

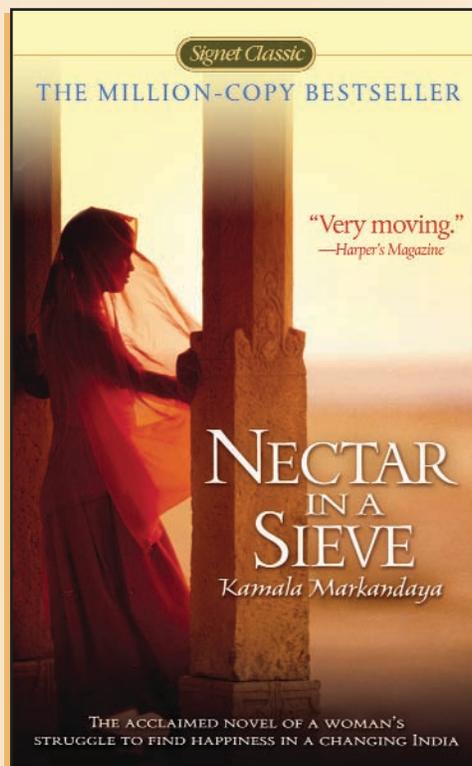


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S

NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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INTRODUCTION

Nectar In A Sieve by Kamala Markandaya is a relatively short novel that introduces Western students to life in rural India and the changes that occurred during that country's British colonization. Although easy to read, the novel is lyrical and moving and can be read on a variety of levels. On the most basic level, it is the story of an arranged but loving marriage and rural peasant life. On another level, it is a tale of indomitable human spirit that overcomes poverty and unending misfortune. Finally, it is a novel about the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning industrial capitalistic society. The novel touches on several important social phenomena: the importance of traditional cultural practices, people's reluctance to change, and the impact of economic change.

Nectar In A Sieve was first published in 1954, a few years after India gained political independence from Britain. Particularly appropriate in English or social studies classes, students can examine the novel's strong character development and cultural significance. For English classes, the novel provides opportunity for vocabulary study, examination of imagery and symbolism, and oral and written response to its themes: the indomitable human spirit, the nature of love, and human responses to suffering. The novel also can be examined as a tragedy or can be compared to novels with similar themes from a variety of cultures. In social studies, students can study the novel in units on India, the British Empire, the role of women in agricultural societies, evolving economies, the effects of poverty, and Hinduism. They also can examine the themes of conflicts between cultures and the benefits and problems of change.

The novel poses several problems for young readers that teachers can help them overcome. Although short, it is monotonous in parts. There are gaps in the episodes with some incidents not fully explained by Markandaya.

This teacher's guide attempts to fill these gaps by explaining the various cultural practices and providing background information necessary for a full understanding of the story. It is divided into several sections: Biographical Sketch of the Author; Synopsis; Main Characters; Background Information about India: Family Life, Religion, Birth, Marriage, Dress, Food, Education, Economy, and Communication; and Teaching Ideas: Prereading Activities, During Reading Activities, After Reading Activities, and Bibliography. Each of the activity sections will list activities for English and social studies. Activities suggested will be appropriate for students at a variety of ability and maturity levels. Those for more capable students will be starred (*).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

Kamala Purnaiya Markandaya was a twentieth century novelist from the south of India. In her early years she traveled widely in India and Europe. She was a journalist in India before migrating to London, England in 1948.

While in England she married an Englishman. She published her first novel, *Nectar In A Sieve*, in 1954. Some of her other works include: *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), and *Shalimar* (1983). Her works, *Nectar In A Sieve* in particular, received high commendation.

OVERVIEW

Nectar In A Sieve is the sad story of a large poverty-stricken Hindu family in a remote rural village in southern India. Despite valiant efforts, the family failed to extricate itself from abject poverty caused by hardships of nature and economics. This poverty forced the only daughter into prostitution and caused three sons to leave the village to seek employment. With very little to eat, it was a miracle the family remained alive. In spite of their hardships, the family exhibited love, contentment, and hope that their situation would improve, but this hope never became a reality.

Rukmani (Ruku) married Nathan and bore a daughter, Ira, and six sons, four of them in quick succession following a long period of infertility after Ira's birth. As the family grew in size, their resources diminished and their problems increased. Ira eventually returned to live with her parents after her childless marriage ended. She subsequently had an illegitimate son, Sacrabani. The two eldest sons of Rukmani and Nathan migrated to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) after losing their jobs at the tannery for instigating a strike; the third son went to the city to take up employment; the fourth was killed when he was found searching for food in the vicinity of the tannery; the fifth became apprenticed to a white doctor; the last died as a child.

With very little substance to begin with, the family became dependent on a small tract of land they rented from a heartless, absentee landlord. The sons did not want to remain on the land as Nathan had. Although Nathan and Rukmani expected

them to stay, they saw no hope of improving their situation. The family's home was a mudwalled structure with thatched roof and earthen floor. They planted rice and vegetables, crops were destroyed by drought and monsoon, they were forced to sell most of their possessions and live extremely frugally. For brief periods, they enjoyed some degree of prosperity. When the family was small, the crop good, and the boys worked in the tannery the family ate well, had crops to sell, and were able to store some of their rice. Kenny, the white doctor, whose ambition was to build a hospital with the foreign aid he collected, became a close family friend and helped them with money, food, and medicine. Rice cultivation, being very labor-intensive, took a toll on Nathan's health, especially since sons disappointedly but understandably did not help much.

