

Nectar in a Sieve



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA

Unlike the characters in her novel, Kamala Markandaya was born into a wealthy Indian family. Between 1940 and 1947, Markandaya studied at the University of Madras and worked as a journalist. After India gained independence from Britain in 1948, Markandaya married British journalist Bernard Taylor. She spent the rest of her life in England, although she visited India frequently. *Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, was Markandaya's first novel and quickly became a bestseller, especially in America. In the next few decades, Markandaya published ten novels. Famously private, the author gave few interviews about her personal life. She died in 2004.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Markandaya never specifies exactly where and when her protagonist, Rukmani, lives; this historical vagueness highlights the universality of the problems she depicts. However, according to writer Thrity Umrigar, the novel probably takes place "during the waning years of the British Raj," the period from 1858 to 1947 when Britain possessed India as a colony and governed it directly. Before this period, the British East India Company, a private joint-stock company, ruled India on behalf of the British government. After the 1858 Indian Rebellion, during which substantial portions of the population unsuccessfully rebelled against British rule, the government began to administer colonial affairs directly. After decades of agitation for self-rule, organized in part by the famous resistance leader Mahatma Gandhi, India became an independent state in 1947. In order to avoid conflict between Hindus and Muslims in British India, the Muslim nation of Pakistan was created at the same time; however, the Partition of India displaced millions of people and led to significant sectarian violence that still inform relations between India and Pakistan today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Nectar in a Sieve takes place at the end of the colonial period, but Kamala Markandaya was part of the vanguard of Indian post-colonial writers, whose work, generally written in English, addresses the significant challenges facing India and its relationship to the Western powers that had once ruled it. Some decades later, Salman Rushdie became one of India's most celebrated novelists for his books *Midnight's Children*, about the struggle for Indian independence, and *The Satanic Verses*, a controversial novel that examines the life of the

prophet Muhammad. Following in Markandaya's footsteps, novelists Thrity Umrigar (*The Space Between Us*, 2006) and Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997) address the challenges facing both impoverished and privileged Indian women. Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri has garnered acclaim for her novels *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), which address Indian politics and the Indian immigrant experience in the United States.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nectar in a Sieve*
- **When Written:** 1954
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1954
- **Literary Period:** Post-colonial
- **Genre:** Semi-autobiographical novel
- **Setting:** An impoverished Indian village
- **Climax:** Rukmani and Nathan make an ill-fated journey to the city to find their son.
- **Antagonist:** Poverty
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Expat. While most of Markandaya's work addresses India, she lived in Britain for most of her adult life, returning to her native country only to visit.

On the Road. Although she was born into a wealthy family, Markandaya traveled throughout India by train since her father was a railway official. These childhood journeys allowed her to observe the rural poverty about which she would later write.



PLOT SUMMARY

As an elderly woman, Rukmani often imagines that her husband, long dead, is sleeping beside her. During the day, she sits outside with her adopted child, Puli. She can see the hospital building where her older son, Selvam, works, and she is content.

Rukmani begins to tell her life story. She is born the daughter of a village headman and the youngest of four daughters. As she watches her sisters get married, she dreams of her own extravagant wedding, although her mother gently warns that hers will be much more modest; because she's the youngest girl, little money is left for her dowry. When Rukmani turns

twelve, her family marries her to a tenant farmer named Nathan, a match that many think is beneath her. When Rukmani leaves home in her husband's cart, she's nervous, and even vomits once during the journey; however, Nathan is kind and soothes her fears. Rukmani is dismayed to see that Nathan lives in a mud hut, but in order to avoid hurting her kindly husband she pretends to be pleased with her new home.

Rukmani quickly becomes acquainted with her neighbors: garrulous Kali, careworn Janaki, and the pregnant and beautiful Kunthi. Rukmani becomes close with Kali and Janaki, but Kunthi always keeps her distance. Rukmani is aware that, without many practical skills, she's more hindrance than help to her husband; however, Nathan is patient and praises her lavishly for every accomplishment.

When Kunthi goes into labor, Rukmani is the only neighbor at home; Kunthi entreats Rukmani to leave her alone, but Rukmani assumes the other woman is delirious from pain and fear and stays on to attend her. When she finally returns home, Nathan is unusually cross, telling her not to forget about her own new pregnancy and exhaust herself. Rukmani starts practicing writing, even though it's considered useless for a girl. Rukmani vows to teach her own children to read and write as well. Nathan is illiterate, and he admires his wife's abilities; Rukmani appreciates this; many husbands would be uneasy with an educated wife and even forbid them to read. Soon, Rukmani gives birth to a daughter, Irawaddy. She's upset that her first child is a girl, but soon grows fond of her. Nathan also dotes on his daughter, even though many fathers aren't fond of girls.

Rukmani doesn't conceive another child for six years. Each time she visits her parents, she and her mother pray fervently at the temple for more children. Rukmani confesses her fears of infertility to a British doctor named Kenny, who treats her, and Rukmani soon becomes pregnant with a son, Arjan. Everyone in the village celebrates, but Rukmani never confesses to Nathan that she sought help from a strange doctor. In the following years, Rukmani gives birth to four more sons—Thambi, Murugan, Raja, and Selvam. While she's relieved to provide Nathan with sons, they stretch the family's resources thin and force Rukmani to sell most of her vegetables.

One day, young Arjan runs into the house to tell Rukmani that change is coming to the village: hundreds of men have arrived and are building a **tannery** in the village square. For months the building progresses, until one day the tannery is complete and the workers depart. Some people are sad to see them go, because they bought lots of local goods, but Rukmani is relieved; their presence drives prices up and makes the town unsafe for children. Nathan cautions that workmen will surely return to operate the tannery. Rukmani no longer allows Irawaddy to go to town on her, curtailing her daughter's freedom because of the influx of strange men.

Soon after, Rukmani is collecting dung for fuel when she sees

Kenny arriving for a visit. Kenny scorns Rukmani's country habits, like burning dung, but he's very polite to her children and addresses Nathan gravely in their local language. From this point, Kenny comes to the house frequently, bringing sweets for her children and sometimes goat's milk for Selvam. Rukmani knows that he treats workers at the tannery, but she has no idea what he does when he travels away from the village, or if he has a family.

Eventually, the time comes to select a husband for Irawaddy. Although Irawaddy has a small dowry, she's very beautiful, and manages to secure a good husband who will one day inherit a lot of land. Ira is nervous to leave home, but accepts her parents' decision without protest. At the end of the wedding, as Rukmani watches Irawaddy drive off with her new husband, she can't quite believe that she no longer sleeps under her roof.

That year, the monsoons come early and are very rough on the crops and the cottage. When the monsoons cease, Rukmani takes some of their small stash of rupees to buy rice, but she's astounded to see that prices have risen sharply because of damage from the monsoon.

Five years after Irawaddy's wedding, Rukmani is surprised to see her return home with her husband; Irawaddy is barren, and he's returning her home in order to take another wife. Irawaddy is depressed by the collapse of her marriage. Around this time, Arjan and Thambi seek jobs in the tannery; with Irawaddy at home, there's not enough food to go around. With the wages the boys bring in, Rukmani is able to provide better meals for the family and start saving up for their weddings.

When Nathan leaves home to attend a funeral, Rukmani walks into town to consult Kenny about Irawaddy's infertility. He tells her to send her daughter to see him. On her way home, she encounters Kunthi in an alley, and the woman insolently suggests that she's been taking advantage of her husband's absence to clandestinely visit other men. Rukmani slaps her and then notices that Kunthi is wearing a revealing sari and has sandalwood paste spread sensuously over her body. She hurries home.

Arjan and Thambi leave home for good to work on tea plantations in Ceylon, and Murugan leaves to work as a servant in a large city. It's a dry year, and the crops die from lack of water. When the rent collector, Sivaji, arrives, Nathan doesn't have the money to pay him. By selling the few possessions they have, the family scrapes together half the rent and agrees to pay the rest soon. When the rains finally come, the family plants again, but they're almost out of food. Rukmani carefully portions out their remaining rice and guards it closely, carrying some on her person and burying the rest. One day, Kunthi arrives, gaunt and ragged. She blackmails Rukmani into giving her food, threatening to tell Nathan that she's seen her alone in the town. Rukmani soon finds that the buried stash of rice has gone missing as well, and Nathan admits that he gave it to Kunthi; she blackmailed him as well, threatening to tell

Rukmani about an affair they had at the beginning of their marriage. Nathan is the father of both Kunthi's sons. Rukmani is devastated, but she also feels that they're finally free from Kunthi.

Soon after, the village men bring Raja's dead body home from the village. He had been looking for food near the tannery, and a watchman struck and killed him. Rukmani is numb and silent throughout the funeral. Two officials from the tannery inform Rukmani that the tannery isn't responsible for Raja's death and warn her against pressing charges. Rukmani has no idea how to take legal action, so she doesn't understand their visit.

As the days go on, everyone in the family becomes weaker, especially Kuti. One night, Rukmani hears someone moving in the night; thinking Kunthi has come back to steal more, she attacks the stranger, only to realize it is Irawaddy. By her daughter's scanty attire she realizes that she's been working as a prostitute in order to buy food for Kuti. Rukmani is devastated and Nathan is angry, but they realize they can no longer compel their daughter to obey. Irawaddy buys food for the family, but Kuti dies of malnutrition.

Rukmani sees Kenny, who has been away for several months, in the village; she tells him that two of her sons have died, and he confesses that his wife has left him and he's estranged from his sons. Rukmani says that a woman should stay with her husband, and Kenny replies that she is too simple to understand the situation. Before leaving, Rukmani tells Kenny that Irawaddy is now pregnant with an illegitimate child.

One day, Selvam informs his parents that he doesn't want to stay on the farm; instead, he plans to apprentice with Kenny, who is building a new **hospital** in the town. Kenny excitedly shows Rukmani his plans, telling her he's raised funds from donors in Britain. Over time, Selvam spends more time with Kenny and less with his own family. He's becoming much more knowledgeable about the outside world than his own parents, and takes on many of Kenny's beliefs. Progress on the hospital is slow, and it seems like Kenny's funds may prove insufficient, but he vows to finish the project.

Sivaji arrives and informs them that the landlord is selling their farm to the tannery; the family has two weeks to move out. Devastated, they decide that Selvam and Irawaddy will stay in the town while Rukmani and Nathan travel to the city to seek out Murugan. It takes them two days to find his house, and they have to sleep in a temple. During the night, thieves steal their small bundles of possessions and all their money.

A street child named Puli directs Rukmani and Nathan to Koil street, where Murugan lives. However, when they arrive they find he no longer works there. The new servants direct them to another house, and they search the servants' quarters for their son. Instead, they find his wife Ammu, and her sons; Murugan has abandoned her and she has no idea where he is. Ammu is exhausted and embittered from supporting her children alone,

and Rukmani is ashamed that Murugan has been a bad husband.

Rukmani and Nathan don't know what to do next, since they don't even have enough money to return home. Rukmani decides to work as a scribe and reader in the marketplace, and sets up a little stall; however, few people believe that a woman can actually read, so she makes barely enough money to buy rice. Well-versed in the city's ways, Puli suggests that Rukmani and Nathan work in the stone quarry, where they can make more money. Over time, Puli attaches himself to the family, guiding them around the city and guarding their store of money. Rukmani offers to take him home as well, but he scornfully tells her he doesn't want to live in a small village.

One day, Rukmani finds Nathan burning with fever. He dies the next day. Convincing Puli to come with her, Rukmani uses her small savings to pay for the journey home. Selvam and Irawaddy welcome her return with joy and relief.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rukmani – Rukmani is the novel's protagonist and narrator. She is a peasant farmer, wife, and mother living in rural India. At the age of twelve she marries a poor farmer, Nathan. She soon becomes a mother and faces the daunting task of providing for an increasing number of children, including Irawaddy, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam, Kuti, and the adopted Puli. Rukmani has a practical, humble, and positive disposition; she's an efficient housekeeper, never hesitates to work hard, and buoys the spirits of her family during hard times. Her greatest delights are her children and her relationship with her kindly husband, for whom she feels unabashed sexual desire. Rukmani's enjoyment of the simple pleasures of her life is balanced by her total resignation to the calamities that befall her. Even when famine claims her son Kuti, and her son Raja dies during an altercation in the town's **tannery**, Rukmani unhesitatingly accepts that such things are a natural part of life and can't be avoided. This attitude helps her cope with the suffering she experiences, but it also prevents her from acting to improve her lot in life. Rukmani's sole aspiration is to keep her family together, and in this she fails; by the end of the novel, Nathan has died prematurely, and most of her sons have dispersed to find their fortune elsewhere. However, in her old age Rukmani emerges as contented and wise, grateful to repose among her remaining children and grandchildren after a turbulent life.

Nathan – Nathan, Rukmani's husband, is a kindly and gentle tenant farmer. Although Nathan and Rukmani represent archetypal Indian peasants, Nathan's behavior as a husband helps combat widely held stereotypes about this demographic; Nathan is a surprisingly patient and caring husband, especially

at the time of their marriage when Rukmani is no more than a child. He supports her as she learns to manage a house and garden, and applauds her ability to read and write even though most husbands disapprove of educated women. Nathan dotes on their sole daughter, Irawaddy, even though sons are considered more valuable. As Rukmani grows older, she and Nathan have a remarkably equitable relationship. Nathan is even more resigned to inevitable suffering than his wife, and in times of crisis he often turns to Rukmani for guidance; by the time the couple lose their land and journey to the city, Nathan relies completely on Rukmani to lead the way. Nathan's character is marred only by his affair with their sultry neighbor Kunthi; midway through the novel it emerges that he is the father of Kunthi's two sons. Nathan explains to Rukmani that he was seduced by Kunthi's "evil" sexuality, and Rukmani immediately forgives him; this incident shows the extent to which traditional norms still influence their relationship.

Kenny – Kenny is a British doctor who lives and works in the village. Rukmani first meets Kenny at her dying mother's bedside, and she seeks treatment from him for infertility. A gruff man, Kenny claims to scorn the people of the village as backward and uninventive—he often chastises Rukmani for refusing to take action or feel angry in the face of suffering. However, he's actually sensitive and compassionate—he frequently brings Rukmani food during hard times, and when visiting her household, he speaks her language and displays a cultural sensitivity that the novel's other white characters lack entirely. During the novel, Kenny builds a free **hospital** that he hopes will provide desperately needed medical care to the region. His active nature and commitment to progress contrasts with Rukmani's passive resignation, but the novel doesn't prioritize one worldview above the other. Kenny's projects help the villagers, but his restless nature has led to the collapse of his marriage and estrangement from his children, preventing him from enjoying the familial happiness that Rukmani possesses despite her poverty.

Irawaddy – Irawaddy is Rukmani's eldest child and only daughter. When Irawaddy is born, Rukmani is disappointed because Nathan needs sons who can help him work the land. However, she and Nathan grow fond of their firstborn. Irawaddy has the most developed character of all Rukmani's children; her prominence in the narrative shows the extent to which the family defies traditional norms, even as they represent ordinary peasant life. Like her mother, Irawaddy marries at a young age, but her husband eventually renounces her for her failure to bear a child; Irawaddy accepts this humiliation, as well as the likelihood that she'll spend her life as a childless spinster, with the stoic resignation she's learned from Rukmani. When the family is starving during a period of famine, Irawaddy secretly works as a prostitute in order to buy milk for her youngest brother, Kuti, and eventually gives birth to an illegitimate child. Irawaddy's son, who is albino and an

outcast in the village, is a reminder of Irawaddy's social transgressions. The novel characterizes Irawaddy's actions as brave and honorable, and Irawaddy maintains her calm and dignity, as well as her close relationship with her mother, even in the face of social stigma. Her narrative is a revolutionary depiction of female sexuality and the difficulties facing women who don't conform to social norms.

Kunthi – Kunthi is Rukmani's beautiful and alluring neighbor. Kunthi is aloof and arrogant because she comes from a wealthy background and considers life in the village beneath her. While Rukmani becomes close with the other village women, like Kali and Janaki, Kunthi is always rude and "insolent" to her. Once, after Rukmani visits Kenny in town, she encounters Kunthi dressed in a sheer sari and made up provocatively; even though it's obvious that Kunthi is conducting an affair, she implies that Rukmani has been cheating on her husband. Later, Nathan reveals to Rukmani that he slept with Kunthi before and after their marriage; in fact, he fathered both of Kunthi's two sons. While Rukmani and Irawaddy provide surprisingly positive depictions of sexuality, Kunthi's sexuality is characterized as an explicit threat to the cohesion of the family.

Arjun – Arjun is Rukmani's eldest son. While Nathan hopes his sons will join him on the farm, Arjun and his younger brother Thambi reject the idea of cultivating land they will never own, and find work at the new **tannery** that is propelling the town towards urbanization. There, they become involved in workers' strikes and eventually lose their jobs. Arjun's nascent political consciousness and discontent with the rural poverty into which he is born contrast markedly with his parents' acceptance of the disasters that befall them. Eventually, Arjun leaves home to work on a tea plantation in Ceylon. His departure marks the beginning of the family's disintegration.

Murugan – Murugan is Rukmani's third son. Murugan moves to a large city to work as a servant, and eventually marries a woman he meets there, Ammu. Like his older brothers, he refuses to live as his parents have and even makes major decisions without consulting them. When Rukmani and Nathan are evicted, they travel to the city in hopes that Murugan will take them in; however, they discover that he's abandoned his wife and young child, and his whereabouts are unknown. Rukmani feels both sadness for the loss of her son and shame that his character has proved less virtuous than she hoped.

Selvam – Selvam is Rukmani's fifth son. Like his older brothers, Selvam elects not to join Nathan on the farm; instead, he becomes Kenny's apprentice and trains to work in the large **hospital** that Kenny is building. While his older siblings contribute to the family's disintegration, Selvam actually helps preserve it; he cares for Irawaddy and Irawaddy's son, and by the end of the novel he provides for Rukmani as well. Selvam's example shows how ordinary peasants can move away from traditional poverty without becoming displaced or sacrificing precious family networks.

Kuti – Kuti is Rukmani's youngest son. Kuti is born just after Irawaddy's marriage collapses, and his older sister cares for him as if he is her own child. However, when he is a toddler, famine strikes the village, threatening the entire family with starvation. Irawaddy works as a prostitute in order to buy milk for Kuti, who is the most vulnerable; despite her sacrifice, he dies of malnutrition.

Puli – Puli is a street child whom Rukmani befriends when she travels to the city in search of Murugan. Rukmani pities Puli because he's homeless and his fingers have rotted away from leprosy; in turn Puli pities Rukmani and Nathan because they are bewildered and frightened by the city. Puli is wise beyond his years, able to navigate the city and protect money from robbery; but he's also a child, coveting toys in the market and enjoying the care and affection Rukmani provides. Their relationship shows the close ties between urban and rural poverty, as well as the mutual vulnerability of impoverished and uneducated people everywhere. Rukmani's eventual decision to adopt Puli demonstrates the inherent generosity that persists despite her harrowing experiences in the city.

Janaki – Janaki is Rukmani's neighbor in the village, Janaki is a tired and careworn from numerous pregnancies and the stress of providing for her family on slim resources. Janaki's husband runs one of the village's few stores, but eventually the **tannery** brings new merchants and competition to the town, forcing Janaki and her family to give up their business and leave the town.

Father – Rukmani's father is a village headman and ostensibly the most powerful person in his town, but during Rukmani's childhood his position becomes increasingly meaningless as local power concentrates in the hands of British colonial officials. Accordingly, although Rukmani is born into a comparatively wealthy family, by the time she's old enough for marriage, her dowry is too small to win her a wealthy or well-connected husband. Father's narrative shows how outside influences disrupts traditional ways of life and continuity within families.

Irawaddy's son – An illegitimate child Irawaddy conceives while working as a prostitute. Even though he's a reminder of her social transgressions, Irawaddy adores him, as do Selvam, Rukmani, and Nathan. The child is albino, which makes him an outcast in the village; however, the family's love for him highlights their cohesion in the face of outside pressure.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Thambi – Thambi is Rukmani's second son. Closest in age to Arjun, he follows his older brother to work in the local **tannery** and eventually in search of better jobs in Ceylon.

Raja – Raja is Rukmani's fourth son. During a period of famine, Raja is searching for food in the town and a guard at the **tannery** kills him. Raja's death fulfills Rukmani's early

predictions that the tannery, ostensibly a sign of development and progress, will bring only suffering to the town.

Kali – Kali is Rukmani's neighbor in the village. A large and garrulous woman, Kali frequently annoys Rukmani, but she also helps her as she learns how to run a household and care for her children.

