

The price of dignity



Many people look down upon the poor. For these disdainful individuals, being poor means that you have to perform acts that would be reprimanded by others, therefore ruining your social image. It is possible, however, to disagree with anyone who thinks that. Hunger is a threat to dignity, but the definition of threat is a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger. The threat doesn't always have to cause damage. In *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, Rukmani and Nathan do face a threat to dignity, but Puli and Rukmani, even though her dignity is at risk as well, save themselves.

Puli is a major reason that Rukmani and Nathan don't have to resort to begging in the city or doing other acts that may cause them to lose their respect. At first, Puli helps them find the place where Murugan used to work. " Yet I myself will take you there, and if you prosper you can pay me," (page. 83). This is Puli agreeing to help them. Instead of roaming around, hungry, for so long and not knowing where to find their son, the couple finally finds hope. After having their money and belongings stolen, Rukmani and Nathan are purely dependent on the food given to the destitute daily at the temple. Later in the book, Puli takes them to a quarry, where they can work for money. " There is a stone quarry," he said. " Not far from here. Stone breakers earn good wages," (page. 92). When Puli takes them to the quarry, Rukmani realizes that she is earning twice the money that she was earning when she was writing letters for people. This allows them to earn more money with which they can buy food for themselves. Puli, although clever and a bit wily, manages to save the two from starvation. " There may be a bit more today. " Come into money, have you?" he cried". This is when

Rukmani is going to buy rice cakes from the man she purchases from daily. In the book, Rukmani points out all of Puli's friends who look utterly sick. "For all their play they looked as if they had never eaten a full meal in their lives, with their ribs thrust out and bellies full blown like drums with wind and emptiness," (page. 82). Rukmani says she admires them however, most people looked down upon them. "When he saw us approaching, one of the peons came up to us. "No beggars allowed," (page. 86). This statement shows that beggars aren't welcome near people's homes. They wouldn't even give them food or money. Although Rukmani and Nathan aren't beggars, if they were, they would be treated like that. But with Puli's help, Rukmani and Nathan don't have to be treated poorly. However, Puli isn't the only one that helped the couple.

Rukmani herself is one of the only people that is supporting them during their struggles in the city. Nathan and Rukmani are robbed, leaving them with no money. Before Puli lends them a helping hand and shows them a place where they can work, Rukmani and Nathan are left to fend for themselves. They come to live with their son, but they find out that he left many years earlier. Nathan is sick, and they have to get back to their village for Nathan wants to die in his village. Luckily, Rukmani is there to help. Not only is she emotionally strong, but she also has skills and youth. Nathan is many years older than she; therefore, he would become old and frail more quickly than she would. When Nathan and Rukmani are trying to figure out how they're going to go back to their village, Rukmani says she can open up a stall where she would sit and read for people. "Then one day I thought I would set up as a reader of letters such as there are in most villages, and

surely also in cities,” (page. 90) Rukmani is also smart, for she knows to charge less than someone usually would charge for this so that she could attract customers. She doesn't earn much as a letter reader, but she does earn enough to buy rice cakes every morning for her and her husband. Their hunger doesn't make people look down upon them. In fact, some people probably gain a newfound respect for her; girls who can read are rare. These aren't the only reasons why Rukmani helps keep the two going.

Rukmani was also stubborn, for she refuses to become someone who would lose her dignity to hunger. “ We may yet be forced to do that,” said Nathan, pointing to their begging bowls, “ if we do not find our son—“ “ Never,” I protested,” (page. 83). This proves that Rukmani doesn't want to become a beggar and refuses to do so. But there are some people who would go very far for money, such as Irrawaddy, Rukmani's daughter, who becomes a prostitute to save her brother from starvation. Another example is Murugan's ex wife, who does the same to earn money. “...I mean he is not your grandchild.” “ Of course.” “ One must live,” (page. 88). This quote said by Ammu, Murugan's wife, is true. Her family was most likely starving or suffering to a point where she is forced to take up prostitution. This spoiled her dignity. However, Rukmani would never do such a thing, which helps her maintain her reputation as just another poor woman. Rukmani also doesn't seem to appreciate being laughed at or being taken as a joke, which is what would possibly happen if she became a beggar or prostitute. “ Says she can read! These village folk are certainly getting above themselves!” Grimly I took no notice and went on with my cries,” (page. 91). This is why Rukmani saved her and Nathan's dignity.

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya proves that hunger is a threat to dignity, but dignity isn't always taken away with hunger. Puli's generosity and Rukmani's skill, attitude, and youth are what saved Rukmani and Nathan from being stripped of their dignity.