisions in town, Nathan and Rukmani venture out only to find all the shops destroyed as well. When the water recedes a little they are able to buy some rice for an expensive price in town, and drain the paddy to get the fish that have accumulated in the water there. However, there will be no crops or food until the next year's crop.

In Chapter eight, the destruction of the farms from the monsoon has some of the village children turn to the tannery for work in order to be able to afford the high prices for the scarce supply of food in the town. Kunthi's sons are the first to seek work in the tannery, Kunthi begins seeking the attention she receives from young men in town, and Janakai's husband goes out of business as a shopkeeper and the family is forced to pack up and move away. While the people of the village continue to struggle and starve, their village grows into a crowded and busy town. The tannery continues to buy up more and more land, and their workers and officials continue to increase. A Muslim population moves into the town, and Rukmani continues to be shocked and curious by the burkas worn by the women. Rukmani is frightened by the restricted and closed in life of a wife indoors, and keeps her distance from the newcomers.

In Chapter nine, the changing times of the town near which they inhabit finally reach Rukmani's family as well. The change begins when Ira is returned to her family by her husband due to not having borne him any children in their five years of marriage. While this is not seen as uncommon or a misconstrued choice by her husband, Ira is deeply wounded emotionally by the experience. With no hope for another marriage as a non-virgin and rumored to be barren, Rukmani and Nathan once again have another mouth to feed. Rukmani holds onto a secret hope that Kenny can help her daughter as he helped her, which allows her to continue life without a loss of hope.

Finally fed up with being hungry and seeing his brothers constantly hungry, Arjun makes up his mind to go and work at the tannery to earn a wage for food. While his parents



feel disrespected, he assures them he knows they are doing everything they can, but that it is not enough. Shortly after the second oldest goes to join his brother, stating that there is no point in working land they do not own. This comment hurts Nathan, who was looking forward to his sons working with him. However, their sons are very generous and good, always sharing their wages with their parents to help feed the family.

Analysis

These four chapters represent the changing of times from tradition to new ideas that came with the independence of a nation. On the one hand, there is the very traditional marriage of Ira, combined with the very traditional returning of her to her parent's home when children are not forthcoming. On the other hand is the decision of Arjun and Thambi to set off on their own to make money, rather than following in their father's footsteps and helping with the farm, as was tradition. In these two scenarios the difference between the always accepting Rukmani and Nathan, who expect life to go no other way than how it is going and don't search for something to do about it, but rather survive it, is sharply contrasted with the attitude and thoughts of the younger generation who decide it's time to do something about their perpetual state of hunger.

Whether it's the influence of the "white men" such as Kenny and others who view the traditional silence and survival attitude of the Indian people as idiocy and simple mindedness, it is clear that the mindset of Rukmani and Nathan's children is much different from their parents. Having voiced her concern about the influence of the tannery on their simple village life, Rukmani is forced to accept her elder sons' choice to use the tannery for their survival and benefit.

Vocabulary

insolence, dissuade, provocative, paddy, pallid, distended, gruel, pervading, vivid, corrugated



Chapter 10

Summary

Chapter ten is a welcome break from the hardships and struggles Rukmani and her family continues to endure throughout the book. During this chapter the Festival of Lights, Deepavalli occurs. Due to the extra money being earned by their eldest sons, it is the first time the family can afford to buy fireworks to set off during the festival. Traditionally a holiday and celebration for children, this particular year finds everyone in a great mood, most of all Rukmani's husband who jokingly lifts her high above the village crowd to better view the spectacle. That night, exhausted and happy from the fun of the evening, Rukmani's seventh child is conceived.

Analysis

This short chapter occurs as a brief break from the heartache and struggles of Rukmani's ever-changing world for both the characters and the readers. Not only is this chapter indicative of the small joys and pleasures still enjoyed by children in this difficult time, but for Rukmani and her husband marks a rekindling of their youth and love for each other. Able to put their current situation behind them enough to enjoy each other physically and emotionally, this is one of Rukmani's only descriptions of their love making in the entire book. It is in this chapter that the differences and disagreements about the tannery and how to approach the changing atmosphere in which they lived disappear and Rukmani and Nathan are once again united as one. This also marks the beginning of making more decisions together, rather than fighting each other on things that are happening and then finally conceding to what is deemed inevitable.