Mother – Rukmani's mother. Although Rukmani leaves home at a young age, she visits her mother whenever she can and is present at her deathbed.

Sivaji – The local rent collector. His yearly arrival is a reminder that the land Rukmani and Nathan live and rely on is not actually their own.

Granny – A poor local fruit seller. Rukmani develops a friendship with the older woman, and eventually asks her to arrange Irawaddy's wedding. Towards the end of the novel, Granny collapses of starvation and dies at the village well; her grim demise is a reminder of the harshness of rural poverty.

Biswas – A local merchant and moneylender. Rukmani dislikes him because he uses his relative power and prestige to coerce villagers into predatory loans. However, during times of famine she's forced to buy rice from him at exorbitant prices.

Ammu – Murugan's wife. When Rukmani and Nathan travel to the city in search of their third son, they find Ammu and her children living a hovel, having been abandoned by Murugan. Careworn and haggard, Ammu is clearly embittered by her husband's disappearance and wants nothing to do with his parents.

Birla A female doctor for whom Murugan works for a while.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SUFFERING

Portraying the lives of Indian subsistence farmers, *Nectar in a Sieve* is permeated by unflinching depictions of unspeakable suffering. Even at the best of times, Rukmani's family is only precariously secure, growing just enough to eat. When beset by sickness or agricultural failure, they have no resources to sustain them, and when they are evicted from their land, they have no other way to make a living. In order to cope with the repeated disasters that befall the family, Rukmani chooses to view suffering as inevitable and unremarkable; rather than trying to avoid calamity, she focuses on shepherding her family through it. Kenny, a British doctor who befriends Rukmani, repeatedly

chastises her for this viewpoint, saying that suffering is preventable and people should constantly struggle against it. Ultimately, the novel argues that both Rukmani and Kenny's stances are valid but incomplete: while Kenny's actions often provide Rukmani with crucial assistance, her beliefs ensure she maintains peace of mind despite the suffering she experiences throughout her life.

Rukmani is an extremely stoic character, accepting without question that her life will rarely be secure and often full of suffering. She describes the events of her life, many of which disturb the reader, with a bluntness that clearly helps her confront these situations. For instance, when she throws up from fear while driving away from her wedding with Nathan, virtually a stranger, she doesn't dwell on this fear but rather Nathan's gentleness in tending to her. Later, while listening to a destructive storm destroy her family's crops, Rukmani says she "understood a vast pervading doom." However intensely aware she may be of the suffering that is going to befall her family, she has no plans or hopes to evade it; instead, she only braces herself to endure it.

Even when it comes to her own children, Rukmani prefers to accept their suffering rather than work to avoid it. When her daughter Irawaddy's husband leaves her because she can't have a child, Rukmani knows that without a man's support Irawaddy will become a beggar once her parents die. However, she says that "one gets used to anything," and that after thinking it over she "accepted the future and Ira's lot in it." When her two sons Arjan and Thambi, who work at the **tannery**, strike for a longer lunch hour, Rukmani believes the attempt to change their working conditions is foolish, asking "of what use [it is] to fight" when "one only lost the little one had" by doing so. To Rukmani, the dominance of the rich over the poor is part of the natural order, and it's easier to accommodate oneself to the suffering this causes than to strive against it.

Kenny, a gruff but charitable doctor, challenges Rukmani's belief that suffering is natural, arguing that people can mitigate the calamities that threaten them through active struggle. Kenny arrived in India working for an unnamed British company, but he makes his home in Rukmani's rural province in order to provide medical care to people who desperately need it. Although he frequently belittles his patients, he's also remarkably assimilated into their society and provides free medical treatment to Rukmani and many others.

Most importantly, Kenny acts on his beliefs by founding a **hospital** in the town with money he fundraised in Britain. The hospital remains unfinished by the end of the novel, but it has the potential to seriously mitigate suffering from curable diseases, thus supporting Kenny's argument that it is possible to combat human suffering through thoughtful action. By contrast, when Rukmani encounters Kenny during a famine, she bravely assures him the family will endure their suffering until better times arrive; Kenny explodes in frustration, telling

her that "you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools" and exhorting her to "demand—cry out for help—do something." To Kenny, Rukmani's refusal to strive against her desperate circumstances is a character deficiency and, in a broader sense, a quality that prevents her society as a whole from advancing.

The novel refuses to definitively endorse either character's mindset, acknowledging that each has its benefits. While Rukmani is skeptical of Kenny's beliefs, she also profits by them: instead of accepting her infertility, she seeks treatment from Kenny and subsequently bears several sons. One of those sons, Selvam, becomes Kenny's apprentice, pursuing an educated career that will insulate him from the suffering and poverty of his parents' lives.

Moreover, it's important that Kenny's views are shaped by membership in an imperialist society, bent on arranging the world to its own benefit. In contrast, Rukmani's country has been subject to British rule for generations, so it's reasonable that her culture is permeated by a sense of the futility of controlling outside events. Both Rukmani and Kenny, then, are informed by their positions as citizens of colonized and colonizing nations.

Yet even as his mindset benefits Rukmani's family, Kenny's constant striving has alienated him from his own wife and child, whom he left behind in Britain. And though Rukmani is often incapable of protecting her family, her tendency toward acceptance allows her to derive peace of mind and deep calm from her husband and children. While the novel doesn't definitively endorse either character's outlook, it's also important that Rukmani's mindset does allow her to weather a very difficult life and to look back on it, as an old woman, with contentment rather than bitterness.



WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

Rukmani marries her husband, Nathan, at the age of twelve, and the rest of her life is consumed by the grueling labor of maintaining a house and raising several children on scant resources. Although she represents an ostensibly conservative view of femininity, Rukmani actively endorses her way of life, asserting her contentment with Nathan. Moreover, by describing her loving and fairly equitable relationship with her husband, her unabashed sexual desire, and the authority she acquires as a matriarch, Rukmani challenges stereotypes of traditional Indian society as inherently repressive of women. Meanwhile, Rukmani's daughter, Irawaddy, and her neighbor, Kunthi, provide two less conventional views of women's roles. Both work as prostitutes, but Irawaddy does so in order to provide for her siblings during a famine, whereas Kunthi appears to do so out of boredom and a desire to sow mayhem. By the end of the novel, Irawaddy achieves redemption by becoming a loving mother, while Kunthi disappears from the narrative altogether. Written in the 1950s, *Nectar in a Sieve* is revolutionary for its

depictions of women as intelligent, capable, and sexual partners—however, through Kunthi's demise, the novel argues that such qualities are only valuable if they help women fulfill traditional roles within the family.

Rukmani both fulfills and defies stereotypes of traditional Indian womanhood. She's married off at a young age, but after brief unhappiness at leaving her family, she quickly acclimates to her new life, describing with pride her first garden and increasing facility with household affairs. Through her happiness as a young bride, the novel questions the assumption that traditional Indian culture is regressive and oppressive of women. While Rukmani is outwardly subservient to Nathan, it's important that he respects her deeply, praising her for being able to read and write even though "it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was."

Rukmani frequently makes decisions in the house, and it's she who handles their limited supply of money.

Rukmani is also frank about her sexual desire for Nathan—*Nectar in a Sieve* is one of the first novels to address the taboo topic of sexual desire among Indian women. Rukmani remarks that while people say "a woman always remembers her wedding night," she derives more sexual satisfaction later in her marriage, "when I went to my husband matured in mind as well as body." Here, Rukmani establishes female desire as natural and positive, rather than shameful. She also quietly insists that her narrative focus not on the act of marriage as the climax of a woman's life, but rather the importance of maturity and development throughout an evolving marital relationship.

Through her failed marriage and her brief stint as a prostitute, Rukmani's daughter, Irawaddy, challenges her mother's satisfaction within conventional gender norms. Like her mother, Irawaddy marries young. Her husband, however, returns Irawaddy to the family after she fails to bear children. Because Irawaddy is unlikely to find another husband and there are not socially acceptable ways for women to support themselves, it's likely she'll become a beggar after her parents die. Irawaddy's grim fate shows that, despite Rukmani's happy marriage, her culture does often fail its women.

Irawaddy herself contravenes and fulfills expectations of women by working as a prostitute in order to buy food for her youngest brother, Kuti, after a crop failure. While Rukmani is devastated when she finds out, she comes to respect Irawaddy for her pragmatism and sacrifice. Eventually, Irawaddy conceives a son; although her child is a public declaration of her social dishonor, Irawaddy and Rukmani love him deeply. Because she's acting to save her family and because personal relationships are more important to her than social norms, Irawaddy emerges as incredibly brave. However, it's important to note that if society provided any legitimate methods for women to make money and provide for their families, Irawaddy wouldn't have been forced into prostitution. The flip side of Irawaddy's bravery is the implicit critique of a society that limits

women's freedoms without providing any safeguards against poverty and starvation.

Like Irawaddy, Rukmani's neighbor Kunthi defies social norms and eventually becomes a prostitute. While her exact motives are unclear, it seems that she's acting for personal gratification; the novel characterizes this transgression of social norms as malicious and threatening. While Rukmani describes her own sexuality as positive, when she encounters Kunthi scantily clad and wearing sandalwood paste on her throat, she characterizes the other woman as unwholesome and threatening. In her description, Rukmani lingers on the makeup Kunthi uses to alter her appearance; Kunthi's physical artifice suggests moral deception as well. Eventually, when Rukmani eventually discovers that Nathan has slept with Kunthi and fathered her two sons, Rukmani's suspicions prove correct.

Kunthi uses this secret to blackmail Nathan into giving her the family's supply of rice, threatening them with starvation. She's a threat to the cohesion of Rukmani's family, both emotionally, by ostensibly seducing Nathan (Rukmani largely absolves her husband from culpability in this affair), and materially, using her sexuality to take their food. Kunthi's sexuality earns her punishment. By the time she arrives to beg for food, Kunthi is haggard and emaciated; she tells Rukmani that she has parted from her husband, although it remains unclear when or how this split occurred. While Rukmani and Irawaddy's sexuality bolsters familial unity, Kunthi's contributes to her family's disintegration—at least, Rukmani interprets the situation this way. Normally compassionate, she's uninterested in Kunthi's plight because she considers her an enemy. However it's important to note that the two women are very similar. Like Rukmani's family, Kunthi's teeters on the brink of starvation; and like Irawaddy, she may have been driven to prostitution by circumstances beyond her control. Implicitly, the novel uses Kunthi to point out that restrictive gender norms encourage even kindhearted women to judge other women in black-and-white terms, rather than appreciating the complexities of their individual circumstances.

While Rukmani and her family accept Irawaddy's unconventional sexuality because it is selfless and benefits the family, Kunthi's emerges as immoral because it threatens the family unit. Kunthi shows that the novel is only willing to challenge contemporary expectations for women up to a point. *Nectar in a Sieve* provides an important and nuanced meditation on the place of women within a traditional but rapidly changing society. While its treatment of women's roles within traditional marriages is groundbreaking, it's ultimately unwilling to articulate a way for women to live outside the roles of wife and mother to which their society confines them.



RURAL VS. URBAN POVERTY

Though *Nectar in a Sieve's* protagonist, Rukmani, lives in poverty for her entire life, the novel tracks her initially rural surroundings as they become increasingly urbanized—from the arrival of the **tannery** to her self-sustaining village and the industrial slums it creates, to Rukmani and Nathan's eviction from their land and decision to seek out their son in a large city. While Rukmani finds great happiness in her life as a poor farmer, navigating towns and cities proves a bewildering and miserable experience. Her life's great tragedy is the dissolution of her rural society, despite its desperate poverty, and the loss of security she enjoys within that society. However, Rukmani's sons sharply criticize the farming life their parents enjoy, pointing out that they live at the mercy of their landlords with no chance of improving their circumstances. The novel thus creates a tender picture of rural life but refuses to romanticize it, showing that farmers like Rukmani are just as vulnerable and oppressed as the urban poor.

For Rukmani and Nathan, life on the farm initially provides an opportunity to live in comparative independence and freedom even though they are poor and uneducated. Rukmani's narrative style is usually straightforward and blunt, but when she describes her small farm she lapses into lyricism. As a young bride, she asks herself, "when the fields are green and beautiful to the eye [...] and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times [...] what more can a woman ask for?" Nathan especially derives his self-worth from working the land. He's proud that "he had no master" as a farmer and is never happier than when teaching his sons "the ways of the earth." Even though the family barely has any money or possessions, Rukmani and Nathan feel that the farm allows them to live with freedom and dignity.

The village's transformation into a larger and larger town coincides the downfall of the family's fortunes; their eventual journey to the city marks the lowest point of Rukmani's life. When a large tannery comes to the village, for instance, it immediately transforms the family's lifestyle. Rukmani is suspicious because the influx of workers drives prices up and makes the town unsafe for children; besides these material concerns, she complains that "they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter." Perhaps because it involves interacting with an outside world she doesn't quite understand, Rukmani sees transactional labor as less honorable than farming, and she attributes a larger psychological malaise to the town's development. Later, strikes at the tannery forces Rukmani's two oldest sons to flee the town; a tannery guard kills another son, Raja. The urbanization of the city, then, directly correlates to the dissolution of the family.

When Rukmani and Nathan finally lose their land, they travel to a large city where their son Murugan is living. In the city, thieves steal all their possessions and money, which results in

an intensification of their material poverty and demonstrates that the city fosters a less communal and principled way of life than do small towns. Even Murugan is not immune to this degeneration; to her shame, Rukmani discovers that he has run away from his wife, Ammu, and their child, disowning his obligation to provide for them. It's no accident that Nathan's health quickly declines and he dies in the city; his physical weakness points out the sharp contrast between the fulfillment he derives from life as a farmer and the sense of bewilderment and loss he experiences trying to make his way among the urban poor.

While Rukmani and Nathan believe that rural struggle is infinitely preferable to urban poverty, their more educated sons challenge these notions, pointing out that whether they live in the city or country, the lower class is disadvantaged in the same ways. To Rukmani's dismay, her oldest sons, Arjan and Thambi, seek jobs at the tannery; they don't want to be like their father, who "labors for another and gets so little in return." Thambi also points out what Rukmani prefers not to notice—that Nathan doesn't own his land and will never be able to save up enough money to purchase it. After Thambi makes this comment, she even acknowledges that "almost all we grew had been sold to pay the rent of the land," an injustice that she's never before acknowledged. The boys' concerns prove valid, as eventually the land agent, Sivaji, informs Nathan that the landlord has sold their plot to the tannery. In light of their abrupt eviction, against which they have no legal recourse, the independence that Rukmani and Nathan associate with their farm seems like a mockery. In fact, they're just as vulnerable to exploitation and hardship as are urban wage laborers Rukmani sees in the city.

The novel's depictions of rural farming imbue Rukmani's life and vocation with beauty and dignity. However, while she praises her protagonist, Markandaya sharply criticizes the unjust systems under which the rural poor function, pointing out that while urban poverty looks worse, the rural poor are subject to many of the same disadvantages.



FAMILY

While Rukmani's life is difficult and tragic in many ways, the one thing that sustains her is her abiding love for her family. *Nectar in a Sieve* presents familial love and familial sacrifice as the most important aspect of life. While this point of view is beautiful and inspiring, it's also poignant because Rukmani's deep love for her family coexists with her inability to protect and provide for them. The novel points out that while the family's emotional cohesion is important and praiseworthy, it doesn't help them combat the calamities that repeatedly occur. Ultimately—and tragically—the novel presents the crushing poverty and oppression they experience as more powerful than family bonds.

Both Rukmani and Nathan orient their lives completely around

their children. Rukmani finds deep satisfaction in motherhood—even though she wants sons because they are more valuable as farmhands, she loves her firstborn daughter, Irawaddy, whom she describes as an ideal and beautiful baby. Nathan also dotes on his daughter, and his behavior is presented as unusual for a man; in fact, Nathan’s devotion to his children pushes back against assumptions that familial stewardship is an inherently female role.

Gestures of familial sacrifice are frequent. In times of famine, Rukmani goes without food so her children can eat, and Irawaddy sacrifices her honor by working as a prostitute in order to feed her younger brother, Kuti. Family is also more important than social convention. Rukmani loves and supports her daughter even after she turns to prostitution, and she cares for her grandson even though he’s born out of wedlock.

However, Rukmani’s consuming love for her children juxtaposes with her frequent inability to provide for them. In times of famine, the entire family is quickly reduced to starvation; at these junctures, Rukmani has no resources to draw upon. Although she goes without food herself and provides spiritual comfort to her children, it’s not always enough. For example, despite Rukmani’s and Irawaddy’s sacrifices on his behalf, Kuti, dies of malnourishment. Rukmani is also unable to protect her children from the social forces that threaten them. When a **tannery** guard accidentally kills her son Raja, for instance, she’s unaware that she’s entitled to justice and doesn’t seek legal recourse. For Rukmani, deep maternal love does not necessarily imply advocacy on behalf of her children.

Ultimately, the novel argues that while strong and selfless family bonds can survive even amid desperate circumstances, familial love is not an effective weapon against social injustice or oppression. Rukmani’s and Nathan’s love for their children does not enable them to fight the quasi-feudal tenant farming system which prevents them from keeping enough food to feed them, nor does it allow them to combat the tannery, which kills poor children with impunity.

By the end of the novel, Rukmani’s family is reduced in size—two of her sons have died, while three others have left to make their fortunes in faraway places, never to see their parents again. Although Rukmani has been a devoted mother, her family structure crumbles by the time she reaches old age. The novel emphasizes the tragic deaths of Raja and Kuti and the loss of Arjan and Thambi not to emphasize Rukmani’s failure as a parent but to show how personal love and initiative inevitably fails against the structural injustice of the society within which the family lives.

While the novel creates a moving portrait of Rukmani’s family, it refuses to romanticize family life. The disasters the family undergoes are an implicit call for social structures that promote and reinforce strong bonds among family members, rather than imperiling them at every turn.



AGRICULTURE VS. EDUCATION

Nectar with a Sieve portrays a family living as subsistence farmers in rural India. The parents—Rukmani and Nathan—are totally committed their agricultural way of life, but most of their sons, who have a slightly higher level of education, question their parents’ values and eventually leave the farm for good. Rukmani idealizes the land and the lifestyle it provides, and initially views her children’s lack of interest as a tragedy; in her opinion, education has rendered them impractical when it comes to daily life. However, as the novel progresses, Rukmani herself becomes disillusioned with dependence on the land, which often fails the family and leads to desperate famines. In contrast, her son Selvam’s superior education and knowledge of the outside world enables him to provide for his sister and aging parents when they can no longer live on the farm. At the beginning of the novel, the land emblemizes stability, but by the end education represents a more secure way of life.

As a young wife and mother, Rukmani derives great fulfillment from living off the land. However, as the farm repeatedly fails to provide for her family, she gradually becomes disenchanted. Although she initially balks at living in a mud house, Rukmani proves an adept housekeeper and gardener, taking pride in the size of her vegetables. In one romantic description of the farm, Rukmani mentions the fields, which “are green and beautiful to the eye,” just before she says that her husband notices beauty in her “which no one has seen before.” Associating the land’s beauty with her own, she shows just how closely she identifies with the farm and derives her sense of self from it.

As the novel progresses, multiple natural disasters, from storms to crop failures, leave the family on the brink of starvation. During one period of famine, Rukmani’s son Raja is killed while looking for food in town and her youngest, Kuti, dies of malnourishment. Rukmani says that shortly after Kuti’s death, the crops began to prosper “with a bland indifference that mocked our loss.” Once, she saw the land as a benevolent force that ensured stability for her young family. Now it seems not only unreliable but actively malicious.

While Rukmani initially believes that education has lead her sons into unwise decisions, Selvam’s educated career eventually saves the family when their farm fails. Rukmani is proud of being able to read, a skill which few women possess. She teaches her sons, and with this advantage and access to the growing town they develop a political consciousness that she fears and opposes. As young men, Arjan and Thambi grumble at the power held by “white men,” like the British doctor Kenny, which Rukmani has always taken for granted; they keenly perceive the injustice of working land they will never own, refusing to join Nathan in the fields. When they organize an unsuccessful strike with fellow **tannery** workers, putting their education and new beliefs to work, Rukmani says that she does not even know “what reply to make” because “these men are

strangers." Worker's rights are irrelevant to Rukmani; increased education has damaged the cohesion of her initially tight-knit family. Arjan and Thambi's disappearance in search of work does chip away at the family's integrity, seeming to prove Rukmani right.