The construction of the tannery in the village provided employment for some but increased the price of consumer goods and succeeded in squeezing many of the peasants off the land. When Nathan's land was sold to the tannery, he and Rukmani went to the city in search of their third son with whom they had never corresponded. There they found an equally cruel environment. Their few belongings and money were stolen as they sought refuge in the temple, and they were forced to survive mainly on handouts of food given as offerings to the gods and goddesses. In addition, they failed to find their son who had left his wife and male child. Nathan and Ruku yearned for the land from which they had been evicted. When they finally saved enough money to return to their village from the back-breaking work they acquired at a stone quarry with the help of Puli, a destitute but cunning street boy, Nathan died. Ruku, however, returned to the village with Puli, who she introduced as her adopted son and for whom she expected medical attention from Kenny to rid him of the disease which had eaten away his fingers. Apparently, the cycle of poverty would continue for the family who now had no land and relied on Kenny and their apprenticed son Selvam for support.

MAIN CHARACTERS

1. Rukmani (Ruku) is the hard-working and devoted wife of Nathan. She is willing to accept challenges in order to achieve her aims. Like her husband, she hopes their situation will improve. She seems to have an aversion to change.
 2. Nathan is hard working and supportive of his wife. He, too, hopes for better times and is disappointed that his sons do not want to work on the land. He dies in the city after they lose their land and he and Ruku go to look for their son, Murugan.
 3. Kennington (Kenny) is a benevolent village doctor, probably British, who discharges his functions diligently. His ambition is to build a hospital in the village with foreign aid, and he devotes much time and energy to this project. He adapts well to Indian culture, speaks the language, and eats Indian food. However, he cannot understand the peasants' unwillingness to accept change.
 4. Old Granny, sells fruits and vegetables in the street market and serves as a matchmaker. Her moment of glory is when she successfully finds an acceptable groom for Ira, but this glory dissipates when Ira is separated from her husband.
 5. Kunthi is an attractive woman of the village who becomes a prostitute after the opening of the tannery. An opportunist, she successfully blackmails both Nathan and Ruku to obtain food from them during the drought.
 6. Kali is a village woman who talks a great deal about seemingly unimportant things.
 7. Biswas is the avaricious money-leader who capitalizes on opportunities to extort gains from the villagers.
 8. Puli, a cunning, young, orphaned boy, learns to survive on the city streets. He helps Ruku and Nathan find work and survive in the city and eventually becomes a member of the family.
 9. The children of Ruku and Nathan:
 - a. Irawaddy (Ira), the only daughter, is married at age fourteen but separated from her husband because she cannot bear him a child. She returns to live with her parents. Poverty forces her into prostitution. She eventually has an illegitimate albino son, Sacrabani.
 - b. Arjun and Thambi do not want to work the land with their father. Briefly, they are employed at the tannery and are able to make a financial contribution to the home. After they lose their jobs, they emigrate to Ceylon to work and have no communication with the family.
 - c. Murugan leaves the village to become a servant in the city. He marries and fathers a son but deserts his family to seek employment elsewhere. He fails to keep in touch with his wife or parents.
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- d. Raja becomes frail because of malnutrition and is beaten to death by the watchmen when he is found rummaging for food in the vicinity of the tannery. His parents have no recourse and are persuaded by the watchmen to admit that they were not responsible for his death.
- e. Selvam builds on what his mother taught him and thus becomes the most educated person in the family. He is apprenticed to Kenny and looks forward to the completion of the hospital.
- f. Kuti becomes closely attached to Ira but in spite of her efforts to buy him food with money she earns from prostitution, he suffers and dies from malnutrition.

BACKGROUND AND INFORMATION

FAMILY LIFE

An extended family structure was common among Indian families. Often, as many as three generations lived in the same house. This resulted in problems such as lack of privacy, inadequate resources, family disputes, and dependence on diminishing food supplies produced on ever less fertile land.

Although there were not enough resources available to the family, its members lived with some contentment and peace. Rukmani (Ruku) and Nathan were devoted to each other until Nathan's death. They encouraged and supported each other. Nathan was a compassionate and loving husband. Ruku adjusted quickly to the role of a homemaker. The belief among Indians was that a woman's place was in the home, bringing up children, preparing meals, keeping house, and maintaining religious and cultural traditions. In addition, Ruku planted a vegetable garden and on occasions helped Nathan in the rice field.

Ruku and Nathan worked hard to achieve their goals. They attempted to put aside food and money to purchase their land and provide for their family. When that failed and they were forced off the land, they worked at backbreaking labor to earn money to return home from the city. A characteristic of Indians is their frugality, as evidenced in Ruku's astute handling of the family's meager finances. To some extent, the couple was broad minded, but also incredibly naive and unworldly. They trusted Puli, shared their food with him, and in the end, Ruku took him home, aware that there was not enough food for her own family.

In an extended family, strong family ties often discourage members from leaving the family unit. Nathan and Ruku, for example, tried to dissuade their sons Arjun and Thambi from going to Ceylon, even though their land and meager resources could not support them. As with most Indian peasant fathers, Nathan wanted his sons to stay and work the land, but they were reluctant to do so because they recognized that the family's situation would not improve and their opportunities were better elsewhere. This provides an example of how changing, industrialized economies alter extended family structures that tend to exist in agricultural, peasant economies. Selvam had similar thoughts about the land, but when he decided to work for Kenny his parents did not stop him because he was not going to leave the family's home as his elder brothers had done. In many ways, villagers were also an extension of the family helping one another during births, deaths, marriages, and drought or monsoon.