Vocabulary

strode, climax, peril, capering, indulgently, ecstatic, quickened, crackle, wicks, converging



Chapter 11-14

Summary

The joy of the Festival of Lights does not last long. In chapter eleven, Rukmani capitalizes on Nathan's absence for a day to visit Kenny and ask if he can help Ira bear children, as he helped her. After waiting all day, Rukmani finally manages to speak with a tired and disgruntled Kenny who wonders why Ira did not come to him herself. Finally dropping his rough tone and chastising Rukmani for still behaving like a child around him, he agrees to see Ira and do what he can. While walking home, Rukmani runs into Kunthi. It is now very late, and Kunthi wonders why Rukmani is out and about at such a late hour. When Kunthi implies Rukmani was using her body to gain favor with Kenny, Rukmani gets angry and physically attacks her. As her sari slips, the truth of Kunthi's career as a prostitute is revealed in the markings and paintings covering her body to make her appear more voluptuous. The meeting ends with more hatred between the two women than ever before.

Ira visits Kenny, and Rukmani travels alone to ask her husband to take her back. Unfortunately, he had grown tired of waiting and had already taken a new wife. Ira is crushed until Rukmani gives birth to her last child, another son named Kuti. Ira takes him on much as her own and becomes herself again, however Rukmani worries about what will become of her once she and Nathan have gone. "Who will take care of her?" she often wonders in her narrator's voice.

In Chapter Twelve more trouble ensues. The tannery stops allowing the workers to take a lunch break, and to her horror Rukmani discovers that her two eldest sons are the leaders and instigators of a group demanding higher wages and therefore responsible for the increased strife in working conditions. Finally leading a revolt in the form of a strike, the tannery replaces those not willing to work for the wages they paid with those who would, and Rukmani's husband is once again the sole provider for the family. Shortly after, an opportunity arises for Arjun and Thambi to travel a far distance to work in tea plantations. Despite the pleading of their parents, and the stark reality that they would probably never see their family again in accepting work at such a far distance, the two eldest boys leave. The third eldest is not long to follow, having found work as a servant in a distant city with Kenny's help. As Rukmani attempts to find comfort and solace in the departure of three of her sons, she and Kenny have the first conversation about Kenny's life outside of India, in which it is revealed he does have a wife and children, whom he goes to see when he's had enough of the poverty-ridden land of India for a while.

The next chapter brings more hardship as the rains necessary for the crops to grow do not come. When the collector for their landlord comes, they have no payment. After threatening to kick them off their land, he agrees to give them time to come up with the money to pay half of their rent. Desperately collecting anything that will fetch a price, Nathan and Rukmani sell everything they can and still come up far short of half of their



rent. Their younger sons try to get work at the tannery, but are refused because of the trouble the older ones caused. The collector allows them to stay, on the condition that next year they will make up for the portion they were not able to pay. Too late, the rains finally fall.

In Chapter Fourteen, the necessity of survival becomes very apparent as Rukmani divides up her final store of rice, enough to last them for 24 days. Now paranoid by nightmares and dreams of someone sneaking in and stealing what little they have, Rukmani hides half the grain in a hole away from the house. Eight days into the last of her reserves, Rukmani receives a visit from Kunthi. Having finally been cast out by her husband, Kunthi is starving, and cunning. Easily blackmailing Rukmani into a fear of losing Nathan by Kunthi misconstruing Rukmani's late night return from Kenny's house and the small gifts and tokens he had bestowed on her as a question of her virtuousness as a wife, Rukmani agrees to give Kunthi rice. After being coerced into giving Kunthi seven days ration of rice, Rukmani goes to her secret stash, and finds that rather than the nine days supply she believed she had, all that was left was a single day's supply.

In desperation she wakes her family and asks accusingly who had been stealing from their own mother? Nathan walks in on the scene and finally admits that he was the one who had taken it, not for himself but for Kunthi. Nathan reveals he had fathered her sons many years before, one before his marriage to Rukmani and one after. She had also threatened Nathan with the thought of telling Rukmani and thus had pitted each against the other. After the initial shock, Rukmani is able to tell Nathan of her interactions with Kunthi and the shadow she had held over her own head as well. Free from the burden of lies and deceit, and without any food or means to get it, the family begins wandering countryside, sometimes feasting on grass when there wasn't much to be found discarded in the town. Kuti, the youngest child who was always sickly, becomes even sicker, crying constantly from hunger.