However, Selvam follows another path towards education by apprenticing with Kenny. Taking this job involves an explicit choice between agriculture and education: Nathan is growing too old to work the farm alone, but he gives up his beloved work so that Selvam can follow his own inclinations and build a better life. Eventually, this choice proves wise. When the landlord evicts Rukmani and Nathan from their land, they experience the ultimate failure of the agricultural system to provide a stable way of life. At this critical juncture, it's only Selvam who can provide for Irawaddy and Irawaddy's illegitimate son. When Rukmani returns home from her failed quest in the city she depends on Selvam's future livelihood as a doctor to sustain her. From Rukmani's relative narration as an elderly woman, it's evident that Selvam has achieved some success in this field. While Rukmani thought education would tear her family apart, it's precisely Selvam's education that binds the family's remaining members together.

Rukmani never describes knowledge and learning with the lyricism she extends to the land. Even at the end of the novel, agriculture is privileged because it represents the most joyful period in Rukmani's difficult life. However, by the end of the novel, her love for the land is balanced by her painful understanding that living off the land has directly caused many of the family's tragedies. Through Rukmani's gradual shift of view, the novel argues that the benefits education can bring to impoverished groups outweigh its disruption of traditional life.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TANNERY

Ostensibly, by bringing new methods of manufacturing to a region previously defined by subsistence farming, the tannery symbolizes progress and development. However, it actually destroys the traditional lifestyle that has provided Rukmani with deep joy, without providing anything to compensate for this loss. Early in the novel, Rukmani and Nathan are surprised to discover that workers have arrived to construct a large tannery in their sleepy village. While some neighbors hope the tannery will bring new jobs and prospects, Rukmani is suspicious and reluctant to accept its presence; in the end, it's she who proves right. Over the years, the tannery drives massive change in the village, mostly for the worse. The influx of new workers drive

prices up without providing increased prosperity for the villagers. Local men, including Arjan and Thambi, find work at the factories instead of farming the land their fathers have worked for generations; instead of improving their lives, the tannery makes them into wage slaves unable to negotiate for better hours or conditions. In this way, the tannery represents a brand of development that promotes economic profit for the elite without doing anything to improve the lives of the impoverished. The village was once cohesive and rooted in local practices, but workers bring vices like alcoholism, and local control gradually concentrates in the hands of factory bosses, meaning that the town no longer serves the interests of its inhabitants and is sometimes actively hostile to them; for example, Rukmani's son Raja is beaten to death by a tannery guard while looking for food near its compound. Markandaya ultimately uses the tannery, and havoc it wreaks on the village, not to defend traditionalism but to critique visions of development that are not egalitarian in nature.



THE HOSPITAL

After one of his long absences from the village, Kenny tells Rukmani that he has been raising money from British donors to build a hospital that will provide medical care to people in the region. Kenny's project represents a vision of rural development diametrically opposed to that which the **tannery** provides. The free hospital is unlikely to profit Kenny or anyone else, but will improve local conditions significantly. Local employees, like Rukmani's son Selvam, are given the opportunity to obtain an education and strive for a better future, rather than becoming pawns of factory bosses. Kenny's vision shows how development and foreign intervention should function, but its unfinished state at the end of the novel, compared to the flourishing tannery, reflects the author's uncertainty that this vision will ever thrive.

Moreover, the hospital reflects the ongoing conflict between Kenny and Rukmani's approaches to suffering. Kenny often chides Rukmani for mutely accepting everything that happens to her; his devotion to improving medical care in a desperately underserved region represents a commendable impulse to fix the problems he sees around him. However, Rukmani doubts that the hospital will ever live up to Kenny's promises, and in some ways she's right; construction frequently stalls due to funding issues, and in the meantime villagers like Granny continue to die of preventable illnesses. The hospital's uncertain fate shows that a blind embrace of development, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot singlehandedly address the challenges India faces. Moreover, it suggests that Rukmani's attitude towards suffering does not reflect a lack of ingenuity but is a brave coping mechanism against challenges that often prove intractable.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night. Well, maybe they do; but for me there are other nights I prefer to remember, sweeter, fuller, when I went to my husband matured in mind as well as in body, not as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Nathan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this early passage, Rukmani reflects on the first days of her marriage and shows how she will both conform to and defy expectations for women in her conservative Indian society. On the one hand, Rukmani assigns great importance to her wedding; it's the climactic event of her young life, and while modern readers are likely troubled to see her becoming a wife at the age of twelve, Rukmani accepts this as an unquestionable tradition of her community. On the other hand, she insists on viewing her marriage as an evolving relationship through which she becomes more of an equal to her husband, Nathan. To Rukmani, marriage reaches its peak when she is emotionally "matured," rather than when she is a young and frightened bride. Throughout the novel, Rukmani will prove more independent and assertive than most of the women in her community. At the same time, she asks the reader to reexamine preexisting prejudices about Indian society and understand how loving and respectful marriages can exist even within a society that seems to oppress women.

☛ When the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Nathan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rukmani expresses her deep contentment with her new life as Nathan's wife and outlines the various factors that will bring her peace and happiness throughout the novel. Foremost is her growing attachment to Nathan. She no longer sees him just as her parents' choice but someone who is uniquely capable of appreciating her; while it's not stated explicitly, Rukmani's new sexual fulfillment hovers behind this passage.

Moreover, while Rukmani was initially scared of the hardships of farm life, she's not only becoming more adept but beginning to deeply identify with the land; she even equates the "beautiful" fields to the "beauty" she sees in herself, showing how much she connect her own happiness to the land around her. While this mindset allows her to be content in a difficult life, the novel will later show that such physical and emotional dependence on the land is untenable. Ultimately, Rukmani's connection to her husband and family will prove stronger than her connection to the land.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ I think it cost him a good deal to say what he did, and he never varied his attitude once [...] I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was, for Nathan could not even write his name; yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure, as lesser men might have done.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Nathan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rukmani addresses her unusually high level of education and the role it plays in her marriage. Rukmani's eccentric father taught his daughters to read, even though this isn't considered a desirable quality in a wife and mother. Nathan's respect for Rukmani's intelligence may seem obvious to a modern reader, but within the paradigms of his society demonstrates great affection for his wife and general open-mindedness. Moreover, it prefigures the evolution of their relationship: as the husband Nathan is the "dominant" partner in the marriage, but by the time he and Rukmani move to the city, he will grow to rely on and defer

to Rukmani's decision-making skills, and even her ability to make money by reading and writing.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ “Never, never,” I cried. “They may live on our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge [...]”

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When the tannery arrives in Rukmani's village, it disrupts the tranquil agricultural life that she's grown to love. Throughout the novel, Rukmani insists that the only way to overcome suffering and misfortune is to calmly accept whatever happens. However, in this passage she departs from her usual stoicism to explicitly complain about the changes to her beloved village. Rukmani easily accepts that everyone in the village is poor—sometimes even destitute—but she resents the tannery because it shows her for the first time the huge gap between those who control economic resources (tannery bosses and workers) and those who do not (tenant farmers like Nathan). Although the tannery's arrival raises this spark of political consciousness in Rukmani's mind, she sees no way to act on her outrage; it's only her sons Arjun and Thambi who will attempt, however unsuccessfully, to fight the injustice they observe through strikes and political action.

☝ So they were reconciled and threw the past away with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present, while I stood by in pain, envying such easy reconciliation and clutching in my own two hands the memory of the past, and accounting it a treasure.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Janaki, Kali

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rukmani shows that her own deep-seated antipathy to the tannery contrasts starkly with her neighbors' acceptance of it. Everyone else around her is ready to embrace the economic opportunity and development that the tannery seems likely to provide; it's only Rukmani who correctly anticipates the disasters it will bring to the village. Usually, Rukmani promotes mute acceptance of misfortunes like the tannery's arrival, seeing this response as the only way to cope with the rampant suffering she experiences and cannot control. When she becomes friends with Kenny, a British doctor, she will often argue this viewpoint to him. However, in this case, Kali and Janaki's unquestioning acceptance of everything that happens around them, which supersedes even Rukmani's equanimity, emerges as unwise and thoughtless. Rukmani's deep misgivings here complicate the worldview that she will endorse throughout the novel.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ She nodded slightly, making no comment, yet I knew how bruised she must be by the imminent parting. My spirit ached with pity for her, I longed to be able to comfort her, to convince her that in a few months' time her new home would be the most significant part of her life, the rest only a preparation [...] but before this joy must come the stress of parting [...].

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Irawaddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Already, Irawaddy is poised to repeat the events of Rukmani's life that comprised the first part of the novel. However, Rukmani's certainty about the tranquil course of her daughter's life will soon be disrupted; Irawaddy's husband will eventually disown her because of her possible infertility, and she will resume her place in her parents' household. In light of events to come, this passage is a poignant evocation of the conventional but deeply satisfying life that Rukmani has enjoyed and Irawaddy will never have. It points out the injustice of a society which provides only one avenue—marriage and motherhood—for a woman to achieve this kind of satisfaction. At the same time, Rukmani depicts the joys of a life that is centered around family, and Irawaddy *will* achieve this. After

returning home, she becomes deeply invested in caring for her younger brothers, develops a close friendship with Selvam, and eventually has a child of her own, albeit outside of the confines of marriage. Eventually, both Rukmani and Irawaddy will realize that true happiness comes not from fulfilling traditional norms but by devoting oneself to family, no matter how unconventional that family might be.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long it will give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This passage prefaces the novel's first natural disaster, extreme monsoons that ruin Nathan and Rukmani's crops. Here, Rukmani's evocation of nature contrasts starkly with her loving depiction of the "beautiful" fields as a young bride. At the beginning of the novel, Rukmani sees the land as a beneficent force; identifying with it so strongly, she assumes that it will always function for her benefit. Now, she is coming to see the land as impersonal and sometimes malicious—much like the "animal" she describes here. As the novel progresses and agricultural calamities become more severe, Rukmani's confidence in the land will erode, and with it her satisfaction and trust in the agricultural lifestyle that is predicated on that confidence. Although Rukmani will always be skeptical (and sometimes outright disparaging) about life in cities in towns, by the end of the novel, she will no longer be convinced that subsistence farming is an inherently practical or superior lifestyle.

☛ "Times are better, times are better," he shouts. "Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek, suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—cry out for help—do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!"

Related Characters: Kenny (speaker), Rukmani

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

After the monsoons finally end, Rukmani and Nathan venture into town and use their slim savings to purchase a tiny amount of rice. On the way back, they encounter Kenny, who is distraught by the damage the monsoons have wrought and the famine that will probably follow. Kenny expounds, however incoherently, on his own attitude towards suffering, which is in direct contrast to Rukmani and Nathan's. Rather than mutely accepting misfortune as inevitable, Kenny believes that people should actively strive against it, or demand that others help him. Kenny's outrage stems from true compassion for the villagers, and he will eventually act on this compassion by building a hospital in order to ameliorate the villagers' physical suffering. However, his declaration that there is "nothing" in India shows that he doesn't understand that Rukmani's mindset is an important coping mechanism, providing peace of mind in the midst of turbulent circumstances. As an outsider and a member of an imperialist society, he will never be able to achieve complete understanding of Rukmani's society.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ Nobody asked, "Where do you go from here?" They did not say, "What is to become of us?" We waited and one day they came to bid us farewell [...] then they were gone, and the shopkeepers were glad that there was less competition [...] and we remembered them for a while and then took up our lives again.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Janaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Because of the ruinous monsoons and the economic upheaval wrought by the tannery, Janaki's husband's general store fails, and the family has to leave town. For Janaki and her family, this isn't just an inconvenience but a moment of complete existential uncertainty—they have no savings and no connections outside the village, so it's unclear how they will support themselves or survive.

Their abrupt departure prefigures Nathan and Rukmani's reluctant flight to the city when they are evicted from their own land, and points out the injustice of social structures which provide no economic security or safety net for society's most impoverished members. At the same time, the villagers' attitude exemplifies Rukmani's habit of responding to suffering with extreme stoicism. Their brief response is the only way to observe Janaki's fate without succumbing to worry about their own fortunes. At the same time, it prevents them from acting to improve their own circumstances or fight political injustice.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ "If it were your land, or mine," he said, "I would work it with you gladly. But what profit to labor for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice." Nathan said not a word. There was a crushed look about him [...].

Related Characters: Thambi (speaker), Nathan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Nathan and Rukmani are devastated to see Arjun depart the farm to work in the tannery, and even more so to see Thambi join him. Just as Irawaddy's failed marriage prevents her from achieving her parents' tranquil lifestyle, the boys' decision means that they will not follow tradition as their parents imagined. Their departure from the farm necessitates a conversation about the worth of Rukmani and Nathan's lifestyle. They have always believed that farming is the best possible occupation, offering them some freedom and self-determination despite their poverty and lack of education. Thambi points out that their conception of their own freedom is in fact a sham; by mentioning their status as tenants rather than owners (which Rukmani prefers not to think about) he points out the lurking vulnerability of their occupation. At first, Rukmani sees her sons' attitude as bizarre; however, when the farm fails to provide for her family and when they are eventually evicted, she will eventually realize that her sons' distrust of agricultural poverty is well-founded.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ None more so than Ira: the transformation in her was as astonishing as it was inexplicable. I had feared she might dislike the child, but now it was as if he were her own. She lost her dreary air, her face became animated, the bloom of youth came back to her.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Kuti, Irawaddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Irawaddy's husband disowns her and returns her to Rukmani and Nathan, Rukmani becomes pregnant with a seventh child, Kuti. Filled with compassion for her daughter, Rukmani worries that her own pregnancy will add insult to the injury of Irawaddy's infertility and failed marriage. However, the baby has the opposite effect, lifting Irawaddy out of her depression and providing her with a new sense of purpose. This passage shows that family attachments don't have to be conventional to be compelling; Irawaddy can derive as much fulfillment from caring for a younger brother as she would from her own child. Rukmani is growing to accept different kinds of families; this experience helps prepare her for Irawaddy's eventual illegitimate pregnancy, to which she will respond with admirable equanimity and affection.

☝☝ It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got used to the noise and smell of the tannery; they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from town, and I grieved no more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it, and thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak, or in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting and no longer calm.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Irawaddy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment of reflection, Rukmani shows that her general acceptance of suffering is tested when misfortune afflicts her own children. The dissolution of Irawaddy's

marriage isn't just a matter of social humiliation; without a man to provide for her, when her parents become too old to work, Irawaddy could be reduced to poverty or begging like Old Granny, who sells vegetables by the side of the road. Rukmani contrasts her acceptance of the tannery's presence in town, however ruinous it proves, with her inability to accustom herself to such a future for her daughter. Throughout the novel, Markandaya toggles between Rukmani's and Kenny's radically different approaches to suffering. She adds complexity and depth to this tension not just by refusing to prioritize one over the other, but by showing that each character privately questions their beliefs even as they argue fiercely with each other.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ I do not know what reply to make—these men are strangers. Nathan says we do not understand, we must not interfere: he takes my hand and draws me away. To his sons he is gentle. Into the calm lake of our lives the first stone has been tossed.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Thambi, Arjun, Nathan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After working at the tannery for some months, Arjun and Thambi lead a workers' strike for better wages. While the novel doesn't state so explicitly, it implies that the boys are able to become leaders because of their superior education; they've long surpassed their mother in reading and even manage to acquire and read the village's few books. Rukmani viewed education as a mere "pastime," but her sons see it very differently, as a path to political action and change. While their skills derive from their mother, they use them for ends that she doesn't understand and which make them "strangers" to her. Education both binds the family together and distances the boys from their mother.

Another interesting aspect of this passage is Nathan's unquestioning acceptance of his sons' decisions. Although Nathan and Rukmani are always devoted to their children, they don't exact familial obedience in return but have a remarkable respect for their children's ability to take care of

themselves. Nathan's mindset helps complicate stereotypes of patriarchal or controlling family structures in traditional Indian society.

☝ People will never learn! Kenny had said it, and I had not understood, now here were my own sons saying the same thing, and still I did not understand. What was it we had to learn? To fight against tremendous odds? What was the use? One only lost the little one had.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Thambi, Arjun

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Arjun and Thambi instigate a workers' strike at the tannery where they work, but after a week the tannery bosses threaten to hire replacement workers and the strike collapses. Now out of a job, Arjun complains that "people will never learn," echoing Kenny's anguished comment when he encounters Rukmani after the monsoons. Arjun's increased level of education leads him to align himself with Kenny's worldview, rather than that of his parents; like the British doctor, Arjun now believes firmly that people need to strive against suffering and injustice. However, witnessing her son's failed strike solidifies Rukmani's views. To her, such effort seems ridiculous and likely to incur further suffering. While it's easy for the reader to sympathize with Arjun and bemoan his colleagues' lack of understanding or commitment, Rukmani's thoughtful reflection forces the reader to appreciate that, to a relatively uneducated and impoverished worker, such political action seems intuitively unwise.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ It seemed to me that a new peace came to us then, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us, and the power we ourselves had given her finally rested from Kunthi.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Nathan, Kunthi

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of a famine, Kunthi blackmails both Rukmani and Nathan into handing over the family's extremely limited supply of rice. In the aftermath, Rukmani reveals that she sought medical advice from Kenny without consulting her husband, and Nathan admits that he had an affair with Kunthi and fathered her two sons. Although Rukmani is devastated, she immediately accepts her husband's infidelity, attributing it to Kunthi's "evil" nature rather than Nathan's error.

Rukmani and Nathan's marriage has seemed remarkably open-minded and progressive until this point, and it will recover from this disruption. However, Rukmani's inability to hold her husband to account and her decision to blame what she sees as Kunthi's aberrant sexuality instead is troubling and shows how much she still subscribes to and lives within patriarchal norms. Rukmani's positive sexuality and Irawaddy's unconventional independence challenge expectations for women, but Rukmani's demonization of Kunthi upholds them.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination [...] It was as simple as that we forbade, she insisted, we lost. So we got used to her comings and goings, as we had got used to so much else.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Irawaddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the famine, it seems likely that Kuti, the weakest member of the family, will die from starvation; to prevent this, Irawaddy works as a prostitute in order to buy food for him. When they find out, Rukmani and Nathan are devastated, but they seem to accept her decision. This moment recalls their acceptance of Arjun and Thambi's decision to leave the farm, even though they didn't agree with it. It shows their remarkably egalitarian parenting style—they afford Irawaddy almost the same independence that their sons enjoy. For Rukmani and Nathan, parental love always trumps judgment and condemnation.

Moreover, in this moment, Rukmani shows her ability to

accept and reconcile herself to new suffering. Saying she "got used" to Irawaddy's new life, she compares this moment to the process of growing accustomed to the tannery and other developments that caused her pain. While her blunt language seems lethargic, it's clear that this attitude is what allows the family to physically and emotionally survive the famine.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ When Kuti was gone—with a bland indifference that mocked our loss—the abundant grain grew ripe.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Kuti

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Despite the sacrifice that Irawaddy makes, working as a prostitute in order to provide food for Kuti, the baby doesn't make it through the famine and eventually dies. Shortly afterwards, the crops are ready to harvest. In this incredibly harsh context, Rukmani finally appreciates that the land isn't oriented around her family's prosperity or even survival; rather, it's an "indifferent" and impersonal force that knows or cares nothing about the humans who depend on it.

This realization won't make Rukmani abandon her farming lifestyle. She eventually moves to the city with extreme reluctance, and always dreams about returning to her land. However, this experience destroys her confidence in the ultimate superiority of her traditional farming lifestyle. From this point, she's happier to see her children follow different paths—for example, she supports Selvam's decision to train as a doctor because she knows such a career might provide him with the security that the land is unable to provide.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Have I not so much sense to see that you are not one of us? You live and work here, and there is in your heart solicitude for us and love for our children. But this is not your country and we are not your people.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Kenny

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the end of a long dialogue between Rukmani and Kenny, during which the British doctor admits that he has become estranged from his wife and sons, but says that Rukmani will never grasp the intricacies of his personal life because of her “limited” understanding. Although she usually defers to Kenny, Rukmani protests, arguing that she has more common sense and understanding than Kenny gives her credit for. Moreover, she swiftly points out that Kenny himself lacks full understanding of *her* culture, and as a foreigner will never be able to possess it. In this important moment, Rukmani claims ownership of her own culture and demonstrates its intrinsic independence from the imperial rule that Kenny, no matter how good his intentions, represents in his occasional moments of arrogance. Although Rukmani doesn’t know much about Indian politics or imperialism, she refuses to let her own worldviews and confidence in herself be undermined by cultural imperialism.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ Privately I thought, Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not a man’s spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes? [...] What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker), Kenny

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In explaining his plans to build a hospital, Kenny again tells Rukmani that people must “cry out for help” and fight against the suffering they experience. His opinions seem logical and his project is admirable, but Rukmani’s meditation shows how her own opposite views are also logical and poignant. Kenny can fight against and prevent suffering because of his high level of education and social privilege; on the other hand, Rukmani’s recent loss of two sons shows that most of the time there’s no way for her to “cry out” or fight against the things that happen to her. While Kenny’s attempt to help others represents the best

use of social privilege, Rukmani acceptance of suffering as inevitable shows how underprivileged people can endure unspeakably difficult lives without losing their peace of mind.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once colored our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamor.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rukmani compares the agricultural tranquility that preceded the tannery to the urban atmosphere it eventually cultivates in the town. Although the villagers aren’t poorer—in some cases, materially wealthier—since the tannery’s arrival, Rukmani associates the tannery with an urban psychological malaise for which money can never compensate. Rukmani’s loathing for urban poverty will only intensify as she travels to the city—not only are circumstances harsh there, people are often hostile and there is no sense of community. However, Rukmani’s brief sojourn in the city will implicitly show the many similarities between urban and rural poverty. Regardless of better physical surroundings, the rural poor share the vulnerability and ultimately powerlessness that Rukmani sees so clearly in the city. By the end of the novel, Rukmani grows more assertive in her identification of social injustice; however, she fails to truly appreciate this injustice as it occurs in her native environment.

