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Study Guide

for

**Nectar in a
Sieve**

by Kamala Markandaya



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Meet Kamala Markandaya



The eyes I see with are still Indian eyes.

—Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya was born in the southern Indian city of Bangalore in 1924. Her real name is Kamala Purnaiya Taylor. She was born a Brahmin—the highest caste, or social category, of traditional Hindu society. After studying at the University of Madras, she took a job writing for a small newspaper. Although she was city born, she came to know the villages and rural areas, where the great majority of India’s people live. In 1948, when she was twenty-four, she moved to England. Later she married an Englishman and had one child.

Nectar in a Sieve was the first of her novels to be published, although it was the third one she had written. When it appeared in 1954, the novel was greeted as a masterful picture of life in the unfamiliar world of India’s villages. It became a worldwide best-seller and was translated into seventeen languages. In her next novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1955), Markandaya explores the relationship of an educated Indian woman and her English sweetheart. In *A Silence of Desire* (1960), she returns to one of the themes of *Nectar in a Sieve*, the tension between traditional Indian

attitudes and modern Western views. In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Markandaya revisits the village life of *Nectar in a Sieve* with the story of a young boy who endures poverty and finally escapes from his village to the city and its shadowy underworld.

In *The Coffer Dams* (1969), Markandaya again takes up a theme of her first published novel as Western and Indian engineers try to build a dam in southern India. Tensions between the old and the new rise as the dam threatens to harness nature and destroy ancestral land. In *The Nowhere Man* (1972), Markandaya uses her own experiences as an Indian immigrant in London to tell the story of a young student who suffers from the racism of English thugs. In *Two Virgins* (1973), she describes the lives of two Indian peasant girls, one of whom chooses life in the city, while the other remains in the village. Relations between the British and their Indian colonial subjects around the beginning of the twentieth century are the focus of *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). In *Shalimar* (1982), an international corporation’s decision to build an exclusive resort along the unspoiled beaches of southern India threatens the livelihood of local fisherman.

Markandaya has been acclaimed by critics for her ability to craft a precise, well-written story. Charles Larson wrote of the author:

Markandaya is a rare kind of magician—she knows how to control the tension in every scene, in every incident . . . , often by nothing more than a word or two which cancel out everything that has been said in a previous scene or conversation.

Although Markandaya has lived in England her entire adult life, she has visited India frequently. There, she gathers background information and other material for her novels. Some Indian readers have criticized her for losing touch with her roots by choosing to live in another country. Markandaya disagrees. She claims that her long residence in England and self-chosen role as an outsider give her more objectivity and allow her to examine without prejudice the society, customs, and character of her native land.

Introducing the Novel

*India's life is in her villages; they are her heart,
they are her calm, and Nectar in a Sieve is
written from that heart.*

—British author Rumer Godden

How does an author perform the magic of making you experience the world from the point of view of someone else? What does it take to allow you to enter into the mind and heart of someone you will never have the opportunity to meet? How do you develop sympathy and understanding for someone whose experiences may be vastly different from your own?

Reading *Nectar in a Sieve* will help you answer these questions. The novel's characters are mostly southern Indian tenant farmers whose homes are one-room mud huts, with no running water, electricity, or heat. They rely almost entirely on themselves for food and cook their meals over dung fires. When, and if, rain falls determines whether they will have plenty or be in need. Usually, they are so busy providing for themselves and their families that they cannot afford to be concerned with governments, politics, or other aspects of the wider world. Almost all marriages are arranged.

Most of the characters in *Nectar in a Sieve* exhibit an unquestioning acceptance of fate, or their destiny. This feeling of acceptance runs throughout the novel. In fact, it is one of the important dividing lines between the different characters. To create tension and develop themes, Kamala Markandaya focuses on how characters address the issue of fate. Faced with a change from the outside that threatens to alter their way of life forever, one of the characters says, "Bend like the grass, that you do not break." Another character strongly disagrees with this advice. "You must cry out if you want help," he argues. "It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence." This character believes that rebellion against fate, poverty, and misery is the nobler option. As you read the novel, try to determine the different characters' attitudes toward change and the acceptance of their fates. Ask yourself where Markandaya stands. Does she agree that it is better to accept what cannot be

changed? Or does she side with those who cry out and try to grasp fate in their own hands and change it?