Analysis

These four chapters mark the changing of the tides from bad to worse. The significant theme throughout these chapters is the role of Kunthi, who through her cunning nature serves to rob Rukmani and Nathan of what little they do have, but ultimately fails in her goal to also destroy their marriage. The interactions between Kunthi and Rukmani in the woods at the onset of evening, and then again in Rukmani's hut when Kunthi demands rice again, calls into question the true nature of the relationship between Rukmani and Kenny. Rukmani's reaction of anger in both situations does not make her seem like an innocent woman. Had there really been nothing to hide, Rukmani's volatile reaction and physical abuse seems unwarranted. She even thinks of killing Kunthi rather than letting her live with her secrets. However, there is also a level to Rukmani's character that is simple, and she earnestly believes that her husband may believe all that Kunthi tells him, regardless of what is actually the truth.

Vocabulary

treacherous, brooding, quivering, decreed, evoke, giddy, perplexed, dowry, enthusiasm, listlessly



Chapter 15-19

Summary

The struggle continues in chapter fifteen as the inevitable death and loss accustomed with hardship strikes Rukmani's family. It begins with her son Raja, who goes out one day as usual and does not return. Finally, his lifeless body is carried home by two men, who vaguely state that there was a misunderstanding involving money at the tannery, and he was killed by accident. Three days after the funeral, two officials come to the house to ensure Rukmani will not file a complaint with the tannery in hopes of compensation for her son's death.

In the next chapter, tragedy strikes again. Waiting patiently, but starving to death in the process, the crops are not yet ready for harvest. There is much concern that Kuti, the youngest child, will not last the three weeks left before the harvest is ready. Out of desperation Ira turns to prostitution in order to buy food for the child. Her parents discover her when Rukmani, mistaking her for Kunthi, attacks her in the night trying to sneak out of the house. Bleeding and badly injured, it is revealed that Ira has been doing the only thing she can think of in order to keep Kuti alive. Despite her efforts, Kuti finally departs the world quietly, unable to survive on so little at such a young age.

Following the deaths of two of their sons, the harvest comes in and they again have enough food to eat and pay their rent and even to sell at the market. While at market, Rukmani hears both that Kenny has returned after a long absence, and that Kunthi has continued to spread rumors about her throughout the town. In her conversation with Kenny upon his return, Rukmani is very forth coming in letting him know that his presence was missed. As she shares with him the passing of her two sons, she also reveals that Ira is with child following her escapades as a prostitute.

Kenny's return also marks a change for Rukmani's last surviving son at home, Selvam. Having taught all of her children to read and write, he is knowledgeable enough that Kenny offers him a position as his assistant in a new hospital he is building. Having no inkling for the land, Selvam decides to take it. In thanking Kenny for the opportunity he has given to her son, Rukmani is privy to yet another of Kenny's angry outbursts at the quality of life in India and the lack of any care among the elder individuals to change anything, but rather to accept things as they are.

Analysis

As Rukmani loses two of her sons in the chapters fifteen and sixteen, it is clear that despite her silent suffering and trying to be strong for her family, her opinion is that it is far better for one to leave the world they live in rather than keep fighting to stay in it. When Raja is brought home dead, she enters a numb phase where she does not cry or mourn, but rather does what is necessary in preparing the body for burial. She does not



hear what the officials who brought him home said, and when Ira begins to cry she actually scolds her for using her strength up in tears.

With the death of Kuti, Rukmani admits that they all saw it coming, and not knowing what to do allowed it to happen. She feels he is better off leaving this world, saying “yet although I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it.” (100) This attitude is in sharp contrast to Ira, who looked to Kuti as more her son than her mother did, taking great pains to care for him. As he reaches the end, she has the courage to take matters into her own hands as her parents have failed to provide for him, and becomes one of the town strumpets in order to buy the food he needs.