Ruku and Nathan were hopeful that their situation would improve. Nathan aspired to buy a house like that of his father-in-law and abandoned certain traditional Hindu practices such as revering the cobra. Ruku was proud. Despite the sufferings they experienced in the city, for example, she refused to beg. Her resilience and great reluctance to deal with change sometimes irked Kenny who saw her acceptance of fate as a weakness. Ruku, like many peasants, was worried that the construction of the tannery would destroy their traditional way of life; she failed to see its potential economic benefits. To a large extent, she was right. However, she, too, unlike many peasants, accepted some modern ways exhibited in her faith in medicine to cure hers and Ira's infertility. However, this acceptance of modern medicine was her attempt to preserve the tradition and culture of Indian peasant life. Without the help provided by Kenny, she knew that neither she nor Ira would bear sons, and without sons their traditional way of life would be destroyed.

RELIGION

Hinduism is the dominant religion in India. Islam and Christianity also are practiced. When India was partitioned in 1947, most of the Muslims moved to what is now Pakistan. Some, however, remained in India.

The practice of Hinduism is filled with ceremonies and rituals. On different occasions Hindus pray to the various gods

and goddesses. The family did seek God's blessings of the paddy seeds before they were planted, and they offered thanks to God for a good crop. This was a common practice. Very often Hindus conclude their prayers by offering gifts (food, flowers, money, etc.) to the gods and goddesses. The use of mango leaves during Hindu ceremonies remains common today.

Hindus observe many festivals during the year. One such festival is Deepavali or Festival of Lights. This festival is observed to commemorate the return of Lord Rama to his father's kingdom at the conclusion of his period of exile. The people welcomed him with lights because it was a dark night when he returned. Despite their poverty, the family managed to celebrate Deepavali.

As a general practice, Hindus cremate the dead, and the cremation ceremony is male-dominated. In some parts of the world where Hinduism is practiced, Hindu women do not go to the cemetery for a burial, but do attend cremation ceremonies.

The village portrayed in this novel must have been extremely isolated since Ruku was amazed by the Muslim women whose husbands worked at the tannery. Muslims were common in India at the time. One reason why the Muslims rather than Hindus worked in the tannery might have been that they have no aversion to handling cow hides. To Hindus, the cow is sacred, revered, and sometimes worshipped. Hindus generally do not eat beef and do not handle a cow after it has been slaughtered. Nathan's two sons violated this religious practice by working in the tannery. In addition, they probably violated the caste system since each caste is associated with a certain occupation, and they were born into the agricultural caste.

BIRTH

The birth of a child in India is a joyous event, particularly when the child is male. A male child is an asset to a family, growing up to work the land. In addition, the birth of a male child, especially a first born, is perceived by many Indians as a reflection of the father's masculinity. A female child is a liability to a family not only because she will not work the land, but also because a dowry must be given at her marriage. Ruku, for example, saved for Ira's dowry from her birth. In fact, a handsome dowry is a major consideration for a prospective groom and his parents.

Married couples expect to have and are expected to have children. Couples pray for children. Lack of children causes more than disappointment; childless couples are not respected. When Ruku gave birth to Ira and then did not bear a child for several years, Nathan began to worry. He made it clear that he wanted sons to work the land. Ruku sought, albeit secretly, Kenny's medical help. When their first son, Arjun was born, Nathan and his father-in-law celebrated his birth.

A childless union could have serious social consequences for a family. Ira's husband, for example, left her because she did not bear a child. Again, Ruku sought Kenny's help and eventually Ira gave birth to a son. Unfortunately, this birth was an unwelcome one; the child was illegitimate, a result of her prostitution. In addition, he was an albino. An illegitimate child in an Indian family was a stigma and source of gossip and ridicule. The child suffered socially and psychologically and was shunned by his peers.

In remote villages in India, an experienced and knowledgeable person often performs the role of a midwife and assists in the birth of the child. The only mention of a midwife in the novel is when one of the other villagers gives birth, but it is likely that one would have been present when Ruku bore her children. It is also likely that other female villagers would be present at a child's birth as they were in Ruku's case. However, only Ruku was present when Ira gave birth. It is likely that the illegitimacy of the child kept the family from following traditional customs.

A birth in a Hindu family is usually followed by various rituals. One such ritual is the naming ceremony. Following the birth of Ruku's first son, many villagers attended this ceremony at the family's home. Another, not mentioned in the novel, is a ceremony at which the child's head is shaved.

MARRIAGE

Hindu weddings are replete with ceremonies and rituals. Much preparation is required before the day of the wedding, and celebrations can last for several days. On the day of the wedding, people are gaily dressed and there is much merriment, food, drinks, and music. The extent of the celebration depends on the wealth and status of the parents. Celebrations could be unnecessarily extravagant and leave people penniless. The couple, the groom in particular, and parents are usually presented with gifts. Ira's wedding was more modest than many. The music was provided only by drums, for example. Weddings, such as Ira's, are community affairs among Hindus in small villages. People help each other prepare for the occasion.

A Marriage is initiated by identifying a suitable groom. This is usually done by a matchmaker or go-between. Arranged marriages were common in India at the time of the novel. In Ira's case, Granny served as the match-maker. The identification of a

good groom depended on the size of the bride's dowry, the beauty of the bride, and any special skills she possessed. The dowry was most important to the groom and his parents. Since Ira's parents (and earlier, Ruku's) did not have much to offer, they could not expect a particularly good groom. Ruku speaks of this disappointment in terms of her match with Nathan. However, everyone, particularly Granny, was pleased with Ira's match, which probably enhanced Granny's reputation as a match-maker and increased her chance of obtaining another assignment. Understandably, when the marriage failed because of Ira's suspected infertility, Granny blamed herself although Ruku tried to convince her otherwise.