Another important question addressed in the novel concerns the role of hope in the face of suffering. The novel's title and epigraph seem to imply that the author regards hope as necessary to life. Without it, life cannot continue. As you read, pay attention to what the different characters say and how they feel about hope and fear: Are they hopeful? Are they fearful? Of what use is hope if daily life is almost unbearably cruel and filled with frightening possibilities? How can hope defeat fear of the future? When does fear become so powerful that hope is overwhelmed? How can people continue to strive without hope?

Love is another important theme in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The characters' love for one another keeps their family together despite their desperate poverty. The faith they have in one another is tested severely by the tragedies they endure. Nevertheless, the bonds linking them are stronger than the outside forces of nature, society, and other people.

Finally, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Markandaya explores the tensions caused by the coming of modernization and industrial progress. Using one powerful symbol, she shows the effects of the modern world on village life in southern India. Some of the characters adapt successfully to the inevitable changes that ensue; others are crushed by them. Ask yourself whether the characters are better off or worse off because of the change that comes to their village.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The novel takes place in the author's native southern India. Most of the action occurs in an unnamed village, while scenes in the second part of the book are set in a city. Although the author does not give a specific time, the novel seems to be set a few years after India gained its independence from the British, in 1947. India had been essentially under British control since the early eighteenth hundreds.

The British believed that they were benefiting the Indian people by providing India with railroads, irrigation projects, and the cessation of civil war. India was, in fact, developing at a very fast pace. With improvements in education, an active Western-educated group of Indians began to emerge, calling for the representation of Indian interests in government. In 1885 the Indian National Congress, a broadly based political party, was formed. In 1914 Mahatma Gandhi returned to India after a prolonged stay in South Africa and eventually became head of the party. Under Gandhi's leadership, the party pushed for Indian independence, using a strategy of passive noncooperation. In 1947 the Indian National Congress took over the government following the departure of the British. The separate state of Pakistan was created out of the predominately Muslim northwestern and northeastern portions of India.

The period following independence was fraught with problems stemming from the partition between India and Pakistan. Deaths caused by civil strife numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Continuing conflicts, refugee resettlement, and inadequate resources were but a few of the hindrances to economic and political stability. India's new prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, believed strongly in economic planning. In the early 1950s, most of India's funds were spent on rebuilding railroads, irrigation systems, and canals. Food production rose between 1951 and 1961, but population rose even more. As a result, economic benefits went mostly to the large landowners and the elite upper class. The rest of the exploding population remained landless and unemployed, with an inadequate food supply, poor housing conditions, and a very low literacy rate.

Did You Know?

Kamala Markandaya is often grouped with many other writers under the heading of commonwealth writers. This term refers to writers born in countries that were formerly British colonies and are now members of the economic and political alliance known as the British Commonwealth. Most of these writers either speak English as their native language or have chosen to write in English as a way of reaching more readers. Some commonwealth writers have emigrated from their homelands to Britain, the United States, or other countries, while others have remained in their homelands or have returned home after traveling abroad. Among the common themes addressed by many of these writers are the conflict between traditional and modern ways

of life, the effects of colonialism on colonized peoples, and the outsider status of persons who choose to distance themselves from their native traditions.

Commonwealth writers include some of the most famous authors of the twentieth century. Nigerian Wole Soyinka, West Indian Derek Walcott, South African Nadine Gordimer, and Australian Patrick White have all won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Other commonwealth writers include Brian Moore and Mordecai Richler of Canada; V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon of Trinidad and Tobago; Chinua Achebe of Nigeria; Doris Lessing of Zimbabwe; Alan Paton of South Africa; and Kamala Markandaya, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Raja Rao, and Salman Rushdie of India.

Before You Read

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 1–13

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What do you value the most in life? Friends? Family? Personal possessions? Something else?

Journal

In your journal, briefly describe what you consider the most important thing in life.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover what a woman and her family consider to be important.