Nathan and Rukmani’s discovery of Ira’s decision to try to make money comes in another outburst of extreme violence from Rukmani, who believes it is Kunthi come to steal from them again. The extreme hatred of Kunthi is so strong Rukmani does not realize she has attacked her own daughter until Nathan awakes and pulls her off of Ira. While Kunthi did an awful wrong to their family, it is interesting that this character embodies what angers Rukmani to the point of wanting to kill her. There are many things and many people she could be angry at, her country, the men who killed Raja, God, and their situation. However, the only thing that can push Rukmani over the edge of all restraint and sanity, is the thought of Kunthi, the fallen woman who turned to prostitution and blackmail to survive.

Rukmani has yet another unpredictable reaction towards Kunthi in chapter eighteen. While at the market selling vegetables one of the townspeople informs her that Kenny has returned, while explicitly stating that Kunthi had been spreading rumors of the special relationship between Rukmani and Kenny. As her anger rises at Kunthi and the man now mocking her as a result of the rumors, Rukmani suddenly deflates and gives up being angry. She then surprises the reader, and deciding caution is no longer necessary with all the rumors flying around, goes to visit Kenny and brings him a garland of flowers, apparently no longer caring what anyone thought. During her visit with Kenny, Rukmani is also bold in a way she has not previously been with him. She plainly tells Kenny she has missed him, and after waiting years to ask about whether he had a wife and family, boldly enquires after them having learned he did indeed have a wife and children at their last meeting.

In this meeting with Kenny, we also see a deeper part of his character than had been described earlier. At Rukmani’s inquiry after his family, he reveals his wife has left him and taught his children to forget him. The pain he is suffering at having lost his family due to the work he has chosen, namely living in India to try to help a suffering people as best he could, is acutely expressed in his replies and forlorn attitude. It becomes clear to the reader that while Kenny has an anger and frustration towards the people of India, there is also something about the place that just can’t keep him away. After a brief moment of understanding and deep conversation, Rukmani and Kenny’s interaction ends in its usual fashion, with Kenny getting upset at her comment about people gossiping about Ira, who is now with child.



In the next chapter, Rukmani and Kenny have another interlude after Kenny offers her son a position as his assistant in the new hospital he is building. Kenny continues to bestow kindness on Rukmani and her family, all beginning when they first met at her mother's deathbed when Rukmani was still but a child bride. While the readers do not see if his kindness extends towards others, he constantly does what he can for Rukmani and her family. Whether it's money, food or offering and/or securing jobs for her sons. While it does not seem improbable that he has helped many others from the town and village, the rumors spread by Kunthi and the reactions Rukmani still has towards them does call into question whether or not their relationship is truly just a relationship or if there are deeper feelings, acknowledged or not, present for them.

Chapter nineteen also brings up a theme that has been present throughout the last few chapters, and that is religion, God and the Indian practices that were traditional during this time. At every turning, whether for good or bad, Rukmani and Nathan would take an offering out of what little they had to the feet of their Gods and Goddesses. Rukmani also makes reference to her prayers and their thankfulness towards God when things go well, and their anger, at times, when things go bad. Kenny cannot understand their philosophy. During a conversation with Rukmani, Kenny exclaims, "Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering?" Rukmani replies, "Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence and all this so that the soul may be cleansed." (112) This statement of Indian philosophy explains much of her and Nathan's character. It explains their silent suffering, their reliance on their faith to carry them through the hard times, and their resilience through it all. This conversation also displays the large difference in opinion of faith between Eastern and Western cultures at this time. Rukmani's view, as one who has little and suffers much, is to rely on her faith as a backbone to carry her through. Kenny's ideas find this thought unacceptable, and based on his reactions and attitude at times, stupid. In Western cultures where there is plenty and little to want for, the necessity of a strong religious belief and faith perhaps has a different picture than it did in India at this time. For Rukmani and her family, it was absolutely essential to their survival, and one of the only things she does not lose during the course of the novel.

Vocabulary

grandeur, endurance, acquiescent, imbeciles, strumpet, pinioning, exulted, contemptuously, ludicrous, covertly, emboldened, quiescent, forlorn, solicitude, succor



Chapter 20-23

Summary

In Chapter Twenty Ira gives birth to a baby boy. Rukmani is with her throughout the birth, and when the child is born, her heart sinks, for the baby is albino. Ira, perhaps out of strength or necessity, simply refers to the child as fair, and treats him with the love and affection due to any baby. Rukmani and Nathan are both devastated, wishing they had kept her from going into town to earn money as a prostitute. They look at it as punishment for the way in which the baby was conceived. Meanwhile, news of the baby traveled far and wide, and as more and more people came to see the baby, they finally decide to hold the traditional naming ceremony in order to get the visiting to cease. Ira names the child Sacrabani, and both she and Selvam immediately warm to the child.