In arranged marriages, the bride usually has very little say. This was true for both Ruku and Ira. Once the two families agreed on the match, the date of the wedding was fixed by the priest after consulting the religious calendar. There are certain seasons in the year when it is considered best to marry; marrying outside the season is not advisable. A wedding also might be preceded by an engagement celebration and other ceremonies.

At the time this novel was written, child marriage was a common practice in India. Ira was married at fourteen and moved to her in-laws' residence to become part of their extended family. Ruku was about twelve when she married Nathan. In some cases the ages of children were less than thirteen years, but these brides did not immediately move in with the groom or his family. Today, child marriage is prohibited by law, but the law is difficult to enforce because child marriage is strongly ensconced in tradition.

DRESS

The family's extreme poverty did not permit them to dress elaborately. They wore functional everyday clothing and possessed a few items for special occasions. The females wore a sari, which is a five-yard piece of fabric skillfully wrapped and tied around the body. It is usually worn over a bodice, and a part of it can be thrown over the head. The males wore a dhoti, also a five-yard piece of fabric wrapped around the loins and legs and skillfully tucked in at the back to keep it in place. A shirt and sometimes a turban were also worn by the men. The influence of the British in India at the time of the novel caused some people to dress in shirts and trousers. In fact, the female doctor Nathan and Ruku met in the city work trousers. They were surprised by her dress because traditional Indian women considered wearing them immoral.

Muslim women wore veils that they removed only occasionally. This is still a common practice among traditional Muslim women, however it is not unusual for Muslim women who have come under Western influence to wear Western dress. For example, Muslim women who live in Caribbean countries do not wear veils.

Kenny and the white officials of the tannery work Western-style dress. The laborers who worked in the tannery wore loincloths, turbans, and sometimes a shirt they removed during the day. However, the Muslim overseer, who looked and spoke like the workers, wore the shirt, trousers, and hat of the white men. Their clothes were symbolic of their status.

In remote villages, such as the one in the novel, there were no modern laundry facilities or piped water. Women washed their family's clothes in the river and spread them on the grass to dry. However, like Ruku, rural women often used detergent.

FOOD

The food the family ate consisted mainly of rice, dhal (Lentils), vegetables, occasionally fish, and on rare occasions a little milk or butter. At times they might have sugar-cane and fruit. In times of plenty, Granny sold guavas and Ruku sold pumpkins. With the exception of some brief periods of prosperity when the family ate relatively well, they survived on the bare minimum, sometimes going without food. Kenny occasionally helped them. In the city there was a wider variety of food. Pancakes, for example, were available from street vendors. Flour and potatoes may have been available in the village, but the family in the novel, like most peasant families, could rarely afford to buy what they did not grow. Their diet was commensurate with the level of poverty at which they lived. Eating from plantain leaves (a plantain is a banana-like vegetable eaten as a starch), especially at religious ceremonies, was a common practice among Hindus. Other kinds of leaves also were used depending on what was available in the geographic area. For example, in Guyana, Hindus use a broad dish-shaped leaf which grows in canals.

EDUCATION

The novel does not mention schools nor does it mention anyone attending school. However, Ruku must have had some rudimentary education because she read and write. Her father, and later her husband, encouraged her to practice her reading and writing skills. She taught some of her sons the little she knew. Ironically, their ability to read and write may

have encouraged them to leave the family and seek work off the land. Selvam, for example, developed his skills, and his ability might have induced Kenny to hire as an apprentice in the hospital. Arjun and Thambi might have lost their jobs at the tannery because their ability to read and write gave them more independence. However, it is also their ability to read and write that made it possible for them to leave the family to seek jobs in Ceylon.

Ruku used her skills briefly in the city to earn a pittance as a reader and writer. Her limited success may have been because the city dwellers were not convinced that a rural person, particularly a woman, could read and write. Even Nathan, who was usually supportive of her, was skeptical about this venture. Education for rural women was not a priority because of their place in the home. This was the belief of Ruku's mother, Kali, and many others at the time during which the novel is set. Kenny, on the other hand, is appalled by their lack of education and, as he sees it, their ignorance and dependence on the land.

The novel makes no mention of newspapers or radios. Some shopkeepers in the village may have had access to them. Somehow, however, the villagers, particularly the males, kept abreast of current events. Nathan, for example, had foreknowledge of the tannery and the availability of employment in Ceylon. Typically, in small Indian villages, the few people who can read did so for others who could not. Frequently this occurred at the village shop where villagers meet to gossip.

ECONOMY

The economy in India at the time of the novel was basically agricultural. Villagers cultivated rice and vegetables on rented land to which they became strongly attached but did not own. People eked out a meager living from the land, growing most of what they ate and having only a small amount to trade, sell, and use to pay the land rent. The absentee landlord showed little concern for the tenant farmers and their families who had no where else to go when he sold the land to the tannery. The villagers had no recourse.