BACKGROUND

India Today

India, the setting for *Nectar in a Sieve* and the birthplace of Kamala Markandaya, is one of the world's most populous countries. Geographically, India is the seventh largest country in the world. It claims three of the world's fifteen largest cities: Mumbai (also called Bombay), Calcutta, and Delhi. Three of every four Indians, most of whom work as farmers, live in villages or rural areas. Rice and wheat are India's leading crops. Other crops include tea, spices, sugar, and cotton. India's leading manufacturing sectors are textiles, iron and steel, cement, chemicals, and transportation vehicles. Two great world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, were founded in India. Today, 80 percent of Indians are Hindu. About 14 percent are Muslim, followers of a religion brought to India in the eighth century by invaders from the West.

Monsoons

A monsoon is a major wind system that changes direction at certain times of the year. The change in wind direction is caused primarily by the difference in temperature between the ocean and the land. In summer, for example, the monsoon winds blow from the colder ocean to the warmer land. Monsoons bring drastic changes in weather, including rainfall. They can occur in both summer and winter and bring dry or wet weather. In India the summer monsoon brings most of the annual rainfall in most parts of the country, and thus is critically important to agriculture. When the monsoon fails to bring enough rain, crops suffer. India's monsoon climate creates three seasons: One, hot and dry; one, hot and humid; and one, cool and dry.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

acrid [ak'rid] *adj.* bitter

daunt [dônt] *v.* to defeat

injunctions [in jungk'shənz] *n.* restrictions; limitations imposed on a person's or institution's freedom

jauntily [jôn'tə lē] *adv.* lightly; easily

ravenous [rav'ə nəs] *adj.* extremely hungry

reproach [ri prōch'] *v.* to blame; to criticize

ruddy [rud'ē] *adj.* reddish

solace [sol'is] *n.* comfort

taciturn [tas'ə turn] *adj.* silent; reluctant to talk

Active Reading

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 1–13

In a work of literature, any struggle between two opposing forces is called a **conflict**. An **external conflict** exists when a character struggles against some outside force—society, nature, fate, or another person. An **internal conflict** exists when a character is torn between opposing thoughts, feelings, or goals. In this section of *Nectar in a Sieve*, several types of external conflict exist. As you read, use the chart on this page to keep track of the various types of external conflict and note examples. Write down words and phrases that describe each conflict.

Type of Conflict	Description, Examples
Against society	Rukmani is unable to marry a rich man because she does not have a large dowry.

Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 1–13

Personal Response

What were your thoughts at the end of this section? Would you have made the same decision that Rukmani and Nathan made? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does Rukmani see decorating the entrance to her new home when she first arrives with Nathan? In what condition are the decorations? What might the condition represent, or symbolize?

2. How does Rukmani feel when she is told that her baby is female? Why does she feel this way? What does her reaction suggest about the status of Indian women at the time?

3. Who is Kennington? Why does Rukmani keep her visits to him secret?

4. Contrast Rukmani's response to the coming of the tannery with that of the other women in the village. Who do you think is right? Why?

5. Why do Arjun and Thambi go to work in Ceylon? What does their decision say about them? How do Rukmani's feelings contrast with those of her sons?

Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 1–13

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. The story is told from Rukmani’s point of view. How does this viewpoint affect your feelings toward Rukmani and her family? How might your feelings change if the story were told from Kunthi’s point of view? Kennington’s?

7. How might Rukmani answer the **Focus Activity** question? How does that answer compare with yours? What conclusions might you draw from this comparison?

Literature and Writing

Analyze Setting

The conflicts that a character experiences are often determined by the time and place in which he or she lives. Select a character from *Nectar in a Sieve*—Rukmani, Nathan, Ira, or another character—and in a paragraph or two explain the connection between the setting of the novel and the character’s conflicts. Would he or she be likely to suffer the same conflicts if the story were set in a different time and place? Why or why not?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Together with your group, review chapters 1–13 to find instances in which Rukmani breaks from the conventions of her culture. What motivates her to make these breaks? Given her motivations, would you say that she approaches life with a primarily traditional or a primarily modern outlook? Reach a consensus of opinion; then explain your opinion to others in your class.