In Chapter Twenty-one, Kenny begins work on the new hospital and Selvam begins working with him. Rukmani also suffers another loss in her friend Old Granny. Never able to forgive herself for the failed outcome of Ira's marriage, which she arranged, Old Granny finally died of starvation and homelessness. As the hospital continues to be built, Rukmani expresses a wish that it had been finished so Old Granny could have gone there. Nathan corrects her that hospitals were not soup kitchens. However, Rukmani did not seem to be the only one to make that assumption, many people begin trying to stake their claim on the hospital. However, with slow progress and continually running out of money, the hospital will be a long time coming.

As time passes, Sacrabani grows and begins to realize he is different from other children. He also begins to ask questions, about his pale looks, about his father, and about the meanings of words such as "bastard", which he would hear other children call him. The onslaught of questions is the first time Ira loses her strength as his mother and has an emotional breakdown around being prepared to answer those questions. Rukmani tries to help guide her, but ultimately she and Nathan agree it is up to Ira to decide what to tell him.

In Chapter Twenty-three, Rukmani hears from her third son Murugan that he is to be married to a girl from the town in which he works. Due to Nathan's increasing age and rheumatism they are unable to make the journey for the wedding, and have to content themselves with sending a gift. As Kenny tends to Nathan, he expresses his concern for Rukmani that there is no one else to take care of the land should Nathan not be able to continue working. He expresses regret in taking their last son on as his assistant. Rukmani assures him that he has taken nothing, and that Selvam was never made for the land in any case.

Before Nathan has fully recovered, the final blow in the list of trying to survive hits. Coming in from the fields Rukmani finds her husband sitting inside unable to move. With some coaxing he is finally able to tell her that their land has been sold to the tannery, and they have to leave in two weeks. They wait and contemplate for a long time before



breaking the news to Selvam and Ira. Selvam is angry, however there is nothing anyone can do. The tannery pays a high price for land. It is decided that Selvam, Ira and Sacrabani will stay, and Rukmani and Nathan will travel to the city where Murugan lives to seek shelter with him and his wife.

Analysis

These four chapters mark the closing of the first part of the novel, and life as Rukmani and her husband have always known it. Their reaction to being told their land is being sold and they have two weeks to get off of it is one of complete shock and disbelief. Not knowing what else to do, they talk on automatic, planning quickly and quietly. Rukmani wants to blame the tannery for their downfall. However, even she admits in her narrative that they may have suffered the same fate with or without the tannery as nothing had belonged to them. It seems that at this point in the novel Rukmani and Nathan are so numb to hardships and change that they are like walking zombies in the crumbling ruins of their life. Selvam, still with some passion and spark gets angry and tries to ignite in them a sense of fight, but ultimately all accept their fate and they begin packing up the little they have for the move.

Vocabulary

incredulous, recompense, diffidently, redress, whirling, persistent, irked, illumined, translucency



Chapter 24-26

Summary

Part two begins with Nathan and Rukmani's departure for the home of their son, Murugan, whom they have not seen in many years. Acting on blind faith to guide them to him, they set out on a bullock cart carrying hides from the tannery for which they paid for passage. Traveling for several days, they are set on the road 15 miles from the city and must make their way on foot. Tired and hungry, and feeling the oldness in their bones they continue walking until they finally reach the city and decide to rest for a moment on a quiet side street. Realizing it has gotten too late to continue looking for their son, they are told of a temple where there is a free meal and place to sleep by a beggar walking by them. Following in the direction he points them, they join a large throng of people coming to the temple to eat and sleep. During the meal they set their few belongings down, trusting that because it is a temple everything is safe. After pushing their way through the crowd to get food, they quickly discover everything they had brought with them has been taken. The other people in the temple laugh and shake their heads at their stupidity, telling them nothing is safe. Realizing it is true, Rukmani worries for the money tucked in her sari, but thinking it's alright on her body drifts off to a restless sleep.