Rice cultivation was labor-intensive since it did not make much sense to use mechanization, even if it was available (and this was unlikely), on small plots of land. Monsoon or drought could result in the destruction of the crop and in economic hardships. The landlord still expected the tenant farmers to pay rent even when there was no rice crop and the prices for consumer goods increased. Therefore, when the land produced no food for the family, they also had no money or crops to pay rent and no vegetables or rice to trade or sell. Consequently, they had no money to buy food from the village shopkeepers and no money to pay their rent. Food and seed prices increased because shopkeepers had limited supplies and were selling little. Because they could not pay their rent, they lost their land and source of livelihood. Although it appears thoughtless and cruel, it was not surprising that the landlords decided to sell land on which profits were so inconsistent and meager.

The construction of the tannery transformed the village economically and socially. Some people were pessimistic about the tannery. They recognized that it was driving people from the land and, as Ruku believed, destroying the traditional village life. The cobbler, too, felt threatened. Others were more optimistic. Kunthi, for example, saw it as an opportunity for people to acquire employment, and this actually happened. She herself capitalized on the situation by becoming a prostitute. Her new life eventually destroyed her like it did many villagers. Because the employees at the tannery could spend more than what the villagers could spend, the price of goods increased. This was beneficial for those who sold their produce, but detrimental for those who had to purchase. Like wise, small village shopkeepers were forced out of business by the larger shopkeepers who arrived in the village after tannery opened.

The village, in a sense, had been self-contained with a doctor (Kenny), a money lender (Biswas), a general merchant (Hanuman), a shopkeeper (Perimal), a cobbler (Kannan), and a midwife. Perhaps there were others. This was typical of an Indian village of the time, and the tannery changed its self-sufficiency and traditional life style.

COMMUNICATION

The villagers usually traveled on foot even for long distances. On Deepavali night, for example, the villagers walked to town. No mention was made in the novel of even a bicycle in the village. The people also traveled by bullock cart, a cart pulled by bulls. In the city, however there were cars, bicycles, and horse-drawn carriages. One can assume there were buses, too. There was mention of a railway to the city, but it was not used by Ruku and Nathan because they did not have enough money for fare. It is likely that motor vehicles did not go to the village because there were no roads. Although no direct reference was made to a postal service, there probably was a rudimentary one; possibly mail was delivered by drivers of bullock carts. When the couple met their daughter-in-law (Murugan's wife) in the city, Ruku mentioned that she should have written before the visit. In such a remote village, all the mail was probably delivered to one person who then distributed it to the addressees. Personal communication was difficult and relatively rare; no attempt was made by any of the family members to communicate with each other even though most of them were literate.

BEFORE READING

ENGLISH

- Vocabulary: Although the Indian words are kept to a minimum, students should be introduced to the glossary at the end of the novel and also be shown how to use context clues. For example:
 - “ Deepavali, the Festival of Lights...”
 - “those who could afford it wore silver golsu clasped round their ankles...”
- Other important words and concepts may need to be introduced to students unfamiliar with them:
 - dowry (items of importance and wealth given by parents to daughter and husband at marriage)
 - arranged marriage
 - midwife—person who helps with birth of children
 - importance of male children in agricultural economies
 - peasants—work land they do not own; pay rent in money or crops to land owner
 - headman—head of the villagers
 - collector—person who collects rent or crops from peasants for landowner
 - dung—cow droppings, collected and used for manure, fuel, and building
 - sari—cotton or silk fabric draped over the shoulder and worn around the body by Hindu women
 - bullock cart—carts pulled by young or castrated bulls
 - thatch—natural roofing material, such as straw
 - paddy fields—rice field
 - granary—storehouse of grain
 - caste—Hindu society is divided into four hereditary social divisions which dictate, among other things, the jobs that can be held:
 - priests—Brahmans
 - warriors and rulers—Kshatriyas (or Rajanyas)
 - producers—farmers, merchants, craftspeople the Vaishyas
 - serfs and laborers—Shudras (or Dasyus)
 - bier—a frame or stand on which a coffin is placed usually before a cremation
 - fallow—barren, land left unplowed and unseeded
 - albino—a person who lacks usual pigmentation, usually has white milky skin, very light hair, and pink eyes
- Have students brainstorm how a rural, agricultural society differs from an industrial society. Be sure they include the roles of men and women in those societies.
- Examine the title of the novel, *Nectar In A Sieve*, and the Coleridge quotation on the introductory page. Have students brainstorm the meaning of the quotation and ask students what they think the novel will be about.*
- Read aloud to students the first chapter of the novel. Discuss with the students the two time periods in the first chapter. What do the first two pages tell us of what will happen to Rukmani? Who is telling the story? When is it being told?
- After you have established with the class that the novel is written in the first person, have them discuss in small groups the limitation of using first person. Why might an author choose to use first rather than third person?
- On chart paper record the names of the major characters and their relationships (see Main Characters).

- Have students select one of the main characters (Ruku, Nathan, Kenny, or Ira) to follow his/her development throughout the novel. Have them underline or copy in their response journals key quotations that help in understanding the character's beliefs and motives.
- Have the students discuss other books they have read that examine peasant cultures and/or arranged marriages. They might list the titles of these works on chart paper so that other students can refer to them or they can be used in the thematic unit.*

