



## [Nectar in a Sieve](#), by Kamala Markandaya

### **In A Nutshell**

*Nectar in a Sieve* is Kamala Markandaya's first published novel. This narrative focuses on the story of one woman living in poverty in rural India during a time of great change. Though the book meticulously avoids specifics about the time and place of the story, some context clues give us a sense that the work is an exploration of socioeconomic and political issues in the novelist's contemporary India. We see these often controversial issues addressed by the protagonist, Rukmani (who is also called Ruku).

India's political situation isn't explicitly discussed, but there is enough to glean that Markandaya is writing about the changing political and economic situation in her country. She published *Nectar in a Sieve* in 1954, seven years after India gained colonial independence from Britain.

Many traditions in India were eroded by British rule, and the developments brought upon by the industrial revolution lured many young Indians away from their traditional roles to participate in a new economy. Such is the case with the arrival of the tannery in Rukmani's village, and the decision of her sons to leave the land for work of a different nature.

Ruku's literacy also points to reforms in India launched during the colonial period. The British introduced an educational system that allowed many Indians to explore the importance of justice and freedom. Ruku's sons rely less on traditional religious notions of the good of

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suffering, and more on ideas about the importance of political freedom and economic security.

Starvation was a certainty that Markandaya knew firsthand. In 1943 starvation in Bengal of epidemic proportions claimed the lives of over three million people. Markandaya describes hunger in *Nectar in a Sieve* with reference to a starving people, who are sometimes willing to do anything in order to feed themselves. People's attitude towards the new spectrum of economic opportunities is tempered by the cruelty of the natural environment on which they rely.

Tension between Hindus and Muslims are subtly addressed in *Nectar in a Sieve*. This kind of tension between two very different religions and cultures was and continues to be a controversial issue. India's independence also coincided with the creation of Pakistan, a new state largely populated by Muslims who had left India. This departure of Muslims resulted in India being a largely Hindu nation. Rukmani's interactions with the Muslim woman in the novel reveal to our protagonist that many different kinds of lives can be contained in one country. Social roles for women were also changing in post-independence India, and what a woman valued, as well as how she herself should be valued within society, are raised as questions in the novel.

The book also investigates the teachings of Gandhi, leader of India's freedom movement. Markandaya discusses such issues as the importance of freedom and rights alongside the importance of spiritual purity and goodness. All of these religious, cultural, economic, social, and political issues are deftly crafted into this personal narrative. Ultimately, *Nectar in a Sieve* provides infinite doors through which to explore these universal themes in the face of a changing society.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Why does Markandaya avoid talking about any specifics of time and place in the novel? What does she accomplish by avoiding anchoring the novel in practical details? Is the story any more universal for lack of these details?
- 2 In times of utter desperation Rukmani turns to the gods, to her husband, to Kenny, and to others. How dependent is Ruku on other people and outside forces? On the other hand, what indications do we have about her self-reliance?
- 3 Rukmani despairs to learn that her first child is a girl. What does she feel about her own position as a woman? When she refers to her own feelings, how much does her femininity factor into how much agency she has? How does she regard women differently than men?

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