Speaking and Listening

The parents and children in *Nectar in a Sieve* do not always see eye to eye. With a small group of students, role-play one of the conflicts that Nathan and Rukmani have with one or more of their children. If you wish, create dialogue for the characters to speak, but be sure to base the dialogue on information provided in the novel. Perform your role play for others in your class, and ask them to evaluate your performance. Have you presented both sides of the argument—those of parents and child—completely and fairly? Have you remained in character?

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Before You Read

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 14–23

FOCUS ACTIVITY

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease” is an old saying. What does this saying mean?

Chart It

Create a list of examples, from your personal experience or from history, of “squeaky wheels” who spoke up for their rights. Did these people get what they wanted?

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover which members of Rukmani’s family become squeaky wheels.

BACKGROUND

The Hindu Religion

Most of the characters in *Nectar in a Sieve* are followers of Hinduism, one of the world’s major religions. Hinduism developed in India between 1400 and 500 B.C. as a blending of the beliefs of the Aryan invaders and the native people. Today Hindus live in many countries, including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. More than 1.2 million Hindus live in the United States.

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, which means that Hindus worship many gods. These gods are the separate forms of a single god called Brahma (or universal spirit). The three Hindu deities most worshiped today are Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti. Hindu worship practices center less around public group activities than on private rituals, usually performed in the home for important events like marriages, births, and deaths. Hinduism’s holy scriptures include the Vedas, a collection of important rituals and commentaries, and a series of epic poems and stories about gods and heroes.

Among the important beliefs of Hinduism is *samsara*, the idea that all life is a series of births, deaths, and rebirths, influenced by the moral purity of a person’s behavior and attention to religious rituals, called *karma*. Karma is sometimes explained as the law of moral cause and effect. By following proper rituals, doing good deeds, and maintaining purity of thought and action, people can improve and be reborn into a higher, more spiritual kind of life. Hinduism places great emphasis on performing one’s duty to the gods as well as to other people. One’s duty is, in turn, dependent on one’s place in society. Hindu society has traditionally been divided into groups, called castes, based on heredity, which determine a person’s occupation and status. Notice how, in the novel, acceptance of one’s place in society becomes a source of both comfort and conflict.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