In the morning, when they go to buy some breakfast before setting out, she discovers that the money too has disappeared. Thinking it perhaps slipped out during the night, they go back to search for it, but to no avail. Finally giving up, they set off on their way to find their son's house, now bringing nothing with them. They ask for directions and have a hard time understanding what is being said, for the people talk very quickly. Eventually they meet up with a group of children, the leader of the pack is very cunning and offers to show them the way to King Street for payment. When they tell him they have nothing he decides to show them the way in any case, saying he'll find them to collect payment later. They arrive at last at the house where their son had gone to work, only to find that he no longer works there. Nathan is confused, and Rukmani wonders to herself "why did we not write?" As they are wondering what to do next a car pulls up with the own of the house, and the servant to whom they have been talking asks them to leave. Nathan refuses as he wants to ask the doctor about their son. The doctor as it turns out, is a woman. Something that surprises both Rukmani and Nathan. The common connection of Kenny immediately breaks the ice between the doctor and Rukmani and Nathan. She tells them their son left nearly two years ago to seek a higher wage with the Collector. Before they head on their way she offers them their first meal of the day.

In Chapter Twenty-six, they make their way to the Collectors house, a big house on a hill, enclosed by a gate. Mistaken for beggars at first, they are finally taken to the house of their son's wife. Hopeful at last that they have finally found him, they instead find a young woman with two children, bitter and clearly not up to hosting her in-laws. Through bitterness and anger she tells them their son left her nearly two years ago, and she



does not know where he went. It is clear to Rukmani that they have no place with her, as she is struggling to feed her two children. They take their leave of her.

Analysis

The first three chapters of the second part of the book clearly display how sheltered a life Rukmani and Nathan lived in their small village. While they had all the instincts to survive in their simple way of life, it is very apparent that they are in no way prepared for life in the big city. Their foolish mistakes range everywhere from seeking their son without having had any contact with him for several years, to not protecting their belongings and having too much trust and faith in a hopeless and desperate population of people. It is interesting to see the two people who have been the strong heads of their family, finding a way to survive and live in terrible circumstances suddenly reduced to an almost child-like state, lost, scared and making poor decisions that ultimately keep making their situation worse and worse.

The one good thing that seems to be going for them in the these few chapters is that they at least have each other for support, while they literally lose all of their material possessions. Like everything else they have accepted throughout the novel, they again accept what is so, seeing nothing they can do or change about their situation.

Vocabulary

crestfallen, indulgently, shrewdly, nudged, tempting, fragrant, pervasive, dejected, futility, irreparable



Chapter 27-30

Summary

Not knowing what else to do, Rukmani and Nathan return to the temple where they are at least guaranteed one meal and start to plan. They decide they must return home, regardless of whether they end up on the street there. Nathan in particular expresses a wish to be in familiar land. They devise a plan for Rukmani to offer to read and write letters for people for a lower cost than others who have the education to perform such a task. She goes to work, and very slowly begins earning money. At the rate she is going, it will take many months for them to have the money for the journey back. A stroke of luck comes in the form of the young boy, Puli, who had shown them to the doctor's house where their son was supposed to be. Coming to collect his payment, he attaches himself to them as a sort of son. He tells them of a quarry where they could make much more money than what Rukmani was producing writing letters. Due to an infection that had deformed his hands he was unable to do the work himself. However, between the three of them they begin earning more money in the quarry.

In Chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine, Nathan becomes ill again. In a moment of odd happiness, Rukmani goes on a small spending spree with Puli, buying him a toy while they are out getting rice cakes for dinner. With Puli's help saving money there is nearly enough money to travel back to their hometown, however Nathan lacks the strength and begins having symptoms of rheumatism again. When the monsoons hit, he falls while they are out at the quarry, unable to continue. That night, he passes away quietly, with Rukmani by his side. She does not know how she will carry on, but one of Nathan's last words to her is that he lives on in their children so she will never be alone. Slowly, Rukmani pulls herself together, and in the process convinces Puli to return with her to her hometown. They soon have the money and return, where Selvam and Ira take them in, and together they live out the rest of the lives on Selvam's wages.

