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A Woman Challenges the British Empire - Kamala Markandaya's *The Golden Honeycomb*

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Kamala Markandaya 1924-2004

A Planned Grooming

The Golden Honeycomb presents the planned grooming of Maharajkumar Rabindaranath of Devapur State into an enlightened native ruler. Maharajah Bawajiraj III has been successfully

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groomed into a British puppet by his British overlords. His wife Maharani Shanta Devi bears only daughters. But his concubine Mohini bears him a son who is named Rabindranath. Mohini, coached by the Dowager Maharani Manjula, refuses to become Bawajiraj's wife so as to keep outside the pale of the British Resident's power. Mohini's son Rabi is brought up by his mother and his grandmother with a deliberate plan and purpose.

The Story of Manjula

Manjula was originally a commoner. When she was thirteen, the British dethroned and imprisoned the lawful monarch, Maharajah Bawajiraj I, because he dared to "raise levies to eject them from the kingdom" (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 8). Manjula's husband was made Maharajah in the place of the deposed monarch, and she had to leave her valley and move to the Palace. Once in the Palace, Manjula had to submit to several fetters imposed by the British for the sake of her husband, Maharajah Bawajiraj II. She had to make several sacrifices for the sake of the "Ruling House." However, she never proposed "to sell herself short" (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 15). When Manjula's husband dies after a riding accident, as widow and dowager, Manjula is no longer under the control of the British Resident.

Mohini, the Concubine

A distant relation of hers, named Mohini, is sent from the valley to the Palace as her retainer and companion. Mohini shares Manjula's fiery passion for her native land. She is not one to be swamped by the royal atmosphere of the palace. Mohini conquers the heart of Bawajiraj III, and becomes his concubine. She delivers a boy; and Manjula sees in the boy her opportunity to challenge the British imperialists. Mohini, protected by Manjula, refuses to marry Bawajiraj so as to remain free from any shackles that would be placed on a queen by the British.

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She names her son Rabindranath after the nationalist poet, in accordance with the wishes of Manjula. Mohini and Manjula, having thus defeated Bawajiraj III, take on the task of educating Rabi (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 9-44).

Training and Preparing Rabi for Future Roles

Manjula tells the infant Rabi tales of his ancestors deliberately intended to inculcate nationalist fervour in the child. She narrates to him an incident, describing how one of his brave ancestors defeated the British by concealing elephants up in the barracks and making them charge down the ramps upon the British soldiers surrounding the palace. She says that the British learnt a lesson, and brought up cannons the next time to defeat his ancestors. She explains that the British were victorious because their training and discipline were better than those of the Indian soldiers, and also because the Indians allowed the British to divide them through bribery and plotting. These stories have such a telling effect on Rabi that Bawajiraj protests to his mother that she is not narrating history to Rabi but only half-baked legends. Manjula retorts that “legends are the blood-history of a country,” and, she snubs Bawajiraj saying his British tutors taught him only “slanted history” (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 45-48).

Mohini trains Rabi to be natural and native. For instance, she teaches him to eat peaches properly, that is, the whole fruit, skin and all, and not like his father, who, according to his British training, eats only peeled slices. When Rabi is four years old, Bawajiraj, at the suggestion of the British Resident and the native Dewan, wishes to put the boy in school. Mohini understands that this is an attempt “to catch him (Rabi) early” and, so, she declares that Rabi will be taught by a local pandit at the appropriate age (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 52-56).

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The World of Reality

Mohini is of the view that the world of reality begins outside the gates of the palace. She brings a pandit from this world of reality to teach Rabi. The pandit's teaching is quite different from what Bawajiraj's English tutors taught him. His teaching is so effective that, one day, Rabi tells the British Resident that the Indian people never wanted Queen Victoria to be their Empress and that she became Empress only through conquest. This is a seditious opinion in British eyes (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 58-70).

The Resident's Rule

The Resident, Sir Arthur Copeland, is shocked and suggests to Bawajiraj that Rabi be sent to some boarding establishment. Bawajiraj goes to Mohini and says that "Rabi should broaden his horizons." Mohini says that she and the Dowager Maharani have always held the same opinion, and so they propose to take Rabi on a tour of the kingdom. She adds that the pandit, who has travelled widely in the country, can make the arrangements. Bawajiraj says that Rabi could be sent to a boarding establishment. At once Mohini threatens to leave the Palace with her son. Bawajiraj is shaken to the core. He literally goes down on his knees, kisses Mohini's toes and promises never to talk of it again. And, seizing upon his state of contrition, Mohini gets him to consent to the tour of the kingdom (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 70-74).

To Get to Know the Subjects

Mohini proposes to show Rabi everything in the kingdom. She wants him to meet the people. She says that he can learn nothing inside the Palace. Manjula suggests a trip to the family shrine. They take the pandit along with them. Mohini insists on their travelling as commoners.

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She refuses to take along any guards. Finally, at the suggestion of the Dewan, she agrees to be accompanied by a Brahmin cook-cum-guardian named Parasuram provided by the Dewan (Kamala Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* 76-79).

The Golden Honeycomb tells the story of the shaping of Prince Rabindranath of Devapur State into a people-friendly enlightened native ruler in contrast to the anglicized puppet that his father was moulded into by the British. Lest the point be missed, Bawajiraj's formation into a puppet is presented as a foil to that of Rabi in a few vignettes.

The formation and growth of Rabi is managed by his grandmother Manjula and his mother Mohini. They plan carefully and sculpt him adequately, so that he will realize his true heritage. They expose him to the reality outside the palace gates. They ensure that the Delhi Durbar will not subvert him to submit to imperial designs. Rabi himself goes in search of cold reality in the streets of riot-torn Bombay. A police lathi opens his scalp, and incidentally, the golden cage in which he has been imprisoned. He finds his first taste of bliss in a hovel in a Bombay slum where lives a stinking dirt-laden woman; and also gains the first intimation of his duty as heir to the throne of Devapur State. Thus primed, he returns home to deal with holes in the fabric of Devapur, spurning imperial favour, royal splendour and popular acclamation. He transforms the wilderness into a source of prosperity for the entire kingdom. He countenances the just demands of the people and confronts his royal father from the opposite camp. He forces the palace and the Residency to climb down to the people. He holds forth the promise of marrying a popular leader and providing a benign reign. We can witness throughout the novel, the Machiavellian maneuvering of the highly intelligent, bold grandmother and her obliging

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daughter-in-law, as they plot together to raise the prince as a free spirited, nationalist hero who would one day challenge the mighty British empire.

Reference

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