avidly [av’id lē] *adv.* eagerly

cleave [klēv] *v.* to cut

exuberant [ig zōō’bər ənt] *adj.* joyfully enthusiastic

fledgling [flej’ling] *n.* young bird

furtively [fur’tiv lē] *adv.* secretly

incoherently [in’kō hēr’ənt lē] *adv.* without logic

malignant [mə lig’nənt] *adj.* evil

speculatively [spek’yə lā’tiv lē] *adv.* questioningly

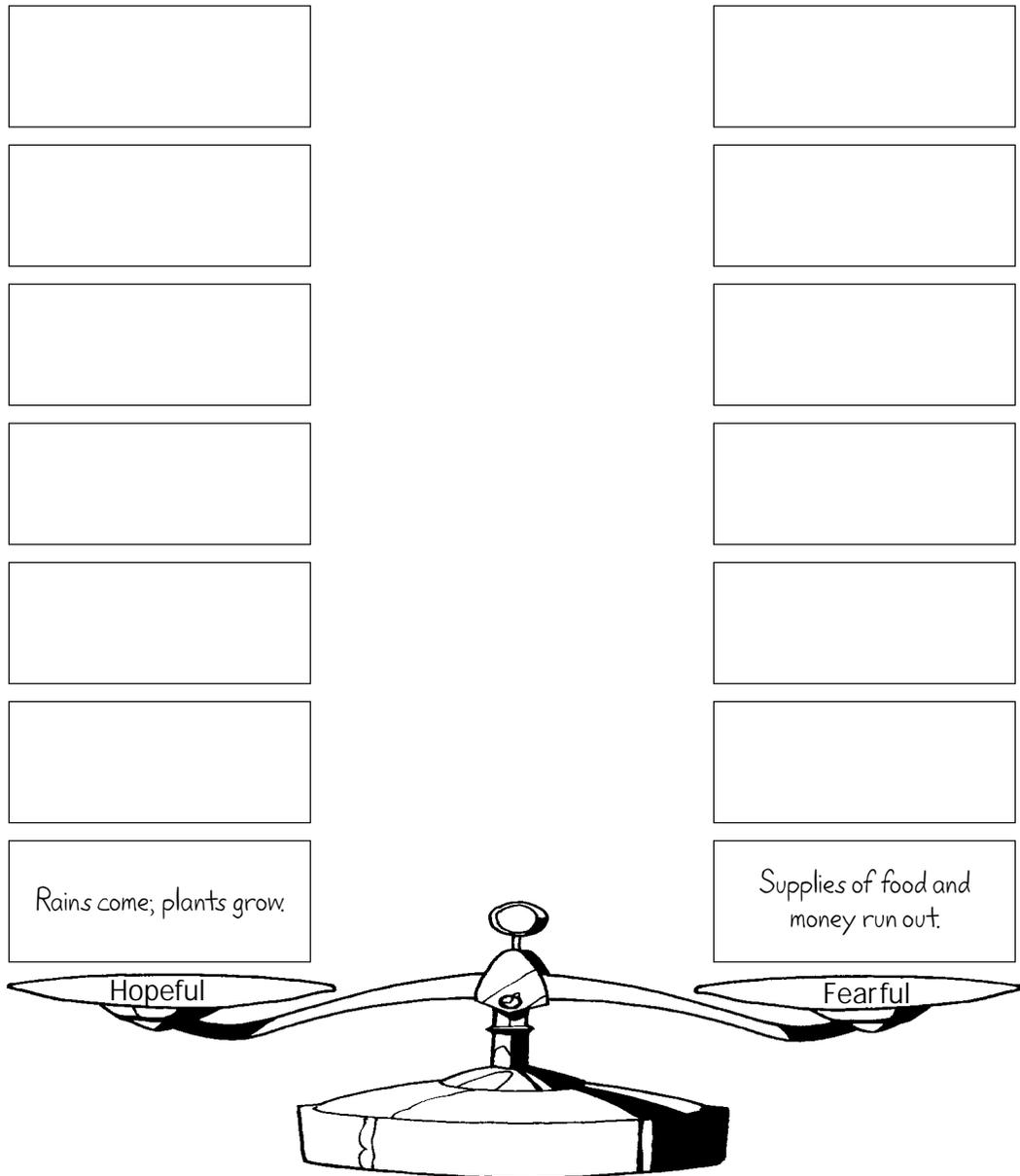
taper [tā’pər] *n.* candle

usury [u’zhər ē] *n.* lending practice in which unusually high rates of interest are charged

Active Reading

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 14–23

Rukmani explains, “Hope, and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say.” Use the scales in the illustration on this page to list events that lead Nathan and Rukmani to feel hopeful about their future and those that lead them to feel fearful.



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Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 14–23

Personal Response

Which scenes linger in your mind? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What secret involving Kunthi does Nathan reveal to Rukmani? What secret does Rukmani reveal in turn? What does their willingness to confess suggest about their relationship? Do you think they are right to confess? Why or why not?

2. How does Raja meet his death? Why do the men from the tannery visit Rukmani a few days later? In your opinion, what is the purpose of this scene in the novel?

3. To what does Rukmani first give credit for Kuti's better health? What is the real reason, and how does it make Rukmani feel?

4. Ira is very unhappy after she tries to answer her son's difficult questions about his birth. What does Nathan say to Rukmani about comforting Ira? What do you think he means by this advice?

Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 14–23

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

5. Rukmani switches to the present tense when describing Raja's funeral. Reread this passage in chapter 15. What effect does the change in tense produce? Why might the author have chosen to tell this episode in the present tense?

6. At the end of chapter 19, Kennington and Rukmani discuss their approaches to suffering and injustice. Sum up each person's opinions. With which person do you agree? Why?