☝☝ Tannery or not, the land might have been taken from us. It had never belonged to us, we had never prospered to the extent where we could buy, and Nathan, himself the son of a landless man, had inherited nothing. And whatever extraneous influence the tannery may have exercised, the calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations.

Related Characters: Rukmani (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Although Rukmani's first instinct was to blame the tannery for all the calamities that happened after its arrival, she later amends this statement. In this passage, she reflects that the tannery is merely a symptom of the institutional oppression that long preceded it; it reflects the unjust social system that prevents Nathan from ever owning his land. Moreover, she finally acknowledges that it's not pragmatic to depend completely on the land, no matter how much she loves it. Giving up her faith in the land and in the farming economy she's depended on for so long is a moment of serious disillusionment for Rukmani. It's only the presence of her family, and especially the necessity of taking care of Nathan, that gives her strength in this time of crisis.

Chapter 29 Quotes

💬 “If I grieve,” I said, “it is not for you, but for myself, beloved, for how should I endure to live without you, who are my love and my life?” “You are not alone,” he said. “I live in my children,” and he was silent, and then I heard him murmur my name and bent down.

Related Characters: Nathan, Rukmani (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the novel's most poignant and compelling passages, Rukmani holds Nathan in her arms as he slowly dies of fever. Although Nathan's death on the floor of a city temple, without any of his children present, reflects the series of desperate circumstances that led the family into penury, at this moment he and Rukmani reflect on the joy and happiness their life together has brought them. Rukmani emphasizes that her love for Nathan has been central to her life, even in the midst of the poverty and suffering they've endured. For his part, Nathan reminds her of the family they've created, an accomplishment that remains no matter how impoverished they've become. Rukmani and Nathan's disregard for material circumstances, compared to the high value they place on family attachments, is one of their most positive qualities and becomes a means of emotional support even at the worst of times.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

As an old woman, Rukmani often imagines that her deceased husband, Nathan, appears to her in her sleep, and they pass the night peacefully together. In the morning, he always vanishes.

From the beginning, Rukmani emphasizes the importance of family. However, by juxtaposing this moment of tenderness with the knowledge of her husband's death, she also recognizes the ephemeral nature of such relationships.



As the sun rises, Rukmani greets her children, especially Puli, whom she has adopted and brought home to her native village. When she asks if he is happy with her, he always nods. Anyway, Rukmani knows it's useless to question her decisions: "what's done is done." Puli's hands have been destroyed by leprosy, but the local doctor, Kenny, and Rukmani's son Selvam have prevented the disease from spreading to Puli's limbs.

Here, Rukmani displays remarkable equanimity when reflecting on big decisions (adopting a child) and contemplating calamity (Puli's mutilated hands). Throughout the novel, she will use such stoicism and composure as a coping mechanism against the suffering she observes and experiences.



Rukmani's sight is fading, but she can still see the **hospital** where Selvam and Kenny work together. The hospital has been growing slowly over the year, constructed by "men's hopes and pity."

The hospital is not just a building but a reflection of Kenny's determination to strive against suffering, rather than passively accept it.



Rukmani's memory drifts to her childhood. She grows up watching the weddings of her three older sisters. The first one is lavish and lasts for many days, as her father is a village headman. The second wedding is also lovely, but the third much smaller, as the family's cannot afford large dowries for so many daughters. Rukmani's mother frequently sighs over her, lamenting the fact that with so little money, Rukmani won't secure a rich or landed husband.

Rukmani's description of her childhood shows that she grows up in a very conservative and traditional Indian household, in which marriage is the climactic event of a woman's life, and partnerships are determined by family networks and considerations of wealth and social status.



When Rukmani hears her mother say things like this, she childishly insists that she will have a large wedding, which everyone will remember. She deserves it, because her father is head of the village. Her mother laughs at this, but her older brother chides Rukmani, saying that headmen are now unimportant compared to the government tax collectors that visit once a year. Rukmani is startled and frightened to hear that her father is no longer "of consequence."

Markandaya never specifies exactly when the novel takes place, but she does hint at the political issues at play. Here, it's clear that power is slowly shifting from local authorities to representatives of the British imperial government. Rukmani will see the increasing centralization of authority when the tannery takes over her village later on.



When Rukmani is twelve, her parents marry her to Nathan, a tenant farmer; everyone in the village says the match is beneath her. Like most women, Rukmani remembers her wedding night vividly, but as she describes it, she notes that she prefers to dwell on other nights later in her marriage, when she “went to [her] husband matured in mind as well as body.”

When the time comes to finally leave home, Rukmani’s mother stands in the doorway, trying not to cry. Rukmani herself feels sick, and after a few minutes of driving in Nathan’s bullock cart, she vomits. Nathan cares for her gently, telling her not to be embarrassed and placing her next to him on the seat. The new couple drives the entire day in order to reach Nathan’s village.

During the drive, Rukmani falls asleep. Nathan wakes her up excitedly when they reach his farm, which is comprised of a paddy field and a small mud hut. Nathan is clearly anxious that Rukmani should like her new home, but she is unprepared for such a primitive house and sinks down on the floor, pretending for Nathan’s benefit that she’s only tired. When he says that in a few years they can save up money and build a better house, Rukmani assures him bravely that she’s not frightened and that she likes the house. Nathan shows her a handful of rice from the storeroom. The grains are fat and bountiful, and Nathan declares that with harvests like this, Rukmani can have anything she wants.

Rukmani does her laundry at a brook near her new cottage. After scrubbing the laundry in the water and laying it out to dry, she sees her neighbor, Kali, walking toward her with two other women, all carrying washing with them. Before long, Rukmani comes to know all three. Kali is plump and talkative, always making jokes; Janaki, the shopkeeper’s wife, is tired and careworn from many pregnancies; Kunthi, the youngest, is beautiful and graceful despite being very pregnant. Now, Kali makes raunchy jokes about Kunthi’s pregnancy and Kunthi shrugs disdainfully.

Kali begins gossiping to Rukmani, telling her how excited Nathan has been for her arrival. She tells Rukmani that he built their hut with his own hands, allowing no one to help. Rukmani feels ashamed of her initial dislike for such a lovingly built home. A month later, she asks Nathan why he never told her about this. She says she is proud that he built their home, and Nathan tells her that she’s grown since their marriage and is no longer a child.

Although Rukmani lives in a traditional society and fulfills conventional female roles, she still redefines expectations for women. Here, she hints at a developing sexuality and emphasizes the importance of mental development for women, both revolutionary concepts at the time.



There’s an uncomfortable distance between Nathan and Rukmani here—he’s an adult, while she’s clearly still a scared child. At the same time, the gentleness with which he soothes her contravenes stereotypical male behavior and presages good things for their marriage.



Rukmani’s eventual love for her agricultural lifestyle is especially notable given that she initially finds it daunting. However, she’ll soon adopt Nathan’s habit of deriving not only sustenance but emotional comfort from the fruits of the land. Moreover, her concern for Nathan’s feelings and acceptance of the house shows her conception of herself as part of a familial unit, even though she’s only just met her husband.



Although Rukmani doesn’t dwell on hardship, it’s clear that her daily life is difficult—even simple tasks like laundry involve hours of hard work. Like her neighbors, Rukmani will become completely absorbed in the concerns of running a household and raising children; however, unlike them, Rukmani will react to events around her with insight and thoughtfulness.



This passage shows Rukmani and Nathan’s mutual commitment to their family. Even before he met her, Nathan took pains to build a house where Rukmani could live safely and comfortably. Similarly, even though she didn’t like the house at first, Rukmani commits herself to accepting it just as she accepts her marriage.



In this period of her life, Rukmani is deeply content. The weather is good, allowing for easy farming and good harvests. Nathan finds her extremely beautiful, and they are quickly growing to love each other. Rukmani gets up at sunrise every day and enjoys her quiet life. As an old woman looking back on her life, she compares this period favorably to the “clamor which invaded our lives later.” Although Nathan doesn’t actually own the land he works, they dream of saving enough money to buy it, and they are proud to own their own animals.

Once a week, Rukmani goes into town to buy vegetables and other provisions. People in the village are generally friendly; Rukmani gets along especially well with Old Granny, a poor woman who sells fruit on the road. Janaki and Kali often drop by to give Rukmani advice, but Kunthi keeps her distance; she’s much quieter than the other woman and no one can make friends with her. Like Rukmani, Kunthi’s marriage is “beneath” her, and she’s not adjusting to it very well.

However, Rukmani notes that in these kinds of marriages, it’s actually the husband who suffers, as she and Kunthi are unfamiliar with basic farming chores. Rukmani has to learn how to milk the goat and plant a garden, and she’s grateful for Nathan’s patience as she masters this task. When she raises her first crop of pumpkins, Nathan praises her profusely, even though he’s been farming for years. Encouraged, Rukmani plants a full vegetable garden, and the young family eats better than they ever have.

CHAPTER 2

Soon, Rukmani is pregnant. Around this time, Kunthi goes into labor on a day when only Rukmani is available to help. Kunthi pushes Rukmani away and begs her to leave, but Rukmani assumes the woman is delirious and frightened and sensibly stays until the midwife arrives. By the time Rukmani returns home, it’s night. Nathan greets her with unexpected anger, asking why she stayed so long and reminding her that she cannot overextend herself during her own pregnancy. Rukmani almost cries at this unexpected rebuke from her usually gentle and patient husband.

To protect her body during the pregnancy, Rukmani leaves more of the household chores to Nathan. In her leisure time, she practices her writing. Her father had taught her how to write, even though it’s very unusual for girls to have any education, and her mother always remarked that reading and writing are useless to married women. Kali and Janaki are surprised that Rukmani is educated, but not particularly impressed.

The fact that Nathan is a tenant farmer seems insignificant at first, but will grow more important as the novel unfolds. It’s this lack of ownership over their own land that prevents the couple’s farming lifestyle from being liberating and empowering, as it initially seems, and keeps them trapped in poverty and hardship.



Rukmani and Kunthi demonstrate two attitudes towards traditional women’s roles—Rukmani accepts what she is told to do, whereas Kunthi resents it. While Rukmani is happy in her own marriage and doesn’t have much sympathy for Kunthi, it’s easy to understand how a woman in Kunthi’s position might be unhappy, regardless of her husband’s social position.



By the end of this chapter, Rukmani has acclimated herself to life as a farmwife. Although she’s technically the subordinate party in her traditional marriage, she’s becoming more of an equal partner with Nathan. Throughout the novel, Rukmani’s vegetables will bring in money and make the difference between abundance and hunger for her family.



Rukmani’s dismay here emphasizes how tranquil her marriage normally is. However, Nathan’s uncharacteristic display of anger in this passage foreshadows the revelations that Kunthi will make later in the novel.



Rukmani has an interesting relationship to education—although she’s the most learned of her peers, and her tutelage later allows her children to pursue other careers than farming, she doesn’t seem to value it as anything more than a pastime, especially because it’s irrelevant to her duties as a housewife. Through behavior like this, Rukmani both defies and reinforces expectations of women.



When Nathan first sees Rukmani writing, he's preoccupied; however, he strokes her hair and says that it's good she is so clever. Rukmani is grateful that her husband, himself illiterate, does not resent her for this pastime. She knows that it must be hard for him to have a wife more educated than he is, and that he is humbling himself by supporting her.

Rukmani also tends to her small garden. She's always excited to see each new crop, although Nathan tells her she'll grow accustomed to it after many harvests. One day, Rukmani sees a cobra among her pumpkins. She knows she should be petrified, but she reaches out and touches it carefully. In the next moment, she comes to her senses and runs away screaming. Nathan cuts the snake into pieces, but tells Rukmani that if left undisturbed, such animals are usually harmless. He gently pokes fun at her for running through the fields with her heavy pregnant belly.

Soon after, Rukmani goes into labor. She's disappointed to discover that her firstborn child is a girl. Kali comforts her, saying that she has plenty of time to give birth to sons; her neighbor takes over the housekeeping for a few days, even tending to the garden. Watching her one morning, Rukmani imagines that the cobra is inside the house and starts screaming. When she tells the story to Kali, the other woman says that Nathan should not have killed the cobra, since they are sacred, but Nathan says that Kali is a superstitious fool. Rukmani eventually forgets about the incident, although while tending to the pumpkins she often imagines the cobra slinking through their wide leaves.

Rukmani names her daughter Irawaddy, after a large river. At first, Nathan pays the girl little attention; he needs sons to work the land with him and "continue his line," not daughters who will one day require dowries. However, as she grows up, he quickly becomes attached to her and dotes on her fondly. Irawaddy is a beautiful child, and people in the village are always happy to see her. Nathan thinks she takes after mother, but Rukmani notes dryly that he's the only one who holds this opinion.

As she grows older, Irawaddy crawls behind her parents in the fields. While Nathan plows and Rukmani scatters the seed, the baby plays by herself or sleeps in a cloth hung from a branch. Rukmani's mother often comes to visit, even though doing so involves long journeys in a cart. Rukmani rarely returns to her parents' house, because she has so much to do.

Nathan's acceptance of his wife's education is extremely unusual for a man of his time, and it's a touching display of his authentic love for Rukmani. Moreover, it's an acknowledgement of his willingness to accept her as an equal partner.



Rukmani is both attracted and repelled by the cobra, which could easily kill her with a single bite. Throughout the novel, Rukmani is interested in the calamitous events that occur around her, but also refrains from becoming too wrapped up in them in order to maintain her mental serenity.



It's interesting that the birth of Rukmani's first child, ostensibly a joyful event, coincides with her unease about the cobra. Although Rukmani takes joy in her children throughout the novel, her love is balanced by an acute awareness of the various dangers they face and her inability to protect them from those dangers. It's also important to note that while Rukmani's reaction to her daughter's gender may seem unfeeling, as a subsistence farmer she's highly attuned to the necessity of bearing sons who can join their father in working the land.



Although sons are technically more important, of all Rukmani's children Irawaddy will be the most highly defined as an individual, with the closest and most complex relationship with her parents. Her position in the family helps contravene stereotypes about the oppression of women in traditional communities.



Like most other aspects of Rukmani's life, childcare is rudimentary. Rukmani's love for her children is balanced by her inability to materially provide for them in more than the most basic ways.



CHAPTER 3

Years pass after Irawaddy's birth, and Rukmani cannot become pregnant again. The neighbor women tell her not to worry, but it's easy for them to say, as they have many children of their own. Only Nathan says nothing, even though Rukmani knows he's deeply worried. Whenever Rukmani visits her mother, they visit the local temple to pray fervently for more children.

When Irawaddy is six, Rukmani's mother becomes ill with consumption and draws near to death. Rukmani returns home to care for her, and her father summons a foreign doctor who has recently settled in the village. When Kenny arrives, Rukmani stares at him openly, having never seen a white man before. Speaking the local language, he dryly asks her to show him the patient when she's done staring at him. Kenny can do nothing for her mother, but by treating her with "understanding and respect" he eases her suffering and allows her to die peacefully.

After her mother has died, Rukmani thanks Kenny, saying that her home is open to him always. Scrutinizing her, Kenny guesses that something is wrong with her, too. Reluctant to share her concerns with a stranger but impressed by his insight, Rukmani confesses that she's unable to conceive sons. Kenny tells her to visit his office, where he might be able to help her. At first, Rukmani refuses, but later she seeks him out for help. Tactfully overlooking her previous fear, Kenny treats her, and Rukmani soon becomes pregnant again.

Irawaddy is seven when Rukmani's first son, Arjun, is born. She's very interested in the baby and happy to have a companion, since Kali and Janaki's children are much older, and Kunthi remains distant. Overjoyed, Nathan invites everyone in the village to celebrate and they prepare an enormous meal to share. Kunthi plays on the tara, a string instrument, and the music causes Arjun to wake up and start screaming.

Rukmani had hoped that Kenny would come to the celebration, but he never arrives. Nathan notices her anxiety and asks why she's so worried about the foreign doctor. Rukmani fibs that she's grateful for his treatment of her mother. She doesn't want her husband to know she sought medical care from a foreigner, and she feels that no harm is done if he never finds out.

Rukmani's anxiety shows just how much a woman's position within her family depends on her ability to bear sons. While Nathan is a notably patient husband, Rukmani's worry now highlights the plights facing women in traditional communities.



Kenny, a British doctor, is the novel's only white character. Although he represents the nation that's currently exercising oppressive colonial rule over India, he will have a rich and complex relationship with Rukmani over the course of the novel. Gruff and sometimes rude but also compassionate and altruistic, Kenny is neither a colonialist oppressive nor a hero of the people.



Rukmani usually avoids seeking help for her problems—she considers doing so a sign of weakness and inability to quietly bear suffering alone. It's only Kenny who challenges her views on this subject. Their differing views on what and how much should be done to appease suffering are a recurring tension throughout the novel.



Unlike Irawaddy's birth, Arjun's arrival is a moment of unmitigated celebration. The family's observance of naming rituals shows their capacity to celebrate and enjoy life regardless of their material poverty. However, Arjun's negative reaction to Kunthi helps reinforce Rukmani's wariness towards her neighbor.



Rukmani's growing friendship with Kenny highlights her independence and ability to act on her own behalf. While she embraces these qualities and often uses them to her family's benefit, she's also somewhat ashamed to depart from traditional female docility, as her uncharacteristic evasiveness shows.



As Rukmani bears more and more children, the family's resources are stretched thin. Irawaddy and Arjun are fed well during their childhood, but the succeeding sons—Thambi, Murugan, Raja, and Selvam—grow up on small portions. Luckily, Irawaddy is very capable with children and helps Rukmani manage the household.

To make more money, Rukmani sells most of her vegetables in the village, usually to Old Granny. One day, Biswas, a moneylender whom Rukmani dislikes for his oily personality, offers to pay her much more for the vegetables. Rukmani doesn't like selling to him, but since she needs the money she agrees. The family eats sparingly, but they don't go hungry, like many of their neighbors. Every month, Rukmani stashes away a little money for Irawaddy's dowry.

CHAPTER 4

Rukmani has experienced change before, but what happens now in the village seems unusually fast and drastic. One morning, Arjun runs breathlessly up to the house with the news that dozens of men have arrived to construct a mysterious village. Nathan says that they are building a **tannery**; he has heard rumors of this before. He leaves his work and takes the family into town to see what is going on.

Everyone has clustered around the maidan, or town square, and all is chaos. The workmen have a strange accent, and they are directed by an Indian overseer and a white man, who eventually tell the crowd to disperse. For two months construction proceeds; villagers make money by firing bricks and making rope, and the workmen build huts for their wives and children in the square. One day, the building is finished and the workmen depart. Everyone wonders what will happen next, but as the building remains unoccupied for some time, they soon forget about it.

Some people are sad that the workmen have departed, as they paid high prices for goods and food. Rukmani is relieved, and hopes they never return; she points out that they drive prices up, making it impossible to buy many things. Nathan warns that people will soon return to use the **tannery**, and she must accustom herself to change in the village. Angered, Rukmani says that she will “never accept” it—she doesn't want to barter for expensive goods and see her children go without hearty food.

The paradox here is that while children are necessary and desired, they also make the family's life much more difficult. This tension shows that tenant farming is ultimately an untenable occupation that cannot provide security or comfort for families like Rukmani's.