SOCIAL STUDIES

- It might be useful to include some of the activities suggested for English classes, particularly the vocabulary and character studies, in social studies as well. Likewise, several of the activities suggested for social studies will also be useful in English classes.
- Copy the Background Information from the teacher's guide. Have the students read and discuss it. Or, place the students in small groups and have each group read and present one section of the background information to the class.
- Find India on a map or globe. Have students examine its size, population and important products. Also examine its topography. Students might produce their own maps of India to keep in their journals.
- Find Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on a map or globe. Have students find out when and why the name of the country changed. Students might also examine the country's currency, exchange rates, and language. They can produce a map of Sri Lanka for their journals.
- Have students research Hindus and Muslims (see Background Information). They can discuss with the class or small groups conflicts that might exist between the Hindu and Muslim cultures in India.*
- Have students in small groups select one of the following short research topics about India to explore in the library and present to the class: family life today, family life in the early 20th century, rural life today, rural life in the early 20th century, industrial development, Indian marriage customs, the British colonization of India, climate and agriculture, Hindu art and architecture, disease prevalent in the early 20th century, and the Irawaddy River.*
- Show a film or video about India today or during British colonization (e.g.: "Queenie" or "Gandhi").
- Play traditional music of India while students look through books or see slides on the art and architecture of India. If possible, have students sip some Darjeeling tea while they are doing this.
- If possible, arrange for guest speakers, perhaps students in your school or their parents, to discuss contemporary India with the class.

WHILE READING

ENGLISH

Once students have an introduction to the novel and back ground information about India, they will be able to begin responding to it orally and in writing at increasingly higher levels. To encourage increasingly complex thinking, quotations have been take from the novel for students to respond to in written response journals or orally in small groups. Teachers should encourage responses that help students develop analytical and evaluative thinking and writing skills.

LEVELS OF STUDENT RESPONSE

- A. Engaging. The articulation of the reader's emotional reaction or level of involvement, from "The is BOR-ING," to " I couldn't put it down," are called engaging. The first is called lack of engagement; the second engagement. However, the reader's articulation of her or his level of engagement with the text may be the first step in responding to it. For example, tell students, "Write about how the chapter makes you feel."
- B. Describing. Restating or reproducing information that is provided in the text requires selecting some important aspect of the text and is often the next level of response. For example, tell students, "Select any quotation from this chapter, write about what you think it means."

- C. **Conceiving.** Making statements about meaning or inferring from important aspects of the text. For example, tell students, "Write about this quotation, discuss not only what it means to you, but what it means to the narrator or to any other character in the novel."
- D. **Explaining.** Explaining why the characters do what they do: examining their motivation. For example, ask students to explain why Rukmani does not tell Nathan she has gone to Kenny for help with her infertility, or why the two sons went to Ceylon.
- E. **Connecting.** The reader connects her or his own experiences with the text. As in all responding to text, connecting is a recurrent movement between the text and one's experiences, knowledge, and attitudes. The reader may first recall a similar experience, next elaborate on that experience, next apply the experience to the text, later use the text to reflect on her or his own experience, and finally, interpret the text and the experience. For example, ask the students to write about a time when they nearly gave up hope. Next they might write about what kept them from giving up hope. Finally, they might put themselves in Rukmani's or Nathan's place: Why do they maintain hope throughout the novel? How do they maintain hope during the drought? When their land is lost? When they are unable to find Murugan?*
- F. **Interpreting.** The reader uses all the reactions above to interpret an overall theme or meaning of the text. For example, ask questions such as: "Why did the author write this novel? Why did she utilize first person narration? How would it be different if Kenny told the story? How does the first person narration help develop the themes?*"
- G. **Judging.** The reader makes judgments about the text: the truth of the text, the importance of the text, the quality of the text, etc. For example, ask students questions such as: "Is this an important novel? A reviewer, shortly after it was published, called it 'minor' (New York Herald Tribune Book Review, May 15, 1955). Do you agree? Is it still a minor novel? Any other reason, other than its relative lack of importance, that it might be referred to as minor? Can you think about the novel in terms of music?*"

QUOTATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE

"Work without hope draws Nectar In A Sieve,/ And hope without an object cannot live."—Coleridge*

"What for you,' my mother would say, taking my face in her hands, 'my last-born, my baby? Four dowries is too much for a man to bear."

"Sometimes now I can see quite clearly: The veil is rent and for a few seconds I see blue skies and tender trees, then it closes on me again."*

"While 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?"

"Was the cobra surprised into stillness that a human should dare to touch it?*"

"It is so easy to be comforting when your own wishes have come true."

"We called our daughter Irawaddy, after one of the great rivers of Asia, for of all things water was most precious to us."

"I have no sons,' I said at last, heavily, 'Only one child, a girl.'"

"I have not lied to him, there has just been this silence."*

"Change I had known before...but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came."

"...the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye."

"They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter."

" I have seen your women forever making dung cakes and burning them and smearing their huts. Yet I though you would know better, who live by the land yet think of taking from it without giving."*

"I kept Ira as long as I could but when she was past fourteen her marriage could be delayed no longer."

"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 will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat."

"At dusk the drums of calamity began; their grave, throbbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throughout the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the mighty impotence of our human endeavor."

"What use to talk of 'exchange' and so forth? Their life is theirs and yours is yours; neither change nor exchange is possible."*

"It seemed it was going to be neither the one thing nor the other, neither land nor letters, which was to claim him."*

"If it were your land, or mine...I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return?"

"I felt qualms about wasting money on such quickly spent pleasures; but their rapturous faces overcame my misgivings."

"Looking back now, I wonder how it came to pass that not until that fateful day did we realize the trouble that had been brewing."

"You brood too much...and think only of your trials, not the joys that are still with us. Look at our land-is it not beautiful?"

"We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need."

"As soon as the rains were over, and the cracks in the earth had healed, and the land was moist and ready, we took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing."

"Of her former beauty not a vestige remained. Well, I thought. All women come to it sooner or later: she has come off perhaps worse than most."*

"Silence fell like a shroud. I listened to it locked in my own brooding bitterness."*

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

"Just a matter of colouring...or lack of it. It is only a question of getting used to. Who is to say this colour is right and that is not?"