Literature and Writing

Analyze Symbolism

In chapter 23, Rukmani describes the influence of the tannery on the lives of the villagers in such a way that the tannery becomes a symbol. In a paragraph or two, explain what the tannery symbolizes. What aspects of the tannery lead you to this conclusion?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In your group, discuss why Raja sneaked into the tannery and how he actually died. Then reach a consensus of opinion about whether the tannery should bear any responsibility for his death. If so, why? If not, why not? Explain your opinion to others in your class.

Learning for Life

Family values is a popular topic among politicians, religious leaders, educators, journalists, and others. Although opinions differ on just what values are appropriate for families, most people agree that families are the best vehicles for teaching important moral lessons. In a small group, discuss the values that Nathan and Rukmani pass on to their family. Find evidence from the novel to support your statements. Then decide which of these values you share. Work together to make a group list of the values that you consider the most important for parents to pass on to their children.

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Before You Read

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 24–30

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when you felt like giving up. What made you feel this way? How did you cope?

Journal

In your journal, briefly describe the situation and the ways in which you worked through it.

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how Rukmani and Nathan work through their troubles.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

One of the best-known charities in the world, the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, was founded in India in 1948. Its creator, an Albanian woman named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, is better known by the name she took in memory of Saint Theresa of Lisieux—Mother Teresa.

Arriving in India in 1928, Mother Teresa was touched by the extreme misery and poverty of the poor. She moved to the slums of Calcutta and, in 1948, was given permission to use a section of the abandoned temple of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction. Along with a few helpers, Mother Teresa used the temple to tend to the sick and dying. As her work became known, Mother Teresa attracted more followers. Centers spread throughout Calcutta and other parts of India, serving blind, aged, handicapped, and dying poor people. The order also operated a leper colony. From its beginnings in Calcutta, the Order of the Missionaries of Charity has spread to more than two hundred locations worldwide.

The Goddess Sita

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.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

amity [am'ə tē] *n.* friendship

benignly [bi nīn'lē] *adv.* kindly

dolefully [dōl'fəl lē] *adv.* sorrowfully

fitfully [fit'fəl lē] *adv.* irregularly

inexorably [i nek'sər ə blē] *adv.* mercilessly, relentlessly

poignancy [poin'yən cē] *n.* bittersweetness

predatory [pred'ə tōr'ē] *adj.* preying on others

saunter [sōn'tər] *v.* to stroll

truculently [truk'yə lənt lē] *adv.* fiercely

wily [wī'lē] *adj.* sly

Active Reading

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 24–30

In the next chapters, Nathan and Rukmani suffer further losses. As you read, use the chart below to take notes on their hardships. (You may add boxes if you wish.) What point or points might the author be trying to make by having the characters suffer such losses?

<p>LOSS 1: Rukmani and Nathan lose their home and must leave their son, daughter, and grandchild behind, shows the effect of modernization on family life.</p>
<p>Loss 2:</p>
<p>Loss 3:</p>
<p>Loss 4:</p>
<p>Loss 5:</p>

Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 24–30

Personal Response

Were you surprised by the ending of the novel? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. This section begins with a journey. In what way is this journey a metaphor, or symbolic representation, of the lives of Nathan and Rukmani? How do aspects of this journey reflect the lives of the two characters?

2. To what activity does Rukmani first turn in order to earn money in the city? What is ironic, or unexpected, about this choice?

3. Several times in this section, Rukmani refers to the stone god and goddess in the temple where she and Nathan are staying. What might Markandaya be saying about the role of religion in the characters' lives?

Responding

Nectar in a Sieve Chapters 24–30

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Markandaya does not name the city to which Nathan and Rukmani go, nor does she give specific details about where they live or when the events occur. There is also no mention of politics, government, or other aspects of modern life. Why might the author avoid presenting this kind of information?
-

5. Returning from work one day with Puli, Rukmani spends some of their precious money on toys and food treats. How does she feel about these purchases? Do you feel she was right to buy them? What might buying such things as toys and treats represent to people in Rukmani's situation? How would you justify buying the toys and the treats if you were in her place?
-

Literature and Writing

Explore a Theme

One of the themes of *Nectar in a Sieve* is the tension between modernization and traditional ways of life. In a few paragraphs, analyze how this theme is handled in the novel, focusing on how different characters respond to elements that represent the coming of the modern world to the village.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Do you feel that Nathan, Rukmani, Puli, and other characters in the novel are responsible for their own condition? Have they made decisions that make them responsible for their plight, or are they victims of forces beyond their control? What kinds of welfare reforms would you make to improve their condition? Consider how your reforms might affect their way of life. In your group, come up with a list of suggestions, and present them as persuasively as you can to others in your class. Then ask your classmates to evaluate your suggestions. Which suggestions do they think would work?