Rukmani always elevates agricultural occupations over anything concerning trade, which she usually associates with Biswas. To her, agriculture is more honest and valuable because it's connected with a tangible product, while traders like Biswas engage chiefly in manipulating and taking advantage of others. This mindset will influence her reactions when trading companies like the tannery arrive in town.



Arjun's excitement highlights how small and sleepy the town has been. Although its size seemed to guarantee residents a measure of control and freedom, the arrival of the tannery without warning or explanation shows that rural farmers have very little say in what happens on or around their land.



Before the tannery, there are few social distinctions among the villagers. However, Rukmani immediately notices a strong hierarchy among the workmen and the racial privileges enjoyed by the white overseer. Although she doesn't overtly criticize this, she will later resent the tannery's abrogation of control within the town.



Skeptical of the “advantages” the tannery brings, Rukmani implicitly criticizes profit-minded conceptions of economic growth. Although the tannery means that more money flows through the town, it does not guarantee a higher standard of living for residents.



Soon, different workmen arrive at the **tannery** with their families, under the direction of the same white foreman. Rukmani stays out of the village, glad that her house is far from “the smell of their brews and liquors.” Kunthi says she should be glad that the village is becoming a town, and it will soon contain shops and tea houses; contemptuously, she says that Rukmani is a village girl with no understanding for the ways of the world. Kali and Janaki are also bewildered, but Janaki is happy that the tannery can employ some of her many sons, and Kali thrives on the excitement. Only Rukmani mourns the past.

Before the **tannery** was built, Irawaddy was allowed to come and go from the village as she pleased, just like her brothers. However, Kali points out that strange men often look at her. Wary, Rukmani is more cautious about her daughter and restricts her freedom. She feels sorry for Irawaddy’s restlessness, even though her daughter doesn’t complain.

CHAPTER 5

Rukmani and Nathan never see the Zemindar, or landowner, who owns their farm. Instead, they pay rent to his agent, Sivaji. They are grateful that he is a kind man and does not demand bribes or extra grain like many agents.

One morning, Rukmani is gathering dung from the fields for fuel when she sees Kenny approaching. In a gesture of respect, she bends to his feet, but he retreats quickly, telling her that he’s not a “lord.” Rukmani announces proudly that she has five sons thanks to him, and invites him into her house. As they walk, Kenny criticizes her for collecting dung, rather than letting it nourish the land. Rukmani quietly points out that there’s no other way to heat the houses and strengthen the walls.

Rukmani is proud that her children behave well in front of the guest, and that Irawaddy gracefully pours a bowl of rice water. Nathan is taken aback to see Kenny in the house, but when the white man greets him formally in his own language, Nathan quickly warms to him. Rukmani worries that Kenny will admit that he treated her for infertility, but the doctor says nothing.

Rukmani’s strong antipathy towards the tannery contrasts with her calm acceptance of most other calamities. This reveals that the tannery—and the loss of personal freedom and intrusion of outside forces it represents—is outside the range of everyday suffering.



Although progress of all sorts is supposedly good for women, it’s interesting that the town’s development actually makes it seedy and unsafe for Rukmani and her daughter.



The landowner’s absence allows Rukmani and Nathan to feel as though they effectively own the land; however, the landowner’s absence also emphasizes the impersonal nature of the forces that control them, and the precariousness of their ostensibly secure lifestyle.



Kenny’s discomfort with Rukmani’s display of respect shows that he doesn’t want to enact the stereotypical relationship between colonizer and colonized. At the same time, his assumption that he knows how to manage the land better than she does shows that he maintains a certain level of prejudice and arrogance, despite his good intentions.



Kenny’s ability to fit in with the family, and even to appeal to Nathan, emphasize his tact and cultural sensitivity. At the same time, it’s Rukmani who has the serious friendship with Kenny, not Nathan—this emphasizes her role as the leader of her household.



Kenny becomes a frequent visitor at Rukmani's house. She wonders where his own family is, but out of politeness never asks. He is always patient with her children and brings sweets when he comes, and even milk for Selvam, which Rukmani normally can't afford. Rukmani doesn't understand much about Kenny's work; she knows that he treats the workmen at the **tannery**, but he often disappears from the village for days or months at a time, and no one dares to ask where he's been.

Rukmani's deep rootedness in her family and community contrast with Kenny's apparent solitude and wandering lifestyle. Although Kenny often criticizes Rukmani's worldview, it's apparent to her that he doesn't have anything to match the satisfaction that she derives from her children.



CHAPTER 6

When Irawaddy is fourteen, it's time to find a husband for her. Rukmani picks Old Granny to act as a matchmaker; she's grateful that the old woman agrees to this task, even though Rukmani hasn't sold vegetables to her in years. Every week Old Granny brings news of a different boy, and Rukmani and Nathan discuss their merits. Eventually, they settle on a young man who stands to inherit some good land from his father. Since Irawaddy is beautiful, she can obtain such a husband even without a large dowry.

As Rukmani married "beneath" her station, Irawaddy marries "above" it because of her unusual beauty. For women in the community, superficial attributes make the difference between a life of comfort and security or a life of poverty.



Irawaddy accepts her marriage without protest. Wistfully, she asks Rukmani how often she will visit, and her mother says she'll come often, even though Irawaddy's new home is ten villages away. Rukmani wants to communicate that soon she'll be so absorbed in her new household and life she won't miss her mother at all, but she doesn't know how to say this; moreover, Rukmani herself is saddened to part ways with her daughter.

Irawaddy's mingled excitement and fear mirrors Rukmani's feelings in the lead-up to her marriage. While Rukmani recognizes that her community's rituals—separating children from mothers at such a young age—are imperfect, she doesn't desire to change the circumstances, believing them inevitable.



Rukmani and Nathan host the small wedding, at which Irawaddy looks like a child in her elaborate outfit and makeup. Rukmani cooks food that she has been stashing for months, and everyone agrees that the match is very good. When it's finally time to leave, Irawaddy looks frightened but remains calm as Rukmani and Nathan bless her and she climbs onto her new husband's cart. At home, the boys fall asleep and Rukmani lays down beside Nathan, leaving the cleaning until the morning. She finds it hard to fall asleep without her daughter under her roof.

Although it's a triumph to marry Irawaddy off to a good husband and a practical benefit to have one less mouth to feed, the novel stresses Rukmani's feelings of sadness and loss. In this way, it contravenes the stereotype of Indian women as material bargaining chips and focuses on their meaningful roles within their families.



CHAPTER 7

Rukmani says that nature is much like "a wild animal that you have trained to work for you." It can be helpful if you are careful, but if you relax for just a moment, it can turn against you.

At the beginning of the novel, Rukmani glorified and trusted in nature without reservation. Now, she's beginning to understand it doesn't always function to her benefit.



In the bustle of Irawaddy's marriage, Rukmani and Nathan neglected to prepare the hut for the rainy season or protect the land from flooding. Soon after the wedding, the monsoons arrive, more intense than ever before. The rising waters destroy the rice crop, and Rukmani and Nathan anticipate times of hunger before the next harvest. On the worst night of the monsoon, lightning strikes Rukmani's coconut tree and destroys it.

The next morning, the rain suddenly stops and Rukmani ventures outside to survey the destroyed crops. Many of her neighbors, including Kali, have even lost their homes. Nathan brings out the family's small savings so that they can buy rice.

In the village, Rukmani sees that while the **tannery** is still standing, most of the workers' huts have been destroyed. Trees and even bodies lie in the streets. All the shops are closed, and Rukmani has to cook gruel for her children. At night, drums beat in the town, announcing that a calamity has taken place. Rukmani cannot sleep; she understands that the drums signal "a vast pervading doom," but right now, her own circumstances seem more immediate and pressing than the troubles of others.

The next day, Rukmani and Nathan return to town. However, the shopkeeper they go to see says he has no rice left to sell and directs them to Biswas. Knowing that he can charge whatever he wants right now, Biswas gives them a pitiful amount of rice for the two rupees they can afford to spend.

On her way home, Rukmani runs into Kenny, who looks pale and grim. When he enquires after her welfare, she says bravely that the rice she's acquired will last until better times arrive. Kenny explodes at her, shouting that times won't be better for months, and meanwhile her family will starve. Kenny calls the villagers "meek, suffering fools" and asks why they don't "cry out for help" or "do something," instead of suffering in "ghastly silence." Rukmani believes that he has gone mad, and she and Nathan quickly take their leave.

Until the next harvest, the family lives on dried fish and roots which they gather from the forest. When they drain the fields to reap what remains and plant the next crop, the children catch dozens of fish in nets, and the family enjoys a feast. However, the rice crop is tiny and Rukmani knows she will have to sell many vegetables and be very careful in order to make their food last.

Although Rukmani views farming as allowing her a tranquil and free life despite her poverty, her total dependence on the land actually makes her vulnerable to any natural calamity that occurs. Rukmani always elevates rural poverty above urban living, but it's increasingly clear that farmers are just as defenseless as city dwellers.



The sheer loss of infrastructure that the rains inflict shows how precariously families like Rukmani's hover to disaster, even at the best of times.



It's important that natural calamities harm poor farmers and laborers more than large companies, who have the resources to protect themselves. This is one of the few moments in which Rukmani can't quickly reconcile herself to the trials she and her family must endure. While she chides herself for this reaction, it's clear to the reader that her feelings are natural, understandable, and even healthy.



Rukmani associates Biswas and his extortions with the rise of trade that the tannery has brought to town, but here he's profiting off traditional power structures, in which rural farmers have no reserves to draw on in case of disaster.



This is one of the key moments of conflict between Rukmani's strategy of accepting and ignoring suffering, and Kenny's insistence on struggling against it. Kenny sees Rukmani as foolish, rather than brave, and she sees him as insane, rather than genuinely grappling with horrifying realities.



From this point on, food availability and famine will be a recurring problem in the novel. Once a benevolent provider, the land is slowly revealing itself as an unreliable source of sustenance.



CHAPTER 8

Kunthi's sons begin to work at the **tannery**, bringing home high wages to their mother's delight. Rukmani still refuses to accept the tannery, pointing out that wages buy less and less in the town. Kunthi calls Rukmani a "senseless peasant woman," and Rukmani retorts that at least she has "true" values. Rukmani notices that Kunthi often travels into town, where men admire her beauty. The villagers gossip about her behavior, but her husband is mild-mannered and doesn't intervene.

Soon, Janaki's husband's store fails because of competition with new shopkeepers. Without bewailing their fate, the family packs their possessions and bids farewell to the village. After they leave, no one knows what has become of them, and the village soon forgets they've ever lived there.

The **tannery** continues to grow, often absorbing the small farms that lie next to it. Rukmani can't believe that such a high demand for tanned skins exists anywhere in the world. Several tannery officials settle in the town, Muslims who form their own separate community. Rukmani pities the women who have to walk around the town veiled in burkas, but Kali points out that they are wealthy and have servants to do their housework. Once, a Muslim woman beckons Rukmani into her house in order to buy some vegetables. Rukmani sees that she wears several rings, each of which could feed her family for a year. Still, she decides she wouldn't trade the "unfettered sight of the sun" for this woman's life.

CHAPTER 9

As Rukmani pounds chilies one morning, she sees two figures approaching the house. As they grow closer, she makes out Irawaddy and her husband, but understands immediately from their troubled faces that something is wrong. Irawaddy goes inside the house, and her husband announces that he is repudiating her because she is barren. Rukmani points out that they haven't been married long, but the husband counters that he cannot afford to wait longer for sons. He departs.

Nathan says that the husband's decision is understandable, but Rukmani points out that he himself was far more patient with her. Meanwhile, Irawaddy seems exhausted and depressed. She tells Rukmani that it's easier to endure this disappointment than to anticipate it, as she's been doing for some time. Rukmani comforts her, saying that her parents will never blame her for something that isn't her fault. She decides to visit Kenny and see if he can help.

While Rukmani's independence emerges as laudable and revolutionary, Kunthi's is dangerous and immoral. This dichotomy shows how the novel both allows women to challenge some social norms but insist they live within traditional roles.



The village's mute acceptance of this small tragedy seems hardhearted, but in fact shows their commitment to ignoring suffering in order not to be crushed by its magnitude.



The town is becoming part of an integrated economy, rather than a self-sufficient entity. Rukmani still prioritizes farming over trade, but given the famine it's less and less clear that agriculture is a superior way of life. Rukmani's pity for the Muslim women is not necessarily a critique of Islam, but rather demonstrates her determination to appreciate the benefits of her own life, arguing that this trait makes her happier than women like Kali.



Just as Irawaddy repeated her mother's young marriage, now she shares Rukmani's struggles with possible infertility. While Rukmani eventually overcame this with the help of her husband's unusual forbearance, Irawaddy shows how these issues play out in marriages that are weaker and less affectionate.



Although the collapse of Irawaddy's marriage shows how women are undervalued and mistreated in Indian society, Rukmani's maternal tenderness and unconditional acceptance demonstrates the novel's strong faith in individual familial bonds.



In his teens by now, Arjun has far surpassed Rukmani in reading and writing. Even though he's never been to school, he manages to obtain books and frequently practices his reading and writing. Rukmani is proud of him, but she's disappointed when he announces his intention to work in the **tannery**. He points out bluntly that he's tired of going hungry and seeing the rest of the family without food as well. Especially since Irawaddy returned, food has been scarce. Rukmani has to admit he's right, even though she hates to acknowledge that she can't provide for her children as well as she would like.

Arjun says that Kunthi's son will procure him a job, but Rukmani counters that she will ask Kenny, since she doesn't want to be indebted to her neighbor. However, Arjun doesn't want to ask a white man for help, saying bitterly that white men already have too much power.

Soon, Thambi joins Arjun at the **tannery**. Nathan is devastated, because he expected his sons to help him on the farm. However, Thambi says that he's unwilling to work land that neither he nor his father owns. His son's brief speech stuns Nathan, reminding him of his failure to realize the dream of buying his own land.

Still, Thambi and Arjun remain loyal to their parents, always bringing home their earnings. With the increased money, the family begins to eat well again, and Rukmani is able to keep her vegetables instead of selling them to pay the rent. She buys clothes for her children and even outfits for herself and Nathan.

CHAPTER 10

Soon, the annual festival of lights, Deepavali, arrives. For once, Rukmani has enough money for her children to partake fully in the festivities—she gives each child some coins to spend on fireworks and makes candles to light during the night.

When it gets dark, Rukmani decorates the outside of her house with candles. From the town, fireworks are beginning to be visible, and her own children are setting off the fireworks they've purchased. Only Selvam, the youngest, is wary, telling Rukmani that that he's afraid. Selvam refuses to come into town after dinner, and Irawaddy stays with him; when she sees people in the village, she feels the humiliation of her failed marriage afresh.

Ironically, although Rukmani wants her son to stay on the land, it's her teaching that has allowed him to question his father's occupation and seek another future. Rukmani is both proud of her son's intellect and disappointed that it leads him away from her. Interestingly, she and Nathan rarely question their children's decisions, insisting on their right to act for themselves even though they always sacrifice personal desires for the family.



Rukmani takes Kenny's superior social status for granted, but Arjun questions it. His nascent political consciousness stems from his education, however rudimentary.



While Rukmani and Nathan usually dwell on the pleasures of farming even amidst calamity, their sons point out the pitfalls of agricultural life and force their parents to acknowledge facts they'd rather ignore, like their lack of security on their own land.



Although Arjun and Thambi have begun to make their own way, it's clear that the integrity of the family unit is still of paramount importance to them.



That Rukmani normally can't afford fireworks underlines just how impoverished her family really is, despite her determined optimism.



While the closeness of the village empowers Rukmani and makes her feel safe, it's repressive to Irawaddy, who is unable to fulfill expectations for women in the same way her mother does.



As Rukmani approaches the bonfire in the center of the town, she remembers Janaki, who had celebrated with her last year. Her absence now reminds Rukmani that she has no idea what's in store for her in the next year. However, she quickly dismisses the gloomy thought, seeking out "perfection of delight" in this rare time of celebration.

Rukmani's ability to accept the frightening unpredictability of the future allows her to stay calm throughout much suffering. At the same time, it prevents her from taking steps to achieve a more secure life.



Everyone is gathering around the bonfire in the center of the village, and Rukmani loses track of Nathan and her sons. At first she tries to look for them, but in the excitement of the beating drums and blazing fire, she soon forgets about him. Rukmani watches until the fire dies down and the drums stop.

This is a rare moment in which Rukmani is separated from her family, reminding the reader that even though she's a devoted wife and mother, she still has a highly individual inner life.



When she finds Nathan, he is giving piggyback rides to all the boys at once, to the amusement of other villagers. Rukmani chides him gently, but he says he's been infected by the "joy in the air." Putting the boys down, he swings Rukmani around in his arms. He says he is happy because his life and children are good, and his wife is best of all.

Rukmani's affectionate and highly physical relationship with her husband refutes stereotypes that Indian society uniformly represses female sexuality.



At home, the children fall asleep quickly. Rukmani stretches out next to Nathan, aware that he's still wide awake. She closes her eyes, trembling with desire, as her husband reaches for her.

Markandaya was revolutionary for her time in explicitly depicting positive female sexuality, as seen in this passage.



CHAPTER 11

Shortly after, Nathan leaves for a few days to attend a family funeral. Rukmani takes advantage of his absence to consult Kenny about Irawaddy's infertility. She doesn't think Nathan would approve of seeking medical care from a male foreigner, but she knows this is Irawaddy's one chance to reclaim her marriage and have a family of her own. Rukmani explains the plan to Irawaddy, who assents mutely; she's becoming listless, and rarely shows enthusiasm or looks anyone in the eye.

Although Rukmani rarely takes steps to alleviate suffering she personally experiences, her children's suffering is the one thing that spurs her to action. Here, Irawaddy's depression shows the consequences when indifference to suffering is taken too far—an inability to live a healthy or productive life.



Rukmani reaches Kenny's office at the end of the day, when he's "grim and tired" from long hours of attending to **tannery** workers. At first he tells Rukmani sternly that he can't see her today, but when Rukmani pleads with him he agrees that she can bring Irawaddy to his office soon. He apologizes for frightening her with his gruff tone, and tells her she shouldn't "act like a timid calf at [her] age."

Kenny's admonitory tone dismisses the cultural conditions under which Rukmani lives, which encourage her to be deferential to men and foreigners. Although Kenny wants to immerse himself in local culture, he can never fully do so.



Walking home from Kenny's office, Rukmani encounters Kunthi in the path. Kunthi remarks insinuatingly that Rukmani keeps "late hours," but Rukmani retorts that her reasons for doing so are better than Kunthi's. Kunthi stands in Rukmani's way and taunts her, implying that she's been visiting other men in the city to assuage the "passion in [her] body" while Nathan is away. Rukmani is so enraged that she throws herself at Kunthi and pummels her.

In close proximity to Kunthi, Rukmani notices that she has tied her sari below her bellybutton, "like a strumpet," and that she's naked underneath. She has put sandalwood paste on her body and used makeup to make her breasts appear larger. Rukmani steps back and surveys Kunthi, who is unashamed. She warns her not to say anything, "or it will be the worse for you." Kunthi seems unconcerned by this threat.

After Kenny treats Irawaddy, Rukmani visits her daughter's husband and entreats him to take her back. The husband informs her that he has already taken another wife, although he seems sad to lose Irawaddy. When Rukmani breaks the news to her daughter, Irawaddy barely responds. She begins to walk for hours by herself and does her chores in silence. Only Selvam can occasionally coax a smile from her.

Meanwhile, Rukmani herself is pregnant again. Sometimes, she sees resentment in Irawaddy's eyes and wonders if her daughter hates her for her ability to do what she cannot. When the baby is born, Rukmani names him Kutu. Although she worried he would irritate Irawaddy, his presence affects a transformation in her; she becomes "animated" and youthful again, and takes pleasure in caring for the baby.

Nathan is happy to see Irawaddy recovering, saying they should be grateful for the present happiness, but Rukmani worries about her future; without a husband to provide for her when her parents die, Irawaddy may have to live on the streets like Old Granny.

Old Granny often talks over the issue with Rukmani and tries to console her. She tells Rukmani that her life, while difficult, is "not unbearable," and that she became accustomed to it over time. Rukmani reflects that Old Granny is right: "one gets used to everything." Even Rukmani is used to the **tannery**, which she used to loathe. She tries to accept Irawaddy's future in the same way, and to banish the worry from her mind; however, when she's lying in bed at night she often finds herself "rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm."