"He does not expect us to leave at once. He has given us two weeks' time in which to go, which is lenient."

"To those who live by the land there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know; that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve."

"I sensed her troubled uneasy mind moving from doubt to doubt. No words, the meaning clearer than if there had been."*

"Each night was a struggle, more fierce now that we were daily engaged in it."

"More peaceful, with green fields and open air...and when the paddy is ripe-ah, such a sight as you have never seen."

"And what would I do there... in these green fields of yours I know nothing about!"

"There is a limit to the achievements of human courage.*"

"In fancy I was already home."

"The memories of that night are hard and bright within me like a diamond, and fires that flash from it have strange powers."

"It was a gentle passing...I will tell you later."

ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH

- The author uses a flashback technique. The novel begins with Rukmani as an old woman remembering her life. Ask students: Why might the author have used this technique? How would the novel have been different if she had begun the story with Rukmani as a child? Would first person narration be appropriate if the novel had begun with Rukmani as a child?

- Review the definition of tragedy: A serious work with an unhappy ending brought about by the characters or central characters impelled by fate or moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressure. Students should be asked to identify tragedies they have previously read. These can be listed on chart paper and kept for comparative purposes. Ask students to read the novel with this definition in mind.*
- Have students chart the fortunes of the family. They might measure them in terms of the births of the children, food supplies, money saved, and success or failure of crops.
- Rukmani is literate. This was unusual for an Indian peasant, particularly a woman. Students can keep a diary in Rukmani's voice or write letters in her voice to other characters, particularly her children who leave home.
- Rukmani teaches her children to read and write. Discuss: Why do the children never write to their parents? Why does Rukmani not write to her children? Students can select one of the children and write letters in his/her voice to their siblings or parents.
- After students have selected a major character to study, have them place this character in a variety of different situations and write or role play how the character responds: the collector comes to collect the rent which they do not have; it is an important Hindu festival day; it is the wedding day of one of the girls of the village; it is the character's wedding day; the parents have nothing for your dowry. Students should attempt to be faithful to the culture and traditions as expressed in the novel.
- In small groups, students can select one of the themes of the novel: the indomitable human spirit, the nature of love, and human responses to suffering. They can select quotations from the novel that help develop the theme.* n Have students find, read, and discuss the Coleridge's entire *Work Without Hope*, 1828.*
- Many interesting questions are raised in the novel: Are the peasants ignorant fools as Kenny suggests? Can silence be a lie? Who is evil? Who is good? Should the pace of change ever be slowed? Students can write about these questions, discuss them, and debate them.*
- If your library has indexes with book reviews, have students find, read, and respond to reviews of the novel.*
- Have students research the meaning of their names. If there is no meaning, students can ask their parents why their name was chosen. They can compare the meanings of their names and reasons why they were chosen to why Rukmani and Nathan selected the name Irawaddy.
- Throughout the novel symbols and images give clues to what will happen to the family. Have students brainstorm the possible symbolic meanings of: Irawaddy, lighting striking the palm tree, drums of calamity, clothing worn by white men, the coming of the tannery.*
- The concept of hope is central to this novel. How do Rukmani and Nathan show their hope? What keeps them hopeful? Do one or the other ever lose hope? Students can write about hope from their experience and perspective.
- Have students write from Puli's perspective. Students should attempt to be faithful to the culture and traditions portrayed in the novel. What does Puli find when he goes to the country with Rukmani? Is he happy there or would he rather return to the city? What occurs the first time Rukmani takes Puli to see Kenny?*
- Have students write from the perspective of Ira, Selvam, Sacrabani, or Kenny. How does he/she feel when Rukmani returns home? What does he/she think of Puli? How does he/she respond to Nathan's death?*
- Suggest that students write or compose and perform a poem or song about hope and what happens to it when tragedy occurs and goals are thwarted.

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Money, or lack of it, is very important to the family. Students can look at numerous examples: the money lender, traders, the family's savings, work in the tannery to make money, the collector, bribery, the discussion of compensation after the death of Raja, prostitution to make money, selling the land, the family's possessions, buying in the market. Students can examine how Nathan and Ruku look at money differently than the children and how the white colonists view money differently from the peasants. n Have students examine how economies change when industrialization occurs in rural areas. what typically happens to the peasants? What happens to the land held by the landlords? what happens to the small shopkeepers and money lenders in the villages? Who benefits? Who is hurt?
- Throughout the novel Kenny's views of the peasants and Rukmani's views of Kenny and other white men set up an

interesting debate. Have students chart the character's thoughts and discussions and prepare to debate the issues.*