Learning for Life

At least two characters in the novel are restricted in their daily activities because of certain physical conditions. Puli has leprosy and limited use of his hands and fingers, and Sacrabani cannot stay in the sun for any length of time. However, both have friends and relatives who seek to include them in all their activities. How accessible is your community to those who are physically challenged? Prepare a checklist of items for rating different institutions in your community on how accessible they are to all people, including those with disabilities. Rate several different buildings, activities, or institutions. Use the data you collect to make a list of suggestions on how accessibility might be improved.



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Pictures of Marriage

Ved Mehta

Before You Read

Focus Question

How does marriage fit into your plans for the future?

Background

At about the same time that the fictional Rukmani was married to Nathan, Ved Mehta's real middle-class parents were arranging the marriage of their oldest daughter. Both marriages took place while India was in the first years of its independence from Great Britain. In Mehta's family, unlike Rukmani's, the young women were beginning to question traditional customs. A native of India, Ved Mehta is the author of many books and a frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*. This memoir first appeared in that magazine.

Responding to the Reading

1. Although Daddyji and Mamaji outwardly show their support for arranged marriages, what instances indicate some misgivings about the custom and the traditional role of women in the Hindu home?

2. In this personal history, Mehta recounts conversations in which his older sisters challenged their parents' beliefs about arranged marriages. From the conversations he joined in as a child, do you think Mehta's attitude and his thinking were more like Sister Pom's or Sister Nimi's? Explain.

3. Daddyji says, "In the West, they go in for romantic love, which is unknown among us. I'm not sure that that method works any better than our method does." Briefly summarize Daddyji's arguments that arranged marriages are best for the individuals involved, the good of the family, and Indian society.

4. **Making Connections** In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani is considered a plain woman, but her daughter, Ira, is perceived as beautiful. How did families take a girl's physical appearance into account as they selected mates and calculated dowries? Among Mehta's extended family, find the two engagements that were called off because of physical appearance. Why do you think Mamaji told Ved "without a moment's hesitation" that he would never marry?

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Literature Groups

In Mehta's account of his sisters' debates with his father, everyone seems to have some valid points. Do you agree with Daddyji that arranged marriages reduce the risk of unhappy marriages? Or would you side with Sister Nimi and argue that arranged marriages and dowries are a financial drain on poor families? Debate these and other issues raised by the Mehta family, taking the side of one or more members.

Letter to Lord Irwin *and* About That Letter Mahatma Gandhi Rice Chemmanam Chacko

Before You Read

Focus Question

In your opinion, what is the best way to change a law or tradition that you think is wrong?

Background

Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience helped India win its independence from British rule in 1947. Gandhi's letter to the British viceroy of India during the struggle for independence echoes some of the grievances Jefferson and others enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. His later complaints to the press are similar to complaints about the news media today. The changes that took place in India's agrarian economy are reflected in the poem about one of the country's major crops.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to Gandhi, independence from Great Britain would not benefit the ryots, or peasants, unless the social and economic conditions resulting from British policies were changed. List the conditions that Gandhi felt had "reduced [Indians] politically to serfdom."

2. What is Gandhi's complaint against journalists in the short piece he wrote for one of his weekly newspapers? Do you think modern-day public figures in the United States would agree with Gandhi? Why or why not?

3. On his train ride, the narrator of "Rice" imagines his homecoming. Compare the narrator's expectations with what he actually encounters.

4. **Making Connections** If Rukmani's three sons had come back home after Nathan's death, what changes do you think they would have immediately seen in the farm and in the attitudes of their surviving family members?