Although Rukmani is pursuing independent action and keeping a secret from Nathan, she's chagrined at allegations that she's not fulfilling her role as a deferential wife and mother. This shows her ambivalence about the extent to which she departs from social norms for women.



Rukmani—and to some extent, Markandaya—sees a clear distinction between Rukmani's sexuality, which exists within marriage, and Kunthi's, which is clearly extramarital. Rukmani's insistence that female sexuality is only acceptable within socially sanctioned shows her ultimate adherence to traditional women's roles.



While it's clear that Rukmani is irreplaceable in her own marriage, regardless of her ability to bear children, Irawaddy's husband seems to see her and other female partners only in terms of fertility. While Rukmani's marriage helps break down stereotypes, the novel is careful not to paint too rosy a picture of Indian womanhood.



Again, pleasure in the family unit helps Rukmani and Irawaddy endure the disasters that exist in the outside world. Throughout the rest of the novel, Irawaddy will evolve into a strong and fulfilled woman without marriage—but it's the support of her parents and siblings that allows her to do so.



Rukmani's worry over Irawaddy's marriage isn't just about adherence to convention—it's a very real worry for Irawaddy's material security, since there are no acceptable methods for women to support themselves.



Like Old Granny, Rukmani generally believes that people can and should get used to suffering. However, when acute suffering affects her own child, she's unable to do so. Instances like this point out the inherent flaws in Rukmani's overarching worldview.



CHAPTER 12

On their day off from the **tannery**, Arjun and Thambi return to the farm to help Nathan. Nathan loves to see his sons working beside him and to impart his knowledge to them. Although the sons are more educated and have more skills than Nathan, in matters of farming, he is an expert and he has “no master.”

On the other days, Arjun and Thambi work long hours at the **tannery**. Rukmani is proud that they bring all their wages home, instead of spending them on prostitutes like other boys. However, she’s unable to save much money because she has to buy clothes for the boys, who are expected to wear shirts in the factory.

Sometimes Nathan accompanies Rukmani when she goes to the market; on these days, they visit the **tannery** to talk with their sons during the midday meal. One day, they arrive at the tannery to find the gates closed and guarded. When Rukmani timidly asks what’s the matter, the guard dismisses her rudely. Eventually, another guard tells her that there is trouble among the workers. Rukmani and Nathan go home and wait anxiously until their sons come home, long after dark.

Arjun and Thambi say that the **tannery** workers asked for better wages, and the bosses retaliated by taking away their lunch hour. Rukmani is mystified, asking why they need more than they already get. The boys answer flatly that they need more money to stave off hunger, and to save for families of their own one day. To Rukmani, her sons seem like grown-up strangers. Nathan says that he and Rukmani are too old to understand, and shouldn’t interfere in the boys’ affairs.

As it turns out, Arjun and Thambi have been spokesmen in the workers’ disputes. Soon, the workers decide to go on strike; Thambi explains that they will not return until they are paid more fairly, although Rukmani doubts they can force the powerful bosses into doing anything.

After a week, the **tannery** threatens to replace the striking workers with others; most workers return to their jobs, and the strike fails. Arjun says that “the people will never learn,” echoing what Kenny has said to Rukmani earlier. She doesn’t understand what either man is talking about. To her, it seems useless to fight against large odds and risk losing what one already has.

Arjun and Thambi’s higher education and worldliness contrasts with their father’s knowledge of farming. For Nathan, a rural life allows him to feel fulfilled and in control even without material advantages or education.



Although the tannery theoretically brings opportunity to town, it’s important that it doesn’t really improve local quality of life. Instead, it concentrates profit in the hands of company owners.



Rukmani’s powerlessness against the guard shows the extent to which large companies abrogate local control and even governance. While the town’s isolation and primitive character sheltered it from outside intervention, it also makes it vulnerable to exploitative takeover.



Arjun and Thambi are becoming politically active—it doesn’t take that much education to realize the inherent injustice of the wage-slave system in which they’re working. However, their new principles align them with progressives like Kenny, and against their parents, who believe that external events, whether natural or social, cannot and should not be altered.



Rukmani views powerful companies much as she does nature—as entities that act impersonally, for better or worse. This attitude provides an inner calm for that her sons lack, but prevents her from acting for her own benefit.



Rukmani’s attitude towards suffering begins to clash not only with Kenny’s but with her own sons’. It’s important that traditional stoicism towards suffering seems to correlate with lack of education, while knowledge usually leads to the development of progressive tendencies.



Arjun and Thambi are without work, as are Kali's two sons. Kali frequently bemoans their lack of "sense," in striking, but eventually Nathan lashes out at her, saying that "our children must act as they choose to, not for our benefit."

With Nathan the family's only provider, food supplies quickly dwindle. Rukmani has to stretch her supplies to ensure they will last until the harvest. Arjun and Thambi spend more and more time in town, refusing to tell their mother what they do there.

One morning, Selvam rushes into the house to announce that drums are beating in town. Rukmani remembers the morning when Arjun made a similar announcement about the **tannery** workers' arrival, and feels a sense of dread. As it turns out, some people have arrived in town to recruit laborers for tea plantations in Ceylon. Arjun and Thambi see this as a good opportunity for them, a way to escape "hunger and idleness."

Nathan and Rukmani are extremely reluctant to see their children go so far away, asking how they will make such a long journey and what they will do if their employers break their promises. Rukmani points out that money is not everything, but Arjun counters that they cannot make even a meager living as things stand in the village, and that they are wasting their youth here. In the morning, after kissing their parents' feet, the boys leave. Rukmani knows she will never see her sons again.

Nathan consoles Rukmani that the boys must grow up and make their own way. Still, she's despondent to see her family dispersing. Murugan is leaving as well, to be a servant in a nearby city; Kenny has procured the job for him. Nathan says that Rukmani "broods too much," and that she should reflect on the beauty of the land and the promise of a good harvest. Together, they walk outside and survey the land. Once, many birds had lived in the paddy fields, but they no longer come because of the **tannery's** proximity.

After Murugan has been gone some time, Kenny brings good news of him; he is succeeding in his new job, and Rukmani shouldn't worry about him. Rukmani feels sudden pity for Kenny, sitting solemnly in her hut, and asks if he has a family, or if he is as alone as he seems. Kenny admits that he has "the usual encumbrances that men have—wife, children, home" but that he has not allowed these things to "put chains about [him]." Instead, he's committed himself to wandering and doing as he pleases. Rukmani is silent, absorbing this. Kenny demands that she keep secret what he has told her about his personal life, and leaves. Rukmani reflects that he has "a strange nature."

The freedom which Nathan and Rukmani grant their children is remarkable. As parents, they're able to unite an emphasis on familial integrity with a touching acceptance of their children's choices.



While Rukmani wanted to have a large family in order to provide labor for the farm, it's clear that subsistence farming can't actually provide food for so many children.



Throughout the novel, Rukmani associates the tannery with disaster for her family. Here, although the tannery isn't implicitly involved, there are parallels between it and the arrival of recruiters who will lure away two of her sons.



Nathan and Rukmani prioritize familial unity over everything, even physical survival. While Arjun and Thambi seem more hardhearted, their motivations are pragmatic and understandable. Nathan and Rukmani's refusal to question the system that keeps them in poverty prevents them from ever improving their circumstances.



Rukmani once saw the land as eternal and unchanging, but its evolution as a result of the tannery shows that it's not actually very reliable. Still, her faith in her life as a farmer is still strong enough that it consoles her somewhat for the loss of her sons.



Kenny's revelation shows how sharply his personal circumstances and worldview contrast with Rukmani's. While Rukmani derives ultimate fulfillment from having and maintaining a family (and expects that Nathan do so as well), Kenny views these things as detracting from his ability to live a fulfilling life. Even though Kenny is committed to alleviating the suffering of others and feels sure he knows how to do so, it's clear that he can't arrange his own affairs satisfactorily, while Rukmani is highly content with her personal life.



CHAPTER 13

Rukmani had hoped for a good harvest, but the rains fail to come. For weeks, she and Nathan look at the sky anxiously and watch as the water in the paddy fields drains away. By harvesting time, there is nothing to reap. When Sivaji, the rent collector, arrives, they are unable to pay him. Sivaji is sympathetic, but the landlord has ordered that the land be given to someone else if they are unable to pay. Nathan asks how they could possibly live without the land, and Sivaji is unable to reply. Eventually, they agree that if Rukmani and Nathan can come up with half of the rent now, they can pay the rest later.

Rukmani collects what meager possessions they have, even the sari she wore to her wedding, to sell. Nathan says that it's better to sell everything than to lose their land and "wander like jackals." Rukmani takes her goods to Biswas, who insincerely commiserates with her plight. Although she bargains with him skillfully, she only gets seventy-five rupees. Nathan sells their bullocks, but they still don't have enough for the rent.

Nathan suggests that they sell the seed they've been saving for the next crop. He can earn some money to buy more seed before planting time. Rukmani thinks this is a bad idea, because it's nearly impossible to find work these days, and Nathan is becoming an old man. In their anger and fear, they begin to argue and shout at each other.

Eventually, Rukmani convinces Nathan not to sell the side. Instead, she pleads with Sivaji to take the money they have and take full repayment after the harvest. Sivaji assents, saying that he doesn't want to be strict but "must think of [his] own."

The drought goes on for weeks, causing the landscape to wither and dry up. Rukmani has to wait for water at the tannery reservoir, where people jostle and quarrel over supplies of water. Long after the crops have failed, the clouds gather and rain falls furiously. However, it has come too late to help the family.

CHAPTER 14

After the rains cease, Rukmani and Nathan take their seed to be blessed at the temple and plant a new crop. As the new shoots grow, they bring hope with them, but Rukmani is constantly in fear that their food supplies won't last until the harvest. Soon, they run out of dried fish, and they no longer have any savings. Rukmani brings out a secret stash of rice, which will provide tiny meals for almost a month.

Before, Rukmani never emphasized or even talked about the process of paying rent—she doesn't like to dwell on the evidence that she doesn't own her land and isn't secure in possession of it. Her status as a tenant farmer is the major pitfall in rural life, and prevents it from providing security or prosperity to her family.



Nathan's emphasis on the importance of the land, especially relative to possessions, stresses his strong faith in agriculture, even in light of the recent crop failure. To him, the land is still the only way to achieve a modicum of security.



It's notable that although the land is supposed to support the family, it's the only thing capable of driving Nathan and Rukmani to a rare quarrel.



In this situation, Rukmani takes the lead, making decisions and acting for the family. In many ways, she's a much more active character than Nathan, although he's technically in charge.



Rukmani is beginning to see that the land functions impersonally, rather than for her benefit. However, she can't (and doesn't want to) alter her life as a result of this, and so natural disaster will continue to harm her.



Never before has starvation threatened the family so acutely. Rukmani's current predicament shows how strong a reality suffering and hunger is in the lives of poor Indian farmers.



At night, the children sleep restlessly because of their hunger. Once, Nathan wakes up shouting from a nightmare and Rukmani has to comfort him before he falls asleep. Rukmani dreams that a strange figure breaks into the hut and steals her rice. She becomes increasingly distrustful, feeling that their food stores could vanish at any moment. She buries half of it away from the hut and keeps the other part in the granary. Sometimes she thinks of going to Kenny for help, but she hears that he has gone away from the village.

On the eighth day of rationing, Kunthi arrives at the cottage. Rukmani has not seen her since their encounter in town, and she has changed greatly—she has lost weight and become wrinkled and aged. Kunthi inspects Rukmani's pot and asks if she still "has [her] husband"; she has become estranged from her own husband, she says, and he is living with another woman. Rukmani surveys her with pity, and Kunthi says violently that she doesn't want such pity.

Kunthi asks for a meal; Rukmani gives her some rice water but explains that she cannot spare any rice, as she has to feed her children. Kunthi insists on having some rice, saying that "the damage will never be repaired while I hunger." Rukmani says that she should seek help from her sons, who have wives and homes of their own, but Kunthi says she will never beg from them. She can take care of herself, she says, "but first the bloom must come back."

Kunthi threatens to tell Nathan that Rukmani lacks virtue if she doesn't give her any rice. Rukmani protests that Nathan won't believe anything she says, but Kunthi points out that she's seen Rukmani visiting Kenny illicitly in the city, and that he often gives her milk and food, presents that "men make to the women they have known." Rukmani closes her eyes to think; she never told Nathan about consulting Kenny, and because of this lie, he may believe she's been lying about other things. Meanwhile, Kunthi waits by her side "like a vulture."

Eventually, Rukmani gives Kunthi seven days worth of rice. In the middle of the night, worried that Kunthi is still lying in wait, she goes out to retrieve her buried store of grain. However, she finds that most of it is gone; only a day's worth of rice remains. Rukmani feels dizzy with despair and anger. She returns to the cottage and shouts at her children, demanding to know who has stolen the rice. All the children look at her as if she is crazy. Kuti cries desperately.

Rukmani is normally tranquil even when threatened by hardship, but the stress of this period is disrupting her strength of mind and her faith in those around her. The novel makes it clear that excessive suffering does not ennoble its victims—rather, it makes them increasingly less able to function in the world.



The collapse of Kunthi's family is unclear and never explained. While Rukmani will grow to despise and condemn Kunthi, it's important to note that the other woman has never been anchored by a strong familial unit as Rukmani has. Without understanding the complexity of Kunthi's individual life, the reader can't judge her actions.



Kunthi implies that she "cares for herself" by working as a prostitute, but can't do so when she's rendered unattractive by starvation. Kunthi's dire situation points out the repercussions when society provides no legitimate methods for women to support themselves and earn a living.



Kunthi is alert to and able to manipulate the one crack in Rukmani's strong relationship with her husband. In this way, Kunthi and her extramarital sexuality come to represent a threat to the conventional family unit, as Rukmani would never have seen Kunthi in the city if she weren't there for her own nefarious purposes. Even while the novel uplifts Rukmani's sexuality, it unequivocally condemns Kunthi's.



Normally, Rukmani is an extremely tender mother. That she's moved to anger now signifies the gravity of the situation, as well as the extent to which Kunthi disrupts the family unit and threatens to destroy its integrity.



Nathan comes into the hut and tells Rukmani not to admonish the children. Sobbing, he admits that Kunthi forced him to give her the rice. He is the father of both of her sons, and she threatened to reveal this to Rukmani. Rukmani feels acute “disillusionment” to know that her husband carried on an affair in the first blissful days of their marriage. Nathan tries to justify himself, saying that Kunthi is “a skillful woman” and he “did not see the evil for the beauty.”

Finally, Rukmani says tiredly that Kunthi is “evil and powerful” and they should forget about the whole affair. She tells Nathan that Kunthi blackmailed her as well. After they have come clean to each other, she feels that “a new peace” has come to their marriage.

Rukmani also feels a strange sense of relief now that they have run out of rice; she no longer has to scheme about stretching out their supplies. Instead, the boys roam the land scavenging garbage or plants; sometimes they eat grass, even though it makes them sick. Hunger is always with them, so painful that it banishes all other thoughts and eventually makes them empty and listless. Rukmani wonders if they will be strong enough to work when the harvest time comes.

Kuti is most strongly affected by the famine. He has always been a sickly child, and now he cries all the time and refuses to eat even what they have. Irawaddy is tirelessly gentle with him, soothing his wails and coaxing him to eat most of her own food.

CHAPTER 15

One day, Rukmani’s son Raja doesn’t come back from his scavenging rounds. At night, some men from the **tannery** bring his body home; his head is soaked with blood. The men lay the dead boy in front of Rukmani, who can’t believe she is looking at her own son. They explain that he had been “caught,” and they say “something about money,” but Rukmani is too dazed to understand. Irawaddy starts to sing and cry, but Rukmani numbly tells her to stop and preserve her strength.

Rukmani wonders why she gave birth to sons only to see them lying dead in the dirt. Mechanically, she closes his eyes and goes about the tasks of washing the body and preparing it for burial. She feels that Raja’s body has no connection to the soul for which she mourns.

This major revelation complicates the portrait of Rukmani’s marriage, which until this point has been almost perfect. Although Nathan knows what he did was wrong, he doesn’t accept any culpability for it, painting himself as Kunthi’s victim. With this revelation, it’s clear why Nathan was so disturbed earlier in the novel when Rukmani helped Kunthi through her first childbirth.



Perhaps because of her preexisting antipathy towards Kunthi, Rukmani is eager to accept Nathan’s explanation. This way, she can continue to think of herself as paramount in importance to him. Although Rukmani is an unusually independent woman, here she draws on misogynistic tropes condemning women who exercise sexuality outside marriage.



Here, it becomes evident that “living off the land” isn’t really a tenable possibility; even when cultivated, the land doesn’t provide enough resources to support the family.



Even though she can’t have children of her own, Irawaddy is highly maternal and invested in the fate of the family. While her failed marriage links her to Kuti, her conventionally feminine behavior differentiates her from the other woman.



Raja’s death is one of the famine’s major tragedies. It’s notable that Rukmani’s stoicism towards suffering prevents her from mourning fully, as Irawaddy does. It also prevents her from enquiring into the causes of her son’s death, which always remain unclear.



This is one of the few instances in which Rukmani questions the reasons behind the suffering that occurs in her life, rather than accepting it as inevitable.



Nathan prepares a bier and puts Raja's body on it. In the morning, funeral drums summon friends and neighbors, and the men take the bier away to be burned while the women wait in the house.

The community's adherence to ritual links Raja's death to other milestone events like weddings and births, placing tragedy in the context of the ongoing life of the village.



Three days later, two **tannery** officials visit the house. They tell Rukmani that Raja tried to steal a calfskin, and that the guards did their duty, only using violence to protect their property. Further, they say that Rukmani's sons have always been "troublemakers," and that they don't want any trouble from her now. The altercation was Raja's fault, and she has no "claim" on them now. Perplexed, Rukmani says she has no idea what they're talking about and that she hasn't made any claim.

The tannery officials understand that Raja's death was preventable and that there can and should be repercussions, even though they're trying to evade responsibility. Their visit underlines Rukmani's conception of tragedy as inevitable, and the extent to which this worldview makes her unable to advocate on her children's behalf.



The second, quieter man, points out that Raja wasn't "brutally treated"—the guard just "tapped" him with a stick, and Raja fell. Rukmani says that he had been working hard and eating very little. The first man reiterates that the **tannery** is not responsible and Rukmani can hope for no compensation. He even says that Rukmani may even be better off with one less mouth to feed. The other man looks appalled, but Rukmani just nods. She finds "no sense in agreeing or disagreeing" with this man who is so different than her.

While Rukmani is sometimes impractical concerning her children—for example, she willingly gives birth to more than the farm can support—her attitude still contrasts favorably to the official's cold-hearted pragmatism. It's clear that Rukmani's inability to act for her children doesn't prevent her from valuing them much more than this man does, despite his education and "modern" attitudes.



The first official whispers audibly to the second that Rukmani has been "reasonable"; the second lingers behind to tell Rukmani that he is sorry for her loss, and leaves awkwardly.

The tannery official mistakes Rukmani's grief and numbness for complicity with his agenda. His arrogance underlines the enormous psychological gap between the poor and those who exploit them.



CHAPTER 16

Rukmani wonders how they will manage the reaping, given that they are so weak from hunger. Nathan says that "one look at the swelling grain" will give them strength. Three weeks remain until the harvest. Rukmani knows that she and the older children will endure, but Kuti is in constant danger; he's developed a large rash, and sores form when he scratches it. Whenever he falls asleep, Rukmani fears that he has died.

Kuti is dying from highly preventable causes, but Rukmani can do nothing to help him. This family tragedy highlights Rukmani's powerlessness because of the land, even though she previously saw agriculture as an empowering force.



Some days later, Rukmani notices that Kuti has taken a turn for the better. She fears that the small improvement is the signal of impending death, but he continues to sleep peacefully and Rukmani thanks the Gods for their beneficence. Alongside her mother, Irawaddy watches the little boy sleep.

Even in this extreme situation, Rukmani doesn't question why things happen to her children, attributing them to impersonal divine entities.



At daybreak, Rukmani wakes up filled with optimism. Suddenly she hears footsteps entering the hut and fears that Kunthi has returned to steal from them again. She sees a woman's figure in the dusk and throws herself at it, hitting her furiously until she hears a voice screaming, "Mother!" Suddenly, Nathan is dragging Rukmani away and yelling, and Rukmani realizes that she has been violently beating Irawaddy, her own daughter.

Nathan and Selvam carry Irawaddy inside and Rukmani tends to the wounds she has just caused. Seeing long cuts on Irawaddy's arms, Rukmani realizes she has been wearing bangles, which broke against her body. She's mystified, given that no one has enough money to buy jewelry right now. Rukmani brings Irawaddy's dirty sari to the river; as she washes it, a rupee falls from the folds into the water. As she finishes her chores, Rukmani wonders how Irawaddy got the money and if she has been stealing.