Analysis

The last few chapters of the book display Rukmani's courage and strength to survive no matter what. She goes to great pains to care for her husband, helping him as best she can, sharing her food with him and Puli, and doing most of the work to earn money so that they can return home. In the end, he is too weak and too old to continue. While the end of the book is rather abrupt and depressing, we know from the opening chapter that Rukmani made it home and continues to live out life as an old women surrounded by her remaining and adopted children. Her memories of her life show that while she struggled, there were a few good things about it that made it worth living, and telling. As she said, she was blessed in her marriage with her husband, despite their bout with lies and deceit, and no matter what happened, she always found a way to survive. The reader is left with the image of a woman who was able to endure it all, and to continue living no matter how much was lost or how much she suffered.



Vocabulary

boasted, jubilant, ghee, enchanted, hawker, bedraggled, toil, precious, filched, irritation, astonishment



Characters

Rukmani

Rukmani is the main character and narrator of the story. She is the wife of a farmer and the daughter of a formerly prominent village headman.

Nathan

Nathan is Rukmani's husband, a farmer who has never owned his own land.

Kenny

Kenny is the doctor who can't stay away from rural India. He cares for Rukmani's mother in her dying days and serves as a consistent source of help for Rukmani and her struggling family.

Irawaddy

Irawaddy is Rukmani and Nathan's first child, a daughter, who becomes a prostitute to try to help the family survive.

Arjun and Thambi

Arjun and Thambi are Nathan and Rukmani's eldest sons who try to make changes in the tannery, only to be shot down, and who finally leave for work in a far off place.

Murugan

Murugan is the third eldest son whom Rukmani and Nathan go to seek shelter with, only to find he has disappeared.

Raja and Kuti

Raja and Kuti are the fourth and last-born sons respectively, who both die before leaving home. Raja dies in an accident, and Kuti from starvation.



Selvam

The fifth born son who ends up caring for both Ira and Rukmani, while he studies with Kenny to be a doctor.

Kunthi

A woman living in the small village where Nathan and Rukmani live. She is responsible for marital strife between Nathan and Rukmani, having seduced Nathan into her bed before and after their marriage, and spreading rumors about Rukmani and the doctor, Kenny. She ends up a prostitute, cast out of her husband's house.

Old Granny

One of Rukmani's closest friends who arranges Irawaddy's failed marriage.

Puli

The child Rukmani and Nathan end up adopting while they are seeking their son. Puli helps them navigate the unforgiving streets of a foreign city.



Objects/Places

Ceylon

Ceylon is a place 100 miles away where Arjun and Thambi go to seek work.

Bullock Cart

The bullock cart is a cart pulled by bulls. This was the cheapest and most widely used form of travel for Rukmani and her family.

The Tannery

The tannery is a factory built for the purpose of tanning hides on a mass level. These skins were valuable as they were a staple piece of clothing among Indians.

Rice Paddy

The rice paddy is the field that was designed to hold a certain amount of water so that the rice could grow.

Sari

A sari is the traditional woman's dress in India.

Dowry

A dowry is an amount of money and objects of worth given by the bride's family to the husband in marriage.

Themes

Religion

The book explores the theme of religion, God and the Indian practices that were traditional during this time. At every turning, whether for good or bad, Rukmani and Nathan would take an offering out of what little they had to the feet of their Gods and Goddesses. Rukmani also makes reference to her prayers and their thankfulness towards God when things go well, and their anger, at times, when things go bad. Kenny cannot understand their philosophy. During a conversation with Rukmani, Kenny exclaims, “Acquiescent imbeciles, do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering?” Rukmani replies, “Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence and all this so that the soul may be cleansed.” (112) This statement of Indian philosophy explains much of her and Nathan’s character. It explains their silent suffering, their reliance on their faith to carry them through the hard times, and their resilience through it all.

The Clash of East versus West

Along with the previous theme, the work also explores the large difference in opinion of faith between Eastern and Western cultures at this time. Rukmani’s view, as one who has little and suffers much, is to rely on her faith as a backbone to carry her through. Kenny’s ideas find this thought unacceptable, and based on his reactions and attitude at times, stupid. In Western cultures where there is plenty and little to want for, the necessity of a strong religious belief and faith perhaps has a different picture than it did in India at this time. For Rukmani and her family, it was absolutely essential to their survival, and one of the only things she does not lose during the course of the novel.