- Chart how the coming of the tannery affects the family's life. How do the various characters/groups of villagers react to the coming of the tannery? Why?
- One of the ironies of peasant life, as portrayed in the novel, is that sons are required to maintain the family's subsistence. However, more children mean more mouths to feed. Why are sons so important? What keeps the sons in the novel from working the fields? How does this affect the family? If the sons had worked the field, would the family have been better off? What effect does having more children have on the family? What other cultures place this much emphasis on having sons?*
- Examine the food eaten by the family throughout the novel. How does it change as their fortunes change?
- Rukmani suggests that when the tannery comes the pace of change increases. Have the students examine other times in history when the pace of change significantly increased (e.g.: industrial revolution, technological revolution). Discuss how the increases pace of change affects the family. Research how families changed during the industrial revolution. Interview adults to see how technology is affecting their lives.*
- Weddings, births, and funerals are important in the family's life. Examine the weddings, births, and funerals in the novel. Research and report on Hindu wedding, birth, and funeral custom.
- Rukmani is literate, and she teaches her children to read and write. Have the students discuss or write about how their ability to read and write affected their lives. Was their skill beneficial? Was the children's skill beneficial to Rukmani and Nathan? Is education always a good thing? Why? Why not? When and to whom has education been denied? What were the results of denying people the opportunity to read and write? (You may want to read to the students two sections from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave; Written by Himself* where he discusses how he learned how to read and write despite being forbidden to do so [pp. 49-50; 52-55]. Compare his experiences and beliefs to what would have happened to Ruku's and Nathan's children if they had not been taught to read and write.)*
- The two parts of the novel can be examined in terms of rural and urban life. Divide the class into equal numbers of small groups. Have half the class look at rural life and half at urban life in India. Suggest that students compare and contrast their findings to the lives as portrayed in the novel.
- Find pictures of Hindu temples. Research what occurred in the temples. Have students compare what they find to the events experienced by Ruku and Nathan.
- In small groups have the students discuss and list events in the novel that exemplify the conflicts between a peasant agricultural economy and an industrial economy.
- Research the lives and goals of white missionaries and doctors in India in the early 20th century. Have the students list these and compare them to Kenny's goals and beliefs.*

AFTER READING

- Compare *Nectar In A Sieve* to other works with similar themes (see bibliography).
- Interview people from a variety of cultures, ask questions about food, economy, religion, wedding and funeral traditions, other life passage ceremonies, festivals, and the roles of men and women. Present results of interviews to the class.
- Continue writing the novel or rewrite a chapter of the novel from the first person perspective of any character in the novel other than Rukmani.*
- Divide the class into small groups. Have each group select and dramatize any event of the novel.
- Write a story with any of the following as a character: laborer in the tannery, white doctor in early 20th century India, daughter of a peasant, woman forced into prostitution because of starvation, beggar, overseer at tannery, collector, or money lender.
- Research, plan, and enact a Hindu wedding ceremony.
- Have students select and read poetry or folktales of India aloud to the class. Discuss the meaning of the poems or folktales. What do the poetry and folktales tell you about the culture and traditions of India?*

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Research women in contemporary India (e.g. Indira Gandhi). What varying roles do they play? How have their roles changed in this century?
- Research the cast system in contemporary India. How does it compare to the cast system in the early 20th century? How does it compare to social stratification in contemporary U.S. society?
- Research the economy of late 20th century India. Is it still largely agricultural? What place does industry have in the economy? What types of industry are found?
- Project Kenny and Rukmani's and Nathan's children into the future (contemporary India) as you have researched it. Write about how their lives have changed.*
- Research rice cultivation in India. In what other countries is rice cultivation important? What role did rice cultivation play in the early economy of the United States?
- Research migration from India. To what countries have Indians migrated? Why? Compare Indian migration in the early 20th century to Indian migration today. Where would Arjun and Thambi be today if they were still alive?*
- Research the role of the United Nations in India following World War II.
- Have an Indian festival: play Indian music, prepare and eat Indian food, make and wear traditional dress, follow other customs of the festival as appropriate.
- Put up a bulletin board on India: include maps, art work, photographs, poems and songs, examples of dress, etc.
- Have students examine the concept of a market economy. Have them outline how the market economy of the village changes throughout the novel.

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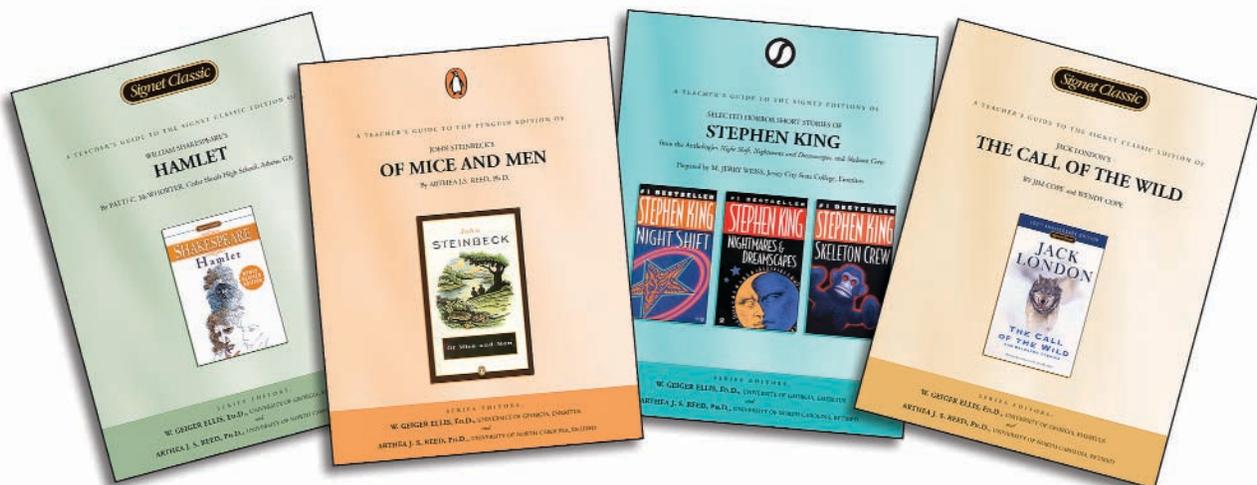
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