Rukmani returns to the hut, where Irawaddy and Kuti are lying. Irawaddy tells Rukmani to use the rupee in her sari and buy him some food. Now, Rukmani knows that Irawaddy has been responsible for the baby's improvement. Rukmani says that she will, not admitting that the rupee fell into the river.

When Irawaddy's wounds heal, she gets ready to leave the house again despite Rukmani's injunctions to rest. She refuses to tell Rukmani where she goes, but arranges her hair carefully. Rukmani imagines her walking into the town, followed by the eyes of jeering men. Irawaddy says that "the truth is unpalatable," and Rukmani remembers that the **tannery** official said the same thing.

When Nathan returns from the fields, he too demands to know where Irawaddy is going. She refuses to tell him, even though she's normally an obedient daughter. Nathan tries to forbid her from going out and accuses her of turning into "a common strumpet," but Irawaddy says that she will do so as long as there is hunger in the house. Rukmani knows that they cannot stop her; she is no longer a child but "a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination."

Rukmani's high state of internal tension leads her to lash out physically at her own daughter. At the same time, the mistake highlights the lurking parallels between Irawaddy, whom Rukmani loves, and Kunthi, whom she despises.



It's increasingly clear that Irawaddy has been working as a prostitute—the only way women in the novel's world can make money, and the reason she would have been wearing bangles. This is another connection between her and Kunthi, but Rukmani's reaction will be very different.



It's never entirely clear if Rukmani accepts or disapproves of Irawaddy's choice. She's not even particularly perturbed to have lost the precious rupee, which could feed Kuti. The extent of her suffering is making her not just stoic but numb and passive to events around her.



While Rukmani refuses to accommodate views like those endorsed by the tannery officials, her children are more pragmatic about the necessity of interacting with and submitting to the outside world in order to survive. Staying aloof allows Rukmani to maintain a moral high ground, but it's often her children who ensure the survival of the family, as Irawaddy does now.



Although Nathan uses harsh words, he doesn't actually try to control Irawaddy's behavior. Girls are supposed to be docile and obedient, but Nathan and Rukmani don't enforce this principle in any tangible way. Rather, they extend to Irawaddy the same freedom of choice that their sons enjoy.



By working as a prostitute, Irawaddy buys milk for Kuti and rice for the family. Rukmani is grateful, but Nathan refuses to eat the food his daughter brings home. At first, Kuti seems to improve, but soon it becomes clear he is dying. One night, he calls out for Rukmani, telling her he can no longer see. Rukmani tells him to go to sleep, promising he will soon be better again. He seems content, and when he opens his eyes again Rukmani sees that he is already dead. With Nathan, Rukmani croons and cries over her son; however, although she's mourning, she's also relieved that Kuti no longer has to struggle and suffer.

Again, Nathan shows himself a more passive and less pragmatic character than his wife and daughter. Although his objections are understandable, it's clear that the family would not survive if it relied exclusively on him. This situation punctures the myth of male control on which Indian society rests. On the other hand, it also points out the desperate circumstances of women who have to provide for their family but have no legitimate way to do so.



CHAPTER 17

After Kuti's death, the rice ripens "with a bland indifference that mocked our loss," producing a better crop than was expected. Despite their weakness, the family works for days draining the fields and harvesting the rice. When they finish, they look at each other's sweaty, emaciated bodies and laugh in helpless and hysterical relief.

Initially a benevolent provider, the land now seems almost malicious, conspiring to cause Kuti's death. The famine marks a major loss of faith in the agricultural system, for Rukmani if not for Nathan.



With the bountiful harvest, Nathan plans to pay the missing rent and plant vegetables. The family begins to plan for the future, even though their minds still dwell on the painful past.

The family's resilience after the death of two sons is remarkable but also necessary, since they need to start accruing more food reserves.



Rukmani reflects that while planting "disciplines the body" and watching crops grow "uplifts the spirit," the harvest provides a "rich satisfaction" that nothing else can equal. She loves feeling the rice she has raised spill into her hands, and knowing that it will provide for her family during the coming months. Later, she goes to the temple to pray, feeling deeply grateful.

It's remarkable that Rukmani is capable of gratitude after the painful tragedies she's just experienced. This shows the extent to which she's acclimated to a life of suffering, as well as the optimism that is deeply ingrained in her character.



CHAPTER 18

When Rukmani grows a crop of vegetables, she brings them to sell at the market. Enough shops have sprung up that she no longer has to sell to Biswas, whom she despises. Still, she sees him in the street, and he tells her that Kenny has returned to the village. She points out that this is good news for everyone, but Biswas says insinuatingly that he knows she is close to Kenny and that he has heard of their friendship from Kunthi. Rukmani calls him a "carrion crow," but soon her anger subsides. She knows Biswas isn't worth a fight.

Previously, Rukmani's worries over her reputation led her to capitulate to Kunthi. Now, since she no longer has secrets from Nathan, she's imperturbable. Her strong marriage leads to peace of mind in all aspects of life.



Rukmani decides to visit Kenny and buys a garland for his cottage. She finds his house bare and caked with dust. Many people have brought garlands just like Rukmani's, and he welcomes her with a laugh. Rukmani says that she has missed him, not only for the help he provides but for his gentle presence. She confides that Raja and Kuti have died, then asks about his own family. Kenny roughly admits that his wife has left him, and he's estranged from his sons.

Rukmani says that it wasn't right of Kenny to stay away from his wife for so long, but that his wife should have accompanied him wherever he went. Kenny says that she simplifies everything because she has such a limited worldview. Rukmani counters that she is limited but "not wholly without understanding," especially in the ways of her own culture. Although Kenny lives in her country and cares for its people, she says, it is not his own country and never will be. Kenny says he is just beginning to have that realization himself.

As Rukmani stands to leave, Kenny asks after Irawaddy. Rukmani says that she is pregnant, but that the baby's father is unknown. Kenny says that the baby will bring happiness to the family, and she shouldn't pay attention to other people's judgmental comments. As Rukmani walks home, she reflects that Kenny's thoughts on this subject are very similar to Nathan's.

CHAPTER 19

Like his older brothers, Selvam doesn't take to the land; although he's hardworking, he's not a very good farmer. One day, he announces that he can't stand to work on the farm, and that Kenny has offered him a job in the new **hospital** he is building. He can learn quickly, as he already knows how to read and write better than Rukmani. Rukmani and Nathan are disappointed that Selvam is pursuing a different way of life, but support him nonetheless. Rukmani warns Selvam he may hear rumors that Kenny gave him the job as compensation for a sexual relationship with his mother, but Selvam says stoutly that he won't pay any attention.

When Rukmani next sees Kenny, she thanks him for helping Selvam and asks about his new project. He shows her blueprints for a **hospital** much bigger than the town's tiny dispensary. Rukmani is perplexed, asking where the money will come from; Kenny replies that he has been raising money in Britain during his trips away from the village. As he's done before, he tells Rukmani that "you must cry out if you want help."

Kenny hasn't experienced tragedy on the scale of Rukmani's, but his domestic woes do parallel hers. However, it's important to note that Kenny's troubles stem from his own refusal to consider himself as a husband and father foremost, while Rukmani's derive from the flawed system in which she lives.



Kenny is incorrect and somewhat condescending when he says that Rukmani "simplifies" everything—she's merely evaluating his life from her family-centered worldview, while his worldview is oriented around individual fulfillment. While Kenny abrogates control of the dialogue—he wants to decide which views are simple, and which are nuanced—Rukmani nimbly rebukes him. By reminding him that this is not his country, she's refusing to let his foreign principles define her conception of her own culture. Without fully knowing it, she's taking a stand against cultural imperialism.



Even though the previous exchange has shown the vast gulfs between Rukmani and Kenny, she's again brought closer to him by his similarities to her husband. It's important to understand that while Rukmani's life is centered around her family, this doesn't make her blindly adherent to community norms.



Although he's pursuing a different—and probably better—career, Selvam follows in his older brothers' footsteps, leaving the farm to pursue opportunities that his education opens for him. By this time, worn down by consistent agricultural calamities, Rukmani is less skeptical about a livelihood that doesn't depend on the land. Selvam's immediate understanding of her warning shows the deep confidence and trust that exists within the family.



Sometimes it seems that Kenny is hectoring Rukmani without practicing what he preaches, but here he's truly putting his beliefs into action. The idea of the hospital points out that much of the suffering Rukmani considers natural and inevitable is in fact preventable. If it can be constructed, the hospital would be a powerful argument for Kenny's views on suffering.



Rukmani assents, but she privately reflects that people “would be pitiable creatures indeed” if they were always asking for help, instead of learning to suffer their various burdens, which can never be alleviated. Kenny can tell that she disagrees with him, and points out that no “spiritual grace” comes from suffering or starvation. Rukmani counters that Indian priests often fast and punish themselves, and Kenny shakes his head, saying he will never understand her culture.

While Kenny’s hospital may help the people of the village, it won’t really help Rukmani to change her views about suffering. For instance, seeing her sons’ deaths as preventable, rather than inevitable, would add guilt and regret to the grief she’s already experiencing.



CHAPTER 20

Although the town is becoming clogged and congested, on the outskirts where Rukmani lives nature is still dominant, and the changing seasons can be seen in the green fields and the night skies. When Irawaddy goes into labor, flowers are blooming to signal the new year. In preparation, Rukmani scours the hut and gathers flowers to celebrate the birth. She remembers the births of all her own children, which occurred in this hut as well; she’s sorry that Irawaddy’s child is born not out of a loving marriage but a transactional encounter in which no human connection occurred. The baby’s father could be anyone, and they have no way of knowing his character or morals.

Even though Irawaddy’s extramarital pregnancy is highly unconventional and probably brings social stigma to the family, Rukmani is supportive—she prepares to celebrate the birth just as if Irawaddy was married. It’s important that she worries about the baby’s conception not out of social anxiety but because she wants the child to grow up in a loving family. Although she’s often unable to provide material resources, Rukmani is cognizant of the psychological advantages that a calm and loving upbringing gives her children.



For her own part, Irawaddy is unafraid and anxious to become a mother. Rukmani tends to her during her labor and she soon gives birth to a healthy child. However, while Irawaddy is consumed by exhaustion and delight, Rukmani immediately sees that the baby is albino, a serious deformity.

By this point in the novel, even the happiest events are marked by some suffering. Not only will the baby’s deformity cause social stigma, underlining its unusual parentage, but albinism involves serious health risks for a child in such a hot climate.



When he sees Irawaddy’s son, Nathan is very troubled, calling the event “a cruel thing in the evening of our lives.” He worries that Irawaddy, who doesn’t seem to notice her child’s affliction, has lost her mind, and says he should have prevented her from prostituting herself. Already the baby seems uncomfortable in the hot sun. Rukmani tells him not to worry, although she notices how easily the child burns outside.

Although Irawaddy is technically an adult, Rukmani and Nathan still find themselves the decision makers and providers of the family. Their children’s inability to pursue independent lives as their parents did will eventually erode the couple’s confidence in the rural farming economy they’ve long loved.



News of Irawaddy’s baby spreads, and people often come to see him for themselves. Some are kind, but all are clearly relieved that their own children haven’t suffered such a fate. To put an end to the unsolicited visits, Nathan decides to hold a formal naming ceremony, after which no one will have an excuse to visit. They name the boy Sacrabani and all the neighbors come to the celebration; Old Granny brings a rupee for the child, saying she still feels guilty for the dissolution of Irawaddy’s marriage.

Sacrabani’s naming ceremony mirrors Arjun’s at the beginning of the book. At the time, Rukmani was thrilled to bear a son and fulfill the conventional role of wife and mother. Now, she has to accept that Irawaddy will never achieve the same conventional security and happiness.



Kali arrives at the ceremony, garrulous as ever. She wants to gossip about the baby, but Irawaddy simply holds out Sacrabani, refusing to act as if he is abnormal. Kali tactlessly points out his pink eyes and strange appearance. Seeing Irawaddy's troubled face, Selvam says stoutly that "it is only a question of getting used to" his appearance, and that "a pink-eyed child is no worse than a brown-eyed one." Chastened, Kali hurries away, and Selvam cuddles Sacrabani.

Selvam and Irawaddy's friendship is the closest of all the siblings. Even though the children can't set off for their own lives and households as Rukmani did at a young age, they reproduce the tenderness and unconditional love that their parents have long modeled.



CHAPTER 21

Selvam spends less and less time at home now that he works for Kenny. The **hospital** encounters many delays in building, and Selvam and Kenny alternate between enthusiasm and dejection. Rukmani feels skeptical and exasperated as she watches the building progress, feeling that the men lack the patience to see the project through.

Rukmani's skepticism when Kenny originally presented the plans to her is now justified. Although he intends the hospital to prove his own approach to human suffering, he's now learning that "calling out for help" and correcting suffering is easier said than done.



In the meantime, Old Granny dies on the street. If the **hospital** were finished, she could have spent her last days there, but she has no relatives and no one to take care of her when she can no longer make a living. One day she disappears, and her body is soon found near the well. It appears she has died of starvation.

Granny's grim death points out the inability to solve large and systemic problems through one-time fixes, like the beginning of the hospital.



Rukmani takes Old Granny's death especially hard. She regrets accepting the rupee from her, which could have provided food for several days, even though Nathan points out it could only have prolonged the inevitable. He says that she could not have stayed in the **hospital** for very long; after all, it's a place for sick people, not a soup kitchen. Rukmani doesn't know what a soup kitchen is and he explains to her, pleased to know more than she does for once. Selvam has explained this to him, having learned about it himself from Kenny.

Selvam's new job is expanding his parents' conception of the outside world. This is a new experience for Rukmani, who is used to being the most educated person in the house. However, while she sees reading and writing chiefly as a pastime, now she's learning that it can expose her to revolutionary new ideas—like the rudimentary principles of social welfare represented by the soup kitchen.



As the **hospital** progresses, people begin to seek jobs and assistance from it. Rukmani knows that Kenny won't be able to attend to even a tenth of the people seeking help, even if the project was finished on time. To Rukmani, it seems like the two men are trying to fill a bottomless pit.

While Markandaya approves of Kenny's personal altruism, she makes clear that India needs systemic and internally driven change, not personal philanthropy or imperialist intervention.



Selvam begins training as a doctor with Kenny, and by his second year treats some patients by himself. Kenny pays him a small wage. Rukmani wonders how he will pay a staff to run his **hospital**, and Kenny doesn't seem to have an answer to this question.

Kenny usually scoffs at Rukmani's literal-minded approach to problems, but she adeptly points out the serious flaws in his project.



CHAPTER 22

Selvam and Irawaddy have always been extremely close, always sharing the same opinions even when they oppose their parents. Irawaddy is especially grateful for Selvam's ease with her son. He accepts Sacrabani's albinism and rarely discusses it, even though the boy is usually ostracized by his peers and can't stay outside for very long.

One day, Sacrabani asks Irawaddy what a bastard is; apparently, another child has levied this insult at him. Irawaddy explains that a bastard is a child whose mother did not want him to be born. When Sacrabani asks if she wanted him to be born, she assures him that she did, although in fact she tried to induce an abortion more than once. Later, he asks Irawaddy if he has a father, and Irawaddy fibs that his father is away and will come to see him when he's older. Irawaddy is upset by these questions, and Rukmani hears her crying privately.

CHAPTER 23

Murugan, who has been working as a servant, marries a girl from the city without consulting her parents. Rukmani and Nathan want to attend his wedding, but they don't have any money to make the journey, and Nathan is getting older and is too weak to travel.

Kenny tells Rukmani that Nathan needs to rest more and eat better, but they don't have money to buy nourishing food. Moreover, Irawaddy and Rukmani can't tend to the land alone. Kenny understands that things would have been easier if Selvam remained on the farm, and apologizes for taking him away, but Rukmani says that "Selvam never belonged to the land," and she is glad to see him engaged in a meaningful occupation.

Kenny asks if Rukmani thinks about the future, when Nathan will be too old to farm. Rukmani replies that she does, but that "it is not within our means" to plan. She shrugs off her worry, saying that there are many other families in the same situation, and that God will provide. Rukmani keeps the conversation secret from Nathan, simply telling him not to worry about the family.

While Rukmani worries about Sacrabani's lack of a father, he does enjoy the same strong family structure as her own children. In many ways, Selvam reproduces Nathan's patience and gentleness in his treatment of his nephew.



Social stigma has never been an issue for the family, because they've fulfilled most conventional social expectations. Now it's really sinking in that the community isn't unconditionally supportive as the family is. The novel simultaneously points out the strict social mores that dominate rural Indian society, and the capacity of strong bonds within families to counteract social stigma.



While Selvam and Irawaddy play important roles in keeping the family together, Murugan's increasing distance from his parents is a reminder of the family's dissolution.



This episode shows Kenny in a moment of insight and cultural understanding. At the same time, it shows Rukmani gradually changing her views on the role of education. While she originally thought it was dangerous for her sons to venture off the land, now she sees that such a choice can be beneficial.



Theoretically, Rukmani's sons should provide for her when she and Nathan are too old to work. However, none of her sons are in a position to do so. This predicament shows how the rural farming economy doesn't actually provide the security it claims to give poor farmers.



One day while Rukmani is gathering cow dung, Sivaji comes to the hut. When she returns, she finds Nathan alone, looking dazed and terrified. He tells her bluntly that the landlord is selling their farm to the **tannery**, and Sivaji has just informed him that they have two weeks to leave. Rukmani rails against the injustice of eviction after thirty years on the land, but Nathan points out bleakly that the landlord will make a large profit by selling.

Rukmani reflects that she always knew “the **tannery** would eventually be our undoing.” It has changed not only the geography of the village but the fortunes of its inhabitants. Some people have grown rich from it, but Rukmani’s family has lost much. Her sons have left after the strike or been killed, and Irawaddy has “ruined herself” by consorting with foreign men, while men native to the village would never have touched her. However, even in her grief, she acknowledges that the tannery is not to blame for everything. The vagaries of the land led to starvation and Kuti’s death, and the landlord could take away the farm at any moment.

Still, Rukmani feels unmoored and helpless without the land. She looks around her hut—it is bare and primitive, but Nathan built it with his own hands, and she’s lived there for decades. She cannot believe that it will now belong to someone else.

Selvam takes the news stoically, but soon becomes angry with the landlord. He can’t believe his parents are accepting the decision without question, but they point out there’s nothing else to do. Rukmani and Nathan have decided to set off in search of Murugan, who has a good job and can support his parents. They can no longer provide for themselves, as they are too old to acquire another plot of land and have no other skills. Rukmani doesn’t like to hear Nathan talking of his age, but he strokes her temples to soothe her.

Reluctantly but genuinely, Selvam offers to return to the land and rent another farm to work with his father. However, Nathan firmly rejects the offer, saying he doesn’t want Selvam to sacrifice his future.

This moment marks the height of Rukmani’s disillusionment with her agricultural lifestyle. Not only is the natural world often unable to provide sufficient resources, it’s now clear that the social system leaves poor farmers vulnerable to the whims of landlords and without any legal protections.



Rukmani attributes their eviction to the tannery, but in fact it’s due to the social system she’s toiled under her whole life, long before the tannery arrived. She’s finally realizing that her poverty and desperation are deeply unjust, but she doesn’t know enough to attribute these problems to their actual causes.



This moment provides a contrast to Rukmani’s arrival on the farm, when she was hesitant to begin life as a rural farmwife. As this phase of her life comes to a close, she poignantly realizes how much she’s loved it.



In their conception of the injustice of their lives, Rukmani—if not Nathan—is growing closer to her sons’ viewpoints. However, she stops short of actually questioning the landlord’s decision, as Selvam does.



It’s important and touching that Nathan always prioritizes his son’s future happiness, even when doing so may leave him homeless and penniless.



Irawaddy decides that she and Sacrabani will stay with Selvam rather than starting a new life elsewhere and being a burden to her parents. Selvam promises to look after her, despite his slim wages. Rukmani and Nathan are too exhausted and bewildered to argue with their children.

Finally, Irawaddy and Selvam are becoming independent. However, they're doing so under harsh and heartbreaking circumstances. Rukmani finally sees that the rural lifestyle in which she's had such faith can't provide the life she's imagined, or the future she wanted for her children.