The clash of the eastern and western ideals is also seen in the differences between Rukmani’s sons and their parents. Rukmani and Nathan grew up in a time when sons followed in their fathers footsteps to carry on the family. However, all but one of their sons ends up leaving home and seeking their fortune far and wide, having developed a different set of ideals in the changing times in India.

Infidelity

The presence of Kenny throughout these chapters in the book also brings to Rukmani’s character a shroud of mystery. While she visits Kenny to help her conceive her sons, she never provides detail as to what sort of procedure was done. It may have been she herself did not understand it—there is much evidence throughout the novel that Kenny and Rukmani exist in very different worlds with very different opinions of each other. He does not hide his disgust of the simple mindedness of the villagers (and specifically Rukmani) or their refusal to ask for help as they go through hardship after hardship. She wonders silently if he has a wife and family, and what compels him to keep returning to



their village. Their mutual affection and friendship raises the questions as to the true nature of their relationship, not only for the people of the village, but also for the reader. While nothing untoward is ever implied by Rukmani and her love for her husband is genuine throughout the novel, the mystery surrounding some of their relationship and the closeness with which they interact and converse does raise thoughts and questions that come back to haunt Rukmani later in life.

While Rukmani's faithfulness to her husband is never blatantly called out in the narrator's voice, her husband does admit to being unfaithful to her early on in the marriage. Having fathered Kunthi's sons, he finally admits his wrong to Rukmani and the iciness and hatred of Kunthi towards Rukmani is finally explained.

Style

Point of View

The entire novel is told through the narrative voice of Rukmani. She is telling the story in her old age, reflecting on her life as she lives out her final days. It is told in the first person and in the past tense.

Setting

The story is set in rural India. No names are ever given to the places in which the story occurs, giving the impression that it could be anywhere in India. All that is known is that the village where the majority of the story is set is at least 100 miles from any major city. The difference between the village life and city life is sharply contrasted between the first and second parts of the book when it becomes very apparent just how much of a village life Rukmani and Nathan led as the fight to survive in a big unfamiliar city.

Language and Meaning

The language of Nectar in a Sieve is both direct and eloquent. Told in the narrators voice it is apparent that she is educated, as the language she uses is beyond what might be expected of a simple farmers wife. The speech and thoughts she has both highlight her education and upbringing, and the sheltered life she has led.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts. Part one covers from Rukmani's marriage at age twelve up until they lose their home. Part two is much shorter, and details the failed attempt to go and live with their third born son. There, Rukmani loses not only what little possessions and money they had left, but also her husband. The book ends with her return to her home.

Quotes

Our relatives I know, murmured that the match was below me...how little they knew, any of them!

-- Rukmani

We ate, finding it difficult to believe we did so. The food lay rich, if uneasy, in our starved bellies.

I howled at her and put my hands to my ears. Thoughts kept hurtling through my head like frenzied squirrels in a new-forged cage. With sudden clarity I recalled my daughter's off looks that far off day when I had gone to Kenny.

For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs.

My God! I do not understand you, I never will. Go before I too am entangled in your philosophies.

-- Kenny

I hung about for a while, unable to make up my mind whether I should seek him out in the town, or whether to go home in prudence and await his coming, as I felt sure he would.

Well and what if we gave into our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes?

Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing.

I picked up the fragments of my life and put them together, all but the missing piece.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Why does Nathan, who is so kind and doting towards his wife, father children with Kunthi after they are married?

Topic 2

What is the nature of the relationship between Kenny and Rukmani? Do you think there is a level to their relationship undisclosed by the narrator?

Topic 3

Why do Rukmani and Nathan adopt Puli in their final days in the temple?

Topic 4

Kenny's character is difficult to completely understand throughout the novel. What do you think compels him to return to India, when he is openly frustrated and angry by the situation there? What is it about his and Rukmani's relationship that has them both benefit from it?

Topic 5

Do you feel it was inconsiderate of Rukmani's sons to leave their parents for off lands and no plans for the future? What is the responsibility towards parents that is warranted from children in this culture versus now?

Topic 6

There are many instances where Kenny or one of their children wonders why Rukmani and Nathan allow themselves to be walked all over or won't do anything about their situation. They seem to feel they have no choice. Do you feel they did all they could? Or were there other options for them that they either did not know or were not willing to explore?