Creative Writing

Pretending that you are Rukmani's daughter, Ira, or her son Selvam, write a letter to the editor supporting or challenging Gandhi's call for nonviolent resistance.

Snatched from Death

translated by Dwijendra Nath Neog

In India, Marriages Made

by Computer Sheila Tefft

Before You Read

Focus Question

Do you think computers will affect your choices in life about such matters as location, career, or marriage?

Background

Folklore and legends give us insight into the ancient values and beliefs of a culture. This story, translated from ancient Hindu scripts, explains a religious rite practiced by married Indian women. An article from a U.S. newspaper tells how one ancient Hindu custom is being affected by computer technology.

Responding to the Reading

1. Although the story "Snatched from Death" allows the princess to defy her father and make her own choice of a husband, contrary to Hindu traditions, Savitri herself is determined to follow certain other Hindu customs. Which of Savitri's words and actions are consistent with the Hindu customs of no remarriages for widows and wifely devotion to the husband's family?

2. According to the story, what greater good does Yama see in giving Satyaban back to Savitri?

3. According to the newspaper reporter, what change in the traditional way of Indian life has caused parents to use newspapers to find mates for their children?

4. **Making Connections** Considering her values and the hardships for a tenant farmer's wife, list three requirements Rukmani might emphasize in a newspaper advertisement for a husband for Ira.

Learning for Life

Throughout the world, the computer is being used to provide services that traditionally were performed by people. Even though the computer may be faster and less expensive, we sometimes wish for more personal service. From the modern Hindu family's point of view, write a short list of pros and cons for using a traditional matchmaker rather than a computer database.

Work Without Hope

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Before You Read

Focus Question

Recall a time when you felt cut off from the world around you. What made you feel this way?

Background

The title *Nectar in a Sieve* alludes to the final lines of this famous poem. Its author, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), was a leading figure in England’s romantic movement. Coleridge and other writers of this movement often wrote intensely personal poems about humankind’s relationship with the natural world.

Responding to the Reading

1. During what time of year does the poem take place? What feelings are usually associated with this time of year?

2. Why does the speaker feel cut off from the natural world?

3. Analyze the metaphor, or direct comparison, in line 13. What two things are being compared? In your opinion, is the comparison effective? Why or why not?

4. **Making Connections** Why might Markandaya have chosen to title her novel after the last lines of Coleridge’s poem? Do you think that the title is effective? Explain.

Internet Connection

Surf the Internet to find more information about Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Using his name as a keyword, research where he was born, where he spent most of his life, and which of his poems are best known. Present your findings in an oral report to your class.

from A Passage to India

Santha Rama Rau

Before You Read

Focus Question

How would you react to someone who is very different from yourself?

Background

English traders began settling on the Indian subcontinent in 1639. Eventually Great Britain made India a colony of the British Empire. The conflict in India between Western and Eastern ideas and philosophies has been the subject of fiction and nonfiction. This play, by a writer who is a native of India, is based on a novel of the same name by English writer E. M. Forster.

Responding to the Reading

1. From the opening conversation between the Indian doctor and the Englishman, list at least four stereotypes or misconceptions that Dr. Aziz believes Englishmen hold about Indians.

2. What does Fielding's friend Turton mean when he calls his get-togethers with Indians "Bridge parties"?

3. Fielding questions why the British "must add social insult to [the] political injury" they are inflicting on the Indians. List three instances in which Ronny Heaslop, a British government official, is rude and insulting to Dr. Aziz and Dr. Godbole.

4. **Making Connections** The fictional characters Fielding and Kennington develop warm friendships with individual Indians. Do you think they are able to bridge the gap between East and West because they are (1) sensitive to others? (2) not able to "fit" in with their own countrymen? (3) have a natural curiosity about other cultures? or (4) all of these? Explain your answer in a sentence or two.

Creative Writing

A Passage to India was made into a movie in the 1980s. Imagine that you are a filmmaker preparing to film *Nectar in a Sieve*. What movie or stage stars would you cast in the roles of Rukmani, Nathan, and Kennington? To introduce your actors to their roles, write a brief description of the characters. Describe personality traits as well as the physical appearances of the characters.