CHAPTER 24

Rukmani packs the few belongings she can carry. She leaves most of her cooking vessels behind, imagining that her daughter-in-law will already have her own tools. She's sad to relinquish her place as the matriarch of the household, and reflects fondly on the daily chores of feeding her family. Rukmani gathers their few rupees in her sari and is ready to leave.

Leaving behind her tools represents leaving behind her identity as an able and competent housewife. The transition to old age, always difficult, is complicated by the material upheaval Rukmani is experiencing right now.



The next morning, Rukmani and Nathan hitch a ride with a bullock cart traveling towards the city. After saying goodbye to Selvam and Irawaddy, they depart the village, watching the familiar fields recede. Rukmani leans on Nathan for comfort.

Rukmani's ride away from the town mirrors her journey here as a young bride. She's experiencing the same feelings of fear and dependence on Nathan, but less of her youthful optimism.



Soon, Rukmani notices that one of the bullocks is not well; his yoke has rubbed a large raw patch on his shoulder. She points this out to the carter, but he says he can't afford to let the animal rest, since he makes his living by trips to the city. Throughout the day Rukmani watches the injured bullock grow slower, and his wound grow more serious.

The animal, which can't stop working despite its obvious sickness, mirrors Rukmani and Nathan, who lack the resources to settle down even though they're approaching old age.



The next afternoon, the carter drops Nathan and Rukmani at the outskirts of the city. They have no idea how to reach Murugan's house on Koil Street, but begin to walk into the city in hopes of meeting someone. The first man they meet tells them that Koil Street is in the suburbs on the other side of the town, fifteen miles away. Rukmani and Nathan walk slowly, burdened by their possessions and often losing their way. They are bewildered by the constant streams of people, carts, and bicycles, often on the verge of crashing into each other.

In Rukmani's first exposure to a large city, the novel explicitly addresses India's growing industrialization for the first time. Until now, it has only portrayed the side effects of that transformation, like the boom in businesses like the tannery. Just as Rukmani was confused and off-put by the tannery, she's ill at ease in the city, which seems inferior to the tranquil lifestyle she's always loved.



After hours of walking, Rukmani sees Nathan flagging and suggests they rest. They sit down in a quiet alleyway, and as the sun sets Rukmani knows they'll have to prolong the search until the next day. A homeless man suggests that they seek shelter at a temple, where they might even get a meal. As they approach, they see many old and crippled people entering the temple as well. Soon, some priests appear with trays of food and perform a long blessing. Rukmani closes her eyes and imagines her children and the fields where she lived.

From being deeply rooted in their own land, Rukmani and Nathan are transformed into wandering beggars. While they accept this change with humility, it's an extremely poignant moment that shows just how much their society has failed to provide hardworking citizens the ability to provide for themselves through meaningful occupations.



A woman next to Rukmani tells her to hurry towards the food, as there's not always enough. She has to jostle for position with other, more experienced supplicants. When she finally reaches the front of the line, the priest refuses to give her a second portion for Nathan, so they have to share one meal. She is shocked and dismayed that he doesn't trust her.

After Rukmani and Nathan eat, they remember that they have left their bundles of possessions in the temple entrance hall. When they return to collect them, the bundles have been stolen. Even though some other people in the temple help them search, they are unable to find them. The others tell Rukmani scornfully that she must take better care of her belongings, even inside a temple.

Nathan says they shouldn't be upset by the loss of mere belongings, but Rukmani is disturbed by the prospect of appearing at Murugan's house empty-handed, like beggars. During the night, she dreams that someone is tugging on her arm, but when she wakes up she sees only Nathan next to her. She sleeps fitfully for the rest of the night and wakes up before dawn, watching as the temple's carved statues gradually appear in the light, looking as if they are alive.

CHAPTER 25

As dawn breaks, Nathan wakes up as well. Rukmani is happy to see he looks healthier after a good sleep. They wash themselves at a communal tap and venture onto the street, where stalls are selling fried pancakes. Cheerfully, Nathan suggests they use some of their slim funds to buy breakfast—but when Rukmani reaches into her sari, she finds her coins are all gone. Returning to the temple, they search their sleeping area but conclude that someone has robbed them during the night. Other beggars in the temple look at them with pity, clearly scorning them as ignorant country people.

Rukmani and Nathan make their way through the city, hoping to find Murugan before sundown. Many times they have to stop and ask for instructions, and Nathan finds it hard to walk quickly. In the middle of the day they sit down to rest and watch a dozen street children playing in the road. Although they are dirty and emaciated, they are cheerful and happy—until they discover any food left in the road, whereupon they fight each other bitterly for possession.

For the first time in her life, Rukmani has to aggressively assert herself in a hostile environment. While she's hesitant to do so, she's more adaptable than Nathan, who is growing more passive and more reliant on his wife's ability to make decisions and provide for him.



Rukmani's mistake might seem silly, but it shows how truly out of place she is right now. For Rukmani, urban life points out her vulnerabilities more than any experience on the farm did, and requires a watchfulness and cunning that feels difficult and unnatural to her.



While Rukmani usually appears stoic compared to Kenny, her own capacity for action and anxiety is revealed by Nathan's passivity. Of the three characters, she has the most nuanced mentality regarding human suffering.



This second robbery adds insult to injury, and means that Rukmani and Nathan are truly helpless. As they become more and more distanced from the village and more absorbed into city life, their vulnerability and poverty increases. This trend suggests that rural poverty is more empowering than urban poverty, but as Rukmani has seen through the famines and her eviction, this dichotomy is much more nuanced than it seems.



The street children's happiness mirrors the many moments in which Rukmani has been content despite her material poverty. Although Rukmani feels very distanced from urban life, many of her experiences will show the close ties between the urban and rural poor.



Rukmani decides to ask the children for directions. Nathan calls them over and asks where Koil Street. One boy explains that there are four Koil Streets, but he happens to know which one Murugan's employer, Birla, lives on. He agrees to guide them there if they pay him later on, when they have money. He proudly introduces himself as Puli, the "leader of our pack," and Nathan and Rukmani take a liking to him. Rukmani notices that his fingers have been eaten away by leprosy, and he's left with only stumps.

After showing them the correct house, Puli quickly disappears. Assuming they are beggars, a servant tries to dismiss them, but Nathan explains that they are looking for their son. The servant says that no one named Murugan works here, and he doesn't even know of such a person.

At that moment, Birla, a female doctor dressed in men's clothing, approaches. Rukmani explains her plight, and Birla remembers that Murugan came to her on Kenny's recommendation. However, he left her employ two years ago, and she believes he's now working for an official on Chamundi Hill. She directs them to her servants' quarters to have a meal before they set off.

The servant brings Rukmani and Nathan to a small cabin and introduces them to his friendly wife, who is caring for a small baby. Rukmani immediately relaxes in the homey atmosphere, cradling the baby while the woman prepares dinner. Later, the servants persuade Rukmani and Nathan to spend the night in their home so they can be well-rested when they continue their search in the morning.

CHAPTER 26

Chamundi Hill is well-known and easy to find; everyone knows of the Collector, who is Murugan's employer now. Approaching the house, Rukmani and Nathan are again dismissed as beggars, but when they mention Murugan's name the gatekeeper directs them to Murugan's wife, Ammu. As she approaches Ammu's cottage, Rukmani trembles with anticipation.

Ammu, a thin and dirty young woman, comes out of the cottage carrying a baby. She's unfriendly and suspicious, even when Rukmani and Nathan introduce themselves as Murugan's parents. Without preamble, she tells them that Murugan abandoned her two years ago, and she has no idea where he is.

Puli's knowledge and confidence in the city contrasts with Rukmani and Nathan's complete helplessness. However, his jaunty air is complicated by the disease that has already claimed his hands. Puli is much like Rukmani in that he maintains an incredibly optimistic demeanor given the trials he's had to endure.



Even though they were always poor, at home Rukmani and Nathan were rooted in a community where people knew and respected them. One of the worst aspects of city life is being estranged from that community and losing the identity it provides.



Although Birla makes only a brief appearance, she's a character who contravenes traditional women's roles more completely than Rukmani or Kunthi ever do. There are many drawbacks to city life, but increased flexibility in social mores is one positive thing it provides.



The small cabin and air of hospitality reminds Rukmani of her life at home. While their circumstances and occupations are vastly different, the attitudes and values of the rural and urban poor remain very similar.



This moment could potentially be a warm, familial reunification. It's important to remember that Rukmani hasn't seen or heard from her son in years, so meeting him now could be a step towards reversing the painful diaspora of her children.



Ammu's attitude contravenes expectations of loving behavior towards parents. She's a reminder that Murugan has purposefully distanced himself from his parents by choosing his own wife rather than letting them arrange his marriage.



After this blow, Rukmani and Nathan have no idea what to do. They sit down in Ammu's cottage, which is much less tidy and cheerful than that of the servants they met before. Her children are obviously hungry. Ammu speaks with hostility, as if she blames Murugan's parents for his actions; she believes he has left the city, and no one knows where to find him.

Trying to conciliate the young woman, Rukmani asks Ammu about her work and picks up her youngest child. Ammu points out bluntly that he isn't even Rukmani's grandson; saying that "one must live," she implies that she conceived him while working as a prostitute.

As they share a midday meal, Rukmani suggests that there must have been "reasons" for Murugan to run away. Offended, Ammu says that the reasons were "women and gambling." Although she's tempted to retort sharply, Rukmani reminds herself that Ammu is a young and very stressed woman, trying to support children by herself. She apologizes.

Nathan says that he and Rukmani must leave soon and prepare to return to their village; he doesn't reveal that they don't have the money to make this journey. Kindly, he asks how Ammu will manage her many children, but Ammu says coldly that she's used to taking care of herself. Rukmani sees that "misfortune has hardened her," and there's no way to befriend her. After taking a last look at their grandchild, Rukmani and Nathan depart. A servant runs after them, chiding them for using the master's gate instead of the smaller one for servants.

CHAPTER 27

The beggars at the temple recognize Rukmani and Nathan and tease them, asking if they've encountered trouble with their son. The couple stays there for several days, not knowing what to do. Every night, Rukmani fights for a single portion of food to share, as Nathan is too weak and listless to enter the fray. After the meal, they rest in the stone corridors wondering how to escape from the city. Nathan has no way to make a living except through farming, and Rukmani has been a housewife all her life.

One day, Rukmani decides to set up a stall as a scribe in the market. Nathan is skeptical, pointing out that no one will believe a woman can read. However, it's their only hope, so the next day she sets out. For weeks she works in the market, but no matter how loudly she hawks her trade, she only makes enough money to buy food for the next morning.

By abandoning his family, Murugan has seriously betrayed his parents' values. While Nathan is an especially loving husband and father, always prioritizing his children's needs above his own, his son has demonstrated the opposite behavior in his own family.



Again, prostitution proves the only recourse for women who must provide for their families without the help of the man. The novel's frequent references to prostitution argue that society needs to provide more legitimate ways for women to support themselves.



Rukmani's ability to admit her son's faults is truly admirable. Here, she shows a solidarity with women disadvantaged by bad marriages, rather than a blind obedience to male dictates.



Nathan and Rukmani want to establish a familial connection with Ammu, but she rejects this entirely. This both represents the inability of recreating rural norms in urban setting, and the irreversible dissolution of the strong family network that Rukmani imagined her children would preserve.



By this point, Rukmani is both physically and mentally stronger than Nathan. Although she hates urban life, she's not debilitated by it in the same way that Nathan is. While Rukmani is ostensibly still subservient to her husband, it's she who is responsible for making decisions, and she who takes on the dominant role in the relationship.



Although Rukmani has depended on Nathan for sustenance all her life, now she has to provide for him. Even though it's stressful and demanding, the role reversal that urban life demands of the couple helps explore new models of family life.



Rukmani grows increasingly worried about Nathan, who frequently has bouts of fever and rheumatism. One day, as she's returning to the temple, she encounters Puli, who says he's coming for payment. Smiling at the child, she tells him she has no money but brings him to the temple to share their evening meal. Puli eats with difficulty, owing to his lack of fingers, but seems unselfconscious about his disability.

To Rukmani's surprise, after finishing the meal, Puli stretches out next to her and falls asleep. Rukmani knows that Puli is better equipped to navigate the city than she is, but she still feels a maternal responsibility for him.

In the morning, Puli suggests that Rukmani and Nathan work at a stone quarry outside the city, where they can make more money. He leads them to the quarry, which is situated on a bare and craggy hill. Everywhere, people are chipping at the rocks; they work independently, and the quarry owners pay them based on how much they collect. Although he can't help because of his maimed hands, Puli explains what to do, and Nathan and Rukmani work with difficulty all day.

At the end of the day, Puli helps Rukmani gather the stones in a sack and bring them to the overseer for payment. Their work earns them eight annas, four times what Rukmani usually makes in a day. Puli, who has been begging, rejoins them. He says sneakily that he's only garnered one coin, but many rattle in his pockets.

Accompanied by Puli, Rukmani and Nathan work in the quarry every day. They always give their earnings to Puli, since he can safeguard them best. They calculate that they can make enough money to return in forty days. They try to coax Puli into joining them, telling him how peaceful and beautiful the countryside is, but Puli points out that they don't even know how they will survive when they return. Anyway, he knows how to take care of himself in the city.

Nathan tries to explain the country is his home, and he can only be happy there, even if he has to starve. He asks Puli what he will do when they leave, and Puli says he'll return to begging and stealing from the market. He says proudly that he's never been caught in his petty crimes; on the other hand, in a small country village, he "would know neither where to hide nor where to seek."

Even though she's removed from her old role of housewife and mother, Rukmani retains her maternal tendencies, wanting to provide for Puli despite her dire lack of resources. This shows her desire to maintain a family structure, which gives her peace of mind in these bewildering new circumstances.



Throughout their relationship, there's a tendency between Puli's superior street wisdom and his desire to be treated like a child, which he shows here by attaching himself to Rukmani.



This work is extremely hard, especially since Rukmani and Nathan are weak and growing old. Even though they're making some money, this occupation shows that Indian society forces impoverished classes into backbreaking and inefficient labor, without providing any social security net for the elderly and disabled.



Rukmani's dogged efforts contrast with Puli's sly begging. Although the child sometimes seems untrustworthy, he will prove a loyal friend and companion. A nuanced character, he gives complexity and depth to the stereotypical image of a street child in a developing country.



While Rukmani and Nathan feel themselves constitutionally unsuited to urban life, Puli has these same feelings about the country. While the novel is sympathetic towards Rukmani's preference for the countryside, it insists through comparisons like these that rural poverty exposes people to the same dangers and injustices that urban life does.



Puli's language here poignantly contrasts his youth and independence. He's in the unfortunate position of providing for himself at a young age, and does so capably; but by childishy phrasing his precarious lifestyle as a game, he reminds Rukmani how young he really is.



Rukmani has become attached to Puli, and is saddened by the thought of leaving him. She also worries about the progression of his leprosy, which seems inevitable. Eventually it will attack his feet or eyes, and his courageous spirit will be helpless against it. To her, Puli demonstrates the “limit to the achievements of human courage.”

As when misfortune strikes Irawaddy, Rukmani has a hard time accepting the inevitability of Puli's suffering. Her reflections here give some credence to Kenny's earlier assertion that suffering doesn't ennoble anyone, or have any moral value.



CHAPTER 28

As Rukmani and Nathan earn more money, they anticipate their return home more and more. Even Puli shares their excitement. One day, Nathan says he will return directly to the temple after work instead of shopping in the market with Rukmani. He's feeling tired.

For the first time, Rukmani's fortunes are explicitly connected to money instead of to the fruits of the land.



Rukmani buys rice cakes from her usual vendor, and purchases extra sweet cakes as a treat for Puli. Emboldened by the extra spending, they stop in front of a man selling small toy carts. Puli is entranced by the beautifully carved toy, and Rukmani can tell he's longing to own it. She points out sensibly that he has his own money from begging, but can't resist his childish eyes. She buys him a toy and even purchases a second one to bring Sacrabani when she returns home.

Puli's desire for the toy emphasizes his youth, which Rukmani is often tempted to forget because of his independence and street smarts. That she buys him a present signals her acceptance of him into her family, and her optimism about eventually returning home to her own children and grandchild.



When they reach the temple, Rukmani shows Nathan her purchases, both excited and ashamed to have spent more money than usual. However, Nathan looks ill and soon staggers away to vomit. He says he has felt feverish since the morning, and when Rukmani feels his body, it is burning hot. She tells him to lie down and massages his limbs.

Nathan's illness is obviously a result of age and physical stress, but the fact that it coincides with his arrival in the city suggests that urban life causes a kind of psychological malaise and breakdown.



It rains the next day, and Rukmani urges Nathan to stay behind while she goes to the quarry, but he refuses. Because of the rain and mud, the work is especially hard today. Nathan is sick and panting, but he doggedly tells Rukmani he will rest when they reach home. They continue to work in the rain all week, even when the weather is so bad that Puli refuses to come to the quarry.

Work in the quarry might not be harder than work on the farm, but it lacks the dignity and tranquility that farm work inspires. This contrast is one of the reasons that Rukmani elevates rural over urban poverty.



After waiting in line for payment one evening, Rukmani finds that a small crowd has gathered around Nathan, who has fainted on the side of the road. Two men pick him and carry him to the temple, while the women console her and ask how long her husband has been sick. They say she should ask her sons to take care of him, and Rukmani has to admit that her children are all dispersed and unable to help.

The fact that Rukmani relies on strangers to convey her husband and console her emphasizes the dissolution of her family. It's important to note that this tragedy isn't a result of her own behavior but rather the injustices inflicted on her by a society which does not prioritize the needs of its impoverished classes.



CHAPTER 29

Even in her old age, Rukmani remembers the following night clearly. She remembers walking down the wet street to the temple, where the flame that usually burns has been put out by the rain. The men from the quarry place Nathan on the floor, and Rukmani sits down beside him, wiping the mud from his body and placing his head in her lap. Nathan is twitching and muttering, calling out for their absent sons. It's clear that he's not in his right mind.

By midnight, Nathan's body seems to calm, and he stops shivering. Eventually, he opens his eyes and recognizes Rukmani, telling her not to cry because "what has to be, has to be." Rukmani won't accept his acknowledgement of his own death, telling him that he will soon be better.

Rukmani asks how she will go on without Nathan, but he reminds her that she's not alone, because he lives on through their children. He urges her to remember all the happy times they have had together, and asks her to rest with him. Rukmani lays down next to him and lets his breath fall on her face. Eventually he gives a long sigh and quietly dies.

The absence of the temple's usual flame presages bad things to come. Poignantly, Rukmani tries to reproduce the homey routines of cleaning and comforting, even though she's extremely far from home and the journey has probably caused Nathan's collapse.



Although Rukmani often asserts the inevitability of suffering, it's Nathan who is always truly resigned to it. He represents the complete opposite of Kenny's views on the subject.



Although Nathan's views sometimes seem simplistic and less nuanced than his wife's, they allow him to achieve a peaceful death, despite their desperate circumstances, and to comfort Rukmani. During his final moments, he again takes on the role of guide and protector that Rukmani has long filled.



CHAPTER 30

Rukmani is dazed by grief, but she slowly begins to proceed with her life again. The one person who helps her through this time is Puli. Although she doesn't quite remember the arguments she used, eventually she persuades him to accompany her home, where Kenny and Selvam can treat his leprosy.

After a long journey by cart, Rukmani and Puli reach her own village. She is overjoyed to feel the familiar earth under her; the horrific months in the city are already melting away.

From the **hospital** building, still unfinished, Selvam rushes out to embrace her. Soon, Irawaddy and Sacrabani join. Rukmani introduces Puli as her son, explaining that she and Nathan have adopted him.

As always, it's family bonds—whether biological or adopted—that help Rukmani through moments of tragedy. Actively deciding to seek out Kenny's help, she's admitting that not all suffering should be accepted, and validating some of her friend's ideas.



Although the novel is deeply skeptical of the benefits of rural poverty, it still respects and validates Rukmani's deep emotional attachment to the countryside.



Although the novel is permeated by tragedy, it ends on a moment of familial solidarity, reminding the reader that family provides the central joys of Rukmani's life.



Irawaddy takes Puli in her arms, promising him food and a rest. Selvam assures Rukmani that even with his small wages they will manage to survive. He understands that Nathan has died, even though Rukmani has said nothing. She tells him that it was “a gentle passing,” and they walk home in silence.

The family remains materially poor, but it seems like Rukmani’s days of desperate suffering are over. By ending on a note of tranquility, the novel implicitly argues that people should strive to alter their circumstances in order to prevent or alleviate suffering as much as possible, even if the only way they can do so is by maintaining emotional strength through strong family bonds.





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